8 In the Presence of Mystery


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Part I

The Numinous

One of the most difficult aspects of describing religion is that there is no single good word for what religions are concerned with. The best ordinary word is "sacred," but it has its limitations. It has to be stretched, for example, to cover the demonic forces many religions believe in. The sacred is also usually thought of as "holy," whereas most of the gods of ancient religions are not very holy at all, in the usual sense of the word. Other words are limited also. "Divine" will not quite cover magic and spirits. To many people, "supernatural" suggests only ghosts and not also an infinite God.

Rudolph Otto (1869-1957), a German theologian, used a more obscure word in his book, *The Idea of the Holy* (1917). He borrowed the word "numinous" to refer to the "fascinating and awesome mystery" known as God. The word can serve a wider use here, to stand for the many ways that the mysterious dimension of existence has been encountered and given some religious name by the generations of humankind. Stage by stage, from primitive to modern, the numinous has taken on new faces, names and roles. Descriptions of each of those stages in the next chapters will clarify the meaning of "numinous." The descriptions will also enable us to look again at ourselves as the unusual beings who live with an orientation to mystery.
CHAPTER ONE

An Enchanted World

The Numinous in Primitive and Archaic Religion

PRIMITIVE RELIGION

If you were to awake some misty morning in the central highlands of New Guinea, in the thatched and stilted home of a native tribal family, you would find yourself in a world alive with invisible powers and beings. Before dawn it would not be entirely safe to intrude upon the spirits who roam at night, so you would lie within the hut talking quietly, or begin to eat breakfast inside until sunlight made the outdoors more safe. When you went out you would have to respect the rights of certain snakes. To stare at them openly could provoke them to return as spirits when you slept again and make you ill. Perhaps, though, you were born with a special aura of power about you. If so, the snake might not be able to see you, so you would be safe. At any rate, you would know some ritual techniques of your own to counteract the snake’s power. In fact, you would know many kinds of magic to cause illness to your enemies and health to your pigs, and to deal with threatening spirits.

The daily life of mountain tribespeople of New Guinea provides a good example of what is meant by primitive religion. There are only a few places in the world where this is true, but in the mountains of New Guinea and Southeast Asia, in the Kalahari desert and the rain forests of the Congo, in the upper reaches of the Amazon and in the deserts of Australia, there are tribes almost following the old ways still. Contact with other societies over centuries, and recently with modern societies, has had an impact. The old ways are fading now and being replaced by new modes of thought, for better or worse. But during the last one hundred years or so, anthropologists have learned to live among the tribes, to study their languages, to observe their customs carefully and sympathetically. These outsiders may never have fully seen life and reality as it appears to the tribespeople, but they have provided such precise and thorough descriptions of tribal life that we can form

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a picture of it that is probably close to the truth.

What the anthropologists tell us about the primitive tribal groups gives us our best available basis to estimate what religion may have been like before there was any civilization on this planet. This is important information because it is not just information about the past; the study of primitive beliefs is also a study of ourselves, of what we might be like without our extra layers of cultural accumulations. Primitive thought is woven into the greater complexities of later cultural forms including our own. Primitive religion still lives in the niches of contemporary culture and in the corners of our personalities. We can begin to understand this by looking at the universe as primitive people see it, one full of numinous powers of limited size and power.

The Nonliving Numinous Forces: Luck, Magic, Mana, and Omens

Primitive people are conscious of many mysterious forces at work around them. Sometimes berries grow; sometimes they do not. Disease comes at unexpected times. A brother who is usually quiet and calm runs away screaming. For these and other events there must be causes, but often these are not evident. Sensibly enough, primitive people believe there must be invisible causes at work in the world, affecting people's lives. One category of invisible and mysterious causes is the category of nonliving numinous powers. There are many forms of it, and many names.

Luck is one form. This is not mere accidental luck, not chance or happenstance, but luck as a real force to make good things (or bad) take place. Some inanimate things have it, such as medallions that can ward off evil. Some once-living objects have it, such as rabbit's feet which bring good luck (though not to the rabbit, apparently). Some people have it. In every tribe or group someone is born luckier than others, possessed of an inner power to succeed, be healthy, eat well, please people. Other people are jinxed, afflicted by a power that attracts harm to them and those around them.

