



# Religion and Culture

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# Presentation Background

- Cultural Anthropology
  - Ethnographic methods
  - Human evolution
- Religious Studies
  - Branch of philosophy
  - Hermeneutics
- Evolutionary Psychology
  - Mental life and behavior as selected adaptations

# Starting point

- All behavior makes sense, in context.
- There is a logic to all human behavior, whether you know it or agree with it is the issue.
- If you are having a hard time understanding a phenomenon of culture or religion, you do not have enough context.



# What is culture?

- “...**culture** is defined as the shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization. These shared patterns identify the members of a culture group while also distinguishing those of another group.”

- University of Minnesota's Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition

Embedded in this definition is the psychological ingroup-outgroup phenomenon, which may underlie discriminatory and prejudicial behavior.

Tattoos, Shipibo: the “real” people, language

# Do other animals have culture?



- Yes and no.
- All culture consists of learned behaviors
- Only humans have facility with highly abstract and complex, detailed technical knowledge



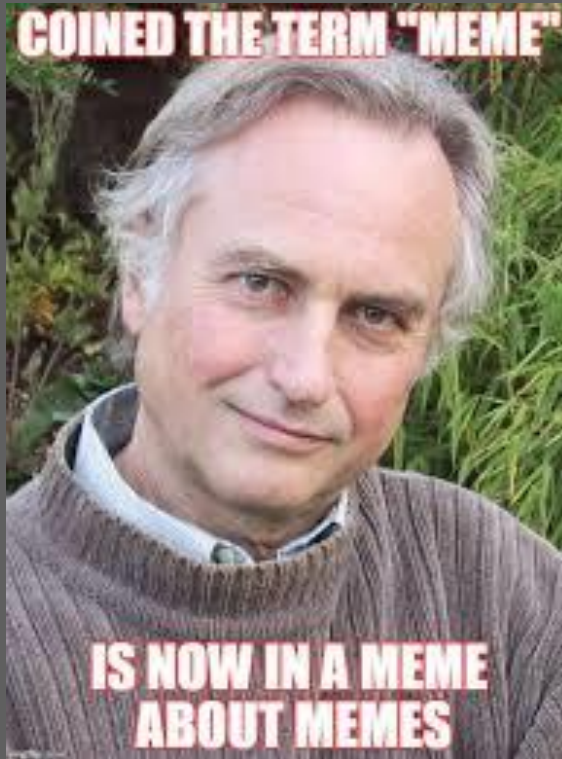


# Human culture

- To understand human culture, we need to understand human nature.
- Culture is the human adaptation to life.

# What differentiates human culture?

- Rapid, facile transmission of complex cultural memes
- Richard Dawkins video





# How did human culture evolve?

- Adaptive survival value of rapid transmission of complex knowledge, communication and cooperation.
- Great Human Odyssey - Film





# Timeline of human origins

Closest primate relative – 5 million years BP

Stone tools – 2.5 million years BP

Control of fire – 800,000 BP

Anatomically modern  
humans

Migration out of  
Africa

Behaviorally modern  
humans

8000 BCE Agriculture adopted  
3000 BCE Bronze Age  
1000 BCE Iron Age  
1685 CE Enlightenment  
1760 CE Industrial Revolution  
545 BCE Birth of Buddha

