

# **Weird Beliefs**



**by Barry Wilson**

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**Public Domain Edition**  
**March 2012**

### **Acknowledgments**

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### **Introduction**

Almost every religion contains ideas that can seem weird to outsiders. The following examples come from all over the world and involve many different religions and faiths.

## The Temple of Rats

Everyday about 20,000 rats roam through the Karni Mata temple, which is located in the city of Deshnok in northwestern India. These rats are believed to be re-incarnations of certain dead people who will eventually be reborn as higher life forms. The rats can move freely throughout the entire temple complex, and they are always provided with all the food they can eat, including milk and special sweets. Visitors must remove their shoes and let the rodents run across their feet.

The temple is dedicated to a 15th-century female sage named Karni Mata, who is now considered to have been an incarnation of the Hindu goddess Durga. The temple complex is mostly made of marble, but has some gold and silver decorations. A small shrine inside the inner temple may have been built about 600 years ago by Karni Mata herself.

The vast majority of the rats are brown, but occasionally a white rat is seen. Some people say that four white rats live in the temple, and that they are incarnations of the four brothers of Karni Mata. The brown rats are thought to be incarnations of her descendants, relatives, and most devoted followers.



This photo shows a group of the rats that live in the Karni Mata temple. Some visitors to the temple are afraid of the rats, but the animals are accustomed to the presence of humans and seldom bite anyone.

## **Jivaro Head Shrinkers**

Up until recent times, warriors of the Jivaro people of South America would cut off the head of a slain enemy and then shrink it down to a much smaller size. The warriors believed that this would trap the soul of the dead enemy inside the shrunken head and prevent it from taking revenge against the killer. For additional protection against attempts at revenge, the head would be soaked in a sacred liquid that would remove all hate from the trapped spirit and transform it into the supernatural slave of the warrior. The shrunken heads were displayed as trophies and used in religious rituals that celebrated the past victories of the tribe.



This is a photo of a shrunken head.

According to scientists, the first step in shrinking a head is to remove the skull, bones, brain, and facial fat. The remaining skin and attached flesh is then shrunk by boiling it in a brew of special jungle herbs. After drying, it is wrapped around a small clay or wooden ball and molded into the proper shape. The outer surface is then coated with charcoal ash, because the Jivaro believe that this forms a supernatural barrier which prevents the trapped spirit from getting out.

The Jivaro tribes live in a remote section of the Amazon rain forest of South America. Because of their ferocity and independent spirit, they have

been less affected by outside influences than most other native peoples of that region. However, recent reports indicate that they no longer practice head-hunting and head-shrinking. Most of the shrunken heads sold in regional tourist shops are either replicas or fakes.

## **The Black Stone of Mecca**

According to Islamic traditions, the Black Stone of Mecca fell directly from heaven thousands of years ago. The traditions also say that the stone has the power to cleanse a person of his sins by absorbing them into itself. In fact, some Muslims believe that the stone was originally a pure white color, but that it has gradually turned black because of all the sins it has absorbed since it fell.

The stone is roughly oval in shape with an average thickness of about 10 inches [25 centimeters]. It is probably either a meteorite, a piece of volcanic lava, a chunk of agate, or a fragment of glass created by the impact of a meteorite. It was broken into a number of pieces at some point in the past, perhaps accidentally, or possibly during an attempt to destroy it. What survives now is an assemblage of pieces held together by an external frame. This assemblage is embedded in a corner of an ancient structure called the Kaaba, which is located in the courtyard of the Sacred Mosque of Mecca.

The exposed surface of the stone has been polished smooth by the hands of millions of Muslim pilgrims, who try to touch it, or even kiss it, during their visits to Mecca. All Muslims hope to make at least one pilgrimage to the city, and during a visit they are supposed to walk around the Kaaba seven times and touch or kiss the stone each time they pass it. But usually the crowd around the Kaaba is so dense that most pilgrims can't get near the stone, and they have to be satisfied with merely pointing toward it.

According to the traditions about the stone, it fell from heaven to show Adam and Eve, who had left the Garden of Eden, where they should build an altar. The location of this altar was submerged during Noah's flood, but

the stone remained at the original site and was eventually found by the Hebrew patriarch Abraham during a trip to Arabia. After he found the stone, Abraham told his son Ishmael to build a temple at the location, and this temple was the original Kaaba. Later, when the structure was remodeled, the stone was embedded in one of its corners. Some people believe that the stone originally had a gleaming white color, but that it has been made black by the sins it has absorbed.

Muslim believers consider the Kaaba to be the spiritual center of the Islamic world, and they always bow in its direction when they pray. Along with the Sacred Mosque of Mecca, it is annually visited by more pilgrims than any other religious site in the world.

## **Baby Tossing**

In some parts of southern India, in a strange annual ritual known as "baby tossing", Hindu priests heave babies from the rooftop or balcony of a temple into a blanket held by men on the ground below. The practice, which is centuries old, supposedly makes the babies grow stronger and more courageous, thus better able to face the challenges they will encounter later in their lives. Some people also believe that the practice will bring future prosperity to the infants and their families.

The falling distance to the ground is typically about 10 meters [33 feet]. The babies, who are usually between the ages of three months and two years, often scream in terror as they plunge through the air. But as each one is safely caught in the blanket, the surrounding crowd celebrates exuberantly, and then the infant is passed from person to person until it is finally returned to its mother.

Because of the trauma experienced by the babies, some human rights groups in India are trying to get the government to ban the practice. But many local villagers regard it as an important part of their religious tradition and are resisting the attempts to stop it.

## Hungry Ghosts

One notable aspect of Buddhism is the unusual role played by strange creatures called Hungry Ghosts. These are phantom-like creatures, only half-alive, who are constantly tormented by an intense hunger. Their bodies are so starved that their arms and legs have shriveled down to mere skin and bone. But they can't eat anything, because their mouths are the size of a pin hole, and their necks are extremely long and thin. The only part of their bodies that isn't thin is the huge bloated belly. But this belly is always empty, and because it is so big, it produces intense hunger pains.



This depiction of a Hungry Ghost was copied from a 12th-century scroll.

Buddhists believe that a very greedy man will be punished in his next incarnation by being reborn as a Hungry Ghost. This punishment can result from various kinds of greed, such as a gluttonous appetite for expensive food and drink, or an obsessive lust for money and power, or a hedonistic quest for sensual pleasures. Harmful emotions such as anger and hate can also cause a person to be reborn as a Hungry Ghost. But in Buddhism no punishment lasts forever, and after a Hungry Ghost has endured enough suffering, it will be reborn into another life form.

Hungry Ghosts live in a kind of shadow world that is sometimes described as a hidden reality. Because they live in this hidden realm, they normally can't be seen by humans. However, some sources say that they



can become momentarily visible under certain circumstances. They have supposedly been seen trying to nibble on corpses, or wandering around in deserts and waste places.

**Note:** Beliefs about Hungry Ghosts vary slightly from one region to another. Also, imaginary beings that resemble Hungry Ghosts can be found in several other religions besides Buddhism.

## **Cargo Cults**

A group of unusual religious movements known as "cargo cults" appeared on several small Pacific islands during the early decades of the 20th century. These islands had been claimed as colonies by various industrialized countries, and small numbers of foreigners had come to live on them. Most of these foreigners were missionaries, government officials, soldiers, or businessmen. After they began arriving, ships would sometimes deliver supplies to them, and the native people would usually help unload the cargo.

Many of the items in this delivered cargo amazed the natives. Because they had never seen any modern manufactured goods, they thought that the items must have been created through miracles or supernatural effects. Not surprisingly, they began looking for ways to acquire such items themselves, and this is what led to the formation of the cargo cults.

The beliefs and practices associated with these cults varied from one island to another. For example, the natives on some islands thought that the manufactured items in the deliveries must have been created by gods. Another explanation, which appeared on at least one island, was that the items had been made by the natives' own dead ancestors. In this case the natives believed that the items were intended for them, but that the foreigners were intercepting and stealing everything.

Several of these cults appeared on islands that were temporarily occupied by American military forces during the Second World War. As the war progressed, the natives on these islands witnessed deliveries of large quantities of equipment and supplies. Sometimes they were even given



gifts, such as candy and cigarettes, that came from the cargo. After the war ended, the Americans left and the deliveries stopped arriving. But on several islands cargo cults were formed to try to get the deliveries resumed. For this purpose, the members of these cults tried to use a form of sympathetic magic in which they imitated the earlier activities of the Americans. For example, on one island they dressed in clothes that resembled U.S. army uniforms and conducted military drills under an American flag. On another island they built a landing strip to try to attract airplanes. Of course, no cargo miraculously arrived, and on most islands these cults eventually disappeared.

## **Gods in Human Form**

The belief that a god or goddess can appear on the earth in the form of a human is found in many religions. For example, in ancient Greek myths a god or goddess sometimes came to earth in the guise of a human and mingled among ordinary people. In some religions a god can also assume the form of an animal. These bodily forms, both human and animal, are called incarnations. Usually these incarnations are only temporary, and the god eventually returns to his normal form as an invisible supernatural being.

In Hinduism, an incarnation of a god or goddess is called an avatar. Many Hindus believe that avatars of the god Vishnu have appeared on the earth at crucial moments in history in order to save the world from an impending catastrophe.

Spiritual beings such as angels and demons can also temporarily assume a physical form. Thus, although the Devil is normally invisible, he sometimes tries to trick people by disguising himself as a handsome man or beautiful woman. Some people believe that the snake which tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden was Satan in disguise. Other snakes are sometimes regarded as incarnations of demons.

## **Witch Smellers**

During past centuries the people of some societies would often blame witches for sickness, famine, accidents, and other misfortunes that occurred in a community. This belief in the evil powers of witches has appeared in many parts of the world, and each society has developed its own methods for protecting itself. But in order for a community to protect itself from witches, it first needs to identify them. In some parts of Africa, especially among Bantu-speaking tribes, this identification was formerly carried out by individuals known as Witch Smellers.

These Witch Smellers, who were almost always women, would be called upon whenever members of one of these African tribes suspected that witches were living among them. To begin the process of identification, the chief would summon all the tribe's people to a meeting and tell them to gather into a large circle. Then the Witch Smellers would assemble in the middle of the circle with long switches in their hands. They would begin to dance wildly, repeatedly spinning and leaping, until they worked themselves into a frenzy. Eventually they would reach out with their switches and touch one or more people who they had identified as witches. In some tribes anyone who was identified in this way was immediately dragged away and killed.

Many Witch Smellers were powerful and important members of their tribes. When performing their duties, they always wore flamboyant costumes and decorated their faces with brightly-colored paints. Most of them also dyed their hair red and twisted it into elaborate designs. In addition to their switches, many also carried ceremonial spears and shields.

Most people in modern societies doubt that witches even exist, and organized hunts for them rarely take place anymore. But in a few countries there are still sporadic reports of witches being blamed for misfortunes, and occasionally someone is killed either by a mob or by relatives of a supposed victim. We can only hope that these dreadful incidents continue to become less common, and that eventually all superstitious beliefs about witches will completely die out.

## **Egyptian Crocodile Worship**

One of the religious beliefs of the ancient Egyptians was that a god called Sebek (or Sobek) could appear on the earth in the form of a living crocodile. At one time some people even believed that this god had taken the form of a particular crocodile named Petsuchos which lived in a large pool of water beside a temple in the Fayyum province. Because this crocodile supposedly was a god in disguise, it was fed the best cuts of meat, and was pampered so much that it became quite tame. The priests at the temple even put golden rings in its ears and gold bracelets on its legs.

**Note:** The priests at various other ancient Egyptian temples sometimes claimed that their crocodile was the real incarnation of the god Sebek. It isn't clear if any disputes ever arose between the priests at different temples as to whose crocodile was the actual god.

## **Christian Snake Handlers**

The worship services of some American churches regularly include a ritual called snake handling, in which members of the congregation pick up poisonous snakes, often raising them into the air and sometimes even allowing them to crawl on their bodies. The most commonly-used types of snake are rattlesnakes and copperheads, both of which can be caught wild in the forests of the southern United States. Participation in the ritual is voluntary, and some worshipers may remain in their seats and just watch. In addition to snake handling, the services normally include praying, singing, and speaking in tongues.

Members of these churches believe that snakes are demons in bodily form, and that handling them demonstrates God's power to protect true believers from the forces of evil. Unfortunately, more than 100 deaths from snakebites in religious services have been documented in the United States. As a result of these deaths, six southeastern states have passed

laws against snake handling. But this hasn't stopped the practice, because most of the churches are located in remote rural areas where people tend to live by their own rules. Many of the bitten people believe that God will heal them and don't seek medical help, so that some cases may not be reported.

Snake handlers say that they are following instructions from the bible, particularly a verse at Mark 16:18 which says that believers "*shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them*" [King James Version]. In fact, in addition to snake handling, some members of these churches regularly drink poison (usually strychnine) during worship services. If someone is bitten by a snake, or gets sick from poison, other church members may attribute it to the person's lack of faith and failure to receive the Holy Spirit.

The total number of these churches isn't known, but is probably less than 100 congregations. Many of them require their members to follow strict dress codes, including the stipulation that women must not use any cosmetics and must always wear ankle-length dresses. Most of the ministers also preach against the use of alcohol and tobacco.

Some ministers and church leaders own small collections of snakes which they keep in cages at their homes and carry to the services in small boxes. The snakes are not drugged before they are handled.



This photograph was taken during a church service in which snakes were handled.

# Zombies

As depicted in modern movies, zombies are re-vitalized corpses that have no souls and very little intelligence. They hunger for the flesh of living people, and they tend to gather in groups to search for victims. Because most of them can't run, or even walk fast, they have to shamble slowly across the ground. But they pursue their intended victims relentlessly, and they can break through doors to reach a hiding place. If one of them gets hit by a bullet, it pauses for a moment but soon starts moving forward again. They can't be killed because they're already dead.

