"As a theologian in a Catholic liberal arts college, I have found it difficult to find texts that offer academic excellence in the analysis of the development of religion while maintaining a respectful demeanor that is supportive of religious faith. Michael Horace Barnes's *The Enduring Quest for Meaning: Humans, Mystery, and the Story of Religion* strikes the perfect balance. It both challenges and inspires."

—John B. Switzer, Spring Hill College

"Michael Horace Barnes's *The Enduring Quest for Meaning: Humans, Mystery, and the Story of Religion* (the revised edition of Barnes's peerless textbook, *In the Presence of Mystery* [1984]), puts a much finer point to his exploration of 'a supreme and awesome unity' of the entire universe. I can think of no other work that will better accompany the reading of Pope Francis's critically important encyclical on ecology, Laudato si', than this work. The coherence and timing are propitious and providential."

—David G. Schultenover, Marquette University

Michael Barnes's book, *The Enduring Quest for Meaning*, is written clearly and intelligibly, not assuming too much knowledge on the part of its readers. It introduces the academic study of religion in a fascinating, well-organized way that relates its topic to the lives of students, including footnotes to relevant academic sources and key chapters that make the book's story clear. The treatment of postmodernism is helpful to the understanding of religion in the twenty-first century.

—Alan Meyers, Lindenwood University

Michael Horace Barnes's book, *The Enduring Quest for Meaning*, is a comprehensive and well-constructed introduction to religion as human response to mystery. It talks about a God that transcends the limits of particular religions' titles or manner of relating to God or God's existence. The book is coherent, useful, and attractive: coherent because of its examples of how humans have understood Ultimate Reality; useful because of its footnotes and charts and summaries of terms; and attractive in the images that illustrate topics (a picture is frequently "worth a thousand words").

—James V. Zeitz, Our Lady of the Lake University

At a time when many students question the value of religion, Michael Horace Barnes's *The Enduring Quest for Meaning* provides them with an engagingly written text that demonstrates why the religious quest not only endures but thrives. Barnes shows how human religiousness is grounded in our shared humanity. This book will appeal to students who are religious, as well as to those who are suspicious of religion. It integrates insights from multiple disciplines, including religious studies, theology, philosophy, history, psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Its rich examples from a wide variety of religious traditions provide concrete illustrations of the larger points being made and will spark student interest.

—Donna Teevan, Seattle University

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the enduring quest for meaning

HUMANS, MYSTERY, AND THE STORY OF RELIGION

Michael Horace Barnes

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Contents

Preface

This is the fourth edition of a book first published in 1984, then titled *In the Presence of Mystery: An Introduction to the Story of Human Religiousness*. This new edition has been revised to bring the contents up to date and to augment the text with recent recommended readings and footnotes to guide further study. The new title, *The Enduring Quest for Meaning: Humans, Mystery, and the Story of Religions*, reflects well the orientation of the work, to study religion as a developing story of a human quest to make sense of and respond to the many mysteries in life. The human mind can endlessly ask questions beyond its capacity to answer; every generation struggles to know what it means to be human. This book is one telling of that long and varied story. I am gratified that in the thirty years since the original publication of this book many people have found it to be a useful and meaningful contribution not only to their college courses but also to their own perspectives on life. My students have often told me they liked it enough to give their copy to a friend or even to a parent, which I take as sincere praise indeed.

For those not familiar with earlier editions, it may help to understand the particular approach of this text. Although the text describes the beliefs and practices of many traditions and cultures around the world, it is not mainly a "world religions" text. It would be more accurate to call it a text on the nature of religion or religiousness, as it uses somewhat of a "history of religions" and "comparative religion" approaches. The historical development of modes of religion over the last ten thousand years or more reveals layers of possibility for religiousness, layers still found among many cultures today. A comparison of religions across cultures helps identify aspects of religion that are apparently embedded in human nature enough to be part of religions almost everywhere in spite of other cultural differences.

This is a risky enterprise. It is notoriously difficult to define *religion*.[1] There are those who argue that *religion* is not truly a distinct thing at all but is instead an expression of various cultural realities.[2] So a book on the nature of religion has an uphill climb. In this case, the task is made easier by the subject matter of this book—how those beliefs and practices traditionally called religion show various aspects of human nature, needs, and hopes. The history and variety of religion reveals a great deal about humans.

1. Robert E. Van Voorst offers thirteen sample definitions and then proposes a fourteenth in *RELG: World* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2013), 5–6.

2. See, for example, chapter 6 in Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1997).

As part of this search to see humans through religion, the book reflects on various analyses of religion by both defenders and critics of religion. Challenges from Feuerbach and Freud, for example—that explore possible human needs motivating religiousness—are balanced by appreciative evaluations of religion by, say, Eliade or Rahner, who find a sense of religion to be natural or intrinsically meaningful. The viewpoints of the outsider on religion are usually part of "religious studies" scholarship. The viewpoints of the insider on a given tradition are normally called theology. Both approaches have something to say about the human dimension of religion, so both are included.

The Nature of the Book

Every book on religion has a philosophical or theological perspective—sometimes, however, not identified as only one possible perspective among others. Many who teach and write about religion, for example, claim that religions in general are different modes of response to the sacred and that the sacred is a *sui generis* (unique or its own kind of) reality. That is not the underlying assumption of this book. The not-so-hidden philosophy or theology behind this text is the conviction that all people share what can be called an openness to the infinite, an awareness that beyond the horizon of life lie important mysteries and that religion is a response to mystery.

As noted, the focus of this book is not so much on the mystery as on humans—as those who live in the presence of mystery—and what this tells us about what it means to be human. Long before modern social sciences tried to discover the social, psychological, political, and economic forces driving human life, the religions of humankind already manifested those forces. When there were, as yet, no formal theologies of revelation, people acted as though they were often in the presence of the special powers that later would be called supernatural or sacred. Religion expresses human capabilities, needs, aspirations, and fears, as well as the many kinds of human responses to those aspects of human life.

Over the years, I have heard complaints, albeit mild ones, from those who say that this book is either (a) too religious or (b) not religious enough. On the one hand, it is sympathetic to religion and seeks to present religion as religious people experience it and to present their arguments in defense of it. On the other hand, the text includes a fairly thorough survey of critical questions that have been directed at religion throughout the centuries. In my own courses, I have found that religious students are still religious by the end of the course. A few say they have learned to appreciate religion more; some are more critical of religion. I have also found that those who enter the course as skeptics tend to leave still skeptical but usually saying that their earlier form of skepticism was simplistic and not sufficiently appreciative of the many human dimensions of religion.

