

## Ix2 – Possible Origins of Ideas about Spirits, Souls, & Gods

Dear: Of course we can't be certain about why and when our primitive ancestors conceived ideas of gods and souls, but through a combination of historical, anthropological, and archaeological studies, a general picture has emerged that is, at least, fairly consistent.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, I want to try to sketch at least a little of this “general picture” – but I caution you at the outset (and will caution you more as I proceed) not only that am I “no artist” (to be “sketching” anything!) but also that I’m “way out of my field of expertise”. If you want to learn more about possible origins of ideas about spirits, souls, and gods, then “go for it” – on your own. There are hundreds if not thousands of books written on the subject, as well as hundreds of thousands of relevant websites.

Yet, if you find the subject to be sufficiently interesting that you consider the possibility of becoming an anthropologist, archaeologist, or historian, I hope that you'll give the matter serious thought, before you invest years of study in preparation for a career in one of these “scientific” fields. You'd undoubtedly find such fields interesting (and the more you studied, the more interesting they'd become), but simultaneously, they must be extremely frustrating fields of inquiry – and they are only marginally scientific: ‘frustrating’ because you'd never know if you had found “the answer” and “only marginally scientific” because although the fields include observations, data analyses, and formulations of hypotheses, it's usually extremely difficult to test predictions of the resulting hypotheses. I would therefore recommend that you consider the possibility of a career in a field that is fundamentally more rewarding – a field in which hypotheses lead to testable predictions – such as artificial intelligence (AI), biomedical research, chemistry, dendochronology [dating past events (e.g., climate change) by studying tree rings], engineering, forestry, geophysics, horticulture, ichthyology [the branch of zoology dealing with the study of fish], etc., through the rest of the alphabet!

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<sup>1</sup> Dear: As maybe I mentioned before (and as you probably know anyway!), ‘anthropo’ is from the Greek word *anthropos* meaning ‘man’ or ‘human’, ‘archaeo’ is from the Greek word *archaios* meaning ‘ancient’, and ‘logy’ is from the Greek word *logos* meaning ‘a word, reckoning, or thought’. In a combined word such as archaeology, anthropology, biology, etc., ‘logy’ has come to mean ‘study’ or ‘science’, and therefore, ‘anthropology’ means ‘study of humans’ and ‘archaeology’ means “study of life and culture of ancient peoples”.

Again, although data are available that hint at how (and maybe even why) our ancient ancestors became “hooked on the supernatural” and although I suspect that generally-accepted interpretations of these data are correct, yet as in the case of all hypotheses that summarize anthropological, archaeological, and historical data, it’s almost impossible to test their predictions. Nonetheless, such studies (done well) are the best that can be done, and therefore, rather than describing such studies as “nonscientific”, maybe it would be more appropriate to describe them as “extremely difficult science”. In comparison, testing hypotheses in the physical sciences is usually relatively simple – provided that taxpayers are willing to pay for building 10 billion dollar super-conducting supercolliders or similar!

Furthermore, even before hypotheses are proposed, there is the major problem that, taken alone, anthropological or archaeological or historical studies can easily mislead, because the data can be severely biased. Let me try to explain what I mean for each field of study, listed below.

### History

Written histories are commonly biased, in large part because “the winners” normally write them. As an example, consider how biased are essentially all histories of slavery or of wars. Similar biases should be expected in the “official historical records” of all religions: not only are these usually written by “the winners” but also most of them contain a huge number of deliberate “priestly fabrications and falsifications”, i.e., lies. I’ll show you many examples in the “excursions” **Qx** and **Yx** (dealing, respectively, with “The Quagmire of Revealed Religions” and “Your Indoctrination in the Mountainous God Lie”), but let me mention three examples here.

- Anyone who as at least average intelligence and who investigates the matter will find not only that there’s no doubt that Joseph Smith’s “translation” of some Egyptian hieroglyphics to create the Mormon’s *Book of Abraham* was a total sham but also that the *Book of Mormon* wasn’t written by ancient people (as claimed) but by someone in the early 1800s who was well acquainted with the doctrines of a renegade sect of the Baptists known as the Disciples Church.
- Anyone similar who investigates how the New Testament (NT) of the Bible was written and assembled will similarly find that it contains gross distortions and fabrications: first to be written were Paul’s letters (which are assembled last in the NT, only some of which were actually written

by Paul, and which contain no description of an historical Jesus); next written was Mark's "gospel" (which originally contained no descriptions of any "Star-of-Bethlehem" fable and no nonsense about Jesus rising from the dead); then later, about a century after the death of the alleged "savior", the rest of the gospels were "fabricated", including Mathews (which appears first in the NT).