Magic is another name for this numinous power. Rituals have magical power to affect the weather, put snakes to sleep, insure pregnancy. Medicines in general are all full of strange power. (The English word "pharmacist" comes from an ancient Greek word meaning "magician" or "poisoner.") Water from sacred streams has magical power to cure or to kill. Special signs made with the fingers can inflict harm or ward off demons.

For many primitive people names have a kind of magical power. To label something is to control it. Children experience this when they discover they can influence the large warm creature who holds them by saying, "Mama." In some tribes, people hide their true names so that no malicious spirit can control them by calling their name. The mere name of a spirit sometimes has power over other forces, a power to bless or a power to exercise evil influences.

There is a power in similarities. Pouring water on the ground from a gourd may stimulate further water on the ground from the sky in the form of rain. Painting a bison on the wall of the cave and hurling spears at it may help in tomorrow's hunt. There is power in contact also. To touch a dead person without later purification can make a person ill. What belongs to you, your hair and saliva and food that has been in your stomach, has some relation to your whole self and can be used in magical ways to affect you. The connections of similarity and contact can be used together in sorcery. If you construct a doll similar to a person you wish to harm and also use bits of hair or clothing from the person, that will make doubly certain that any harm done to the doll will affect the person it represents.

Those who believe in magical powers often do not claim to know what such forces really are or why they really work. So often all a person can do is to memorize what does work. Notching the ears of cattle protects them from evil disease. Hex signs keep demons away. It is not necessary to understand why this works, so long as it does.

To make it easier to talk about this invisible nonliving power, a name will help. The one used most commonly now by anthropologists is "mana." In 1891 a missionary, Bishop Codrington, wrote to a colleague in London about the Southwest Pacific culture of the Melanesians. These tribes, Codrington reported, share a belief in an invisible power which is "the cause of all success in life that surpasses the ordinary." They called this power "mana." The name has stuck, as has its companion name "taboo" (or "tapu" or "tabu"). Mana-power can be good or bad, but because it is power it is often dangerous. Places, people, or objects with too much mana are therefore taboo—dangerous—and are to be avoided or handled with great care.

Mana-power may also make its presence known by peculiar effects on the environment. Spirits do the same, as the next section will mention. Such signs of numinous power are called "omens." The derivative word "omnious" suggests that omens are warnings about bad things to come. Vultures flocking over your house may be an ominous event. But there are also good omens and neutral ones. An itchy palm is an omen you will receive some money. It is said. A fire that flares up signifies that visitors are on their way, perhaps friendly, perhaps not. Primitive people live in a world where there may be numerous signs every day. Any odd occurrence is likely to foretell something. It is important to be alert to the signs.

Divination is a name for the practice of reading omens. For the most part anyone can read the signs that appear in nature and daily life. It is especially handy to have available some reliable method of divining. In some cultures bones or marked pebbles can be cast down on the ground to be read. In another the shape of the clouds can be trusted to foretell the immediate future.
Numinous omen-power is useful in many ways. The English used to throw a murderer suspect into a pond that had been blessed. If the suspect floated, the holy water was rejecting him. He was therefore guilty. (If he drowned, his innocence assured him of a good afterlife.) A New Guinea tribe discovers who is guilty by cutting off the head of a chicken and letting it loose to run around until it drops. Where it stops indicates who is guilty.

The numinous power in luck, magic, or omens can be good or bad, strong or weak, easily controlled or completely independent of human choice. It is a force residing in spirits, people, animals, inanimate objects, or daily events. It is a nonliving power, though some omens are signs given by spirits. It is unexplained in the sense that, by and large, it is just there in reality, affecting people even when no one can say why or explain what it is. Primitive people perceive it as relatively limited and local. As we will see, archaic people believe in much more powerful forms of it.

Living Numinous Beings: The Spirits

The world of the primitive is at least as crowded with spirits as it is with mana. However big the tribespeople conceive their universe to be, it is alive with invisible living beings, forces that are not only numinous powers but also conscious, with thoughts and feelings like those of a person. The more similar the spirits are to humans, the more they can be called “anthropomorphic” (human-form).