Religion and Culture Have Evolved

A number of comments received since the first edition have been directed against the thesis on which the book is built—the claim that there has been an evolution of culture and religion.

There was, in fact, much that was wrong with earlier evolutionary interpretations of religion and culture. The famous early nineteenth-century theory of August Comte, for example, identified religion with primitive and archaic belief styles, philosophy with classical (or "historical") cultures, and science with modern culture. This text claims, instead, that religion (as well as science and philosophy) has primitive, archaic, classical, and modern forms, as the first chapter of this book explains. Religion does not belong only to primitive and archaic styles of thought, as Comte claimed.[3]

The nineteenth-century theories of cultural evolution were also misused as a justification for colonialist imperialism on the grounds that the superior culture of Europe ought to dominate lesser cultures. There were other problems with many of the nineteenth-century formulations, enough for the anthropologist Franz Boas to lead the movement away from such interpretations of the cultures of the world and toward a greater degree of cultural relativism. Each culture deserves to be appreciated as its own functional unity, its own coherent pattern of life, said Boas and his followers; they reject any claim that European culture is the norm against which all other cultures can be judged.[4]

There is a great deal of wisdom in Boas's approach. Nonetheless, many anthropological studies in the last forty years or so have tested the degree to which changes in economic and social complexity, as from nomadic foraging cultures to urban agricultural-trading cultures, produce parallel changes in notions about the spirits and gods and in the form of the stories about them. Various studies have explored how Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development and the formulations of Lawrence Kohlberg about the development of moral reasoning correlate with degrees of social complexity and differentiation in various cultures.[5] The result of these studies has been to support the general idea of cultural evolution as well as the basic outline of religious evolution in this text. Much is still unclear and in dispute about cultural and religious evolution. There are still dangers of misusing any theory of cultural development

3. Michael Horace Barnes offers one long argument in support of this claim in *Stages of Thought: The Co-Evolution of Religious Thought and Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

4. Robert L. Carneiro provides an excellent history and analysis of the last century of disputes over cultural evolutionism and claims that decades of anthropological and archeological work supports the conclusion that patterns of cultural evolution are real factors in human history. *Evolutionism in Cultural Anthroplogy* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2003).

5. Christopher R. Hallpike offers extensive evidence and analysis of these correlations in *The Evolution of Moral Understanding* (Alton, UK: Prometheus Research Group, 2004).

to oppress others. So it is best to speak cautiously. However, the general fact of cultural development is well supported by numerous anthropological studies.[6]

New in This Edition

For those already familiar with earlier editions of this text, there are three major, and many lesser, changes since the third edition. The first major change is the addition of footnotes, which brings the academic foundations of the text to the fore. The work of developing notes during the development of this new edition, provided many occasions for reviewing recent scholarly work and bringing the material in the text up to date. This updating is evident in the footnotes as well as in the suggested readings lists at the end of each chapter.

The second major change is the reversal of chapters 2 and 3. Chapters 1 and 2 now tell a continuous story of the types of religiousness represented by the sequence of animism, polytheism, and monotheism or other concerns for a single ultimate reality. Chapters 3 and 4 focus, in different ways, on theories of religion and its origin and nature, both from nonreligious and religious points of view.

The third major change is the loss of the epilogue, which first appeared in the third edition. It was a set of somewhat abstract analyses of methods of defending religion against criticism and of the validity of those methods. It would fit well in a text on the philosophy of religion, but that is not the main focus of this book.[7]

In addition to these major changes, multiple minor changes occur throughout the book. The Tiwi of Papua New Guinea, for example, have now been identified as a specific group that stays in at night to avoid dangerous spirits. The Wahhabi interpretation of Islam has been identified as a form of the broader "Salafist" movement spoken of more often in the press. The footnotes are the best guide to many such changes.

The Use of Repetition

One aspect of this book's style reflects my teaching experience. Even a long and clear exposition of any one aspect of religion gets lost among the many other aspects and can be readily forgotten. So the reader will often find a major idea described once in the context of one chapter's topic and again in one or more later chapters. The repetition of the same idea in different contexts helps make the idea clearer by showing it from different angles and fixing it more firmly

6. See the list of sources at the end of this preface for some significant contributions.

7. To access the epilogue, visit *www.anselmacademic.org* and go to the tab labeled "teacher materials" for *The Enduring Quest for Meaning* or contact the author at *barnes@udayton.edu.* The author retains the copyright and gives permission for its use.

in the reader's memory. Such repetition is especially valuable because of an increase in international students in college classrooms. What an Arabian student takes for granted about religion can be quite strange to a Chinese student. The strangeness is partly dissipated by repetition.

Suggested Reading

Anthropological Sources on the Evolution of Cultures

Barnes, Michael Horace. *Stages of Thought: The Co-Evolution of Religious Thought and Science.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. This work provides detailed evidence about the long-term cultural evolution of religious thought.

Dasen, Pierre R., and Alastair Heron. "Cross-Cultural Tests of Piaget's Theory." In *The Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology. Developmental Psychology*, 4:295–341. Edited by H. C. Trianis and Alastair Heron. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1981.

Diamond, Jared. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: the Fates of Human Societies*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997. Diamond argues that climate and physical context, not any difference in innate abilities, have allowed the people of some cultures to dominate others recently.

Gellner, Ernest. *Plough, Sword, and Book: The Structure of Human History.* London: Collins Harvill, 1988. For somewhat more popularized descriptions of cultural evolution, see an expert interpretation of cultural development.

Levinson, David, and Martin J. Malone. *Toward Explaining Human Culture*. New Haven, CT: HRAF Press, 1980. Levinson and Malone analyze and compare studies on a large number of different cultures.

Merlin, Donald. *The Origins of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991. See the second half.

Sheils, Dean. "An Evolutionary Explanation of Supportive Monotheism." *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 15, nos. 1–2 (1974): 47–56.

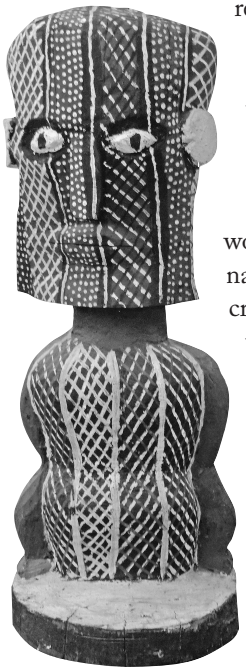
Skoyles, John R., and Dorion Sagan. *Up from Dragons: The Evolution of Human Intelligence*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002. This text reviews how modern thinkers emerged eventually from hunting-gathering origins.