- And similarly, studies of the Old Testament (OT) of the Bible have shown not only that most of its myths were merely "borrowed" from other cultures and that Moses was not the author of the first five books but also that the entire OT is mostly just a propaganda ploy perpetrated by Ezra and clerical colleagues (who lived about 800 years after Moses – if ever there was a Moses!), a ploy designed to convert the Hebrews to the religion of Ezra's political bosses, i.e., the Persians.

And of course it's the case that such "priestly fabrications" have been uncovered from historical studies, but here again, some major problems have occurred: some of these historical studies have been conducted by "partisans" who, in turn, have fabricated evidence to bolster their cases (e.g., some of the "testimonies" against and reports about Mormonism, Christianity, and Judaism have been found to be fakes). Consequently, Dear, when reading "histories", then (modifying a famous line by Shakespeare): screw your skepticism to the sticking point!

### Archaeology

Similar skepticism should be applied to all archaeological reports, of course not because deliberate falsifications are common, but because most archaeological studies are both biased and inherently limited. One of the obvious inherent limitations of archeology is that it's essentially impossible to determine what people thought based only on physical evidence, e.g., Dear, how about if I guess what you were thinking about when you painted your picture of a tiger?! Also, archaeological data are biased, because on the one hand, unless an ancient civilization was "frozen in time" (e.g., by being buried under an avalanche), archaeologists basically rummage through what are essentially garbage dumps (after countless generations have already done so!), and on the other hand, archaeologists commonly seek samples from sites that inadequately represent some ancient culture, e.g., think about what you would infer about our culture from digging up graves and from looking at graffiti on subway walls!

To illustrate, let me quote from an article by Kevin L. Callahan, who apparently is at the Department of Anthropology at the University of Minnesota. I'll omit his list of references; you can find them at his website.<sup>2</sup>

...Presently there is a dispute about the interpretation of clay figurines found at many Neolithic [viz., "Neo" = new + 'lithic' from the Greek word *lithos* meaning 'stone'; therefore, the Neolithic Age is the New Stone Age] sites in the Old World. Instead of viewing them all as "Mother Goddesses", Peter Ucko has argued... that "all over the globe clay models, very similar to those of the Neolithic, are made as children's dolls. Just as in the modern West, most are intended for girls and are themselves female. Another widespread use of such figures is in sympathetic magic, to draw illness or danger from a person... many portray pregnant females, as without modern obstetrics childbirth is one of the greatest dangers women have to face" (Hutton 1993:38). According to Hutton: "Some tribes, like the Baluba, use clay models in mourning rituals" (Hutton 1993:38). None of these figurines have anything to do with portraying a divine mother goddess figure. Hutton indicates that "Ucko concluded that Neolithic figures may have had just as many different functions, and that if they apparently portrayed supernatural beings there was absolutely no need to interpret them everywhere as the same female or male deity..."

Another example of an issue in archaeological interpretation... is the interpretation of large funeral monuments which, when found, are often cited as evidence of the burial of 'elites'. Awareness of a modern cultural phenomenon casts doubt on this early assumption. Peter Ucko has pointed out that large burial monuments in contemporary cemeteries in Britain are sometimes those of carnival people and not 'elites' or high status individuals.

Perhaps the most frequently encountered example where this needs to be done is the often reported assumption in the popular press that cut marks on prehistoric human bone are clear evidence of 'cannibalism'. Up until the last century, Native Hawaiians defleshed their loved ones to save their bones, which they believed possessed mana or sacred power (Handy and Pukui 1958). They did not eat members of their family. The flesh was disposed of in the sea, and the bones were carefully wrapped up and hidden in places such as volcanic lava tubes... The cut marks on their bones had nothing to do with cannibalism.

So again, Dear, screw your skepticism to the sticking point – or if you don't like that expression, then how about not "*Caveat emptor!*" (i.e., Buyer beware!) but "*Caveat lector!*" (i.e., Reader beware!).

### Anthropology

Anthropological studies of modern-day but primitive tribes can also be severely biased, because anthropologists can never be sure of how the tribe

<sup>2</sup> Available at <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/5579/folklore.html>.

has been influenced by “outsiders” (especially by various groups of “missionaries”, spreading their speculations about “supernatural stuff”). As a particular branch of anthropology, the study of the myths of various tribes (“mythology”) can be revealing, but many of the enormous number and variety of such myths contain substantial “cross-culture contamination”. For example, as I’ll try to show you in later chapters in this “excursion”, essentially all of the myths that the authors of the Bible attribute to the Ancient Israelites are merely “retellings” of the myths of the more Ancient Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Persians, and Indians.

