

Are we wired to believe in a higher power?

Video transcript for “Death, culture and power”

The earliest religious activities emerged in response to bodily, physical, material changes in the human life cycle – especially death.

Death rituals are one of the earliest forms of religious experience. Our ancestors didn't believe that death was necessarily the end of life. It was a transition. And ancient stone circles like this, still much loved by modern-day pagans and druids, were spaces in which the living and the dead came together.

Some of our ancestors believed that the dead and other spirits could see what was going on in this world. They knew what was happening in the lives of the living and to a certain extent they could influence events in that world. That's a really powerful notion. The idea that the dead or even the gods are with us and they can intervene in our lives is comforting, but it can also make us very careful about what we do.

Humans are essentially social beings, and so we live in social groups, and as all social groups we tend towards a hierarchy, and religion is no exception. When you've got a system of hierarchy, you have a system of power. And in a religious social group that hierarchy locates the most powerful member at the very top, and that's the deity: God. And it's to God that we're held accountable.