A vast array of small nature spirits live in different places and things. Each tree, river, field, rock, cave, and mountain top is likely to have its spirit. Often the spirit has a personality like the place where it lives: the spirit of a brook is talkative and lively; the spirit of the thunder is loud and angry. Every animal has its own spirit. Or we could as easily say that many spirits have animal-form (are “theriomorphic.”). Nature has a hundred thousand souls.

Many pests and demons, small invisible beings, care only to cause trouble. They make you forget your stew on the fire until it burns. They trip you, so you break a leg. They turn your milk sour and make your apples rot. Some of these are strong enough to cause major troubles such as disease, miscarriage, deformed children, and even death.

Many people have attendant spirits. When you are born, perhaps you have an invisible twin who will accompany you through life, or even two of them, one helpful and one harmful. Perhaps you have a spirit partner you must entertain and keep happy lest it get angry with you. Or it may be more like a guardian angel, a protector, or source of luck.

The spirits of the dead are rarely very far away. Sometimes they live at the edges of the campsite or village. At other times they stay in the land of the dead, but might return to visit out of loneliness, or to cause trouble out of envy for the living, or to demand more remembrance and attention than has been given them, or to give advice in dreams, visions, or omens.

The original ancestors of the tribe may still be present. They established the tribe’s customs. In a very few cases they watch to punish anyone who violates those customs. Or they act as guardians and give warnings through omens. The ancestors of the animals sometimes show up also, as talking animals in a dream; or metamorphic—shape-shifting—beings, sometimes human in form, sometimes not.

You yourself are a spirit-being; your life is your spirit. It is even possible that within you are various spirits that together make up who you are. One tribe, for example, says each person has three spirits. Upon death one spirit dissolves, another remains to roam around on earth, the third goes to the sky to live. Another tribe believes that it is possible to capture one of the spirits of each person you kill in battle. A strong warrior grows in strength because each victory over another person allows the warrior to inhale the other person’s spirit with its additional energy, to add its strength to that of the other spirits which the warrior already possesses. A person who has killed too often, though, may lose control of the many spirits within him and go mad.

Among all these numerous spirit-beings are other strange and numinous ones that are not spirits, yet not human either. There are elves, gnomes, trolls, leprechauns, and such. They are a little too solid to be spirits, yet they are in touch with the numinous in special ways. They can bless or curse a person or give warning signs, so it is advisable to remain on good terms with them.

No single tribe is likely to see around them all of the forms of spirit-beings described here. Among the many spirits that a given tribe does believe in, only a few have much importance. The spirits of the dead, a local nature spirit or two, an animal whose spirit is of special significance to this tribe, a few spirits who frequently produce omens to guide people—these and one or two others might be the only spirits a child learns much about. Yet no tribe is surprised to discover that the world is full of spirits, some of whom the tribe had not known about before.

Dealing with Numinous Powers

Because primitive existence is crowded with mana and spirits, it is of obvious importance to know how to deal with them. A child growing up in a primitive culture learns about the various mana powers the way a modern child learns about household appliances. Each has its use. Some open cans; others toast bread. A child learns to use them, even without understanding how or why they work. It is the same with magical rituals, or “ oracle” bones that foretell the future, or musical instruments that are taboo because they possess intense mana. A child in a primitive culture learns not to tread on
taboo ground and not to dribble saliva where a sorcerer can get it and use it to do harm to the child. Magical potions can make someone fall in love with you or can make an enemy fall over dead. The proper song can attract the oppossum close enough to hunt. The power-filled symbols on your chest can prevent spears from striking you. Mana-power is everywhere, to be used when possible, to be avoided when necessary.

Dealing with spirits requires some care also. Spirits are like people, with similar needs and feelings. Persuasive techniques can help. The spirits may be lonely and seek company. That is why they want to take your children's spirits, even though that means your children will die. Keep the spirits away from the village if you can. If you cannot, pour a bit of beer on the ground now and then as a little gift, and they may leave you in peace.

Some bothersome spirits can be threatened or driven away. Firecrackers at festivals, and loud gongs and clattering sticks at funerals will keep little demons or the spirits of the dead at a distance where they will do no harm. Some spirits are not too bright and can be tricked. When disease is spreading, leave a dummy image of yourself in front of your hut. The sickness spirit may mistake the dummy for you and curse it with the disease, leaving you safe.