Further, in many cases, these “retellings” commonly modify (and in some cases badly mangle) the messages of the original myths. Let me list some examples in the Bible of “badly mangled myths”, details of which I’ll show you in later **Ix**- and **Yx**-chapters:

- That God made the Earth in six “days” rather than in six “periods” (as described in “the original” Persian myth),
- That God was angry at Adam and Eve for eating fruit from “the tree of knowledge of good and evil” rather than for “getting high” on hallucinatory fruit from the “tree of gnosis” (where ‘gnosis’ is the Greek word for ‘knowledge’), as described in what may originally have been an Ethiopian myth [i.e., as with Native Americans, ancient people “thought” that they could enter “the spirit world” by “getting high” on hallucinogens from “the tree of knowledge” – so the message of the original myth seems to have been, basically, “Just say ‘No’!” (to drugs)].
- That Noah (a drunken lout who promoted slavery) was saved from the flood because he was “righteous” rather than because one of the gods objected to killing everyone (as described in “the original” Sumerian myth).

As I’ll be showing you, similar borrowing (and mangling) of myths continue throughout the Bible, including mythical stories about Moses and Jesus, which I’ll show you were merely “borrowed” from the myths of other “tribes” (especially the Sumerians, Egyptians, Persians, and Indians).

Whichever way one turns, then, there are major obstacles to learning “what really happened”. Further, as I already mentioned, even when a hypothesis is formulated that seems to succinctly summarize all relevant historical,

\* Go to other chapters *via*

archaeological, and anthropological data, it's almost impossible to test the hypothesis. Nonetheless, as I also already mentioned, a "general picture" has emerged about why and when our primitive ancestors concocted their crazy ideas about the "supernatural", and what I want to do now is start to sketch the resulting picture.

First, let me show you a little "background" for the picture, which has been derived from a huge number of archaeological studies. For example, consider an article entitled "Prehistoric Religion", whose author isn't identified but is from a web page<sup>3</sup> "created by Cassiel", who may be the article's author. [In a few places I've put some of the text in italics (*for emphasis*) and added some notes in "square brackets".]

It would appear that religion in some form or other has been an essential element in the life and culture of humankind throughout the ages, going back far beyond the threshold of [written] history [i.e., ~5,000 years ago]. Moreover, many of the beliefs and practices of the later and higher [?!] religions, both ancient and modern, are rooted in their prehistoric prototypes of the Old Stone Age [frequently called "Paleolithic", with 'paleo' from the Greek word *palaios* meaning 'ancient' (as in paleontology, the study of fossils) and, again, 'lithic' from the Greek word *lithos* meaning 'stone'], a period lasting roughly from about 500,000 BC to 10,000 BC. This phase therefore has its place and significance in any study of the religions of the world, past or present.

The difficulty, however, about such an inquiry is that nearly all the available data are confined to those concrete survivals like graves, sacred places and their contents, sculptures, bas-reliefs, engravings and paintings that have escaped the ravages of time. Their interpretation must be to some extent conjectural, but much of the material has survived, little changed, in everyday occurrence among the peoples who live today under conditions very similar to those of early humans. If employed with proper caution, such evidence can afford useful and illuminating *clues* to the purpose and meaning of prehistoric religion.

Since of all mysterious events the most prominent, puzzling, disturbing and arresting is that of death, it is not surprising that the earliest traces of religious belief and practice have clustered round the burial of the dead, centered on what was to become a highly developed cult. Various forms of this seem to go back in China to a very early period in the Old Stone Age, estimated by Professor Zeuner as being in the region of 500,000 years ago. Thus, in the caves near Peking, indications have been found of the cutting off and preserving of the heads of some of those interred, either to keep them as trophies or to abstract their contents to be eaten in order to obtain the vitality of the deceased. And this is by no means an isolated instance, skulls having

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.meta-religion.com/World\\_Religions/Ancient\\_religions/prehistoric\\_religion.htm](http://www.meta-religion.com/World_Religions/Ancient_religions/prehistoric_religion.htm)

been treated in a similar way in Europe before the arrival of the species *homo sapiens*, towards the end of the fourth phase of the Pleistocene Ice Age, about 70,000 BC.

Skulls found in the Placard cave in Charente in France had been made into drinking cups, which suggests that they were used for sacramental purposes. Similar vessels have been found in the Dor-dogne, near the village of Les Eyzies, now well known as a centre for decorated caves, and again at Puente Vicsgo not far from Santander in Spain, in a cave called Castillo, full of paintings.