200,000 BCE

175,000 BCE

150,000 BCE

125,000 BCE

100,000 BCE

75,000 BCE

50,000 BCE

25,000 BCE

0 BCE

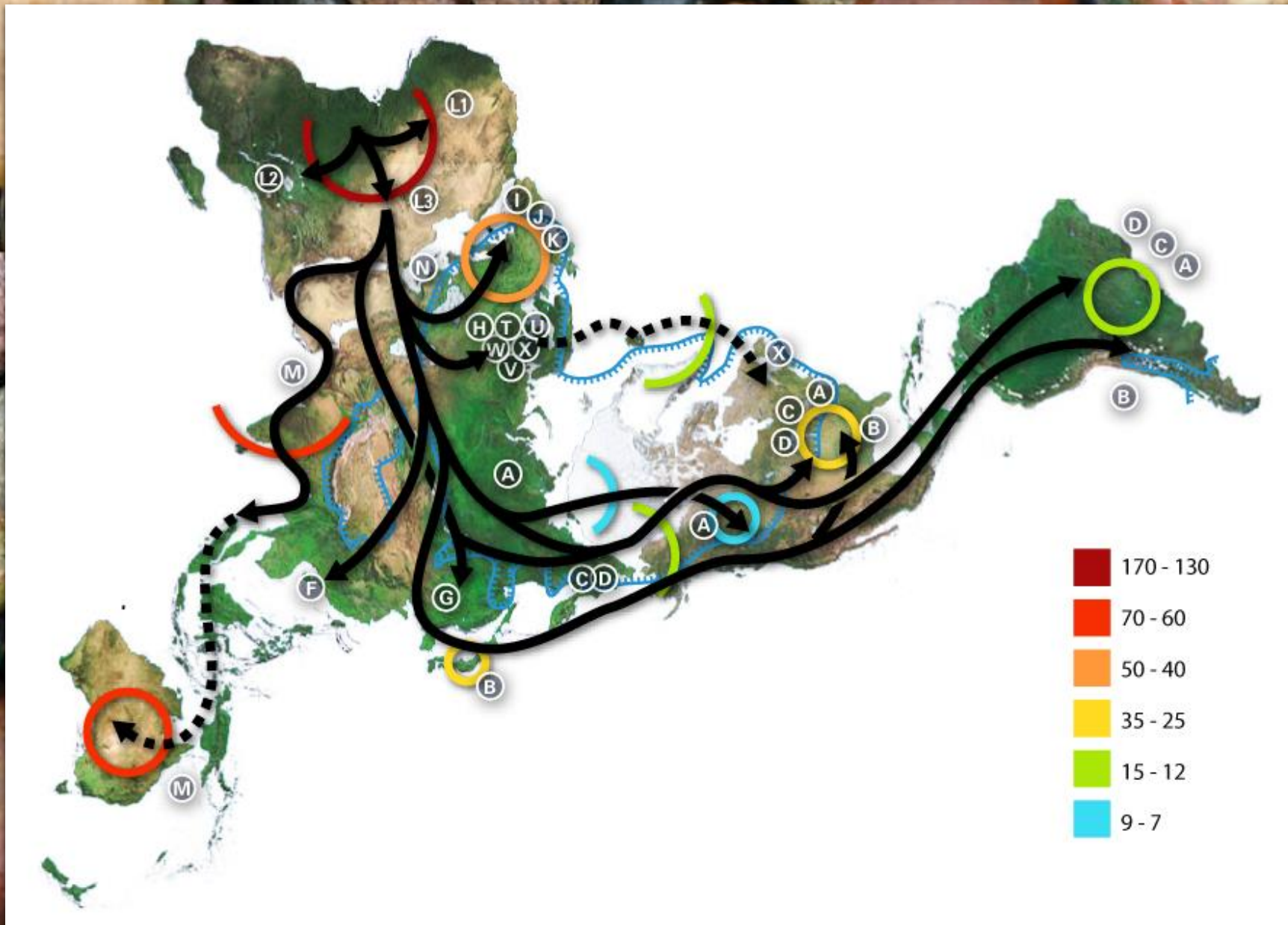


# Human migration

- There were numerous hominid species (Habilis, Neanderthal) that migrated out of Africa, ours came later than most but outcompeted or interbred with all others.
- There is more genetic diversity between any two groups endogenous to Africa than between all of the groups who developed from the original migratory group.
- The historical concept of race has no genetic or biological basis. It was created and continues to be utilized to perpetuate recently evolved social hierarchies.