Modern film makers got their ideas about zombies from strange stories that originated in the country of Haiti. According to these stories, Voodoo sorcerers in Haiti can revive dead bodies and turn them into mind-controlled slaves to work as laborers in the fields. Some people in rural areas of the country believe that these zombie-slaves are still being created today using black magic. The people of Haiti use the name "Bokor" for someone who has mastered black magic, but outsiders usually call them sorcerers, wizards, or witch doctors.

Several theories have been put forward to explain the various beliefs about zombies. According to one theory, stories about zombies arose from observations of people who have certain mental disorders that leave them out of touch with their surroundings. Another possible explanation is that certain plant-derived drugs can put people into a trance-like state in which they obey outside commands. A third theory is that an unknown virus spreads a rare disease that causes zombie-like behavior. Another idea, used in a film called *The Night of the Living Dead*, is that an unusual form of radiation can turn corpses into zombies.

The modern Voodoo religion in Haiti developed from the beliefs of black people who were captured in Africa and transported to the island to work as slaves on sugar plantations. After they arrived, the plantation owners forced them to convert to Christianity. But they secretly kept some of their old beliefs, and they also adopted some religious ideas from the native Amerindian people. As a result, modern Voodoo is a mixture that includes elements from all of these religions.

## Devil Worship

Almost everyone has noticed that evil people often have great success in life, whereas many good people suffer terrible misfortunes. One common explanation for this injustice is that it is the work of the Devil. In fact, one of Satan's favorite activities is to bring pain and suffering to a good person. He also likes to help evil people become successful. With his assistance, even a weak inferior person can gain great wealth and power.

Many people have wondered why God allows Satan to carry out his evil activities. Fortunately the fiend won't be able to keep causing harm forever, because the bible says that he will eventually be brought to justice and punished with eternal torment in hell. But in the meantime he has already enjoyed thousands of years of freedom, and during that time has brought misery and suffering to millions of human beings. Because he has so much influence over what happens in the world, he can appear to be very powerful. Evil people often notice his apparent power and begin worshiping him in hopes of getting his help.

Some people worship him secretly, but others prefer to participate in some form of organized worship. One example of organized worship is a service called a Black Mass, which is usually held in a large room decorated to resemble the nave of a church. During the service people shout obscenities at God, curse Jesus, and act out a parody of the Holy Communion. They may also worship a black cat under the pretense that it is the Devil in disguise.

Another form of devil worship, said to be practiced by witches, supposedly takes place at a meeting called a Sabbat. Most descriptions of these Sabbats say that they begin at midnight at a secret location in the countryside. Purported activities include dancing naked around a fire, trampling on a cross, drinking human blood, and sacrificing newborn babies on an altar. According to some accounts, the Devil himself comes to many of these gatherings, often appearing in the form of a horned goat. Demons may also be present. The festivities usually culminate in a lewd orgy before finally ending at dawn.

In modern times some new groups of "Satanists" have appeared,

especially in the United States. These groups have names such as the Church of Satan, the Temple of Set, and the First Satanic Church. Each group has its own beliefs and performs its own special rituals. However, members of several groups claim that they don't actually worship Satan, but simply admire him for having the courage to openly defy God. In truth, many people in modern societies are secretly attracted to the dark side of life that Satan represents.

**Note:** Contrary to what many believe, modern Wiccans do not worship the Devil, and most of them doubt that he even exists.



This painting by the 19th-century artist Ary Scheffer shows the Devil with Jesus on the top of a mountain. Their trip to the top of this mountain is described in the bible in a passage at Matthew 4:8-10. As they stood on the summit, Satan tried to get Jesus to worship him. Of course Jesus refused. But although the fiend failed in this case, many of his other efforts to get worshipers have succeeded.



## **The Giant Flying Head**

The Iroquois Indians of the eastern United States have legends about a strange creature called the Flying Head. According to the legends, this creature originated from a head that was chopped from the body of an ancient tribal chief and thrown into a lake. Somehow this chopped-off head was transformed into a giant flying head more than six feet tall, with eyes made of fire, and fangs as sharp as needles. It flew by means of its long flowing hair which could spread out like wings to catch the wind.

The Flying Head would descend from the sky at night and devour both humans and animals. Although it was just a head without a body, it was still big enough to eat enormous amounts of meat. The people of the region were so terrified that many of them packed up their belongings and moved to other areas. But finally the monstrous head left the region and was never seen again.

## **Animal Sacrifice**

Animal sacrifice is the ritual killing of an animal in the belief that the action will win favor from a god or goddess. The sacrifice is often intended to be a substitute punishment, with the sacrificed animal being killed instead of the sinful person who actually deserves to die.

One of the oldest descriptions of a sacrifice can be found in the biblical story of Cain and Abel. As described in Genesis 4:2-8, Abel sacrificed an animal to God, and Cain made an offering of some of the crops he had grown. God accepted Abel's animal sacrifice, but rejected Cain's offering of crops. The story suggests that an offering won't be accepted unless blood is shed.

**Note:** When Cain's offering of crops was rejected, he got so angry that he killed Abel. This was the first murder in history.

## Human Sacrifice

Although the idea of human sacrifice is abhorrent to most modern people, the practice was widespread in earlier times. According to one theory, animal sacrifice gradually replaced human sacrifice as people became more civilized. But humans were still being regularly offered as sacrifices in some societies as late as the 18th century, and even today there are occasional reports of isolated instances.

One of the oldest references to the practice can be found in a biblical passage at Jeremiah 7:31-32, which says that children were sacrificed at a place called Topheth, which was near modern Jerusalem. Many scholars believe that this was a sacrificial site of a people called the Canaanites who were living in Palestine when the Israelites arrived. These Canaanites worshiped many of the same gods as the neighboring Phoenicians, and several ancient writers say that children were ritually sacrificed at the Phoenician colony of Carthage in North Africa. Thus the child sacrifices mentioned in the bible and the child sacrifices at Carthage may have been part of the same religious tradition.

Another account of human sacrifice in ancient times was provided by Julius Caesar. In his book *Commentaries on the Gallic War*, he wrote that the Druid priests of ancient Gaul (modern France) would prepare for a sacrifice by using sticks to build a giant humanlike figure called a "Wicker Man". After they finished building this figure, they would place people inside it and set it on fire to pay tribute to the gods. Caesar said that the Druids normally used criminals for this purpose because this was more pleasing to the gods, but that they would use innocent people when no criminals were available. A 1973 horror film called *The Wicker Man* is based on his report.

Actual remains of sacrificial victims have been found in South America. For example, in 1995 the mummified body of a young girl was discovered on a mountain peak named Ampato in southern Peru. The location is about 6200 meters (20,000 feet) above sea level, far too high for permanent human habitation. The body had been naturally preserved due to the freezing temperatures and thin dry air. Scientists believe that the girl was sacrificed more than 500 years ago, probably as an offering to the

Inca god or goddess associated with the mountain.

Frozen mummies of sacrificed children have also been found on other high peaks in the Andes mountains. Young children were reportedly chosen for offerings because they were considered to be purer and more innocent than adults. Healthy good-looking children were selected, and then fattened up on a special diet for several months, before being led away to be sacrificed. In most cases the trek to a high mountain summit would have required at least a week of arduous climbing. When the summit was reached, the child was given an intoxicating drink intended to dull the senses. Most likely a ceremony was performed in the desolate surroundings, and then the child was killed. At least one victim appears to have died from a blow to the head. Others may have been killed by strangulation or by being abandoned to freeze to death.

Some of the most horrifying descriptions of human sacrifice can be found in the reports of Spanish soldiers who participated in the conquest of Mesoamerica in the 16th century. These soldiers were especially horrified by the scale of the practice. For example, some of the Spanish who fought against the Aztecs saw a giant "skull-rack" structure which by one estimate contained about 100,000 skulls of sacrificial victims. Based on this report, as well as other evidence, some scholars have estimated that the Aztecs sacrificed at least 20,000 people annually. Human sacrifices also took place on a large scale in regions occupied by the Mayans, Toltecs, and other native peoples of Mesoamerica. In fact, some societies in the region would regularly start wars for the purpose of capturing enemy soldiers to serve as victims. However, there is evidence that members of noble families were also sometimes sacrificed.

Descriptions of Aztec sacrifices say that they took place on a flat area at the top of a tall pyramidal temple. Here the Aztec priests would first perform various ceremonies while accompanied by musicians playing conches, horns, and trumpet-like instruments. Then, with the musicians still playing, the priests would lay the victim on his back, cut open his torso with a stone knife, then grab the still-beating heart and rip it out of the body. After the heart was pulled out, it was placed in a bowl held by a nearby idol of an Aztec god. The victim's head was then cut from the body and taken to a Skull Rack for public display. Some accounts say that the rest of the body was later cooked and eaten.

The native peoples of Mesoamerica believed that human sacrifices were required to maintain the orderly workings of nature. Thus, unless offerings were regularly made to the sun god, the sun would supposedly stop shining. Similarly, if the rain god wasn't frequently appeased, no rain would fall. The most precious offering was a human, but the gods were so difficult to please that just one human wasn't nearly enough. As a result, at some temples the sacrifices were so frequent that blood often flowed down the sides of the structure and soaked the ground around it.

## **Self Mummification**

In past centuries some Buddhist monks in Japan were able to turn their own bodies into mummies. To do so, these monks slowly starved themselves to death by a prescribed method that gradually transformed their bodies into a mummy-like physical state. The method of starvation was so slow that it usually took many years for the monk to die.

The monks who attempted this transformation were known as Sokushinbutsu. During the first stage of the process, the monk had to perform rigorous physical exercise everyday while eating nothing but seeds and nuts. He had to maintain this lifestyle for exactly 1000 days, which is a little less than three years. At the end of this period, his body fat would be almost completely eliminated, a necessary step toward the anticipated later mummification.

In the second stage, the monk had to adhere to an even stricter diet, for he was only allowed to eat small quantities of bark and roots collected from pine trees. He had to follow this diet for another 1000 days, after which he was virtually a living skeleton. Toward the end of this period he also started drinking a toxic beverage made from the sap of the Urushi tree. Not only did this cause vomiting and a loss of body fluid, it killed any maggots that might damage the body after death.

The final step was entombment. With his body now free of nearly all fat and moisture, the monk would allow himself to be sealed up inside a stone enclosure just big enough to let him sit in a lotus position. Air could enter the tomb through a small tube, and he would ring a bell once a day to

show that he was still alive. When the bell didn't ring for several days in a row, the tube was removed and the tomb completely sealed.

During the centuries when self mummification was practiced in Japan, there was a general belief that the process wouldn't work unless the monk was very holy. This may be why many of the tombs were opened later to see if the attempt at mummification had been successful. In fact, although hundreds of monks tried to mummify themselves in this way, only about twenty mummies are known to still exist. All of these surviving mummies date from the 19th century or earlier, and the practice of Sokushinbutsu is not advocated by any modern Buddhist group.

## **The Sex Slaves of Paradise**

One of the most controversial aspects of Islam is the belief that a devout Muslim man will find female sex slaves called Houris waiting for him in heaven after he dies. Islamic writings describe these Houris as young virgins with sparkling eyes, firm round breasts, and fair skin. In their behavior they are very modest and submissive, and always ready to do anything a man desires. Unlike normal women, they don't menstruate and they never get pregnant. They are like programmed zombies whose only purpose is to give pleasure to men.

According to some Islamic writings, every man who goes to heaven will be given 72 Houris for his own exclusive use. In other words, he gets a heavenly harem of 72 sex slaves. Oddly, even after he acquires this harem, he may still maintain a marital relationship with his earthly wife, provided that she also makes it to heaven. The man, his wife, and all of his Houris never have any disagreements, and everyone lives harmoniously in a state of eternal youth, beauty, and perfect health.

**Note:** Some sources say that each man in heaven gets 70 Houris instead of 72. Of course, as a practical matter this would make little difference.

Non-Muslims frequently criticize the idea of a heavenly harem as being degrading to women. It reinforces beliefs about male authority, and it

contributes to the discrimination against women commonly found in Muslim countries. Fortunately, many modern Muslim men don't believe in the literal existence of Houris, but instead regard the traditional depictions of them as a metaphor for heavenly bliss. Partly for this reason, movements to improve the status of women are starting to achieve success in some Islamic societies.

Muslim ideas about Houris became especially controversial after modern Islamic terrorists began carrying out suicidal attacks in several parts of the world. According to news reports, some of these terrorists were motivated by a belief that martyrs who die for Islam are rewarded with an automatic ticket to heaven and a personal harem of beautiful virgin Houris. Actually all devout Muslim men, not just martyrs, are supposedly rewarded with a gift of Houris when they reach heaven. But if any man is motivated to kill innocent people by hopes of receiving such a reward, then he deserves to go to hell, not to heaven.

## **Self-Flagellation**

Self-flagellation is a weird religious ritual in which a person repeatedly whips his or her own body. Usually it is intended to be a self punishment done out of remorse for sins, and the whipping is often so harsh that blood trickles from the wounds. Actually, most self-floggers believe that their suffering helps pay for the sins of everyone, not just for their own sins, so that they are performing a service for all of humankind. In addition, a small percentage of people secretly get pleasure from the practice, and in some individuals the pain can even induce feelings of ecstasy.

Very pious people usually whip themselves in private, but others normally only do so as part of a group activity. Thus, in some Christian countries many people gather to whip themselves publicly as part of a penitential procession during Lent's Holy Week. And some Shia Muslims flog themselves every year during commemorations for the 7th-century martyr Husayn ibn Ali.