Magic is important for dealing with spirits. Certain signs or symbols can keep spirits away. There are formulas or substances for summoning spirits and for casting them out. Psychotropic drugs or alcohol can aid in making contact with spirits or using their power. Garlic has a noticeable mana, strong enough to drive away evil spirits.

The best magic is coercive magic, guaranteed to work provided only that the whole magical ritual is performed exactly right. Unfortunately, some demons also know magic and can cast contrary spells. Others will make you stumble in your speech and actions and thereby weaken the power of the magic. Some spirits are too strong to be coerced by magic. It is best just to avoid them as much as possible.

In all these ways of dealing with spirits there is no worship. Some ancestors or spirits may be addressed with respect. A hunter may respectfully thank the spirit of the deer he has just killed. The Ainu of northern Japan, for example, have a bear ritual in which they honor the spirit of the bear which they have just killed for their feast. But they do not worship the bear spirit, as a superior spirit being. For this reason some anthropologists in the past decided that primitive beliefs and practices of this sort are not true religion. Once again, it depends on how "religion" is defined. For convenience, we can treat these primitive practices and beliefs as the simplest form of religion.

**Primitive Religion Is Called Animism**

Near the end of the nineteenth century, an Englishman named Edward Tylor (1832-1917) decided that the beliefs of primitive tribes in a multitude of spirits needed a name. He used the word "animism," from the Latin word *anima*, meaning soul or spirit. People who believe that there are many and varied spirits invisibly roaming the world and affecting our lives are called animists; they also usually believe in some form of mana-powers.

Primitive tribes are all animistic to some extent. So Tylor guessed that animism is the origin of all religion. Many people were offended by this conclusion, because it seemed to imply that religious belief is fundamentally primitive.

In defense of religion others pointed out that no one really knows what went on among people ten thousand or twenty thousand years ago. Perhaps the earliest human religion was belief in a single supreme God, and animism was only a later corruption of this noble belief. This theory happened to fit better with what the Judaeo-Christian scriptures seemed to say, that the first human beings knew that there was one supreme God, so this theory was more popular among people who adhered to traditional religious beliefs. The Catholic anthropologist Father Wilhelm Schmidt (1868-1954) promoted this idea in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The dust has settled somewhat since the days of the most turbulent arguments. Though there is always room for revision, we can treat primitive animism as the earliest form of religion and the roots of later religious beliefs and practices. This need not imply, however, that religion is necessarily animist at its heart, as we will see.

Animism is still part of life today. There are numerous forms of contemporary belief in mana. People still believe in good luck and bad luck. Baseball players will not play without their lucky cap or socks. Actors refrain from washing one another well because that is unlucky. They say "break a leg" instead. Hostesses will not seat thirteen people at a table and hotels have no thirteenth floor. Some people wear blessed medals or use holy water for protection.

Belief in mana is sometimes disguised in pseudo-scientific forms. Some people claim that the pyramid shape can focus cosmic rays to clear your mind, preserve raw hamburger, and sharpen razor blades. The magician who used to move objects by "magic" now advertises his exceptional ESP talent of telekinesis, which empowers him to bend forks with his mind and stop clocks at a distance.

Belief in spirits is less common today than it once was, yet we still buy books of stories of haunted houses. People fear ghosts. Others claim to be reincarnations of ancient heroes. Some television personalities claim to bring messages from the deceased to people in a studio audience. Films about dead people communicating with the living are popular. We hear stories at night of demonic possession and tremble a little, even in our skepticism.
Animism today also sometimes appears in the guise of science. Researchers have discovered that people whose hearts have stopped beating for a time report similar “out-of-the-body” experiences. We are tempted to take this as scientific evidence that we are all embodied spirits. When strange lights are seen in the sky, it somehow seems possible to believe there are living beings within the unidentified flying objects. Unseen beings from outer space are replacing some of the invisible spirits that hovered around our ancestors.