# Human migration





# Tracking and the Origins of Science

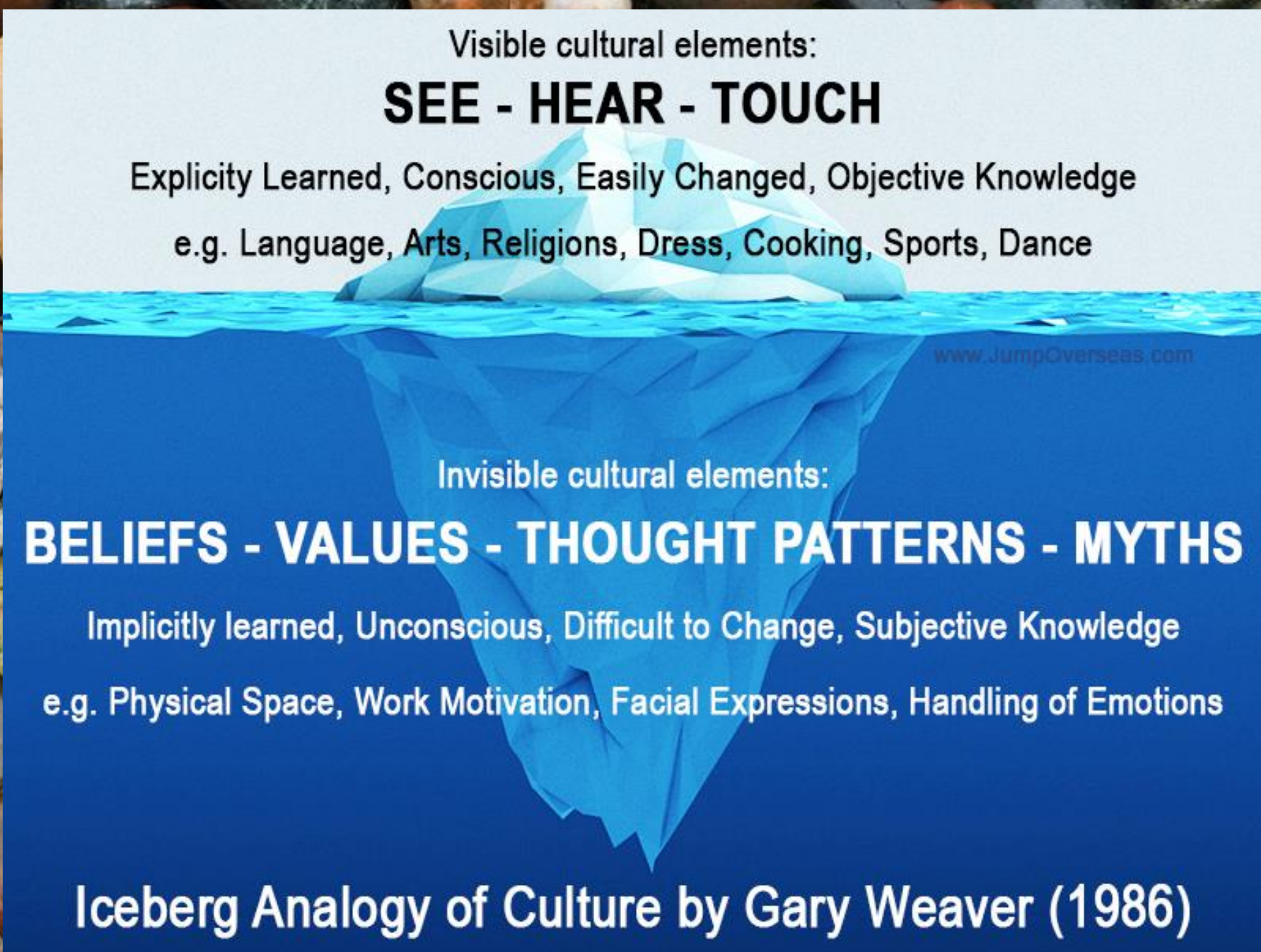
- Louis Liebenberg, Associate of Human Evolutionary Biology at Harvard University, expert on !kung San culture:
  - “It was once assumed not only that rational science originated with the ancient Greek philosophic schools, but that the belief systems of prehistoric hunter-gatherers were dominated by superstition and irrational beliefs. If this was the case, then how did the human mind evolve the ability to do scientific reasoning if scientific reasoning was not required for hunter-gatherer survival? (2013, 18)”
  - “This apparent paradox can be resolved if it is assumed that at least some of the first anatomically modern hunter-gatherers were capable of scientific reasoning, and that the intellectual requirements of modern science were, at least among the most intelligent member of hunter-gatherer bands, a necessity for the survival of hunter-gatherer societies. (2013, 18)”