Snarey, John R. "Cross-Cultural Universality of Social-Moral Development: A Critical Review of Kohlbergian Research." *Psychological Bulletin* 97, no. 2 (1985): 202–32.

Trigger, Bruce G. *Sociocultural Evolution: Calculation and Contingency*. Malden, MA: Balckwell, 1998. Trigger includes many criticisms of general theories.

Introduction

Australian aboriginal peoples tell tales about the beginning. Once there was no death in the world. But one day, Purukupali the hunter returned home to find his son Jinini dead from the heat of the sun. Grieving, he picked up the body of his child and walked into the sea to drown. As he stepped into the swirling waters, he shouted that because his son had died, so must everyone else from that day forth. And so it has been ever since.



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In Tiwi tradition, Purukupali, depicted here by sculptor Stanislaus Paruntatameri, brought death upon the human race.

Purukupali was one of the original people of the world.[1] Just before him had been Mudungkala, the original mother who rose out of the ground with her children, crawled about making hills and rivers, and decreed that the bare ground should grow green things for food and for creatures to hide in. And so it has been ever since.

Stories such as these may represent the earliest human attempts to express and come to terms with the great mysteries of life, such as where the grass and the rivers come from and why all people must die. For the last forty thousand years or so, humans have been engaged in an adventure of self-discovery. Repeatedly, they have discerned a dimension of mystery in their existence, in life and death, in the patterns of love and indifference and anger, in the reality of pain and the surprise of joy. In all this, there are mysteries—why it is so, what promise or threat it holds, and how it is to be handled.

Few things reveal as much about humans as the story of how we have responded to the dimension of mystery. That story, for the most part, is the story of religion.

Facing Mystery

There are many ways to define the word *religion*. It is difficult to settle on a single, clear definition. The goal is to create a definition that applies to all patterns of thought and practices someone would call religious but that do not include

1. C. W. M. Hart et al., *The Tiwi of North Australia* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1988). This book includes these and other stories.

patterns a person would not call religious. A British anthropologist named Edward Tylor (1832–1917) declared, rather simply, that religion is a belief in spiritual beings. But another scholar, French philosopher Lucien Levy-Bruhl (1857–1939), later proposed that primitive belief in spirits was probably not true religion, because primitive people do not worship the spirits; they seek only to avoid or manipulate them.[2] Buddhism is usually listed among the great religions of the world, yet others say it is a philosophy rather than a religion, because Buddhists do not believe in God or any other single, Ultimate Being. Some define religion so broadly that they include patriotism or Marxism as religion because these may be the major object of devotion for some people or the "ultimate concern," to use the words of the Christian theologian, Paul Tillich.[3] The anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) offers a rather complex but well-known definition of religion:

> A religion is 1) a system of symbols which acts to 2) establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men [*sic*] by 3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and 4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that 5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.[4]

Some definitions, like Tylor's, are "intellectualist," primarily about the beliefs or doctrines of a tradition. Others focus on bodily experience or feelings such as Tillich's on concern or Eliade's emphasis on experience (as in chapter 3 here).[5] When many definitions focus on religious beliefs, Geertz highlights the role of moods or feelings. Whether this definition is better than Tylor's is something the reader can decide after finishing this book.

For reasons that will become more apparent by the end of part 1, this text's definition of religion begins with the claim that religion is a human response to mystery. A primitive tribesperson is uneasy about the mysterious forces that cause rain, bring good luck, and make strange emotions enter the heart. The tribesperson names these forces, gives them faces, and tells brief stories about them to deal with them. Later cultures develop greater and more complex myths, describing the mysterious forces of nature as gods and families of gods. People find themselves responding to mystery through symbol, ritual, and elaborate story to tame it and make it less threatening.

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2. For Tylor and Levy-Bruhl's descriptions of the nature of religion, see Michael Horace Barnes, *Stages of Thought: The Co-Evolution of Religious Thought and Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 65.

3. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1957), 1–4.

4. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). See chapter 4, "Religion as a Cultural System."

5. The anthropologist Barbara J. King gives priority to the emotional and experiential roots of religion in *Evolving God: A Provocative View on the Origins of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

Eventually, people discover that mystery is endless. About twenty-five hundred years ago, major cultures of Earth stumbled upon the realization that beyond all the specific forms and faces given to the mysterious forces that exist, an ultimate and infinite context of human life is still an all-embracing mystery. There are various religious ways to label the mystery. In Western religions, it is usually thought of as an Ultimate Reality called God. Buddhists speak of nirvana, an incomprehensible state or condition. Other traditions have their own ways for speaking of ultimate mystery.

Ideas about life's ultimate mysteries often lie hidden in daily life. Two people casually sharing a cup of coffee enjoy each other's company, perhaps because of a shared sense of humor, perhaps because they agree on certain values, perhaps just because they are old and familiar friends. Without explicitly thinking about it, both may live out their responses to mysteries about what, ultimately, is most important in human life. For one of them, life's basic values may be tied to an explicit deeper sense of what life is all about. The other might shrug off the question of basic values as too vague. That is the point at which both are facing ultimate mystery. While a person may choose to ignore it, it is still there. And the way humans deal with it affects their lives one way or another.

In the face of mystery, some have formally declared that, in the end, this dimension is simply the unknowable and to be ignored. This is the position taken about God by agnostics. This label covers two positions, nearly the same, but not quite. Call them tentative agnosticism and strong agnosticism. Tentative agnostics are those who say they do not know whether God exists, because the whole topic is not clear enough to them or because the reasons they have been given for belief in God are not convincing enough to settle the case either way. Their tentativeness leaves them open, eventually, to be convinced one way or another. Strong agnostics, however, are convinced that the existence or nonexistence of God is strictly unknowable. No amount of future information or argument, they believe, will change that. (Chapters 12 and 13 will explain how some people have arrived at strong agnosticism.)

Others have said that the mystery surrounding human life is ultimately just endless possibility, empty in itself with no direction or meaning. This is the position taken by atheists. There are tentative and strong forms of atheism. Tentative atheists find that the available evidence and arguments about God's existence make it more reasonable to believe God does not exist, but they remain open to discovering new evidence or better arguments that might change their mind. Strong atheists are convinced that the available evidence weighs heavily against the existence of God and view belief in God as irrational.

Agnostics and atheists alike find no ultimate meaningfulness in the basic mysteries of life. They turn instead to the projects at hand, of making a living, learning to love, preparing the way for future generations, finding joy in great art and pleasant picnics and the laughter of a child. These are meaning enough, most claim.