The overall life, culture, and religion of the primitive tribes that exist today are like surviving remnants of the common beginnings of all human culture. But the modern “tribes” that are the great industrialized and computerized nations retain the past also in all the little ways we find mana-like powers and spirits all around us still.

The Culture of the Primitives

The numinous is ordinary. The numinous elements, living and nonliving, that are part of the primitive person’s reality blend into the everyday and ordinary aspects of that reality. A child grows up memorizing the names and habits of invisible spirits and living cousins without thinking of one of them as being more “religious” than the others. They are different but all part of the same world. The child learns which snakes to avoid, which rocks have spirits, and which tree is full of mana, all as part of everyday practical knowledge. The spirits are part of the everyday world; the numinous powers are all part of the family’s homeland.

The world is a loose collection of various powers and beings. There is no overall unified order to the spirits and mana-powers. Each spirit has its own story; each bit of magical power has its location or use. The world as it now exists is the result of a thousand different and more or less unconnected events. The porcupine has quills because once it was a person who burned someone’s hut. The owners of the hut threw spears at the arsonist, sticking him all over. The person crawled into a log and came out days later looking as he does now, with tiny spears all over his body. Clouds are wet and the snake is shiny and people die and no one should marry a brother or sister, each for a different reason. The world cannot be understood any more than that. Once upon a time, certain different things happened for different reasons, and that is why the world is the way it is today. Primitive people are as intelligent as people of any culture. They show great ingenuity in the ways they categorize and cross-categorize things, or apply everyday logic skillfully in making tools. But their culture does not train them to use their intelligence in the same ways as other cultures, as we will see.

The collection of customs rules life. The customs give form to daily life and prevent it from breaking into chaos. Many times fights erupt out of jealousies, anger, or pettiness. A small argument leads to great insults and on to physical injury or even death. Suddenly whole families are caught up in tensions, fearful about who will attack whom. Customs may restore peace by dictating a certain specific repartition or banishing an offender. Custom and chaos sway back and forth in uneasy balance. Words of wisdom from one person or a stult reading of omens by another may provide guidance. Those tribes with the stronger and more effective customs, we can presume, are the ones that endure in the face of the human impatience, pride, passion, and pettiness that is part of life everywhere.

Primitive life is usually called egalitarian, because there are no hereditary or official rulers in primitive societies. Any person with good social skills or great strength or other special qualities may in fact exert greater influence in the tribe than others. But primitive people usually resent anyone among them who tries to claim extra power or privilege.

Tribespeople live day by day and generation by generation, juggling a thousand forces both numinous and ordinary, balancing between customs and impulses. There are many plans for long-term projects. There is no well-structured social hierarchy, no kings, no full-time priests. There are just the people in families, hands, and tribes, digging up edible roots, planning a feast, preparing an initiation ritual, driving out a harmful spirit, cooking a meal, making signs to ward off sorcery, nursing a child, stealing from an enemy, falling in love, growing old, and telling the stories about how things are in the world.

From Primitive to Archaic Culture

As far back as ten thousand years ago, some part of the human family transformed its existence by inventing agriculture. Primitive people live by hunting and gathering, sometimes also with small gardens or with a domesticated animal or two. Some cultures became more complex when they extended their gardens or began to herd large numbers of animals. But large scale agriculture brought much greater changes. In the fertile crescent in the ancient Near East (from present day Palestine up through Syria and into Iraq) a few people began to plant various grains that could be tended and harvested in bulk. Ever larger numbers of people could live off the produce of one area of land.

Villages turned into large towns where there were inherited distinctions between an upper and lower class of people, the rulers and the ruled. Eventually cities appeared. Social and economic classes multiplied: landowners, the military, merchants, peasants. The role of chief or king took on greater power. Even religion was put into the hands of full time specialists. Priests were consecrated to offer sacrifices to gods in official acts of worship. In the temples, prophets had full time jobs reading omens in the
entails of animals. As culture changes, religious beliefs and practices change. Primitive beliefs in mana and spirits were retained (as they still are in weaker form even today), but were absorbed into a somewhat different pattern of belief known now as archaic religion.