## **Cerberus**

In ancient Greek mythology, Cerberus was a watchdog of the Underworld. The creature resembled a large dog, but it had three heads instead of one, and its tail had the form of a poisonous snake. It stood outside the main gate of the Underworld with its three heads facing outward to prevent living people from entering, while its snake-like tail faced inward to prevent the spirits of the dead from leaving. Because it ate nothing but raw meat, it always allowed entry to the arriving spirits of people who had just died, but it viciously attacked any living person who tried to get in.

Capturing Cerberus was the last of the twelve tasks given to the great hero Hercules (Heracles). In fact, this was his most dangerous task of all, because he wasn't allowed to use any weapons. To reach the Underworld, he entered a cave and went down through a rocky passageway. When he found Cerberus, he tried to subdue the fierce creature by wrapping his powerful arms around all three heads. Although its snake-tail swung around and bit him, he eventually wrestled the beast into submission. Strangely, after he brought it up to the surface of the earth, he was told to take it back, and so he returned it to the Underworld unharmed.

## **Crucifixion Re-enactments**

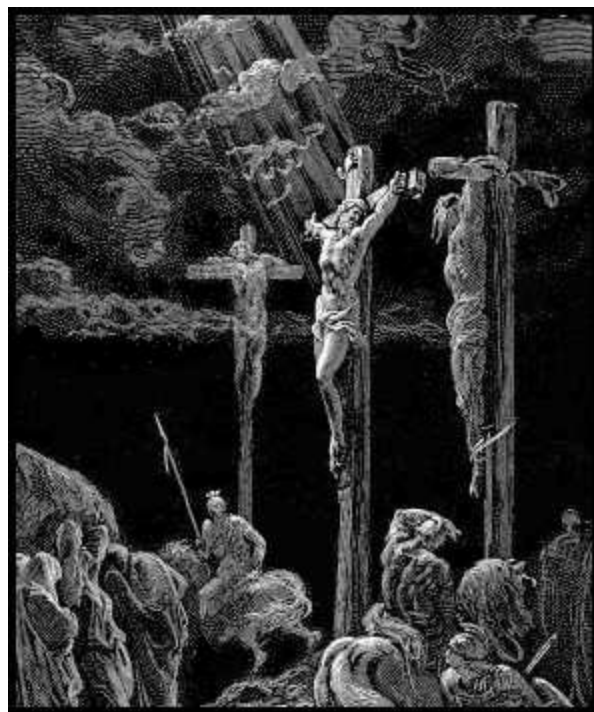
Every year on Good Friday, dozens of people in the Philippines re-enact the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. They allow their hands and feet to be nailed to a wooden cross, and then they remain attached to it for a period of time, in an attempt to experience the same pain and suffering that Jesus went through. Most of these people are devout Catholics who hope to atone for their sins or give thanks for an answered prayer. These crucifixion re-enactments have been taking place in some Philippine villages for many decades, and a few individuals have gone through the ordeal many times. In several villages the event even attracts tourists, who come every year on



Good Friday to watch the bloody spectacle.

According to a witness at one village, a carpenter's hammer was used to drive five-inch [13 centimeter] steel nails through the palms and ankles of each penitent. Many of them screamed in agony as the nails penetrated their flesh, and most continued to weep while on the cross. To prevent excessive blood loss, they were removed from the cross after a few minutes and taken to a first aid station. Because there were only three crosses at the scene, most of the penitents had to wait for their turn. The event was witnessed by a horde of tourists, including some who had come from as far away as the United States.

**Note:** In recent years health officials in the Philippines have begun urging people to get tetanus vaccinations before going through the ordeal. Officials also recommend that the nails be pre-soaked in alcohol to disinfect them.



This engraving by Gustave Dore depicts the crucifixion of Jesus. He is shown between two other men who were crucified at the same time. The bible says that the sky became very dark while he was on the cross.

## **Stoning the Devil**

Every year more than a million Muslims make a pilgrimage (called the Haij) to the city of Mecca during the holy month of Dhu al-Hijjahto. Most of these pilgrims stay in the vicinity of Mecca for at least four days, during which time they participate in several traditional religious activities. Perhaps the best-known traditional activity is to walk seven times around an ancient structure called the Kaaba. But most pilgrims also participate in several other activities, including a strange ritual called the Stoning of the Devil.

The Stoning of the Devil takes place outside Mecca at a place called Mina. The purpose of the ritual is to give people an opportunity to defy the Devil. Until recent times, the pilgrims showed their defiance by throwing rocks at three ancient stone pillars. But the annual crowds eventually got so large that there wasn't enough space around the pillars to accommodate everyone who wanted to participate. To provide more space, the government of Saudi Arabia recently replaced the three pillars with three long walls. Elevated walkways were also built to provide additional standing room within throwing distance of the walls.

The ritual is intended to be a symbolic re-enactment of an ancient story in which the Devil successively tried to tempt the Hebrew patriarch Abraham, his wife Hagar, and his son Ishmael. The three original stone pillars supposedly marked the three spots where these temptations took place. However, many of the pilgrims regard the ritual as an opportunity to symbolically throw rocks at Satan himself.

Before the pillars were replaced by walls, the crowds at the site sometimes got so dense that people were crushed to death. Some were also injured, or even killed, by rocks thrown from the opposite side of a pillar. But the most deaths have been caused by stampedes. For example, 270 people were trampled to death in a stampede that occurred in 1994, and 251 died in a 2004 stampede. It was tragedies such as these that prompted the government to replace the ancient stone pillars with long walls.

## Temple Virgins

During past centuries, young girls in India were sometimes sent to live at a Hindu temple, where they went through an initiation ceremony which "married" them to the god or goddess associated with the temple. These girls, who were known as Devadasi, were often only eight or nine years old when they left their families. After they went to live at a temple, they were trained in arts such as music and dance so that they could take part in the elaborate rites performed during most Hindu worship services. Some of them may have also had other duties, such as working on temple decorations or helping to grow the flowers used in the ceremonies.

Originally these Devadasi were virgins from high-caste families, and they were admired and honored throughout their lives. But over the centuries the system slowly changed, until eventually most of the girls came from low-caste families and served as "sacred" temple prostitutes instead of sacred temple virgins. This transition from high-caste virgins to low-caste prostitutes occurred because political and economic changes gradually reduced the funds that temples received from royal patrons and wealthy donors, so that new sources of income were needed. Obviously it was easier to turn low-caste females into prostitutes, and after the shift had taken place, high-caste families wouldn't allow their daughters to become Devadasi in any case.

Some Indian state governments began to pass laws against the Devadasi system during the 1930s, and it was officially banned throughout the entire country in 1988. Even so, the Devadasi tradition still has some influence in India, because many modern prostitutes in the country try to associate themselves with it. Many of them even go through the same initiation ceremony that was formerly used in temples to "marry" a young Devadasi to a god or goddess. Going through this ceremony allows them to associate themselves with the former temple Devadasi. They want this association because it supposedly gives "religious sanction" to a life of prostitution, thereby making it seem more respectable.

## Incorruptible Bodies

This term refers to a weird belief that divine intervention preserves some dead human bodies from normal decomposition. Most dead bodies gradually decay after they are buried or placed in tombs. But some Christians believe that the bodies of very holy people are miraculously preserved indefinitely without any change at all. This isn't due to artificial preservation or mummification, but instead is a divine supernatural effect. However, it only happens to the bodies of people who were very holy. Some Christians think that these preserved bodies will be resurrected to life again during the End Times.

Many incorrupt bodies produce a distinctive scent known as the "Odor of Sanctity", which resembles the fragrance of rose blossoms. Some of these bodies also have a miraculous power to heal sick people who touch the preserved flesh.



This is a photograph of the incorrupt body of Saint Virginia Centurione Bracelli, who died in 1651. Other long-dead Christian saints whose bodies are supposedly incorruptible include Saint Bernadette of Lourdes, Saint Vincent de Paul, Saint John Vianney, Saint Veronica Giuliani, and Saint Francis Xavier. One of the longest-surviving incorrupt bodies is that of Saint Silvan, who died in the 4th century.

## Weeping Statues

A weeping statue is a statue which appears to be shedding tears by supernatural means. Most modern cases involve statues of either Jesus or the Virgin Mary. Some of these statues only produce one or two teardrops per day, and some only weep on certain days of the year, such as Christmas or Good Friday. In many reported cases the tears resemble blood or scented oil.

Some Christians believe that these tears have miraculous healing powers. If a statue becomes well-known, it may attract sick and lame people who hope to be cured. One well-known statue of the Virgin Mary, located at a shrine in Sicily, is surrounded by dozens of crutches supposedly left there by cripples who were healed by the tears.

**Note:** The insides of some statues have reportedly been secretly rigged to produce fake artificial tears.

## Sacred Mushrooms

The religious use of certain mushrooms has been reported from many parts of the world, and was already widespread during ancient times. The mushrooms contain psycho-active drugs which can produce religious-like experiences, including vivid hallucinations that appear to be supernatural visions. Many people who consume the mushrooms feel that they have entered a hidden spiritual world where they are in touch with the divine. The experience can be very powerful, and can cause permanent changes in a person's views of the world and feelings about life.

Using mushrooms to produce psychological effects is now illegal in most countries. But old religious practices often don't die easily, particularly in remote areas, and ritual ceremonies involving the consumption of mushrooms still take place in several parts of the world. The practice is especially common among the descendants of the Aztecs, Mayans, Toltecs, and other native Amerindian tribes who live in rural areas

of Mexico and Central America. These people were forced to convert to Christianity after they were conquered by the Spanish, but in many villages they didn't completely abandon their old beliefs.

According to a report from one Mexican village, the sacred mushrooms are collected from the surrounding forest by a young virgin. They are then taken to the village church and placed on the altar to be blessed by the Holy Spirit. They are eaten in front of the altar in the evening, and the visions usually continue throughout the night. The villagers believe that the visions take them into an invisible world where all the spirits live, and where they can obtain divine knowledge and understanding.

But the effects can sometimes be frightening. Outsiders who consumed the mushrooms have had visions in which they seemed to fly through the air or were transformed into weird beasts. Many species of mushrooms are poisonous, and eating them can lead to an excruciating death. Although sacred mushrooms may be safer, they can still cause very unpleasant effects, including vomiting, shivering, blackouts, and nightmares.

Various other plants besides mushrooms can also produce trances and visions. For example, a species of cactus called peyote, which grows wild in the southwestern United States, is used in the religious ceremonies of some native Amerindian tribes that live in that area. Also, the sacraments of some South American peoples include the drinking of a psycho-active brew called Ayahuasca, which is prepared from certain jungle plants. During the Middle Ages, a small Islamic sect known as the Assassins reportedly smoked a concentrated form of marijuana called hashish. The modern Rastafarian sect in Jamaica also uses marijuana in its religious observances. And the medieval tales of witches flying on broomsticks may derive from visions of flying induced by a European plant named mandrake.

Hallucinations and other strange psychological effects can also be produced by chemical compounds found in the opium poppy, the deadly nightshade, jimsonweed, morning glory seeds, salvia, cocaine, khat, absinthe, kava kava, and even some forms of tobacco. Also, some scholars think that the mysterious *Soma* mentioned in the ancient Vedic scriptures of India may have contained a psycho-active substance.

## **Ahimsa**

One of the most important teachings of Jainism is the instruction to not do any harm to other living beings. This instruction, which is called ahimsa, prohibits the harming of even the tiniest insects. As a result, many Jain monks wear cloth masks to prevent the accidental inhalation of flying insects, and they carefully clear any ants or other insects from their path before taking a step forward. Many even refuse to eat honey, since removing it from a hive might cause some of the bees to starve to death.

Such a strict observance of ahimsa obviously isn't practical for the average person. But many ordinary Jains are able to observe a less-strict form in which they adhere to a vegetarian diet and oppose the killing of any animals. Many Hindus and Buddhists are also familiar with the concept of ahimsa, and this is one of the reasons for the widespread practice of vegetarianism in India.

## **Demonic Possession**

When a demon gets inside a human body and gains control over it, the resulting condition is called demonic possession. Because demons are spirits, they normally aren't visible, but they can produce visible effects. Thus, when a demon gains possession of someone's body, there are usually major changes in the person's behavior. For example, possession can cause fits and convulsions, disorientation, weird facial expressions, and sudden violent actions. The condition often resembles mental illnesses such as schizophrenia or multiple personality disorder. In some cases the demon gets control of the victim's vocal cords and uses them to talk to nearby people. Demons who talk in this way can usually be recognized by their foul language and strange tone of voice.

The traditional treatment for demonic possession is to try to force the demon to leave the victim's body. A successful expulsion is called an exorcism, and it is usually performed by people who have special knowledge and skills. Because a demon will often resist the attempt to



expel it, the process can take several days, or even longer. At the moment when the demon finally leaves, the victim may give a loud shriek and then faint.

According to the bible, Jesus sometimes encountered possessed people as he traveled from place to place. Because he had supernatural powers, he could expel demons almost instantly. They never tried to resist him because they knew who he was and acknowledged his power and authority. Thus, when he ordered one of them to leave a body, it always obeyed without delay.

Some descriptions of demons say that they were originally angels, but that they were thrown out of heaven after they supported the Devil in his rebellion against God. Although this rebellion failed, they are still loyal to Satan and help him pursue his evil activities. They are sometimes blamed for certain types of bad behavior, including drug addiction, sexual perversions, serial murder, and adultery. Some Christians believe that the Holy Spirit will protect them from any demons that try to cause these kinds of problems.



This image shows a demon leaving the head of a possessed woman after being expelled by Jesus. The image is taken from a medieval book called *Les Tres Riches Heures du duc de Berry*, which is a Book of Hours created for the Duc de Berry during the period from 1412 to 1416 AD.