All of these are treasures of life, but they have not satisfied everyone in history. Beyond living, loving, and laughing, the "more," the mystery, the endless possible questions about whom we really are, from what we ultimately derive, whether there is any lasting purpose to our lives, can still nag us. Is it possible that we come from randomness, are accidents of nature, have no purpose in the end? These questions have haunted all civilizations. Each has found religious ways to deal with mystery, treating it not as a deadly emptiness but somehow as a fullness in which lies the meaning of human existence, naming that fullness "God" or in India "Brahman" or in China calling it the "Tao." In such religions, the ultimate mystery is treated as sacred, as *Mystery* with a capital *M*.

A Basic Human Faith

Most people in history have been religious in the face of mystery. This religiosity reveals aspects of human character that are sometimes hidden. The religions of humankind are manifestations of a kind of courageous faith in the meaningfulness of life. Facing mystery, a person could wander in confusion, feeling great fear or even despair. Instead most find faith to see it as somehow valuable or intelligible. By naming it, embracing it, building a life in relation to it, they show a trust that ultimately it does not destroy but upholds the worthwhileness of their life. This is what Jews, Christians, and Muslims do when they say the Ultimate is God. This also is what Buddhists do by calling the mystery nirvana and Hindus by calling it Brahman or Atman.

Beneath this stubborn and bold faith in the ultimate meaningfulness of life is something else especially human, which is that we are the strange being, the peculiar animal that can be aware of mystery at all. We have the kind of consciousness that can ask questions, can wonder why things are as they are, and can make us insecure as a result. We can think about ourselves, our identities, our place in the scheme of things. Because of that, we can worry whether it all really does make sense.

Most questions can be turned into problems to be solved so that they are no longer threatening, but some genuine mystery that remains a question without an answer is always left. The horizon of mystery always remains in front of us no matter how far we travel. We find ourselves always able to ask one more question about what is worth living (or dying) for, about what sort of person we should be, about what our destiny is. Even when we ignore such questions, we remain the animal with the endless capacity for them.

Another way of saying this is that we are the beings open to the infinite. We are the beings related to whatever is the ultimate foundation or goal of all things (if there is such a foundation or goal as religions claim), because our kind of consciousness is an openness to what is always beyond: the

endless mystery. Our thoughts can "transcend" whatever limits we have so far experienced.

As the religions of the world have been our usual way of dealing with mystery, a study of these religions can show the most about our nature as beings open to infinite mystery. Most of the time, religions provide very specific beliefs, values, and behavioral norms rather than general talk about mystery and the infinite. Religions provide symbols, rituals, moral codes, community life, and personal identity patterns. The following chapters will explore each of these many and varied aspects of religion. But it is good not to forget that these specific forms of religion are significant for humans precisely because each is one of the ways we bring our lives into a coherent and worthwhile focus in relation to the mystery around us.

The Development of Religion in Cultures and in Individuals

There are so many specific aspects of religion that it is difficult to make a coherent story out of it. The outline for the approach in this book is taken from the sociologist Robert Bellah, who claims in a famous article, "Religious Evolution," that religion has passed through certain stages of development.[6] Not all scholars who study religion agree with this developmental theory.[7] (It is wise to be wary of theories; they are not always accurate.) Bellah's theory nonetheless does a great deal to illumine and make sense out of the story of religion and the human capacity for the infinite that religion often expresses.

Bellah claims that religions generally pass through a progression of forms, from small, primitive hunting-gathering groups to larger, archaic agriculture and city-based life to a historic form with a more universalist perspective and, in recent centuries, to a modern style of religiousness. It also appears that each person repeats a similar developmental pattern in life. People are born primitive, as it were, and then add something like archaic, and eventually perhaps historic and even modern, modes of thoughts and values. Descriptions of tribespeople around a fire working their magic and invoking spirits are also descriptions of something buried in the human life's story in ways not always recognizable. What the human race has experienced is still within each person.

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6. Robert Bellah, "Religious Evolution," *American Sociological Review*, 39, no. 3 (June 1964): 348–74. This can be found also in Bellah's *Beyond Belief*, 1970.

7. An excellent and expert review of the status of theories of cultural evolution, from the nineteenth to the end of the twentieth century, can be found in Robert L. Carneiro, *Evolutionism in Cultural Anthropology: A Critical History* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003).

Theories of cultural evolution carry special dangers. Cultures certainly differ, sometimes greatly. But ranking them in terms of how evolved or developed they are can be rather condescending, perhaps even insulting. Humans everywhere are part of the same family, equally intelligent and to be treated with equal respect. Even the term *primitive* is troubling. Once the common word in Europe for hunting-gathering tribes was *savage*, so *primitive* is an improvement. (The many others labels scholars have used—*primal*, *aboriginal*, *indigenous*, *First Nations* in Canada, *tribal*, and *pre-state cultures*[8]—indicate the difficulty in finding a term free of prejudicial implications.) *Primitive* could be misused to imply that this way of life is not worth defending or protecting or that it is inferior to other ways of life.[9] The worst implication would be that hunting-gathering people are inferior in some way to other people. It is important to firmly reject this implication. They have the right to protect their way of life if that is their choice.

Categorizing cultures as more or less developed has presented a special challenge to those who study religions. In the nineteenth century, more than one scholar decided that, at its root, religion is just primitive superstition.[10] Cultures begin with belief in spirits and magic, these scholars proclaimed, and develop into polytheism and, in some places, monotheism or the like. They argued that science was producing reliable answers to mystery and providing guidance in life, so religion can fade away. Religious ideas have indeed changed over the many centuries, but these pages will not portray it as a disappearing relic of ancient times. (Chapter 15 will discuss the future of religion.)

The outline of religions in this text describes human cultures and individual lives as expanding gradually into broader visions of life. Primitive cultures, based on hunting and gathering, live in a relatively small world populated by various spirits and magical powers. Archaic cultures, based on large-scale agriculture, perceive a larger and more complicated world with powerful gods at work. Historic cultures, fueled by a desire for comprehensive answers, conceive of a universal power or Being that exerts influence everywhere. Finally, the mystics of history and now a modern religiousness emphasize the infiniteness of the Mystery, called by such a name as God.

Likewise, each person today may go through stages of understanding. Those raised to believe in God, for example, will begin by thinking of God as an

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8. Bellah has recently changed his language and now favors the last two expressions. Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: from the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

9. As at least a partial antidote to this, see Hugh Brody, *The Other Side of Eden: Hunters, Farmers, and the Shaping of the World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000). Brody writes to praise the ways of hunting tribes.