ARCHAIC RELIGION

The Birth of the Gods

The archaic stage of religious development is a stage in which people begin to think of some of the spirits as numerous beings of very great power, more awesome than ordinary spirits. We usually call these great spirits "gods." Like all spirits they are personal in that they have thoughts and feelings. The word "personal" here does not necessarily mean friendly or warm. Although the gods can be helpful and kind, they can also be petty, vengeful, and destructive.

The gods are not as neighborly as are most of the lesser spirits. Even if the gods live nearby in a shrine or sacred place, they are nonetheless like great chiefs or kings, endowed with majesty and deserving of respect and fear. Many of the gods live far away in the skies, on a high mountain, or deep in the earth.

Human society is no longer egalitarian as it is in primitive culture. Archaic cultures have a hierarchy of power among people, from peasant to landlords and military leaders to king. Among the gods and spirits it is often the same. Many local spirits might live their lives on their own for the most part, but still be under the power of a god. The spirits that live in underwater coves and in various harbors might all have to bow to the greater power of a great god of the sea. Occasionally, there is an explicit line of authority as in the case of Zeus who ruled all the sky gods because he is their father, or of Marduk, god of ancient Babylon, who ruled the other gods of that area as his reward for having defeated monstrous enemies of the gods.

The anthropologists have sometimes used the name "high god" to label a god who is not merely greater than an ordinary spirit but who dominates even other gods in some sense. The category of high god is a fuzzy one. Sometimes it applies to any god like Zeus or Marduk who is the dominant one, albeit not all-powerful. At other times the title "high god" belongs to the god who created the universe as it now exists, perhaps forming it out of some primordial ooze or out of the bodies of defeated monsters. Or perhaps one god is just so appreciated by people that the other gods are overshadowed. Wilhelm Schmidt, mentioned earlier, claimed that all cultures have or had some form of high god, but this does not seem to be true of genuinely primitive cultures.

Awesome as they are, the gods are not always of particularly noble or gra-
the Babylonians and the Chinese devised elaborate descriptions of various kinds of numinous forces that emanate from the heavens and influence human affairs. Still today millions of people check with their astrologer before they make any significant decisions or take important actions.

Perhaps equally ancient is the belief that numbers represent great mana. Sums and propositions have a wondrous regularity. With measurements, angles, and designs, for example, the end of the sun's retreat into winter and its return for spring can be identified. (The structures of Stonehenge in England are just one example of this.) Among the Babylonians, numerology shared popularity with astrology. There were "lucky" numbers, numbers with positive power. The numbers of a person's name established how a person's life would intertwine with the number-value of other places and peoples and powers.

Dealing with Gods and Great Mana

The primitive person lives as a near-equal to the spirits and the local forms of mana; but the archaic person faces numinous powers that loom large over the landscapes of life. The gods are too strong to be controlled by magic or any other means. At best, it is persuasion, not control, that a person must bring to bear on the gods. Worship appears for the first time in history.

No one need worship spirits; they are human-sized and can often be controlled by magic. But the great gods are beyond easy control. People must try to influence them by bribes and flattery, albeit with great respect. Bribery takes the form of respectful offerings; flattery appears as dutiful worship. These acts of persuasion cannot be too brief, or occasional, or casual. Long rituals and celebrations are expected. Formal shrines and temples become common. A whole priesthood with its temple rituals develops eventually. Worship becomes the major business of religion. (Some scholars have argued that religion begins with worship of gods, and that primitive practices are really pre-religious. It all depends on definitions.)

Even with all this, it can still be difficult to please the gods and keep them helpful or at least benign. Subject to their own passions, pride, and pettiness, they might still send a plague, destroy crops, or flood a city. But anger against them in such cases will not help. The gods can be like abusive parents; the children can only submit helplessly. To blame the parent may only evoke more punishment.

To some extent, people can adapt to great mana. Parents can choose a name for their child that has lucky numbers the sum of which is also lucky. They can try to arrange when pregnancy occurs so as to give birth to a child whose sun-sign, for example, is that of Leo, a force producing strong and generous leaders. Yet in the end, the forms of great mana hover over a person's life with such unavoidable and unchangeable force that the only course open to people is submission. The stars and sun will not change in their course; the yang and yin of nature flow unaffected by human decision. Much of life, therefore, can only be an acceptance of what is and will be, with perhaps some modest improvements in things through the occasional help of spirits and gods, the use of magic, and a wise coordination of activities with the patterns of the great numinous forces.