# Human Universals (a-c) (Brown, 2004)

- actions under self-control distinguished from those not under control
- aesthetics
- affection expressed and felt
- age grades
- age statuses
- age terms
- ambivalence
- anthropomorphization
- anticipation
- antonyms
- attachment
- baby talk
- belief in supernatural/religion
- beliefs, false
- beliefs about death
- beliefs about disease
- beliefs about fortune and misfortune
- binary cognitive distinctions
- biological mother and social mother normally the same person
- black (color term)
- body adornment
- childbirth customs
- childcare
- childhood fears
- childhood fear of loud noises
- childhood fear of strangers
- choice making (choosing alternatives)
- classification



An iceberg floating in water, used as a metaphor for culture. The tip of the iceberg is above the water line, representing visible cultural elements. The much larger part of the iceberg is submerged below the water line, representing invisible cultural elements. The background of the slide is a collage of smooth, multi-colored stones in shades of red, orange, brown, and grey.

Visible cultural elements:

## **SEE - HEAR - TOUCH**

Explicitly Learned, Conscious, Easily Changed, Objective Knowledge

e.g. Language, Arts, Religions, Dress, Cooking, Sports, Dance

[www.JumpOverseas.com](http://www.JumpOverseas.com)

Invisible cultural elements:

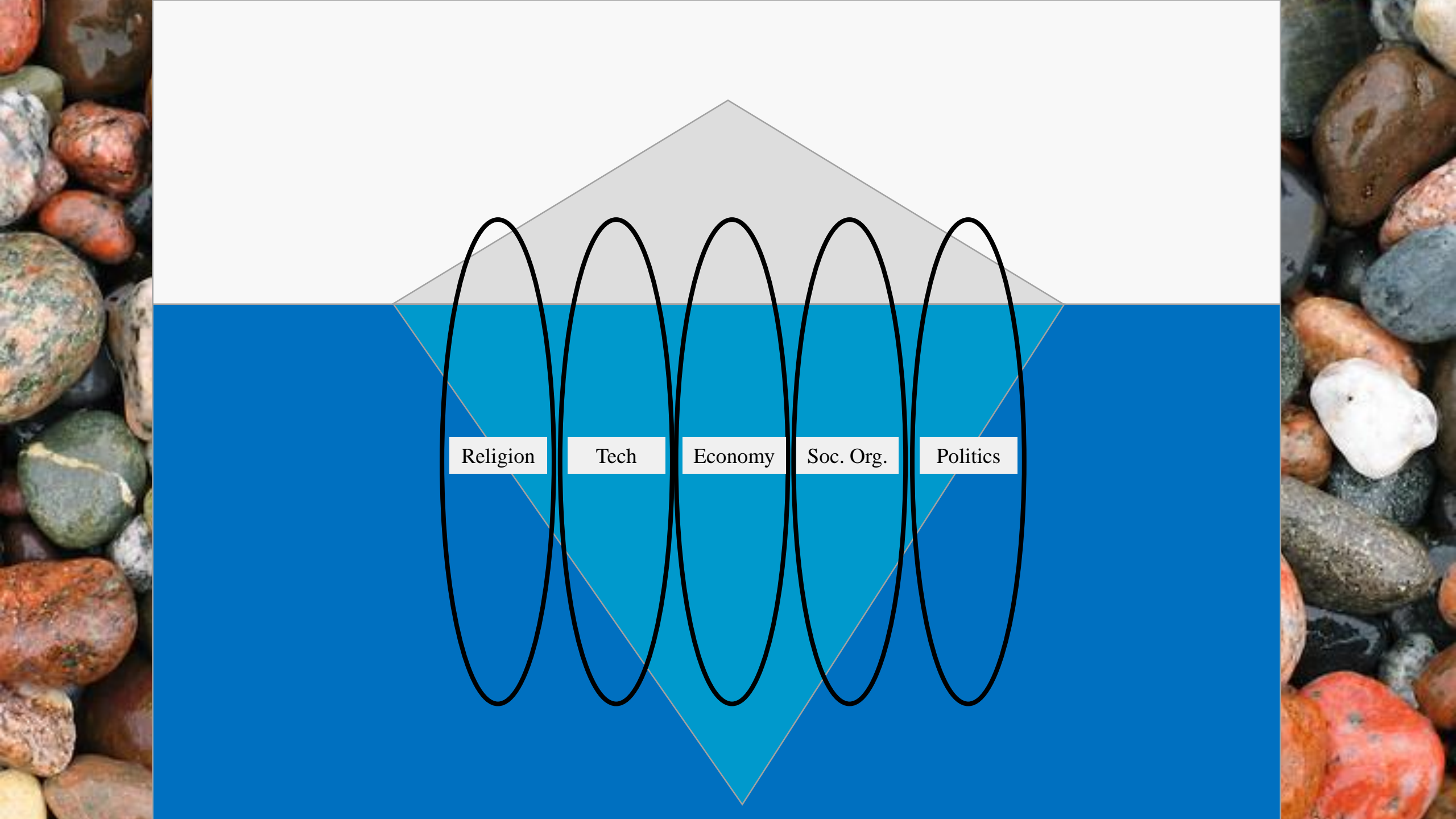
## **BELIEFS - VALUES - THOUGHT PATTERNS - MYTHS**

Implicitly learned, Unconscious, Difficult to Change, Subjective Knowledge

e.g. Physical Space, Work Motivation, Facial Expressions, Handling of Emotions

**Iceberg Analogy of Culture by Gary Weaver (1986)**





Religion