10. As mentioned earlier, two worth noting are Auguste Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, trans. Harriet Montinau (London: Chapman, 1853); and Edward Tylor, *Religion in Primitive Culture* (1871; repr., New York: Harper and Row, 1958).

invisible person, like a distant grandpa, perhaps, except bigger. At some point in life, they may picture God as a cosmic power, clearly and obviously intervening in history and nature. Later, they may reflect more on God as infinite and mysterious, always present in a subtle way. To abandon one way of thinking of God is not to cease to be religious but may be only a change in the way of being religious.

The cultural developmental process is still struggling into the most recent stage in Bellah's outline—the modern stage. It has been emerging only in the last couple of centuries, a brief time in the panorama of history. (Even so, there are now also so-called postmodern theories of religion. This term has too many meanings to be entirely clear. Chapter 15 will discuss the nature of postmodern religious thought and seek what clarity is possible.) Modern religiousness has often been taken to be antireligious, especially by those who are most conservative in their religious feelings, because modern religion lets go of or reinterprets older beliefs and practices. But modern religiousness is also a way of facing the mystery of existence. To understand this modern mode of religion and culture we must start at the beginning, with primitive and archaic religion.

The Academic Study of Religion

Later chapters will introduce the study of theology. *Theology* is usually defined as "rational reflection about the meaning and coherence of a religious tradition." Most theologians accept and support the religious tradition on which they are reflecting. Theologians are "insiders" for the most part. This book, in general, is not theology but is the study of religion. Such study is done, as it were, from the outside. That does not mean it is necessarily done from a position of disbelief or skepticism, though it can be. Most of what is written here is sympathetic to religion. However, the perspective taken is that of looking in on human religious life, as though from the outside.

Another way of saying this is to note that some people study a religion to find out more about God and the supernatural and so forth. That is theology. Others study religion to find out about humans through religiousness, to find in the religious beliefs and practices, the symbols and stories, clear insights or at least good clues to human selfhood. We are hard to figure out. The study of religion is a great help for learning more about ourselves. That is the purpose and the approach of this book.

Chapters 1–15 present a great deal of information about specific aspects of religion, about spirits, magic, gods, God, Brahman, paradise and hell, heaven, belonging, identity, moral values, leaders and sacred texts, rituals and symbols, faith and reason, skepticism, and modern beliefs. But throughout these chapters, a strange side of humanity surfaces, that capacity for the infinite that the human mode of consciousness possesses, which always lies on the edge of mystery. It is

the capacity for reflection and freedom, for hope and despair, for responsibility and commitment. It is humanness.

For Further Reflection

1. Which seems more accurate, to think of religion as a set of answers or to think of it as an awareness of unanswered mysteries? Explain.
2. What would you say is life's ultimate meaning? Express as best you can why this is a difficult question with which to deal.
3. Can most people get along quite well without any active concern for what is mysterious and uncertain about life? Explain.
4. Explain what you currently believe about the evolution of cultures. Do you find it plausible to say that humankind has gone through stages of cultural development for the last forty thousand years?
5. What purpose do you have in mind for studying human religiousness? Is there anything about studying religion from an "outsider's" viewpoint that bothers you? If so, what?

Suggested Readings

Bellah, Robert. "Religious Evolution." *American Sociological Review*, 39, no. 3 (June 1964): 348–74. This can be found also in Bellah's *Beyond Belief*, 1970.

Carneiro, Robert L. *Evolutionism in Cultural Anthropology: A Critical History*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003. See chapters 1, 2, and 12, in particular, for descriptions of current positions on the topic of cultural evolution.

Ellwood, Robert S., and Gregory D. Alles, eds. *The Encyclopedia of World Religions*. New York: Infobase, 1998. A collection of informative articles.

Pals, Daniel L. *Eight Theories of Religion*. NY: Oxford University Press, 2006. This text offers a perspective that tends to align with those opposed to theories of religious evolution.

Peacock, James L., and A. Thomas Kirsch. *Human Direction*. 3rd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1980. An older but quite clear general presentation of cultural evolution. Peacock is a former president of the American Anthropological Society.

Richerson, Peter J., and Morten H. Christiansen, eds. *Cultural Evolution: Society, Technology, Language, and Religion*. Strüngmann Forum Reports. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013. See the fourth major section for a discussion, somewhat technical, of religion.

CHAPTER 1

An Enchanted World

The Numinous in Primitive and Archaic Religion

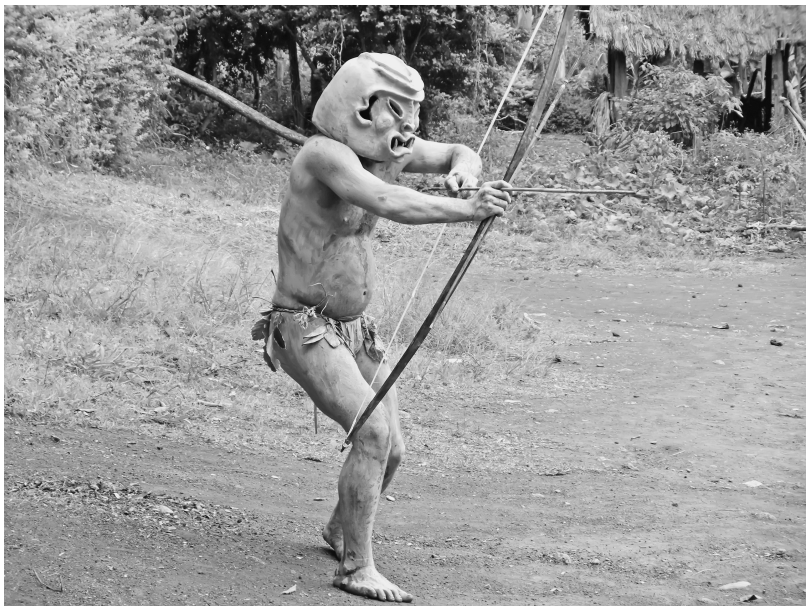
Primitive Religion

At night the Mafulu, mountain people of the New Guinea highlands, close up all entrances to their houses to keep out spirits of the dead that would try to harm them. When walking about during daytime, they worry about the many spirit-haunted spots. When passing them, it is wise to stop talking to avoid calling attention to yourself. It is also wise to tie clumps of grass in a knot and carry them until the spirit's place is passed. Fortunately for the Mafulu, none of their many shamans (or "sorcerers") ordinarily try to harm people, though with the proper bits of a person's discarded food, they could magically make that person quite ill. At the same time, these shamans might provide a young man with mildly magical charms to aid in courting a young woman.[1]

The daily life of these mountain tribespeople provides a good example of what is meant by primitive religion. There are few places in the world where this is still true, but there are tribes almost following the old ways still 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 the deserts of Australia. Contact with other societies over centuries, and recently with modern societies, has had an impact. The old ways are fading and being replaced by new modes of thought, for better or worse. But during the last two hundred years or so, missionaries and then anthropologists have learned to live among the tribes, to study their languages, to observe their customs carefully and, usually, sympathetically. These outsiders may never have fully seen life and reality as it appears to the tribespeople, but they have provided precise and thorough descriptions of tribal life that enable others to form a picture of it that is probably close to the truth.