Polytheism: A Name for Archaic Religion

The name alone says most of what archaic religion is, a belief in many (poly) gods (theos). There is not a clear line between animism and polytheism, because there is no way to fix a standard as to just how powerful or important a spirit-being must be to deserve the title "god." The ordinary sky spirits of the Australian aborigines have been called gods by some outsiders. On the other hand, the high god of the Delaware Indians, for example, was referred to by many colonial residents of America as a Great Spirit. In general, though, it is useful to reserve the name "god" for a spirit of great power, superior to other spirits and people.

Polytheism developed after animism. Most primitive societies today do not exhibit beliefs in extremely powerful spirits. Some societies we loosely call "primitive" believe in a high god, but these usually are not really primitive societies. As a rule, for example, these have a chief or king, which denotes a hierarchical ordering of power that is part of an archaic culture. The most primitive societies, such as those of the highland tribes in New Guinea, Australian aborigines, or tribes of the Amazon basin, have neither chief nor powerful gods. The best estimate is that primitive animism preceded archaic polytheism by thousands of years, and that the belief in local mana, which is part of animistic religion, also long preceded the belief in great mana found in archaic cultures.

Archaic Style Religion Today

Archaic beliefs are still fairly common. There are first of all explicit forms of polytheism alive today; many cultures of Africa have been polytheistic to this day. The popular religion of India is strongly polytheistic, with gods almost beyond numbering filling up the spaces of the universe. There are also less obvious ways in which the old gods have been replaced by their equivalents. In some major branches of Christianity the saints in heaven are accorded great influence. Strictly speaking, they are not to be worshiped as gods, because they are totally subordinate to the one God. Yet people appeal to them and have formal and elaborate ceremonies in their honor in order to benefit from their influence. In his own sinister way, the Satan of popular Christian belief is also a spirit of godlike (though not God-like) power.
The old beliefs in great mana exist today also. Astrology is still strong enough to generate a multi-million dollar industry of book publishing, chart reading, and newspaper columns. Those who believe in pyramid-power sometimes speak of this power as an awesome cosmic force. Those who use TM, transcendental meditation, often interpret it as a way to tap a numinous energy that flows through the whole universe. (To speak of cosmic forces or of the whole universe is normally a sign of “historic” classical or universalist religions. But not all who learn from these religions understand them in the same way. Chapter Four will discuss this further.)

As is the case with belief in small mana, belief in great mana today has also taken on quasi-scientific forms, disguising its sense of the numinous in technical jargon. Pyramid-power can be couched in the language physics uses to speak of cosmic rays. The Transcendental Meditation movement brought to England and the U.S. by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, once guru to the Beatles, still connects its belief in a universal energy to certain medical practices. The mystery of the numinous is only half-tamed and half-hidden beneath all the technical language. Archaic beliefs live with primitive ones in our midst and within us.

Archic Culture
Archic culture is one of greater complexity than the primitive. In archic cultures the numinous powers range from the ordinary everyday spirits and magic, inherited from primitive times, to the awesome and more distant gods and great mana. This wider range of the numinous is a clue to the greater world in which archic people live. Life in the large village or in the city is a life with a more complex kind of knowledge about the world than is usual in primitive societies. There are more social roles and thus more complex relationships to be learned. There is often opportunity for more forms of trade with outside cultures. Local villages, each with its own customs, fall under the influence of a powerful city. Eventually, small empires arise, as in ancient China, India, Mesopotamia, and Egypt.

One result of this is that the universe appears to archic cultures as no longer merely a collection of events and patterns to be learned and assimilated as the one single reality. Instead, the universe looks complex enough to require more elaborate explanations. There are more options about how to live, and so each culture needs some reasons why its ways are better than other ways. The great myths of literate archic cultures portray and explain the complexities of life to archic people. There will be more on this when we speak of myths in the next chapter.

