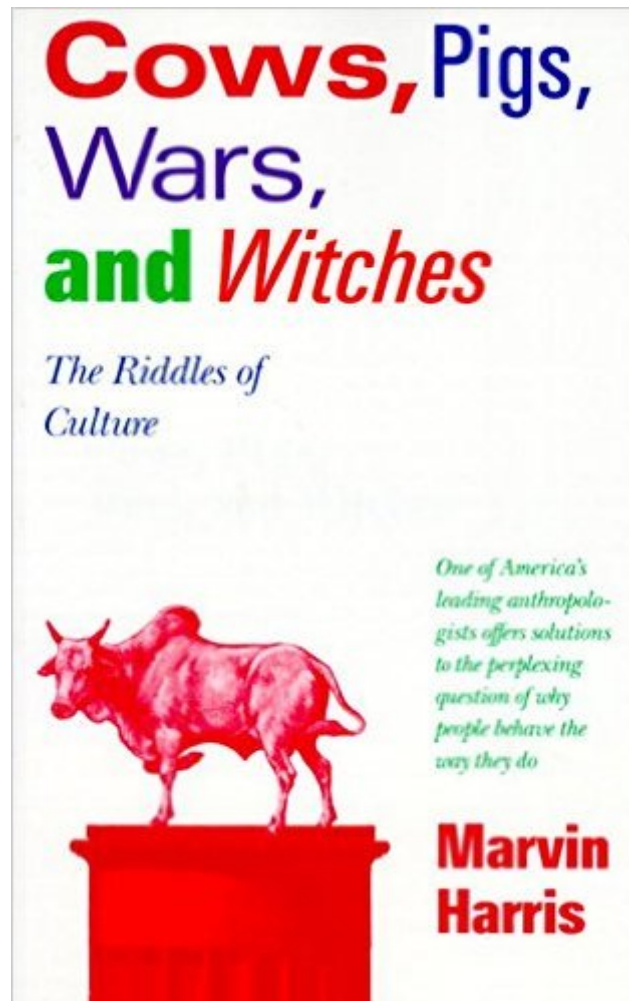


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Cows, Pigs, Wars, And Witches: The Riddles Of Culture



Synopsis

This book challenges those who argue that we can change the world by changing the way people think. Harris shows that no matter how bizarre a people's behavior may seem, it always stems from concrete social and economic conditions.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I first read this book as "light" reading when I was a graduate student in anthropology. Now, as an anthropology instructor, I assign it as a textbook in a course on Religion, Magic and Witchcraft. It proposes logical and fascinating solutions to such puzzles as (1) why Hindus are better off going hungry than slaughtering and eating their cattle,(2) why religions of the Middle East have made pork taboo, while cultures of the South Pacific organize their ritual life around pork feasts, and (3) in what way are New Guinea cargo cults, the 12 disciples of Jesus, the European witch trials, and the popularity of New Age beliefs of today the results of similar cultural pressures. This is the first book I have ever assigned in class that students have asked if they may read all at once, instead of a chapter a week. They can't put it down!

I've read this book twice already, and on the third time, I'm still getting new perspectives from Harris' masterful analysis of puzzling cultural phenomena like religious dietary restrictions (why are cows sacred and pigs aren't?), cargo cults (why are some countries rich and others poor?), and witch hunts (what did religion have to do with it?). All the quick explanations for these phenomena we were given in school were, at best, oversimplified and incomplete. The reviewer who wrote that the

book debunks mythology could also have been referring to the mythology believed by historians, scientists, and academics. Harris occasionally turns the microscope on our own culture and the assumptions we hold and the explanations we accept for things we don't understand. He takes on the sacred cows of anthropology and history, including Sacred Cows, and presents a new paradigm for understanding each subject.

First published in 1973, Marvin Harris' book suffers slightly from time lag (it closes with a refutation of the now-defunct counterculture movement), but is otherwise wholly engaging and undeniably fascinating. Tackling the "Most Wanted List" of anthropology's mysteries, Harris plunges in by explaining the practical socio-economic origins of the cliched "sacred cows" of India, then keeps on going through the reasons for religious dietary restrictions and on into the relationship between secular pressures, leaders and the many faces of messianism from the Middle East to the Middle Ages. His explanations are meticulously constructed, eminently reasonable and provide fuel for many a debate. Written in an open and accessible style, COWS, PIGS, WARS & WITCHES is aimed toward the academic community, but doesn't read that way at all. Though it references classic anthropological works such as Ruth Benedict's PATTERNS OF CULTURE, the book is careful to seed the rest of the text with explanation, thus keeping the more scholarly aspects of the work from alienating readers from the "outside" and deep-sixing the book's readability. In short, Harris' book is a solid addition to any reader's library, provided his unflinching analysis of some of the more common "sacred cows" doesn't offend.

A delightful little book that goes a long way to explaining why religions around the world have developed the way they have. He shows how common sense survival rules have become religious rules, how oppressed people develop 'Messiah's' and how those in control used fear and panic to keep control. Of course some Christians might not like what he has to say about their 'Messiah', but when all the facts are looked at, including the development of 'Messiah's' in other cultures, he is very convincing. Even though he doesn't say it, his book shows how cultures around the world live by a simple rule, 'those who have lots - waste lots, those who have little - waste little'. I found this amusing as environmentalists usually look to primitive societies as 'waste not want not' societies. This is a book that should seriously be incorporated into the school curriculum. It's explanation of how our differences developed show how similar we actually all are.

It takes gumption to reduce beliefs in sacred cows and messiahs to strictly functional purposes. For

the most part, Harris pulls it off with a series of entertaining (and at times speculative) essays on how beliefs cement people together. Particularly interesting is the comparison between the emergence of cargo cults and their leaders and the emergence of charismatic leaders (i.e. John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth) during the Roman occupation of Palestine. But the rewriting of Jesus from messianic warrior to the Prince of Peace is dated, as Biblical scholarship explaining how and why Christianity caught on has come a long way since the book was first written. His chapters on witchcraft and modern pagans are also unconvincing. The arguments are weak and his bias against the counter culture of the time is clearly conditioning his point of view. Still, the main thesis and the stories Harris uses to support it strike me as worth knowing, even if the current age of evolutionary psychology offers alternative (almost always better, sometimes complementary) theories supported with more rigorous evidence.

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