What anthropologists report about the small hunting-gathering groups provides the best available basis to estimate what religion may have been like before permanent towns or cities existed on this planet. This information matters

1. These are all beliefs or practices as described in Robert W. Williamson's book, *The Mafulu Mountain People of New Guinea* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1912), 264–89.



According to legend, the spirit masks of the Asaro people of Papua New Guinea commemorate a battle in which the tribesmen defeated their enemies by disguising themselves as spirits.

because it is not just information about the past; the study of primal beliefs is also a study of ourselves, of what we might be like without many extra layers of cultural accumulation. Primitive religion still lives in the niches of contemporary culture and in the corners of our personalities. We can begin to understand primitive religion by looking at the universe as primitive people see it, one full of numinous powers of limited size and influence, some living (or personal) and some not.

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 they are not evident. Sensibly enough, primitive people believe invisible causes must be 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 that 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. Others are jinxed, afflicted by a power that attracts harm to them and those around them.

Magic is another name for this same numinous power. Rituals have magical power to affect the weather, aid in the hunt, or 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 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 to exorcise evil influences.

There is also 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 have 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. Constructing a doll similar to another person using bits of hair or clothing from the person will ensure 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 work. So often, all a person can do is memorize what does work. Notching the ears of cattle protects them from evil disease. Hex signs keep demons away. Usually 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 anthropologists use most commonly 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 that is "the cause of all success in life that surpasses the ordinary."[2] They called this power "mana." The name has stuck, as has its

2. Robert Henry Codrington, *The Melanesians: Studies in their Anthropology and Folklore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891), 118.

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 taboo—so sacred they are dangerous—and are to be avoided or handled with great care.[3]

Mana-power may also make its presence known by peculiar effects on the environment. Spirits do the same, as the next section, "Living Numinous Beings: The Spirits," will mention. Such signs of numinous power are treated as omens. The derivative word *ominous* 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 in which 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 others, 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 murder suspect into a pond that had been blessed. If the suspect floated, the holy water was rejecting him. He or she was guilty. (If the suspect drowned, apparent innocence assured 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 the guilty person.

To add complexity, the word *oracle* often overlaps with *omen*. Various objects can be oracles. Bones, special potions, or a set of sticks, for example, can be manipulated and then "read" by someone to ferret out a wrongdoer or predict some future event. A person at a sacred place can be an oracle, one who has visions and can answer questions. A specific prediction may be called an oracle also. The numinous takes many forms; so does language about it.

The numinous power in luck, magic, or omens can be good or bad, strong or weak, easily controlled or completely independent of human choice. This power 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. The numinous 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 the text will show, archaic people believe in much more powerful forms of it.

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3. A classic source on tabu is from the Christian missionary William Ellis in his *Polynesian Researches, During a Residence of Nearly Eight Years in the Society and Sandwich Islands* (London: Fisher, Son, & Jackson, 1839–1842), 4:385–91, available through *Books.Google.com*.

Living Numinous Beings: The Spirits

The world of the primitive is at least as crowded with spirits as it is with mana. However large the tribespeople conceive their universe to be, it is alive with invisible living beings that are 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" (having human form).

A vast array of small nature spirits lives in different places and things. Each tree, river, field, rock, cove, cave, and mountaintop is likely to have its spirit. Often, the spirit has a personality that emanates from its source: The spirit of a brook is talkative and lively. The spirit of the thunder is loud and angry. Every animal has a spirit. Or we could as easily say that many spirits have animal form (or are theriomorphic). Nature has an uncountable number of 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 are strong enough to cause major troubles such as disease, miscarriage, deformed children, and even death.

Many people have attendant spirits. When born, perhaps you received an invisible twin who accompanies you through life, or even two, one helpful and one harmful. Perhaps you have a spirit partner you must entertain and keep happy lest it get angry. The spirits of those who have recently died usually stay in the land of the dead nearby until they fade away entirely but might return to visit out of loneliness, to cause trouble out of envy for the living, 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 animals sometimes show up also—as talking animals in a dream or as metamorphic (shape shifting) beings, sometimes human in form, sometimes not.

Each of us has a spirit self, a breath of life power. The Yanomamö, forest-dwelling tribes of Venezuela and Brazil, say each person has three spirits. Upon death one dissolves, another remains to roam around on Earth, the third goes to a sky village to live. Any Yanomamö may also inhale *hekura*, tiny but pretty spirits. The usual method is to snort any of a number of hallucinogenic drugs, collectively called *ebene*. A shaman (curer, medicine man or woman, a witch-doctor, to use some alternative names) needs to inhale and tame many *hekura* for the power they provide.[4]

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4. See Napoleon Chagnon, *Yanomamö: The Last Days of Eden* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1992), 133–34 about human souls, and 137–40 about the *hekura*.

Among all these numinous 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 will 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 or a person (their totem animal), 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. Missionaries often find tribal groups open to accepting the existence of God or Allah, though the tribespeople tend then to ignore such a seemingly distant being, about whom they have no special stories or rituals of their own.[5]

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 various mana powers the way a modern child learns about household appliances. Each appliance 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, 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 or can make an enemy fall over dead. The proper song can attract the opossum close enough to hunt. The power-filled symbols on a person's chest can prevent spears from striking. Mana-power is everywhere, to be used when possible and 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 children's spirits even though that means the children will die. The goal is to keep the spirits away from the village if possible. If not, pouring a bit of beer on the ground now and then as a little gift may invite peace.

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5. Colin Taylor, *Myths of the North American Indians* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1995), section 4, "Gods and Goddesses," 95–117, refers to a supreme God, for example, but note there are no myths, rituals, or symbols attached to this. Christian missionaries have long been at work among the Native Americans in various places.