## **The Ghost Dance**

In the late 19th century, many Indian tribes in the western United States were in a desperate situation. Many Indian warriors had been killed, and the surviving members of most tribes were freezing, starving, and dying from strange diseases. But in the year 1890, just when all hope seemed lost, the Indians' spirits were suddenly revived by reports of a new ritual dance called the Ghost Dance. According to the reports, performing the new dance could potentially cause all white people to miraculously vanish from the earth. In addition, the dance also might bring all dead Indians back to life and re-unite them with their old tribes. The final result of these changes would be a world in which the Indians could return to their old way of life in a restored environment completely free of war, disease, suffering, and death.

It was called the Ghost Dance because the spirits (ghosts) of dead ancestors sometimes appeared in visions to Indians who were performing it. Visions had also played a role in the original creation of the dance, which was first performed by members of the Paiute tribe in Nevada. Knowledge of the dance began spreading from Nevada to other areas in the spring of 1890, and within a few months it had reached most parts of the American west.

According to the predictions of some Indian prophets, the dance would produce its miraculous effects in the spring of 1891, but only if it was performed regularly by many different tribes during the intervening months. The expected effects included the disappearance of all white people, the resurrection of all dead Indian ancestors, a miraculous transformation of the earth, and a return to the old way of life in an unspoiled environment.

Although the Ghost Dance was new, it had similarities to the traditional circle dances that most tribes had been performing for centuries. But the Ghost Dance was unusual in that men and women performed it together. They circled counter-clockwise around a tree or pole, chanting and singing special songs. The dances of some tribes had several hundred participants and lasted up to five days, although there were occasional breaks to allow the dancers to rest. Despite these rest periods, some

people would become so exhausted that they collapsed on the ground. The visions of the ghosts of dead ancestors usually occurred during these collapses from exhaustion.

When U.S. government officials heard about the new dance, many of them became alarmed. They feared that the excitement created by the dance would lead to an uprising. But the Indians themselves viewed the dance as a substitute for an uprising, since it was supposed to miraculously transform the world without any fighting. However, because the Indians had been attacked so many times in the past, they felt a need to protect themselves until the dance could produce its final effects. Somehow a belief arose that a specially-designed cloth garment called a "ghost shirt" had a supernatural power to stop bullets. During the last months of 1890, many Indian men began wearing these "ghost shirts" to protect themselves in case they were attacked.

The desperate situation of the Indians had been brought about by the destruction of the great buffalo herds. White people had wiped out the herds because the buffaloes were the natives' main source of food. The strategy worked so well that many Indian tribes were soon facing starvation. With no other alternative, most tribes finally agreed to live on reservations in return for promises of food and other provisions. The government wanted the Indians confined to reservations so that white people could have most of the land. But many government officials were greedy, corrupt, uncaring, or incompetent, and the promised provisions often never reached the reservations.

In December of 1890 some U.S. officials began to suspect that the Sioux Indians in the Dakota Territory were planning an uprising. When these officials learned that some of the Sioux were preparing to perform the Ghost Dance, a unit of the U.S. Cavalry was sent to monitor their activities. The Indians resented the presence of the soldiers, and fighting soon broke out, with each side later accusing the other of starting it. During the fight, the "ghost shirts" didn't stop any bullets, and many Indians were killed. After this defeat, Indians everywhere began to lose faith in the Ghost Dance, and in most areas performances soon ceased.

## **The Rope to Heaven**

The Dagba people of central Africa believe that a glowing rope once dangled down from heaven to the surface of the earth. Humans could climb the rope to the upper realm and socialize with the gods who lived there. But the gods eventually got irritated because people kept asking them for favors and complaining about the hardships of life down below. The gods finally became so annoyed that they destroyed the rope and scattered the pieces across the sky. The remains of these pieces can still be seen, but they are now known as the Milky Way.

## **The Devil's Mark**

During the era of the witch hunts, the body of a suspected witch would often be searched for a suspicious-looking mole, wart, scar, or skin blemish called a Devil's Mark. Many Christians believed that such a mark was placed on a witch's body by Satan after she pledged herself to him. If the examiners of a suspected witch found a possible devil's mark on her, this was regarded as strong evidence of her guilt. Usually the next step was to torture her until she confessed, and then tie her to a wooden stake and burn her to death.

There were various theories about how the Devil created his mark. Some people believed that it appeared when he licked a woman's skin with his tongue. Others said that he raked his claw across her flesh, or burned it with a hot iron, or created a special kind of tattoo. These differing theories suggest that the marks didn't have a consistent appearance, but could take various shapes, forms, and colors. As a result, the examiners usually relied on their own judgment when trying to identify possible marks. To insure that the search was thorough, the suspect would be stripped naked, and all the hair would be shaved from her body.

One way to test a possible mark was to stick a needle into it. A true devil's mark was thought to be insensitive to pain, so if a suspect didn't feel the penetration of the needle, this would prove that she was a witch.

But even if the insertion of the needle caused her to scream in agony, the examiners could accuse her of faking the pain and condemn her anyway. Thus no matter what she did during the test, she couldn't prove her innocence.

A Devil's Mark is also called a Devil's Seal or Witch's Mark. In some areas it was also called a Witch's Tit, because a mole or wart can resemble a small nipple, and a tiny percentage of people even have a small third nipple on their bodies. Some examiners even thought that the mark could be invisible, and if nothing was found in the initial search, they would begin sticking the needle into random spots on the suspect's body to try to find an insensitive area.

The era of the large-scale witch hunts began in the 15th century and continued for more than 200 years. It started in the Catholic areas of Europe but soon spread into Protestant areas as well. Most of the victims were old women, but some younger women, as well as some men, were also killed. Their punishment was dictated by the bible, for Exodus 22:18 says "*Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live*" [King James Version]. By the time the organized persecutions ended, tens of thousands of people had been tortured into confessing and then burned alive.



This drawing by the 17th-century Dutch artist Jan Luyken shows the execution of a group of suspected witches. Each suspect was tied to a post and burned alive as the flames leaped up onto her body.

## Heavenly Omens

Ever since ancient times, the appearance of a bright comet in the sky has been regarded as an evil omen. This is because comets have long been seen as signs of impending disastrous events, such as the death of a great ruler or the outbreak of a plague. The ancient Romans recorded that a brilliant comet appeared just before the assassination of Julius Caesar, and a fiery comet seen in 1665 was blamed for a flareup of bubonic plague in London that killed 90,000 people. When a comet appeared in 1519, the Aztec king Montezuma saw it as an omen that his empire would soon be destroyed (and it soon was). Some people in the United States even connected the American defeat at the Alamo in 1835 to an appearance of Halley's Comet that year.

Some people still regard comets as bad omens. When a comet named Kohoutek approached the vicinity of the earth in 1973, members of a U.S. religious sect called the Children of God feared that a terrible disaster was about to occur. And in 1997 thirty-nine members of the Heaven's Gate cult committed suicide in California because they believed that the approach of a comet named Hale-Bopp foretold the destruction of civilization.

Other types of heavenly events are also often regarded as omens. Some past eclipses of the sun have produced even more fear than comets normally do. But some events, such as the sighting of a shooting star, have usually been viewed as good omens. Another example of a good omen is the sudden appearance of a very bright new star. Astronomers call a bright new star a "supernova", and believe that they are created when a very faint star suddenly explodes and temporarily becomes much brighter. To ancient people, a supernova often appeared to be a new star, and in some societies its sudden appearance was thought to signal the birth of a great future leader. Some historians think that the Star of Bethlehem, which appeared just before the birth of Jesus, was a supernova.

**Note:** Because supernovas are created by explosions, they gradually become dimmer as time passes, and within a few years most of them are no longer visible to the naked eye.

## The Antichrist

In Christian belief, the Antichrist is an extremely evil man who will appear shortly before the end of the present age, during a period known as the End Times. Assisted by Satan, he will gain temporary control over the earth. While he is in power, he will persecute good people and reward wicked people. His lies and promises of rewards will dupe millions of people into supporting his rule. But eventually he and his followers will be defeated and condemned to eternal torture in hell.

**Note:** Some Christians symbolically identify the Antichrist with a seven-headed beast that appears in the visions of the Book of Revelation.

Many early Christians believed that the Roman Emperor Nero was the Antichrist. During later periods the same accusation was made against some other major historical figures, including Charlemagne, Napoleon, Adolf Hitler, and even several popes. Some modern Christians expect the End Times to arrive very soon, and think that the real Antichrist is already alive and waiting for the opportunity to reveal himself.



This painting by the 16th-century German artist Matthias Gerung shows the seven-headed beast described in the Book of Revelations. Some Christians believe that this beast is a symbol of the Antichrist.



## **Baron Samedi**

The Haitian Voodoo god Baron Samedi is the guardian of the crossroads between life and death. He helps the souls of recently-deceased people pass through the crossroads into the spirit world, and sometimes he allows spirits from that world to come into our world. He is also a master of the occult forces of sorcery and necromancy. Like many gods, he has several names, including Papa Guede (or Ghede) and Lord of the Dead.

As befits a lord of the dead, Baron Samedi has a skeletal body and a skull-like head. But despite his gruesome appearance, he is actually a fun-loving god who tries to enjoy himself whenever he can. He loves to smoke and drink, and is seldom seen without a cigar in his mouth or a glass of rum in his bony fingers. When he goes out on the town, he always wears a black tuxedo, shiny top hat and dark eyeglasses, and he likes to twirl a cane as he walks. His Haitian name, Baron Samedi, means Baron Saturday in English, and derives from his custom of going to parties on Saturday night. He is notorious for telling dirty jokes and chasing after women.

## **Chosen People**

Throughout history various groups of people have considered themselves to be chosen by a god or goddess for special treatment. In most cases they believe that the god or goddess wants them to carry out an important mission or play a special role in human events. In return for carrying out the deity's wishes, they expect to receive exclusive benefits which will enable them and their descendants to multiply and prosper as a people.

According to the bible, God selected the ancient Hebrews (Israelites) and their descendants (the Jews) to be his chosen people. He said that he would use them to reveal his word to everyone on the earth. He also said

that the Messiah, or redeemer of the world, would come from their nation. In return, he expected them to set an example for the rest of humankind by devoting themselves to him, and by living in accordance with his laws. Some modern Jews think that the past catastrophes experienced by their people were due to failures to fulfill their part of the original agreement with God.

Some Christians believe that the Jews relinquished their right to be God's chosen people when they refused to accept Jesus as the Messiah. These Christians also believe that God made a new covenant with them to replace the original agreement with the Jews. However, this view is sometimes criticized because it implies that God made a mistake when he originally selected the ancient Israelites as his chosen people. Another view, which avoids this criticism, is that the Jews aren't the real descendants of the ancient Israelites, but that another group of people is. Several different Christian organizations claim to be this other group. Some Christians even believe that white Caucasians are the real descendants of the ancient Israelites (through the ten lost tribes) and are therefore the true original chosen people.

Members of the modern Rastafarian sect in Jamaica believe that black Africans are God's real chosen people. They base this belief on the legend that the Queen of Sheba had an affair with King Solomon of Israel and bore a son who became the first king of Ethiopia. They believe that this king passed the blood of the ancient Israelites to all black people, making them the true chosen ones.

Another claim to the title of chosen people has been put forward by leaders of the Unification Church, who teach that Korea is the chosen nation, selected by God to serve a divine mission. This church was founded in Korea in the 1950s by Reverend Sun Myung Moon, but it later gained many followers in the United States. According to Reverend Moon, who claimed to be a messiah, Korea was chosen by God to be the birthplace of a heavenly tradition which will eventually lead to the establishment of God's kingdom on earth.

## **The Firebird**

In Russian folklore the Firebird is a magical glowing bird with eyes that sparkle like diamonds and feathers that gleam like silver and gold. These feathers continue to shine even after they are plucked, and a single one can light up a big room. During the night this bird can illuminate the area around it as brightly as a thousand lights. When it sings, pearls fall from its beak, and anyone who finds them can use them to buy food. Its song can also heal sickness and give sight to blind people. It is an immortal bird with eternal youth and beauty.

## **The Rapture**

Some Christians eagerly look forward to an expected future event known as the Rapture. When the expected moment arrives, Jesus will suddenly appear in the clouds and miraculously pull all true Christians up to him, then take them to heaven. Non-Christians and insincere believers will be left behind on the earth, where they will have to go through a period of terrible suffering called the Tribulation.

During the Rapture all saved people will be pulled up to Jesus at exactly the same moment, thereby vanishing instantly from the face of the earth. At the same time all dead people who lived good Christian lives will be resurrected and also pulled up. During this process, the bodies of all the chosen will be transformed into an immortal state of perfect health, and their minds will be freed from any tendency to do sinful things or even to have sinful thoughts. This transformation is regarded as a necessary step in preparing a saved person for entry into heaven.

During recent decades the idea of the Rapture has become very popular among certain groups of Christians. But there are also numerous doubters, and many people consider this to be one of the weirdest Christian beliefs.

## Chinese Guardian Lions

Old statues of creatures that resemble lions can be found outside many Chinese temples and government buildings. In Chinese tradition, these statues have supernatural powers that enable them to protect a building from evil spirits. They are usually found in pairs, one representing a male and the other a female. Positioned outside the entrance of a building, they continually stand guard against evil spirits.



This is a photo of a large guardian lion.

Most of the statues were chiseled from stone or cast in metal. Because artistic styles changed over the centuries, the appearance of the statues varies, and some of them only vaguely resemble a lion. In fact, most of the artisans who created the oldest statues had probably never seen a real lion, because the animals aren't native to China. But an Asiatic breed of lions lives in countries such as India, and occasionally one of the animals was brought to China and given to an ancient emperor as a gift. So even if an artisan had never seen a real lion, he or she could have had some information about their appearance.

The statues are sometimes called Shishi Lions. But the first Europeans who saw them called them Foo Dogs (or Fu Dogs), because some of them have a vague resemblance to dogs.

