Hello, welcome. Today we’re going to talk about sacred objects, things that are used in ritual prayer and worship as a way of communicating with the sacred, a way of linking the everyday world with the sacred world. Many world religions use objects as a link between the common, everyday world and the world of the sacred and supernatural.

The sacred object may be used to persuade a deity to act or react in a particular way desired by the adherent of a particular tradition, or it could be used to ask for protection and to prevent a deity from causing harm. Often, a ritual will accompany the use of a sacred object.

However, in some traditions, like Islam, Judaism, and some sects of Protestant Christianity, having or worshipping images of a deity is strictly forbidden and is looked down upon. For example, in the Hebrew Bible in the book of Dueteronomy-- I am the Lord thy God which brought thee out of the land of Egypt from the house of bondage. Thou shalt have none other gods before me. Thou shalt not make thee any graven image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath or that is in the waters beneath the earth.

However, many religious traditions do include prayer and worship of their respective gods. For example, the central act of Hindu worship is to gaze upon the image of a deity in order to gain its blessings. The act of worship is religiously charged in Hinduism because of the belief that the deity is present in the image. These are called murtis, and are viewed by Hindus as not simply the likenesses of gods or goddesses. Rather, they are the deities themselves taken form. Here you see a depiction of a devotee worshipping Shiva, here as a cosmic dancer. Shiva also manifests as destroyer and transformer.

Other customs and rituals involving sacred objects which are linked to the spirit world include many Native American traditions. For example, the totem poles of the tribes from the Pacific Northwest, like Willapa, Chinook, Tlingit, and other indigenous cultures. These are monumental sculptures carved from large trees, usually cedar trees. The word totem is derived from the Ojibwe word odoodem, his kinship group. And while they are not objects of worship, the meanings of the designs on totem poles and their purposes are as varied as the cultures that make them.

Totem poles may recount familiar legends, clan lineages, or notable events. Some poles celebrate cultural beliefs, but others are mostly artistic presentations. Certain types of totem poles are part of mortuary structures and incorporate grave boxes with carves supporting poles or recessed backs for graves boxes.

Poles illustrate stories that commemorate historic persons, represent shamanic powers, or provide objects of public ridicule.
Now we can review. We started by talking about what a sacred object is. It's an item that's used during worship and prayer as a means of communicating with the sacred. It's a way of linking the everyday world with the unseen. We talked about Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and we use an example from Hebrew Bible as an example of a religion that prohibits the use of idolatry and creating images of God. There are many branches of Protestant Christianity that prohibit it. In Islam it is prohibited, and Judaism as well. In Orthodox Christianity, it's a different story. There are many icons and images and statues and paintings, et cetera, that are used as a way of communicating with the divine.

We then talked about Hinduism, and we introduced our first word murti, which is a representation-- more than a representation, in fact-- because the god manifests him or herself in the object when the devotee is gazing and involved in a devotional activity. We looked at several examples of Shiva in different forms and different sizes. We also looked at the Native American tradition in the Pacific Northwest of constructing totem poles as a way of connecting with ancestor spirits, nature spirits, and in general, a way of binding the community and also connecting the community with the sacred. The three key words again are sacred object, totem pole, and murti.