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 from which they will do no harm. Some spirits are not too bright and can be tricked. When disease is spreading, people leave dummy images of themselves in front of their huts. The sickness spirit may mistake the dummies for the people and curse the dummies with the disease, leaving the people 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 ritual is performed exactly right. Unfortunately, some demons also know magic and can cast contrary spells. Other demons will make a person stumble in speech and actions and weaken the power of the magic. Some spirits are too strong to be coerced by magic and are best avoided if 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 just killed. The Ainu of northern Japan, for example, have a bear ritual in which they honor the spirit of a bear right after they've killed it for a feast. But they do not worship the bear spirit, as it is not a superior spirit-being. For this reason, some anthropologists in the past, like Levy-Bruhl, decided that primitive beliefs and practices of this sort are not true religion. Once again, it depends on how *religion* is defined. This text follows Bellah in treating these primitive practices and beliefs as the simplest form of religion.

Primitive Religion Is Called Animism

Near the end of the nineteenth century, the Englishman 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 their lives are called animists; they also usually believe in some form of mana-powers.[6]

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 or twenty thousand years ago. Perhaps the earliest human

6. Edward Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (London: John Murray, 1873), vol. 1, ch. 11, especially 384–87.

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 Judeo-Christian scriptures seemed to say: that the first humans knew that there was one supreme God, so this theory was more popular among people who adhered to traditional Christian beliefs. The Catholic anthropologist Father Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954) strongly promoted this idea in the early decades of the twentieth century.[7]

The dust has settled somewhat since the days of the most turbulent arguments. Though there is always room for revision, it is plausible to treat primitive animism as the earliest form of religion and the roots of later religious beliefs and practices. (This theory need not imply, however, that religion is necessarily animist at its heart, as this text will demonstrate.)

Animism Is Still Part of Life Today

Numerous forms of belief in mana exist today. People believe in good luck and bad luck. Many baseball players will not play without their lucky cap or socks. Actors refrain from wishing one another well because that is unlucky. They say "break a leg" instead. Hosts will sometimes 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 the pyramid shape can focus cosmic rays to clear a person's 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 many still buy books with 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. Angels, in particular, have a dominant place in the imaginations of North Americans.[8]

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. Some are tempted to regard the reports as scientific evidence that all humans are embodied spirits. Strange lights appearing

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7. Wilhelm Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion* (New York: Dial Press, 1931) provides a brief version of what became the twelve volumes of *Der Ursprung der Gottessidee* (*The Origin of the Idea of God*).

8. Peter Gardella's *American Angels: Useful Spirits in the Material World* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2007) surveys a multitude of such beliefs. Some angels are just spirit-sized; others are more like gods.

in the sky can lead people to believe the lights belong to unidentified flying objects occupied by living beings. 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 human culture. But the modern "tribes" that are the great industrialized and computerized nations also retain the past in little ways: they find mana-like powers and spirits all around them still.

The Culture of Hunting-Gathering Small Tribal Life

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 it. A child grows up memorizing the names and habits of invisible spirits and visible cousins without thinking of either 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.

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 spear-like quills all over his body. Clouds are wet, snakes are shiny, people die, and they should not 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.

A collection of customs gives form to daily life and prevents it from breaking into chaos. Many times fights erupt out of jealousy, 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 certain reparation or banishing an offender. Custom and chaos sway back and forth in uneasy balance. Words of wisdom from one person or astute 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, in the limited sense that there are no hereditary or official rulers. Any person with good social skills, great strength, or other special qualities may 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 rarely plans for long-term projects. There are no well-structured social hierarchies, no kings, no full-time priests. There are just the people in families, bands, 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[9]

As far back as ten thousand years ago, some part of the human family transformed its existence by inventing agriculture. By definition, primitive people are those who live by hunting and gathering, sometimes also with small gardens or 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. About ten thousand year ago in the Fertile Crescent in the ancient Near East (from present day Palestine 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. The transformation of life this caused was so great that the introduction of large-scale agriculture is still called the Neolithic revolution.

In pastoral (herding) cultures about this same time, villages turned into large towns where there were inherited distinctions between an upper and a lower class of people, the rulers and the ruled. Where agriculturally based 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 (or inherited the position) to offer sacrifices to gods in official acts of worship. In the temples, prophets had full-time jobs reading omens in the entrails 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.

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9. Alice B. Child and Irvin L. Child provide a review of the beliefs of both primitive and archaic societies, including discussions of changes from the former to the latter in their *Religion and Magic in the Life of Traditional Peoples* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1993).

Archaic Religion

The Birth of the Gods[10]

The archaic stage of religious development is a stage in which people begin to think of some of the spirits as numinous beings of very great power—more awesome than ordinary spirits. These great spirits—often called gods—are, like all spirits, personal in that they have thoughts and feelings. The word *personal* here does not necessarily mean friendly or warm.

The gods are not as neighborly as most of the lesser spirits. Many live far away in the skies, on a high mountain, or deep in the earth. 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.

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 under the power of a god. The spirits that live in underwater caves and 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 Marduk, god of ancient Babylon, who ruled the other gods of that area as his reward for having defeated monstrous enemies of the gods.

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 such as Zeus or Marduk who is the dominant one, albeit not all-powerful. At other times, the title high god belongs to the god who formed the universe as it now exists, perhaps 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 gracious character. The very size of their power tends to spoil them. Little spirits can be as willful, vain, and petty as children. Unfortunately, the gods are too, but they have such power that their whims must be respected. Even kings can

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10. Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: from the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the development of archaic or polytheistic religions. An early work to do the same is that of Guy Swanson, *The Birth of the Gods: The Origin of Primitive Beliefs* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1964). In spite of the subtitle it includes claims about the origins of polytheism. Many other books describe the development of the gods of specific cultural traditions, Celtic, Mediterranean, Persian, South Asian, Chinese, Polynesian, Mesoamerican, North American, and so forth.

act childishly, so it is no surprise if gods do likewise. When the gods go on a rampage, bringing floods or epidemics, people can only cower in fear, offer the greatest gifts they can find, and hope that their offerings and praise will eventually soothe the divine anger. Archaic people simply did not expect much of what we would call emotional or moral maturity in their gods.

Religion and culture develop together. When chiefs and kings appear among the people, gods appear among the spirits. When cultures perceive a larger and more complex world around them, gods appear to inhabit these larger spaces and receive homage in complex stories of various plans, struggles, victories, and defeats. These correlations would seem inevitable. On the one hand, people can really conceive of only what their language, tradition, and experiences prepare them to find words for. On the other hand, because they do have new experiences, they will eventually find the language to begin to describe those experiences in new ways. Whether religions come from an active presence of the numinous or from human imagination or from both, numinous will still be conceived of and portrayed in ways that the life experiences of the people incline them toward. Religiousness, like all aspects of life, finds its expression in the cultural forms available to people.