Tech

Economy

Soc. Org.

Politics





# Culture and identity

- **Culture** – Membership in a culture is often defined simply as possessing and displaying facility with cultural knowledge, values and skills.
- **Race** – The historically and socially-constructed categorization of people based on observable physical characteristics
- **Ethnicity** – A person's membership in a cultural group based on national or cultural tradition.
- **Nationality** – A political and social designation of national origin, more or less independent from race, culture and ethnicity





# Cultural phenomena

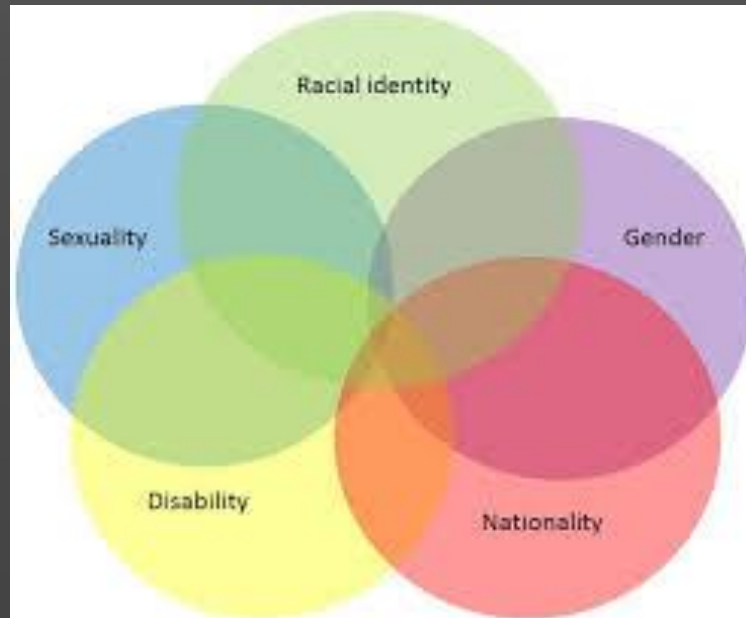
- **Enculturation** – The process of learning one's own culture of origin.
- **Acculturation** – The process of learning or adjusting to a secondary or sub-culture.
- **Ethnocentrism** – The tendency for all individuals to view their own culture favorably when compared to others.
- **Xenophobia** – Fear or distrust of cultural “others” or “outsiders.”
- **Cultural Relativity** – The idea that because culture is learned and ethnocentrism is universal,



# Intersectionality

The idea that all people have a multiplicity of cultural identifications that intersect in complex ways in each individual

- Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1989.
- What is the possible evolutionary origin of this phenomenon?





# Current Cross-cultural Discourse



- Donald Brown makes the point that racism parasitizes a part of our mind that could not have evolved to view race.



## Current Cross-cultural Discourse

Like different people watching different parts of a movie, arguing about the plot, with none having seen the beginning.