## **The Cedar Tree of the End**

According to the myths of some indigenous African peoples, an enchanted tree called the Cedar Tree of the End grows somewhere in Paradise. It is a beautiful plant containing millions of golden leaves attached to emerald branches. The names of all living human beings are written on the leaves, with one name on each leaf. When a leaf falls from the tree, the person whose name is on it dies, and his or her soul either rises to Paradise or falls into Hell. And when a baby is born on the earth, a new leaf inscribed with its name sprouts on the tree.

Islamic traditions speak of a similar plant called the Lote Tree, which grows in the seventh heaven. Leaves fall from this tree during the month of Ramadan, and each falling leaf contains the name of someone who will die during the coming year. As these leaves fall, new leaves appear on the tree with names of children who will be born within the next twelve months. The prophet Muhammad reportedly saw this tree during his legendary night journey to heaven.

## **Religious Police**

The government of Saudi Arabia currently employs more than three thousand "religious police", whose job is to ensure the proper moral conduct of all citizens. These police have the power to arrest anyone who dresses improperly, listens to the wrong kind of music, eats prohibited foods such as pork, or improperly socializes with members of the opposite sex. They also have the authority to shut down businesses that sell unsuitable merchandise, and to close theaters that show banned movies. Foreign visitors are not exempt from the prohibitions, and can be arrested for violations.

These religious police are employees of a government agency known as the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. Within the country they are called Mutaween. To help them perform their duties, thousands of unpaid volunteers watch for improper behavior and

report observed violations. The regular police can also provide assistance when extra help is needed, such as when conducting raids on private social gatherings.

The religious laws of the country put special restrictions on females. For example, a woman is not supposed to appear in public unless she is escorted by a husband or male relative. Females are also not allowed to vote in elections, work as waitresses, or drive cars. However, most of these restrictions could soon be lifted, because movements to abolish them appear to be gaining strength within the country.

But even as old restrictions are removed, new ones can be imposed. Thus in recent years the religious police have tried to stop people from celebrating Valentine's Day. To prevent gift-giving on that day, they have searched businesses for valentine cards, and have even confiscated items such as chocolate candy and red roses from store shelves.

## **The Assassins**

The Assassins were a group of Islamic terrorists who operated in parts of Iran, Iraq, and Syria during the Middle Ages. According to most accounts of their activities, they regularly used a concentrated form of marijuana called hashish. In fact, some sources say that the modern English word "assassin" is derived from the Arabic word "*hashish*".

The Assassins were members of the Shia branch of Islam, which at that time was a persecuted minority, and one of their primary goals was to assassinate leaders of the ruling Sunni majority. As a relatively small group, they mainly operated from the safety of remote mountain strongholds. Although most of their activity was directed against the Sunni ruling class, they also had some encounters with Christian knights who had come from Europe to fight in the Crusades.

There are different accounts of how the Assassins used hashish. Some sources say that the drug was mainly employed to give young recruits visions of the pleasures that awaited them in Paradise if they died while fighting for their faith. According to other accounts, the drug provided the

fanatical courage and reckless attitude needed to carry out suicidal missions. But some modern scholars doubt that the Assassins even used hashish at all, and suspect that the stories about it may be based on false accusations made by their enemies. Unfortunately, the truth is hard to determine because most of the original accounts were destroyed when Mongol invaders conquered much of the region in the 13th century.

## The Wandering Jew

Shortly after Jesus picked up his cross and started walking with it, a Jewish bystander hit him on the back and told him to walk faster. For this evil act, the Jew was condemned to wander the earth alone, homeless and friendless, until the Second Coming of Jesus. Over the centuries many people have reported seeing this wanderer slinking past in the distance. Some think that an increase in these sightings would be a sign that Jesus is about to return. **Note:** The story of the Wandering Jew has sometimes been used in anti-Jewish propaganda.



This depiction of the Wandering Jew was drawn by the 19th-century American cartoonist Joseph Keppler.

## **Faith Healing**

The belief that diseases and deformities can be miraculously cured through supernatural effects is found in many parts of the world. It is even common in some advanced societies where modern medical treatments are available. Unfortunately, modern medical practices still can't cure many conditions, and people sometimes become so desperate that they turn to unconventional treatments like faith healing. It is most often used in attempts to treat conditions such as cancer, arthritis, paralysis, and tuberculosis. It has also traditionally been used to cure blindness, deafness, psychological disorders, lameness, and leprosy.

Faith healing is also called divine healing. Attempts to use it as a method of treatment probably originated in prehistoric times, and many ancient people believed in its effectiveness. According to the bible, Jesus could cure people almost instantly just by saying a few words. The apostle Paul also performed some miraculous cures. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he wrote that the ability to heal is one of the special gifts of the Holy Spirit, and that certain people may possess this gift to a very high degree. Most modern Christian healers attribute their supposed abilities to the power of the Holy Spirit.

Some modern faith healers in the United States claim to have cured hundreds of people. Some have even performed apparent cures on live television. But there are many skeptics who doubt that any of these cures were genuine. Actually, a few apparent cures could have been brought about by the placebo effect or by spontaneous remission, because the human body is sometimes able to heal itself naturally. But there is evidence that many claimed healings are fraudulent. There have also been reports that some well-known televangelistic healers have become very wealthy from contributions sent in by their viewers.

Members of some religious groups have such a strong belief in faith healing that they oppose the use of modern medical techniques, and refuse to see doctors or go to hospitals. Some people have even been charged with crimes after their children died from diseases or conditions that could have been successfully treated by modern methods. But prosecutors in such cases have had difficulty obtaining convictions,



because the accused often use legal guarantees of religious freedom as part of their defense.

## **Monuments Built by a God**

The mysterious ruins of Tiahuanaco lie about 4000 meters [12,500 feet] above sea level at a remote location in western Bolivia. According to many experts, the precision and quality of the stonework at the site is unmatched anywhere in the world. Some of the individual stone blocks weigh more than 70 tons and were transported from a quarry about 10 kilometers [6 miles] away. One well-known monument, the Gateway of the Sun, was cut with remarkable precision from a single block of a very hard type of rock called andesite. The overall workmanship at the site is so good that modern stone-cutters equipped with steel tools and electrically-powered machinery would find it hard to achieve the same quality.

According to scientists who have studied Tiahuanaco, it was a major ceremonial center of a pre-Inca civilization that arose in the region about 2000 years ago. Eventually, for unknown reasons, this civilization disappeared. Centuries later, when the first Spanish explorers reached the area, the people who lived near Tiahuanaco knew virtually nothing about the earlier civilization. In fact, these people believed that the structures at the site had been built by a god. They also believed that this god, whose name was Viracocha, had created some gigantic artificial robots to help move the massive stones.

**Note:** Because the precision and quality of the stonework at Tiahuanaco is so remarkable, some people refuse to believe that pre-modern humans would have been capable of building it. There is even a theory that it was actually built by aliens from another planet who visited the earth thousands of years ago. Some supporters of this theory say that native legends depicted these aliens as gods, and that this could have led to the belief that Tiahuanaco was built by a god. Of course this theory is mostly speculation.

## Prayer Wheels

Many Buddhists believe that a spinning prayer wheel transfers compassion and good karma to everyone who is near it. As a result, thousands of the wheels have been placed at locations throughout the region of Tibet, so that anyone walking past one of them can reach out and set the wheel in motion. Many inhabitants of this region also carry small prayer wheels with them and spin them whenever they have a chance. It is a common belief that people can use the wheels to gain personal benefits such as greater compassion, more wisdom, and better health. Animals, and even insects, that pass near a spinning wheel are also thought to get benefits.



The photo shows a row of prayer wheels.

Although they are called "wheels", most of them have the shape of a drum. According to Buddhist belief, they get their spiritual power from the mantras that are written on them. These mantras, which are similar to prayers, are groups of syllables from the ancient Sanskrit language, and they supposedly provide spiritual benefits to anyone who chants them. The turning of a wheel inscribed with a mantra is thought to have the same effect as reciting the mantra aloud. Each full turn of the wheel is equivalent to one oral recitation. Some large wheels have enough space for several mantras, and thus can produce a multiple effect.

Prayer wheels are also called Mani wheels. Most of them have a cylindrical shape and rotate horizontally around a vertical spindle. They can be made of stone, metal, wood, leather, or even cotton. The largest are more than twelve feet tall and have diameters up to six feet. At some shrines and monasteries, there is a row of prayer wheels which visitors can spin in sequence as they walk past.

## **Idol Worship**

The term "idol worship" can have several different meanings. According to one definition, it is the worship of a physical idol itself, such as a statue, as if it were a real god or spirit. By another definition, it is the use of an idol to symbolically represent a god or spirit during an act of worship. And in a third possible case, a god or spirit is thought to be inside the idol at the time of worship. Thus, in the first case the worshipers believe that the idol is an actual god or spirit, whereas in the second case they regard it as a stand-in for a god or spirit, and in the third case they think that a god or spirit is inside it. Only in the first case is the physical idol itself worshiped.

One of the most famous idols is the Golden Calf described in the bible. According to the Book of Exodus, this idol was created when the ancient Israelites were camped at the base of Mount Sinai waiting for Moses to return from his climb up the mountain. The Israelites had expected Moses to return quickly, so when many days passed and he still didn't appear, they started to worry. Eventually they asked Aaron, the brother of Moses, to make them an image of the God of Israel so that they could make offerings to it. At first Aaron refused, but they continued to pressure him, and he finally decided to try to satisfy them by making something for them to worship. He collected a large quantity of gold from their jewelry, melted it with a fire, and ended up with the Golden Calf. He built an altar in front of the calf so that the Israelites could worship it and make offerings to it.

Eventually Moses came down from the mountain carrying two stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments. When he saw the Golden Calf, he got so angry that he shattered the tablets on the ground. Then he

burnt the calf idol in a fire, ground it into powder, poured the powder into some water, and forced the Israelites to drink the mixture. Aaron admitted that he had collected the gold and melted it, but said that it had formed itself into the shape of a calf on its own. God was so angry that he decided to kill all of the Israelites, but Moses convinced him to spare most of them, although at least 3000 did die, and God said that he would inflict more punishment later by killing some of the tribe's future descendants. Afterward, Moses climbed the mountain again to get new tablets to replace those that had been shattered.

Stories about the prophet Muhammad suggest that he had an intense hatred for idols. According to one story, he smashed more than 300 pagan idols that had been kept inside the Kaaba in Mecca before the people of the region converted to Islam.

Some of the largest images and statues of deities can be found in Hindu temples. To an outsider, Hinduism may appear to have numerous gods and goddesses, but many Hindus regard all of these individual deities as different aspects of a single Supreme God called Brahman who permeates everything in the universe. Even so, a particular god or goddess is often worshiped individually, as if he or she had a separate independent existence.

In Hinduism, an image or statue of a deity is called a murti. Many Hindus believe that a murti provides a way to communicate with the deity that it represents. Some even believe that the deity can be present within the murti. Thus, when a Hindu bows down to a murti, or places offerings before it, he or she may believe that a god or goddess is inside it and is aware of what is happening. Actually, many Hindus believe that a deity only spends part of its time inside a murti, and they try to make their offerings when they think it is present. Another common view is that the murti is a kind of "listening post" for the deity. But in all of these cases, the murti itself isn't worshiped, and most Hindus will protest when an outsider refers to a murti as an idol.

## **Holy Laughter**

During the worship services of certain Christian churches, some members of the congregation may begin to laugh uncontrollably. They may also leave their seats and stagger around, or even fall on the floor. When they are later asked why they began laughing, they say that they had no control over it, but were driven to do it by the power of the Holy Spirit. Because they actually feel this power within them, or imagine that they feel it, in these churches uncontrollable laughter is regarded as one of the signs that a person is filled with the Holy Spirit.

Most of the churches in which holy laughter is common are located in Canada and the United States. In addition to laughing, members of these churches sometimes roll around on the floor or make sounds like the roaring of a lion, the crowing of a rooster, or the barking of a dog. This type of behavior has even occurred during church services that were being shown on television.

## **Naturist Religious Sects**

When Alexander the Great led his army into India in the 4th century BC, he encountered several wandering groups of naked Hindu holy men. In fact, members of some Hindu sects still practice nudity today, and there are also some Jain and Ajivika monks in India who go around naked. In these religious groups the practice is usually associated with a belief that a truly virtuous person should give up all material possessions, including clothes.

Naturist religious sects have also appeared at various times in other parts of the world. For example, an ancient Gnostic-Christian sect called the Adamites existed in Egypt in the 2nd century AD. Its members believed that going naked would enable them to return to the original state of innocence enjoyed by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This sect, which rejected marriage as well as clothing, eventually came into conflict with mainstream Christians, and it apparently died out in the 4th or 5th

century.

Although the ancient Adamite sect died out, many similar groups appeared in later historical periods, and some still exist today. These modern groups include the Christian Naturist Church Association, the Church of the Universe, the Doukhobors, and the Naturist Church of Universal Brotherhood. There are also some religious groups whose members normally wear clothes but undress to perform their rituals. These include some covens of Wiccans, some Raelians, and members of several "new-age" religious groups.

Modern Christian naturists say that God originally created people without clothes and intended for them to always live that way. As their proof for this, they say that Adam and Eve would have never tried to hide their nakedness if they had obeyed God's command to not eat the forbidden fruit. Modern naturists also point out that the bible doesn't say anywhere that nudity is a sin. Finally, many of them believe that Jesus was a nudist, and that they are merely following his example.



This engraving by Gustave Dore depicts the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden.

## Original Sin

In Christian belief, all human beings inherit their sinful nature from Adam and Eve, who acquired it after they disobeyed God's instructions in the Garden of Eden. When God created Adam and Eve, he originally made them sinless, and he intended for them to remain that way. But the eating of the forbidden fruit somehow transformed human nature so that we are all naturally sinful and can only obtain salvation by divine grace. Some Christians believe that our natural tendency to sin is transmitted from generation to generation by male semen.