The many facts of reality are not just scattered facts, as they most often are to primitive people. The facts are organized into more complex categories and put into a hierarchy of power or importance. In Egypt the sun that gives light and life was above all life so the sun was the most important god, called Amen or Ra. Lesser gods had to take subordinate positions. Osiris and Horus had special presence, though, in the Pharaoh and the Pharaoh’s power over the Egyptians, so these gods outranked most others. In the ancient religion of the Indo-European people, whose language and thought is the parent of so much of Western language, the sky is the dominant numinous realm. The power of sun and storm, of light and darkness, overwhelmed all else. So the sky god was high god. In ancient Greece his name was Zeus. Under the high god were often a hierarchy of other specific gods. Under Zeus, for example, were his children such as Aphrodite, Helios, Hermes, Athena. Below the gods were the extraordinary beings such as the giants and the monsters. Below the extraordinary beings were the ordinary ones, the spirits and the humans.

In archic cultures, however, this hierarchical ranking was usually rough and unsettled. Alliances of power were made and broken. Competing major gods might divide reality among them, as Zeus took the sky and open air, Poseidon the sea, and Hades the underground. Archic cultures perceive a greater amount of unifying order in reality than do primitive cultures, but it is still an incomplete order. There is no overall unity as is found in monotheism and other great classical religions, as we will see.

Summary
This chapter has presented some interpretations of the ways primitive and archic societies perceive numinous mysteries, as magic and spirits and great mana and gods. Primitive religion is a way of living with a multitude of smaller numinous powers in a relatively small universe. Mana and spirits are plentiful, each to be dealt with to make life run smoothly. Archic religion, an aspect of a more complexly structured society, still acknowledges magic and spirits but also worships the more distant powerful spirit-beings known as gods, whose influences can extend over many parts of the world, and may seek to conform life to grand powers like the stars and numbers.

Behind the fact of such beliefs is the question of why these beliefs exist. The various answers people offer are valuable because they give us clues about our own human character, needs, and hopes. That is the topic of the next chapter.

For Further Reflection
1. List all the kinds of mana-like powers, spirits, and numinous realities in general that people today believe in. (Look at the magazines sold at your supermarket checkout counter to get some ideas.)
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2. To what extent do you find it reasonable to believe in numinous powers like spirits, magic, or gods? Explain why or why not.
3. Explain how coherent or integrated the many forces of the universe seem to you. What sort of single underlying unifying order is there to all things, if any?
4. Are you comfortable with the claim that religious ideas and practices change as the culture changes? Is this true of the religious traditions you are most familiar with, including your own? Explain.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Alice B. and Irvin L. Child, Religion and Magic in the Life of Traditional Peoples, 1993. Includes information about both primitive and current “archaic” style cultures.
Robin Horton, Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West, 1993. A collection of Horton’s many influential articles about non-literate tribal cultures in the twentieth century.

CHAPTER TWO

The Human Quest

The Origin and Function of Belief in the Numinous

THE FACT OF BELIEF

Every culture in the history of humankind has included belief in the numinous as a major part of its understanding of reality. In fact, most people in history have considered it self-evident that the gods are real, or that ancestors guide them, or that demons cause sickness. Does the sun rise and water run downhill and the eagle soar in the sky? Of course. Do spirits roam, and does magic exist? Of course. The numinous and the non-numinous are equally obvious, especially to people of primitive and archaic cultures.

Later developments in human history, though, included some degree of disbelief. In the classical or historic cultures, as we will see, people began to doubt some primitive and archaic beliefs. In contemporary times, there are those who doubt all beliefs in the numinous. In theory such doubts would have been possible all along; the numinous beings are usually invisible, after all. Why believe in something you cannot see? In our view, there is little evidence that magic is really efficacious. How is it that most people proceeding us have believed in it or some equivalent mana-power?

The possibility of doubt makes it all the more striking that so few doubts have existed. If disbelief could have existed at any time, the fact that it has been quite rare indicates something about human beings in general.

Individual religious traditions have proposed that the reason for belief lies in the actions of the divine power. Western religions, for example, have claimed that they believe in God because this God revealed himself to them. But these same believers do not think that Zeus really appeared to the Greeks or nature spirits to primitives. Have all the gods and spirits and mana-powers that people have believed in really given reliable and obvious evidence of their existence? If even most of these do not really exist, why is it that almost every culture in history has believed in so many of them