# What is religion?

- Definition from the Latin:
  - Religio – “To go over again” or “consider carefully” (Cicero)
  - Religare – “To bind or connect” (Joseph Campbell)
- Distinction between “religion” and anything else is an exclusively “Western” concept.
- Beliefs and Practices
  - Doctrine
    - Orthodoxy
    - Heterodoxy
  - Practice
    - Orthopraxy
    - Heteropraxy



# Selected classifications of religions

- **Animism**

- Belief that all life forms/matter are sentient, consciousness is embodied, communication possible. Ex: most indigenous religions, Daoism, Jedis.

- **Mysticism**

- A form of religion that centers on the direct experience of transcendence, connection with God, expanded consciousness, direct revelation of knowledge. Ex: Sufi, Jesus, Buddha.

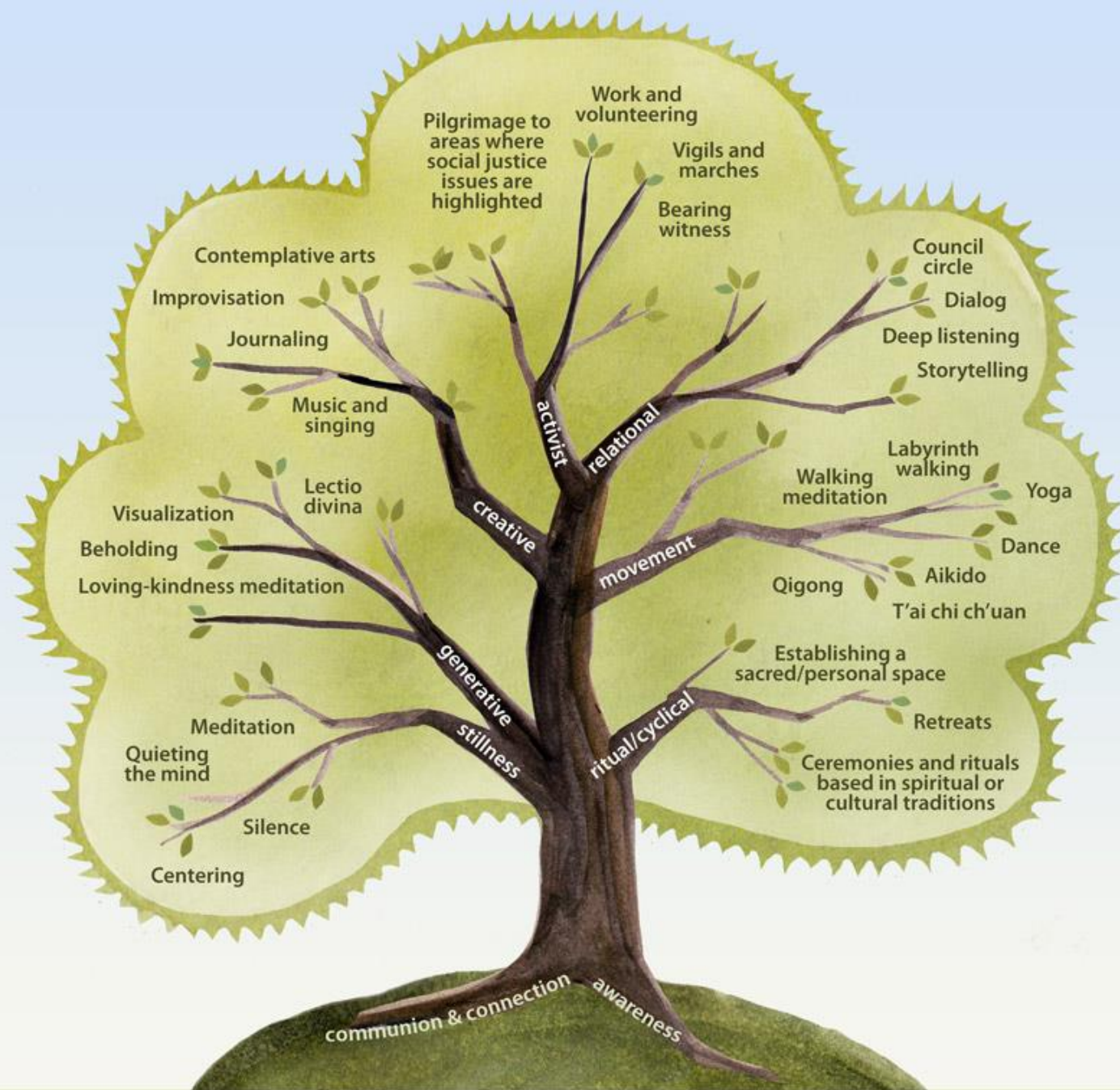
- **Polytheistic**

- Belief in a hierarchy of powerful divine beings. Ex: Roman, Hinduism

- **Monotheistic**

- Belief in one God, may possess different aspects. Ex: Judeism, Christianity, Islam.