The disobedience of Adam and Eve and their resulting loss of innocence is called the "Fall of Mankind". It is often regarded as the basic cause of all the misery subsequently experienced by the human race. According to a biblical passage at Genesis 3:16-19, this misery started with some punishments that God announced to Adam and Eve as they left the Garden of Eden. God told them that Adam would have to toil and sweat in order to survive, and that Eve would feel severe labor pains when she gave birth to children. Many Christians interpret this passage to mean that God inflicted these punishments not only on Adam and Eve, but also on all of their descendants, so that all human beings must pay the same price.

Some people think that God acted unfairly when he decided to punish all humankind just because two people disobeyed him. Some also think that the punishments are unduly harsh, especially the infliction of labor pains on all women. After all, Eve wouldn't have eaten the forbidden fruit if a serpent hadn't tricked her into doing it. God could have forgiven her and let her have another chance. But instead, he decided to punish not only her, but all other women too.

**Note:** Some Christians believe that God exempted the Virgin Mary from the punishments, so that she didn't feel any labor pains when she gave birth to Jesus.

## Chinese Spirit Money

In one traditional Chinese view of the afterlife, the souls of dead people continue to pursue many of the same activities that their living counterparts pursued before they died. For example, these souls continue to eat, drink, wear clothes, read books, play sports, go to parties, etc. To help ensure that they can do whatever they want, their still-living relatives may try to send them gifts, including money. Normally this isn't real money, but instead is a special "spirit money" that supposedly can be used for transactions in the afterlife. This special money is "sent" to the souls of dead people by burning it, for fire is thought to transform a tangible object in our world into a corresponding spiritual object in the other world. After the souls of the dead receive this money, they can use it to buy the things they need to make their afterlife more enjoyable.

Spirit money is also called "hell money" and "heaven money". The use of these other names came about because many Chinese misunderstood the teachings of early Christian missionaries, and thought that hell and heaven were English names for their own imagined world of the afterlife. The mistake was eventually recognized, but only after the new names were in common usage.

Most spirit money has the form of a printed bank note or paper bill. It comes in various sizes and denominations, and many of the designs are very elaborate and colorful. Some of the bills have denominations that are equivalent to billions of dollars, which suggests that prices in the afterlife could be very high.

People in China sometimes try to send other things besides money to the souls of dead relatives. To do so, they burn paper replicas of items such as clothes, watches, cars, and even houses. It is thought that the soul of a dead relative receives the real item when the paper replica is burned. Some modern Chinese have even used this method to try to send credit cards to the souls of their dead kin.



## Golems

In Jewish folklore a golem is an artificial humanlike creature made from clay or mud. It appears to be alive, but it has no soul. It is created by forming clay or mud into the shape of a human, and then performing a secret ritual to animate it. A Jewish legend says that the prophet Jeremiah made a golem, but this isn't mentioned in the bible.

Actually, very few golems have been made, because only a very holy person has enough spiritual power to animate a clay figure. But even a very holy person can't make a golem that has the personality and independent mind of a human being. Golems are always inferior to humans because they are made by men rather than by God. They can't think or talk like a human, and they are slow and clumsy in their movements. Some descriptions say that their bodies are animated by a demon or a nature spirit instead of a human soul.



This photo shows a statue of a golem.

The best-known story about a golem describes some events that supposedly took place in the European city of Prague during the 16th century, at a time when the Jews in the city were being persecuted by the Christians. To help defend the Jews, the chief Rabbi of the city created a golem out of clay dug from a river bank. Eventually this golem helped bring the persecution to an end, but then it began to run amok. To stop it,

the Rabbi deactivated it and hid the body in the attic of the Alt-Neu Synagogue in Prague.

During the Second World War, the Nazis destroyed almost all of the synagogues in the areas they occupied, but the Alt-Neu Synagogue in Prague miraculously survived. According to a legend, a Nazi soldier tried to climb to its attic and stab the golem, but died mysteriously before he could get to it. Some people believe that the body of this golem is still in the attic.

## **Holy Mud**

Every year about 300,000 Christian pilgrims visit a small church located in a remote area north of the U.S. city of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Inside the church, in a small room near the chapel, is a pit full of mud. Many of the pilgrims believe that this mud has miraculous healing powers. They smear it on their bodies, and sometimes even eat it, in hopes of being cured of their ailments. Another room in the church contains numerous braces, crutches, and other objects supposedly left behind by people who were cured by the mud.

The church, which is named Nuestro Senor de Esquipulas, is located in the village of Chimayo, New Mexico. It attracts more visitors than any other Catholic pilgrimage center in the United States, and was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1970. To reach it, some pilgrims follow a traditional custom of walking all the way from the city of Albuquerque, a distance of about 90 miles [150 kilometers].

Many of the pilgrims take some mud with them when they leave and give it to friends or relatives who weren't able to make the trip. It is sometimes assumed that this removed mud is replaced by new mud welling up from deeper in the ground. Actually, the hole is refilled every evening with dirt dug from nearby hillsides, a fact which isn't publicized. This carried-in dirt adds up to about 25 tons per year.

## **The Australian Fertility Stone**

People who travel through a certain section of central Australia may pass near a large isolated boulder known as the Erathipa stone. According to the aboriginal people who live in the region, this stone contains the souls of children who have recently died. These souls can look out through an opening in the side of the stone, and they continually watch for people to pass by. If they see a young woman come near, one of the souls will leap into her womb and make her pregnant. This will be the soul of the baby that is eventually born.

So if a married woman is childless and having difficulty getting pregnant, she can make a trip to the Erathipa stone and allow one of the souls to leap into her body. In this way, a barren woman can get pregnant, and the soul of a dead child can have a chance to be reborn in a new body. On the other hand, if a young woman has to pass near to the stone, and she doesn't want to get pregnant, she will get a walking stick and slowly hobble by, so that the souls in the rock will think that she is an old woman and won't try to leap into her body.

## **The Valkyries**

In Norse mythology the Valkyries are beautiful goddess-like maidens who decide which warriors deserve to go to Valhalla after they die. These maidens ride majestic spirit stallions through the sky to the scene of every battle, then watch from above to see which warriors show the most courage during the fighting. After the battle is over, they escort the souls of the worthiest dead warriors to Valhalla. To be eligible for this reward, not only must a warrior be very brave, he must also die during a battle. The souls of warriors who die in some other way aren't allowed to go to Valhalla even if they were extremely brave fighters during their lifetimes.

Some descriptions of Valkyries say that they can influence the course of a battle and help determine which warriors are killed. Artists usually depict them as statuesque women with blond hair, blue eyes, and fair skin. When

they go to the scene of a battle, they wear scarlet corsets and carry spears. Their horses are magnificent animals whose hoof beats sound like thunder as they gallop across the sky.

The Valkyries also participate in the raucous feasts that take place every night in the great hall of Valhalla. Wearing white robes, they serve ale or mead to the souls of the dead warriors that gather there every evening. During the day these warriors practice their fighting techniques and compete in knightly tournaments, but they always gather in the great hall in the evening. Some Norse myths suggest that a Valkyrie and a dead warrior can become lovers.

## **Sacred Cows**

In Hinduism, killing a cow is a heinous sin, and the eating of beef is worse than cannibalism. As a result, stray cows enjoy great liberties in many parts of India. They wander through the streets, break into gardens, relieve themselves on the sidewalks, and frequently create traffic jams. To most Hindus, everything about them is sacred, even their dung and urine.

Although many people in India feed stray cows, most of the animals are skinny and produce little or no milk. Some economists argue that the presence of these strays increases poverty and hunger in the country by consuming resources that could be put to better use. But many Indians dispute this, pointing out that cows mostly live on non-human foods like fodder and rice straw, and that their dung is an important source of fertilizer and fuel.

Ancient Indian writings indicate that reverence for the cow goes back thousands of years. Even today, no pious Hindu will pass a cow without touching it and then touching his own head as an act of homage. In some parts of India a person can be sent to jail for killing or injuring a cow. And some local governments even maintain old-age homes for animals that have become too weak to survive in the streets.

## Magic Spells

The casting of magic spells is one of the activities regularly performed by wizards, magicians, sorcerers, and witches. These spells can be used for both good purposes and bad purposes. Examples of spells used for good purposes include love spells and happiness spells, whereas curses and death spells are almost always created with evil intentions.

In order to cast a magic spell, it is necessary to get the help of the invisible powers of the spirit world. Because this requires occult knowledge and special skills, an ordinary person normally isn't able to do it. Correct knowledge of the procedures is hard to obtain because most wizards and sorcerers try to protect their secrets from outsiders. During most periods of history, practitioners of the art had to hide their activities to avoid being persecuted. However, to prevent the knowledge from being completely lost, they usually passed it on to one or two favored students.



This painting by artist Frederick Sandys depicts the legendary sorceress Morgana le Fay, who lived in England during the era of King Arthur. She may have gotten some of her training in sorcery from Merlin the Magician.

## **Ki-Agpga-Pod**

The Tupi Indians of Brazil have a myth about a strange creature called a Ki-Agpga-Pod. According to the myth, this creature begins forming inside the heart of every dead human body, starting three days after the death occurs. The creature, which has a human-like shape, grows very rapidly and soon gets big enough to burst out of the heart and leave the body. After it is free, it magically ascends to the sky and then soars around forever.

## **The Scientology E-Meter**

The E-Meter is an electrical device used for spiritual healing by members of the modern Church of Scientology. It was first used for this purpose by the writer L. Ron Hubbard, the original founder of the church. It is similar to medical instruments that apply small voltages to the skin in order to measure the electrical resistance between different points on the human body. The first E-Meters were made by hand during the 1950s, but there have been gradual improvements since then, and they are now manufactured to a standard design.

The device is also called the Hubbard Electro-Psychometer. Its main use is to help a person deal with harmful influences associated with immortal spiritual beings called "Thetans". According to the teachings of the Church of Scientology, these Thetans are similar to souls. They have supposedly existed for billions of years, during which time they have gone through millions of re-incarnations in different bodies. Because they are scattered throughout the universe, many of their incarnations take the form of alien species living on other planets. Unfortunately, the earth currently has more Thetans than humans, and the extra Thetans attach themselves to the outer surfaces of human bodies. These attached spirits are called "body Thetans", and their presence has detrimental effects on a person's health and well-being.

The E-Meter is used somewhat like a lie-detector. The subject grasps electrodes that resemble metal cans, and an advanced church member called an Auditor asks questions and observes the meter readings produced by the subject's reactions. Supposedly the process can detect the influences of the attached "body Thetans" and give the subject the ability to recognize them. In addition, the meter can detect the presence of harmful "engrams", which are ingrained subconscious memories of stressful events that occurred in previous lives. Every Thetan accumulates these engrams as it goes through successive incarnations, but most people aren't aware of their influence. The increased awareness provided by sessions with the E-Meter helps church members resist these various influences. The claimed benefits include a higher IQ, enhanced memory, and a better ability to communicate.

## **Hair Shirts**

Hair shirts are under-garments made for the purpose of scratching the skin. They have traditionally been worn by members of certain religious orders as a kind of self-punishment. Usually woven from animal hair, such as that of a goat, they are covered in stiff hairs that constantly scratch the wearer's skin, producing discomfort that is especially noticeable during movement. Some hair shirts even have small barbs woven into them to lacerate the skin and increase the pain. Also, some of them are made to be worn as girdles rather than shirts. The word "cilice" is sometimes used to designate all the different types collectively.

The bible mentions several people who wore such garments, including John the Baptist, whose shirt was made from camel's hair. Many Christian saints, as well as many nuns and monks, have also worn hair shirts. The practice is less common now than in the past, but it is still compulsory for members of some Carthusian and Carmelite orders. Well-known historical figures who wore hair shirts include Saint Patrick, the martyred Archbishop Thomas Becket, the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV, and Prince Henry the Navigator. In modern times they have been worn by Mother Teresa, Saint

Padre Pio, slain archbishop Oscar Romero, and Russian author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Some people wear the garment almost continually, whereas others only put it on during penitential seasons or periods of mourning.

## **The Procter and Gamble Logo Controversy**

During the early 1980s, some Christian groups in the United States began accusing the Procter and Gamble corporation of having secret connections to Satanism. These groups claimed that the company's logo contained satanic symbols. The company, a maker of soap and other household products, had been using the logo on its packages since the 19th century, and it denied that the image had anything to do with Satanism. But some Christians continued to insist that it showed a symbolic representation of the Devil. Some also said that it contained a cryptic depiction of the number 666, which is the supposed number of an evil beast described in the Book of Revelation. There were even rumors that some of the top officers in the company were Satanists.

Shortly after the controversy erupted, some Christian groups began urging their members to boycott the company's products. Letter-writing campaigns were also organized, and during one period in 1982 the company was receiving about 15,000 complaints per month. It reacted by taking legal action against several individuals and groups, accusing them of spreading false rumors and publishing defamatory pamphlets. But the bad publicity continued, and in 1985 the company finally gave in to the pressure and stopped using the logo. However, this didn't completely end the matter, and stories linking the company to Satanism still appear on the web occasionally.



## **Ghouls**

In ancient Arabian folklore, ghouls are fiendish creatures that open up graves during the night and eat the rotting flesh of dead bodies. They are a type of invisible spirit called a Jinn (or genie), but they can also assume a physical form, and sometimes appear in the guise of a human or animal. However, no matter what form they take, they always leave the hoof prints of a donkey. In addition to eating corpses, they also rob graves, drink blood, steal coins, and kill young children. The only defense against a ghoul is to strike it dead in one blow, because a second blow will bring it back to life again.

Ideas about ghouls can be traced back to the pre-Islamic superstitions of the ancient Middle East. Members of some desert-dwelling tribes originally called them "ghuls". After Islam became the main religion in the region, its followers tried to eradicate the old superstitions. But belief in ghouls persisted, and the creatures were eventually incorporated into Islam as one form of a type of spirit called a Jinn. Some descriptions of them say that they are the offspring of the Devil. In modern Islamic countries, stories about ghouls are sometimes used to frighten a disobedient child.