Great Mana

Just as the archaic cultures think some spirit-beings are great enough to be gods, they think of some mana-power as very great also. Most great power was usually personified; even time, known as Chronos, was likely a god in ancient Greek thought—as were heaven and earth, Uranus and Gaia—rather than a nonpersonal or nonliving force. Yet occasionally there have been forms of belief in some massive numinous forces.

The ancient Chinese, for example, perceived two complementary forces, the *Yang* and *Yin*, at work in all aspects of the universe. The ancient Hindu priests believed that, in their rituals, they generated a kind of cosmic power. (A later chapter will say more on both traditions.) Astrological belief in the influence of the stars and planets on life is very old. There is no way of knowing how long human societies have taken notice of the effect of the moon on the tides or even a correlation of the twenty-eight-day lunar month with menstruation (from *mensis*, the Latin word for "month"). Nor do we know which societies of the Northern Hemisphere first noticed that when the constellation called Cancer arose at night, the days were longest and the sun brightest. But out of these and similar observations, ancient peoples, such as 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 sacrificial offerings; flattery appears as dutiful worship. These acts of persuasion cannot be too brief, 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.

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 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 *Yin* and *Yang* of nature flow unaffected by human decision. Much of life 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 (*theoi*). There is no 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 of god. Some outsiders have called the ordinary sky spirits of the Australian aboriginal peoples gods.[11] On the other hand, many colonial residents referred to the high god of the Delaware Indians 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 small-group hunting-gathering societies today do not exhibit beliefs in extremely powerful spirits. Some societies loosely called primitive today 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 aboriginal peoples, or tribes of the Amazon basin, have neither chief nor powerful gods. So a reasonable 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.[12]

Archaic Style Religion Today

Archaic beliefs are still 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 subordinate to the one God. Yet people appeal to them and have formal and elaborate ceremonies in their honor to benefit from their influence. In his sinister way, the Satan of popular Christian belief is also a spirit of godlike (though not Godlike) power.

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11. See, for example, the descriptions of the way Christian missionaries reinterpreted native beliefs in D. H. Turner, *Tradition and Transformation: A Study of the Groote Eyland Area Aborigines of North Australia* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1974). For discussion of the Delaware Indians (Lenni Lenape), see C. A. Weslager, *The Delaware Indians: A History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

12. This simplistic two-step history bypasses the development of pastoral life, which occurred about the same time as the Neolithic revolution ten thousand years ago in various places. For a brief review of this post-primitive way of life, though without analysis of religious beliefs, see chapters 2 and 3 in Emilio F. Moran, *People and Nature: An Introduction to Human Ecological Relations* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).

The old beliefs in great mana exist today. Astrology is still strong enough to generate a multimillion–dollar industry of book publishing, chart reading, and newspaper columns. Those who use TM, or 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 4 discusses this further.) The mystery of the numinous is only half-tamed and half-hidden beneath all the technical language of modern culture. Archaic beliefs can live with primitive ones in our midst and within us.

Two Cultural Forms

	Primitive	Archaic
Source of food	Hunting and gathering	Farming and herding
Social groups	Seminomadic village life	Permanent towns and cities
Structure of society	Egalitarian	Hierarchical
Perception of the numinous	Spirits and magic/mana	Great spirits (gods), lesser spirits, and mana

Archaic Culture

Life in a large village or in a city is a life with a more complex knowledge about the world than is usual in primitive societies. There are more social roles and more complex relationships to be learned. There is often opportunity for more forms of trade with outside cultures. Local villages, each with its customs, may fall under the influence of a powerful city. Eventually, empires arise, as in ancient China, India, Mesopotamia, and Egypt.

In these larger and more complex social groups, 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 much of Western language, the sky is the dominant numinous realm. The power of sun and storm, light and darkness, overwhelmed all else. So the sky god was high god. In ancient Greece, his

name was Zeus. Under the high god was often a hierarchy of other specific gods. Under Zeus, for example, were his children, such as Aphrodite, Helios, Hermes, and 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 archaic 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. Archaic 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.

Summary

This chapter presents some interpretations of the ways primitive and archaic 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. Archaic 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.

The few pages of this chapter and the simple chart comparing primitive and archaic cultures only hint at the multitude of culture forms and their religious elements. It is instructive, for example, to note that in Japan spirit-beings are generally referred to as *kami*, whether they are nature spirits, ancestral spirits, ghosts, or gods. This is a reminder that distinctions, as between spirits and gods, can be imprecise. Similarly, a review of North American native cultures should not lump them together as all just native cultures. The life of the hunting-gathering natives of the Great Plains differed greatly from the city life at Cahokia on the Mississippi, across from what centuries later would be St. Louis, Missouri. Cahokia was a city of as many as 40,000 people by around 1200 CE, living off extensive trade across the Midwest and beyond and with Central American imports of squash, beans, and maize to cultivate (perhaps also learning human sacrifice from pre-Aztec cultures).[13] Likewise, cultures of agricultural natives of the Southwest differ from those of forest hunter-gathering tribes of the Northeast. Chapter 2 sketches a few more cases of cultural differences, doing this, however,

13. Timothy R. Pauketat, *Cahokia: Ancient America's Great City on the Mississippi* (New York: Viking, 2009).

to lead further into examining beliefs about a truly Ultimate Reality or Being that transcends even the gods.

For Further Reflection

1. List all the kinds of mana-like powers, spirits, and numinous realities, in general, in which people today believe. (Look at the magazines sold at your supermarket checkout counter to get some ideas.)
2. To what extent do you find it reasonable to believe in numinous powers like spirits, magic, or gods? Explain.
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

Burton, Dan, and David Grandy. *Magic, Mystery, and Science*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004. A history of magic and animistic ideas in Western culture from Ancient Egypt to Roswell, New Mexico, today.

Hallam, Elizabeth, general ed. *Gods and Goddesses: A Treasury of Deities and Tales from World Mythology*. New Brunswick, NJ: Overstock Unlimited Inc., 1996. This is sourcebook of polytheistic beliefs includes background for ideas in chapter 3 about folktales and grand myths.

Lamb, Michael E., and Barry S. Hewlett, eds. *Hunter-Gatherer Childhoods: Evolutionary, Developmental, and Cultural Perspectives*. Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2005. This book, a bit technical at times, combines both the cultural and individual development of children as windows into primitive cultures.

Marlowe, Frank. *The Hadza: Hunter-Gatherers of Tanzania*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2010. Chapter 1, "The Hadza and Evolutionary Theory: An Introduction," and the afterword, "The Hadza Present and Future," alone tell much about this group and their relation to the cultures that surround them.

Wilson, Peter J. *The Domestication of the Human Species*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988. Describes the shift from seminomadic primitive life to the settled life of early agriculture.