## The Tree of Contemplative Practices

[www.contemplativemind.org](http://www.contemplativemind.org)





# Universal facets of religion

**Epistemology** – Valid means of acquiring knowledge.

**Cosmology** – Concepts of the shape, nature and function of the universe.

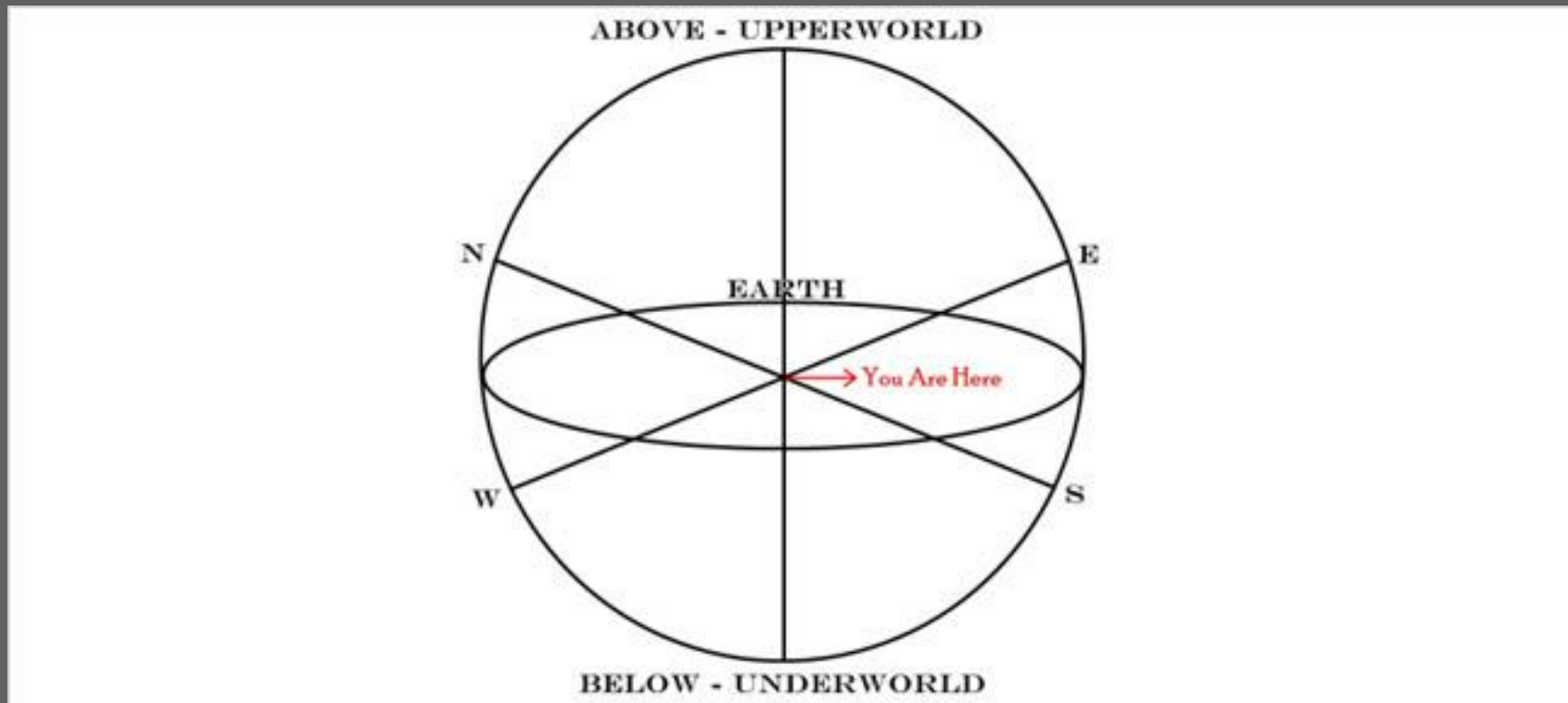
**Ontology** – Definitions of the nature of being.