## **The Tree of Zaqqum**

In Islamic descriptions of hell, the Tree of Zaqqum grows at the lowest level. Its fruits, which look like the heads of devils, have a horrible taste. If one of them is plucked from the tree and eaten, it puts out thorns that rip into the inner lining of the belly. It also becomes so hot that it burns any flesh it touches inside the body.

As part of their punishment, the sinners in hell are always starving. In their search for food, they eventually reach the lowest level and find the Zaqqum Tree. Driven to desperation by hunger, they eat the disgusting fruit. But it doesn't alleviate their hunger or provide any nourishment to

their bodies. Instead, it burns and lacerates the inside of their stomachs.

Hunger also drives sinners in hell to eat the festering pus that oozes from the sores on their own bodies. Their other possible foods include the burned flesh of other sinners and the discharge that flows from the private parts of condemned adulterers. In other words, if you end up in the Islamic hell, don't expect to enjoy any fine dining there.

## **Chinese Dragons**

In Chinese mythology, dragons are very wise creatures with supernatural powers. Despite their menacing appearance, they normally don't try to harm humans. They use their powers to protect the heavenly homes of the gods and to help control the weather on the earth. Since they live in the spirit world, they are usually invisible, but they can reveal themselves to people when it suits their purpose. Because of their miraculous powers, they were once worshiped in some Chinese temples.



This photograph shows part of a costume used in Chinese dragon dances.

## **Transubstantiation**

In a Christian ritual called Holy Communion, ordinary bread and wine are purportedly converted into the flesh and blood of Jesus. This supposed conversion, which is thought to be a miraculous act of God, is called transubstantiation. After the conversion, the newly-created flesh and blood of Jesus is eaten by the worshipers. The Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and certain other Christian groups officially affirm that the transformation actually does take place.

To most people, the bread and wine still look and taste the same after the purported conversion into flesh and blood. One possible explanation is that the conversion doesn't take place until after the bread and wine are swallowed. But most modern Christians doubt that the conversion really occurs at all.

## **Dervishes**

Dervishes are members of certain Islamic religious orders who seek mystical experiences through activities such as dancing, chanting, and meditation. The best-known groups are the whirling dervishes and the howling dervishes, but there are also groups that meditate, chant verses from the Quran, or perform controlled breathing exercises. They are found in many countries, including Egypt, Turkey, Morocco, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Many of them take vows of poverty and have very austere lifestyles.

Dervishes perform hypnotically repetitive activities such as dancing as a way to induce a state of ecstasy and feelings of communion with God. Group performances, which are usually accompanied by music, can last for hours. The famous whirling dervishes begin their performance by sitting in a circle and reciting poems. Then they slowly rise and begin moving across the floor, spinning rhythmically. As they rise, they shed their outer black robes, which are a sign of death, to reveal their pure white dancing robes, which are designed to flare outward as they spin. They continue to

whirl at an increasing speed until they attain the desired mental state. Some descriptions of the activity say that they enter a mystical trance, but many of them deny this and say instead that the whirling enables them to think very lucidly.

Another type of dance is performed by the howling dervishes of Morocco. According to some reports, they dance themselves into a frenzy during which they bite off the heads of poisonous snakes, lick hot irons, swallow hot coals, slash their limbs with long knives, and levitate into the air. But these reports probably include considerable exaggeration.

## **Mongolian Death Worms**

Death Worms are strange creatures that supposedly live in the Gobi Desert of Mongolia. According to the native people of the region, they are thick-bodied worms that can grow to about 1.5 meters (5 feet) long. The surface of their bodies is mostly red in color, but may have darker spots, or blotches, in certain areas. Some descriptions say that they have no visible eyes, nostrils, or mouths, and that spike-like projections stick out from both ends of their bodies. Their local name "olgoi-khorkhoi" means "blood filled intestine worm" because in some ways they resemble the intestine of a cow.

The Mongolian people say that touching any part of a death worm's body will cause instant death. They also say that it can kill at a distance, either by spraying a venom or by producing an electric discharge. Luckily, encounters with the creatures are said to be rare, because they hibernate underground for most of the year, and are usually active only in June and July.

Outside groups have made several expeditions into Mongolia to look for this worm, but no convincing evidence of its existence has been found. Most scientists believe that the local legends about it probably derive from observations of non-poisonous burrowing reptiles. But the Gobi Desert covers an immense area, and a small localized population of the worms might be difficult to find, especially if they spend most of the year underground. For these reasons, some people think that the legendary

creature, or an animal that closely resembles it, could still be discovered in the future.

## **Sin Eaters**

In past centuries Christian families would sometimes hire an outsider to "eat" the sins of a loved one who had just died, in the belief that this would enable his or her soul to go to heaven. The hired sin-eater was nearly always a man, and usually a very poor man or beggar. After he was hired, family members would put a piece of bread on top of the corpse of the deceased loved one. It was thought that the bread would miraculously suck all of the sins out of the dead body and absorb them into itself. When the sin-eater arrived, he would eat the bread, thereby transferring all the sins into his body. Because the dead person was now cleansed, his or her soul would be able to go to heaven.

The practice of sin-eating began during the Middle Ages and survived into the 19th century in some European countries. At one time it was also practiced by people living in the Appalachian region of the United States. In many towns the same man was nearly always hired to serve as the sin-eater. This man often became a social outcast because other people believed that all the sins he'd absorbed must have turned him into a vile evil person. Usually only a very poor man was willing to play this role. Some of these men learned to recite special prayers or incantations over the bread after they arrived, claiming that this was necessary for the sins to be transferred from the dead body to the bread. They thought that this pretense would increase their chances of being hired when the next death occurred.

When a member of a very poor family died, the survivors often couldn't afford to pay the fee of a sin-eater. In this case they would sometimes lay a piece of bread on the dead body, say some prayers over it, then carry the bread into the street and give it to a beggar without telling him that it had been on top of a corpse. By using this trick, they could get the sins removed from the body of their loved one for free.

## **Towers of Silence**

The religion known as Zoroastrianism is based on the teachings of an ancient Persian prophet named Zoroaster (also called Zarathustra), who probably lived at least 2500 years ago. One of the unusual aspects of this religion is the practice of placing dead human bodies on top of a structure known as a Tower of Silence, and then allowing the flesh to be eaten by vultures and other birds. These "towers" are actually solid structures, made of stone, which resemble a circular building with a flat roof. After a corpse is placed on the roof, vultures usually eat all of the flesh within a short time, leaving the bones picked clean.

Zoroastrians consider earth, water, air and fire to be sacred, but regard the putrefying flesh of a dead body as unclean. They have traditionally avoided burial because the decaying body would defile the sacred earth. Similarly, they oppose cremation because the burning flesh would pollute the sacred fire. They can avoid these desecrations by using Towers of Silence to dispose of their dead.

The roofs of these towers are divided into three concentric rings. The bodies of men are put in the outer ring, bodies of women go into the middle ring, and dead children are placed in the inner ring. Vultures often sit on a tower to be ready in case a new corpse arrives. After the bones of a body are picked clean, they are collected and put into a pit sunk into the center of the roof, where they eventually disintegrate.

After Muslim invaders conquered Persia in the 7th century, the new rulers discriminated against Zoroastrians, and during the following centuries a large majority of the population gradually converted to Islam. Many of the remaining Zoroastrians migrated to other areas, including India, where they are now known as Parsis (or Parsees). According to most estimates, less than 25,000 practicing Zoroastrians still live within the area of ancient Persia, which roughly corresponds to the modern country of Iran.

During the last decades of the 20th century, the government of Iran began making attempts to prohibit the use of the towers for disposal of the dead. Also during this period, vandals began stealing corpses from the

towers. As a result, the Zoroastrians in Iran have started burying their dead in graves that are lined with concrete to prevent direct contact with the earth. Many Zoroastrians in India still use the towers, but have run into difficulties because of a drastic decline in the population of vultures. According to some reports, more than 99% of the birds have died from exposure to a drug given to livestock. With fewer birds available, a corpse may lie on a tower for several weeks before all of the flesh is eaten.

## Nukekubi

In Japanese folklore, the Nukekubi are strange creatures who look like ordinary humans during the daytime, but whose heads detach from their bodies at night. After a head separates from its body, it flies around looking for human prey. When it sees a potential victim, it flies toward the person and tries to frighten him or her by emitting a series of loud shrieks. When it gets close enough to attack, it plunges its teeth into the victim's throat.

The head of a Nukekubi always waits for nightfall before it leaves the body. Then it detaches smoothly from the neck and flies away. After the head leaves, the rest of the body is no longer under the control of a brain, and it sits sluggishly at the original location throughout the night. Unless the head returns and re-attaches itself before sunrise, both it and the body will die. Thus, one way to kill a Nukekubi is to hide the body after the head flies away.

During daytime the Nukekubi use their resemblance to humans to try to blend into society. Sometimes a small group of them will pretend to be a human family. If examined closely, they can be identified by a line of red markings around the base of the neck where the head separates. But these markings can be easily hidden under clothing or jewelry.

**Note:** Nukekubi are sometimes confused with another Japanese folkloric creature called a Rokuro-Kubi. The two creatures are similar, but the heads of the Rokuro-Kubi don't completely detach from their bodies. Instead, their necks can stretch to enormous lengths, allowing their heads

to search for prey over a large area while their bodies remain in one spot. Like the Nukekubi, they look like normal humans during the day and only hunt at night.



This depiction of a Rokuro-Kubi was drawn by the 18th-century artist Sawaki Suushi. Note the extremely long neck.

## Religious Body Piercing

During an annual Hindu festival called Thaipusam, some of the participants undergo a form of body piercing in which hooks, skewers, and small spears are inserted into their bodies. The hooks and other sharp objects are inserted into various parts of the body, including the tongue, the cheeks, the forehead, the back, the abdomen, and the buttocks. Sometimes other objects are suspended from the hooks to add weight and thereby increase the pain. Some people also wear special shoes containing upturned nails that push into the soles of their feet.

The practice of body piercing is most common at the Thaipusam festivals held in predominantly Hindu areas of the Malay peninsula. Several of these festivals attract very large crowds, including as many as a million people at the festival associated with the temple at Batu Caves near Kuala Lumpur. But at most festivals only a small percentage of the devotees, almost all of them men, undergo body piercing. The large



majority who don't get pierced involve themselves in other activities such as fasting, singing, and dancing.

The festival is held in honor of the Hindu god Murugan. Body piercing is a way to show devotion, although some of the practitioners may also view it as a form of penance or self-punishment. Some of them reportedly go into a trance after being pierced, and this may help them endure the pain. At the end of the festival, the hooks and other sharp implements are removed. Although this is always done carefully, it is often even more painful than the original insertions.

## **The Scapegoat**

Once each year the priests of ancient Israel would perform a special ritual that supposedly transferred the sins of all the people to an animal called a scapegoat. This animal was then driven into the wilderness to die, taking the sins with it. The purpose of the ritual was to free the people from their sins and allow them to make a fresh start. It was repeated annually to get rid of all the accumulated sins that everyone had committed during the previous year.

The ritual was performed in early autumn on the annual Day of Atonement (also called Yom Kippur). The procedure actually required two goats, both of them males. One goat was chosen to be killed as a sacrifice, and the other was designated to be the scapegoat. After the first goat was killed, the high priest laid his hands on the head of the scapegoat to symbolically transfer the sins of the people onto it. The animal was then driven into the wilderness and abandoned there.

It isn't clear what happened to the sins after the scapegoat died in the wilderness. Possibly they faded out of existence as the body of the animal disintegrated, but some accounts suggest that they were transferred to a demon named Azazel.

## **The Book of Mormon**

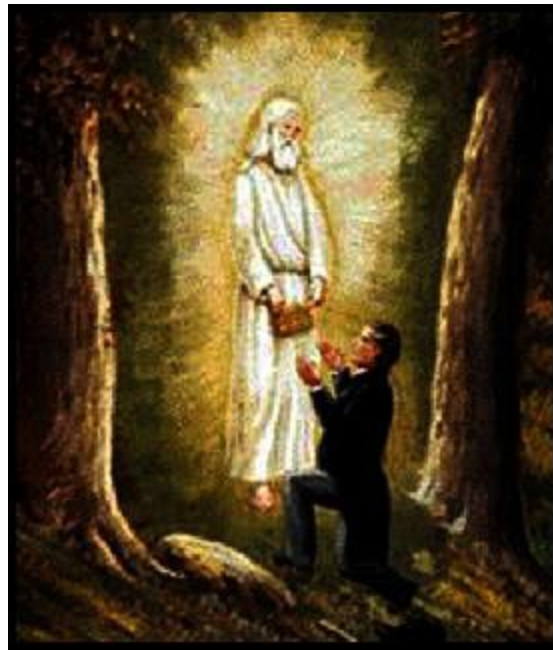
The Book of Mormon is a sacred text of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and most other Mormon churches. According to early accounts of the book's origin, its content was derived from inscriptions on a set of ancient "golden plates" given to Joseph Smith, Jr. in 1827 by a mysterious angel named Moroni. Smith said that this angel retrieved the plates from a stone box that had been buried on a hill near the U.S. town of Palmyra, New York. Although the inscriptions on the plates were in an unknown language, Smith was eventually able to translate them into English and publish them as a book. After he finished the translation, he returned the plates to the mysterious angel, and they have never been seen again.

The book, which was published in 1830, describes the history of an ancient group of Hebrews who traveled from Jerusalem to America in about 600 BC. Sometime after they arrived, they split into two groups. One group, called the Lamanites, abandoned their ancient Hebrew religion and became the ancestors of the American Indians. The other group, the Nephites, kept the old religion and created a great civilization. Eventually these Nephites were visited by Jesus, who gave them many teachings and prophecies. Later, after Jesus had returned to heaven, the Nephites got into a war with the Lamanites, and their entire civilization was finally wiped out in about 400 AD.