**Soteriology** – Concepts of the nature of salvation, liberation, or spiritual destiny.

# Comparative cosmologies

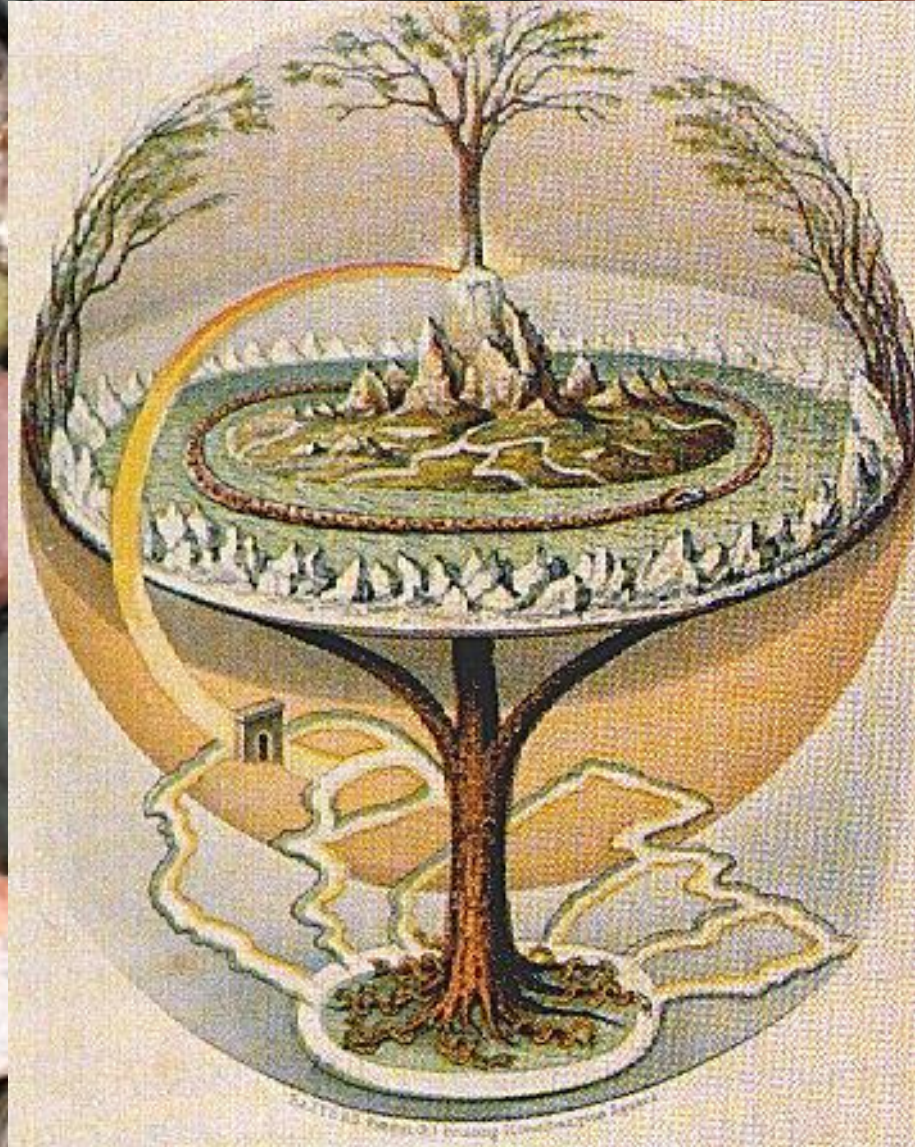
Mircea Eliade:

- Sacred vs. profane space, time, activities
- Axis mundi or world tree





# Ygddrasil – Norse Mythology





# Central Monuments - Obelisks





# Central Monuments - Obelisks





# Cree Medicine Wheel - Wyoming





# Early Christian cross





# Stonehenge - UK





# Lakota medicine wheel





???









# Science vs. Religion

- What are the important differences between science and religion?
- Between religious thinking and scientific thinking? Laypeople and clergy?
- Beware ethnocentrism!