But two of the last Nephite survivors, a prophet named Mormon and his son Moroni, created a history of everything that had happened and inscribed it on a set of golden plates. Moroni put the plates into a stone box with some other artifacts and buried the box in the ground near the present location of Palmyra, New York. He buried the box in about 420 AD and died shortly afterward. But later he was resurrected as an angel, and it was in this form that he appeared to Joseph Smith, Jr. in the 1820s and gave him the plates.

Descriptions of the plates say that they were about 8 inches long, 6 inches wide, and thin enough to be pliable. Estimates of their total weight ranged from 30 to 60 pounds. Apparently their composition was never determined, but their color and other physical characteristics suggest that

they were probably either pure gold or an alloy of gold with another metal. They were held together along one edge by three silver rings, and this allowed them to be turned like the pages of a book.



This painting by C.C.A. Christensen shows Joseph Smith Jr. receiving the golden plates from the angel Moroni.

The plates were engraved on both sides with strange inscriptions. But Smith was able to translate them into English by using what he called "seer stones". These were small rounded stones with magical properties that enabled him to mentally visualize a correct translation of the inscriptions. Unfortunately, his translation of the first part of the book got lost and was never published. In addition, he couldn't translate all of the plates because one group of them was "sealed" and couldn't be opened up. He said that this group of plates contained a special revelation from God that would be revealed to the world at an unknown future time.

Initially Smith wouldn't let anyone else see the plates, although on one occasion he supposedly wrapped them up in a towel and allowed a few individuals to briefly hold them in that way. Eventually, after several people expressed doubts about their existence, he decided to show them to some acquaintances. Altogether he showed them to eleven men, known as the Book of Mormon witnesses, who later gave written testimonies saying that they had seen the plates. But it isn't clear if these witnesses actually saw the real plates or only saw a "vision" of them. And since Smith said that he later returned the plates to the angel Moroni, independent verification of

their existence isn't currently possible. Many Mormons believe that the plates will remain hidden until it is time to show humanity the sealed section containing God's special revelation.

## **The Dance of Death**

One of the strange superstitions of the European Middle Ages was the belief that the skeletons of dead people arose at night and danced on their graves. The skeletons grinned as they danced, suggesting to the living that death could be better than life. The first descriptions of this dance appeared in the 14th century, a period which included terrible famines, devastating wars, and the horrifying Black Death bubonic plague. To some people of that era, death could have seemed preferable to the starvation, sickness, and pain being experienced by most of the living.

Dancing skeletons were also a theme in a type of medieval painting called the *Danse Macabre*. The idea for these paintings may have originated in acted-out church plays intended to show how anyone, no matter how wealthy or powerful, could unexpectedly die at any moment. The ever present possibility of a sudden painful death could strengthen religious faith, but paradoxically it could also create a desire to enjoy forbidden pleasures while there was still time. This strange connection between the fear of death and the desire for pleasure is suggested by the depictions of dancing skeletons.

The *Danse Macabre* is sometimes confused with the Dance of Death, but they weren't the same. Paintings of the *Danse Macabre* usually depict a circle or chain in which dead dancers alternate with live dancers. The live dancers include all ranks of society, from a king down to the lowest beggar, thereby emphasizing the fact that sooner or later everyone will die regardless of their status in life. In some paintings each living person's hand is taken by a skeleton, and everyone is moving toward a graveyard. Thus, paintings of the *Danse Macabre* were usually more complex than paintings of the Dance of Death, which normally depicted only skeletons.

## Weird Beasts

Bizarre beasts play a role in many religions. One of the most famous is Behemoth, a gigantic super-strong animal mentioned in the bible. Some people believe that it resembled a huge mammoth or hippopotamus, whereas others say that it was a dinosaur. But although it was enormous, it may not have been the largest animal in the world, because the bible also mentions a giant sea-monster named Leviathan that could have been even larger.



These depictions of Behemoth and Leviathan were painted by the English poet and artist William Blake.

Another type of strange creature is the hybrid between a human and an animal. Hindu myths describe several of these, including Hanuman (a hybrid between a monkey and a human) and Narsimha (a combination of lion and human). Other well-known hybrids include the centaur (horse and man), the minotaur (bull and man), and the mermaid (woman and fish). Also, in medieval Europe many people believed in strange creatures called werewolves, which could shift back and forth between a man and a wolf-like beast.

A mythical creature called a Basilisk has the body of a dragon and the head of a rooster. Its foul smell is strong enough to kill anyone who comes near it, and its fiery breath will burn up anything in its path. A mere glance

from its eye will also kill, first penetrating the brain and then the heart. The easiest way to destroy it is to hold up a mirror so that it will see the reflection of its own eye, which will cause it to burst asunder.

## **Fire Walking**

The oldest surviving descriptions of fire walking were written about 3000 years ago, but the practice probably originated in prehistoric times. The activity can serve several purposes, including initiations, proofs of faith, trials to determine guilt or innocence, and demonstrations of holiness. In some cultures there is a belief that fire can't harm anyone who is holy and pure. Another common belief is that God or some supernatural force will protect anyone who has true faith.

Places where fire walking is still commonly practiced include India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Japan, Greece, Bulgaria, and some parts of Africa. In its most common form, a person walks barefoot over a layer of red-hot embers spread on the ground, usually in a pit or trench. The activity is often part of a religious festival. At one festival, which takes place annually in certain areas of northern Greece, the local Christians carry icons of Saint Constantine and Saint Helena to a large fire. After they arrive, they dance around the fire in a circle, and then various individuals walk across the hot coals under the protection of the saints.

Most experienced fire walkers can traverse the embers without being burned. But sometimes people do get burned, often seriously. There have been several scientific studies of why some people get burned and others don't. One explanation is that glowing embers aren't as hot as flames, and people who move their feet quickly don't stay in contact with the embers long enough to get burned. This suggests that successful fire-walking requires skill and experience, both in preparing the embers and in learning how to walk across them. Other possible factors include the use of narcotics, applications of chemicals or lotions to the bottoms of the feet, and inducement of trances.

## **White Elephants**

A small percentage of elephants (called albinos) have a rare genetic disorder which deprives them of skin pigments and makes their bodies naturally white. In some parts of Asia, these white elephants have traditionally been treated as sacred animals. There is even a common belief that Gautama Buddha appeared in the form of a white elephant in a previous life before he was born as a human. In some Asian countries these animals are a symbol of royal power, and many kings have owned at least one of them.

During the 19th-century, a royal white elephant in the kingdom of Siam (modern Thailand) was observed by Anna Leonowens, an English woman who had come to the country to serve as governess of the king's children. According to her memoirs, this elephant was constantly attended by servants who bathed it, fanned it, flattered it, and sang to it. Its food consisted of "the finest herbs, the tenderest grass, the sweetest sugar-cane, the mellowest plaintains, and the brownest cakes of wheat, served on huge trays of gold and silver." After the animal was bathed, it was decked out in a crown, gold chains, and a purple velvet cloak. Because it was thought to be sacred, its behavior was watched very closely for omens, and a single grunt from the animal could cause the king to change his mind about an important decision.

## **Pillar Saints**

In about 420 AD, a devout Christian known as Simeon Stylites began living on top of a stone pillar. Initially he lived on a fairly short pillar, but eventually he moved to one that was about 50 feet [15 meters] tall. Altogether he spent more than 35 years of almost continuous residence on the tops of pillars. His living space was so small that he barely had room to sit down, and he usually prayed while standing erect with his arms stretched sideways to form the figure of a cross. He wouldn't allow any women to come near his pillar, not even his mother. When he wanted food



or water, boys brought it to him by climbing a ladder.

Simeon Stylites was one of the first "Pillar Saints". These were a class of Christian ascetics, mostly men, who lived on the tops of tall narrow pillars for much of their adult lives. One of them, Saint Alypius, reportedly remained in a standing position atop his column for 53 years until finally his feet could no longer support him. Many others lived continually on pillars for at least 20 years. Some of them built walls or tiny huts on top of their pillars, but even with this added protection, they still had to endure much hardship and privation.

Pillar Saints are also called Stylites. They first appeared in the 5th century, and a few individuals were still taking up the practice as late as the 15th century. Most of them were extreme ascetics who believed that they could best reach their spiritual goals through self-denial and avoidance of worldly pleasures. They typically spent their time fasting and praying, but some of them also healed the sick and preached sermons to pilgrims who gathered around the bottom of their pillars. Several became quite famous and were visited by emperors and other important people.



This icon depicts Simeon Stylites on a symbolic pillar. His last real pillar was taller than this, and it may have had a low wall or railing around the top.



## **The Heaven's Gate Cult**

Heaven's Gate was a small doomsday cult that was active in the United States during the late 20th century. Most of its members committed suicide in 1997 after they learned that a comet named Hale-Bopp was approaching the vicinity of the earth. They thought that the comet was an omen which foretold the impending destruction of all civilization. But they believed that they had a way to escape from the catastrophe, because they imagined that a spaceship was coming to pick up their souls and take them to heaven. They thought that this spaceship was hidden from view in the tail of the comet. In their minds, by killing themselves as the comet approached, they would give their souls an opportunity to escape to the spaceship and ride it to heaven.

The cult's system of beliefs was a strange mixture that combined elements of Christianity with some odd ideas about UFOs and extraterrestrial visitors to earth. For example, they thought that alien visitations were responsible for several events described in the bible. According to some reports, they even believed that Jesus was an alien visitor in disguise.

The mass suicide was discovered in March 1997 when thirty-nine members of the group were found dead in a large rented house in southern California. To kill themselves, they had taken phenobarbital mixed with vodka and then covered their heads with plastic bags. Examination of the bodies revealed that some of the men had previously undergone voluntary castration. Reportedly their decision to be castrated was based on a bible verse at Matthew 19:12, in which Jesus says "there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake" [King James translation]. One possible interpretation of this statement is that a man can improve his chances of going to heaven by being castrated.

## **Life or Death Ball Game**

Several thousand years ago the native Amerindians of Mesoamerica began playing a type of ball game which was sometimes followed by the ritual killing of the losing players. The game was played by the Mayans, Toltecs, Aztecs, and other cultural groups of Mexico and Central America. When the Spanish conquered this region, they forced the native people to give up their old religions and convert to Christianity. Since the ball game was part of the old religions, it was officially banned. But despite this attempted suppression, a modern non-violent version of the game is still played in a few remote areas. And evidence of the sport's former popularity can be seen at hundreds of locations where abandoned ball courts still survive.

The game had similarities to both soccer and volleyball. But the exact rules varied, because the sport evolved over many centuries, and different versions of the game were played in different areas. In most versions, two teams of players used elbows, hips, and knees to knock a large rubber ball back and forth in the space between two high walls. Points could be scored in various ways, and one of the teams would eventually gain a victory.

Simple non-violent versions of the game were played for recreation, especially by children. But some ceremonial games must have been very intense and brutal, because the lives of the players were at stake. In fact, after a game was over, the losing players were often executed. Actually, some sources say that only the captain of the losing team was killed, so the number of victims probably varied from place to place. In some cases, the losing players may have been men who were captured in a war and then forced to participate in a game that was rigged against them.

Surviving murals suggest that the victims were killed ritually as sacrifices to gods. The people in these societies believed that such sacrifices were necessary to maintain the orderly workings of nature, such as keeping the sun shining and enabling plants to grow. But the ball games served another purpose as well, because two neighboring societies sometimes settled a dispute by playing a game instead of fighting a war. This would have saved many lives, since the only casualties would have

been the players on the losing side.

## **The Thuggee**

The English word "thug" is derived from the word "Thuggee", which was the name of a secret cult of robbers and murderers that once operated in India. Members of this cult considered it their sacred duty to kill traveling merchants and then steal their possessions. These criminals reportedly killed tens of thousands of people over a 300-year time period before finally being suppressed in the 19th century.

Originally the Thuggee were a religious cult devoted to the Hindu goddess Kali (also called Durga). Even after they turned to robbery and murder, they believed that they were following the commands of their goddess. Because of their religious convictions, they never killed women, priests, holy men, or certain types of merchants. They also used a prescribed method of killing, strangulation with a scarf, in order to avoid bloodshed. Some reports say that a new recruit had to kill someone by this method before he could be initiated into the cult.

As the first step of a planned robbery, a group of Thuggee would disguise themselves as ordinary travelers and then try to join a caravan of merchants. They usually accompanied the caravan for a day or two, acting in a friendly manner to allay suspicion. Then during the night they would attack the merchants and strangle them with scarves. Afterward they would plunder the baggage, which often contained gold, jewelry and other valuables.

The criminal activities of the Thuggee cult were finally suppressed during the 19th century. However, their goddess Kali is still worshiped in many parts of India. The city of Calcutta (Kolkata) is named after her.

## The Grim Reaper

The Grim Reaper is a ghost-like figure who appears at the scene of every human death. He knows beforehand where a death will occur, and as the soul leaves the dying person's body, he takes charge of it and escorts it to its assigned place in the afterlife. Some descriptions of him say that he can also act as an executioner and kill someone whose time is up. If so, this would give him a role similar to that of the "Angel of Death" mentioned in ancient writings. But although he is a supernatural being, he normally isn't considered to be an angel.

Artists usually depict the Grim Reaper as a skeletal figure wearing a hooded cloak and wielding a large scythe. He is often shown standing near the scene of a death, or lurking in the background. But he is also sometimes shown on horseback, because some Christians identify him with the mysterious figure named "Death" who appears in the visions of the Book of Revelation as the Horseman of the Apocalypse who rides on a pale horse.



The above image, called *The Vision of Death*, is an engraving by the 19th-century French artist Gustave Dore.

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