In this phase of the Old Stone Age, the corpse was often laid in a grave *containing red ochreous powder*, sometimes with quantities of shells and other objects in bone and ivory.<sup>4</sup> The ochre represented blood, *the life-giving agent*, and there were often shells, like cowries, in the grave, shaped in the form of the portal through which the child enters the world. These emblems were associated with the female principle, and were widely used as fertility charms and givers of life. Therefore, if the dead were to live again in their own bodies, to color the bodies red was an attempt to revivify them and make them serviceable to their occupants in the hereafter.

Near Nordlingen in Bavaria, nests of skulls have been found, twenty-seven in each of two caves, and six in another. The heads had been intentionally cut off the trunk with flint knives after death, and then, dried and ceremonially preserved in the nest with the faces looking westward. Some were crushed, and had apparently been added later.

It was not only the skull which received this ritual mortuary treatment however. A number of skeletons have been discovered, ceremonially interred with very great care and supplied with grave goods. At Le Moustier in the Dordogne, a great centre of mid-Paleolithic culture, the skeleton of a youth was laid to rest on its right side with the forearm under the head and the cranium resting on a pillow of flint chips. Near the left hand was a fine oval axe, and a scraper was placed not far away with the burnt bones of a prehistoric ox above the skull, suggesting a funeral feast.

In a low-roofed cave close to the village of La Chapelle-aux-Saints in the Department of Correze, a well-preserved Neanderthal skeleton was deposited with its face to the west in a pit dug in the middle of the marly floor, and wedged into position by several stones. The legs were folded, and near the hand was the foot of an ox, with the vertebral column of a reindeer at the back. Surrounding it were quantities of flint implements; remains of the broken bones of contemporary animals, including the bison and the woolly rhinoceros, were nearby.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Ocher' (which is also spelled 'ochre') is a "soft stone that contains iron oxides and comes in a range of colors, from light yellow to brown or red." As you can find on the internet (e.g., see the 10 September 2006 news report at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/5329486.stm>), there are hints that variously colored ochre rocks have been used for as long ago as 200,000 years – not necessarily for their color (which would suggest the capability of abstract thought), since (according to the news report referenced above), ochre was also used "to preserve hides and as a glue to bind stone blades to their shafts."

It is hardly likely that early people would have gone to all this trouble in the disposal of the dead, which often involved reburial, providing them with what they were thought to need after death, unless survival, whether temporary or permanent, was the intention.

Below, I'll quote more from this (what is to me a very interesting) article (which seems to be a chapter from a book), but let me interrupt your reading of it with some comments about the above-mentioned "red ochreous powder" and the presumed importance of blood.

It's not difficult to imagine that even stone-age people were impressed by blood. If, Dear, you try to make a spearhead or arrowhead out of stone, you'll probably soon learn about blood – and the pain of losing some! You would probably experience more blood (and pain) if you ran over rocks chasing an animal, threw your spear at an animal and watched it bleed to death – and maybe also, while you watched your companion bleed to death, if he was gored by the animal. It's then unsurprising that as recently as a few thousand years ago, there is written in the Old Testament (*Genesis 9, 4*): "...but flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood thereof..." That is, it appears that even relatively recently, people equated blood with life. Therefore, it would seem to be consistent that if ancient people (tens of thousands of years earlier!) decided that dead people could come back to life, they'd need more blood – and this the people may have attempted to provide by supplying the corpse with "red ochreous powder". If they could, maybe they would have added the instruction: "JUST ADD WATER"!

And though I've seen nothing written about it, I expect that a woman's first menstrual cycle must have been a dramatic event, not only for the girl but for those who were aware of what was occurring: with no apparent injury, the young girl was losing some "life blood". When the girl later became pregnant and the monthly bleeding stopped (and people before ~10,000 BCE, before they started herding cattle, probably didn't know how women became pregnant!), then with swelling of the woman's abdomen beginning to show, the people's idea that blood was the "life force" was probably re-enforced. But that aside, aside, let me return to quoting the web page referenced above.

**The Mystery of the Caves.** While the motives underlying Paleolithic art were many and various no one who, like myself, has visited a great many of the decorated caves over a number of years, especially before the more famous of them became commercialized and illuminated by electricity, can be in doubt that primarily they

were prehistoric sanctuaries with an intensely awe-inspiring atmosphere. In them rites and sometimes sacred dances were held by ritual experts to control and maintain the always precarious food supply on which subsistence depended, arousing the deepest emotions, because upon them their hopes and fears were concentrated.

They are, therefore, the outward expression of one of the most vital aspects of prehistoric religion. Having little understanding of natural processes and their laws beyond their own observations, early people felt the need of establishing friendly and beneficial relations with the ultimate reality behind the mysterious phenomena around them, however this may have been interpreted. In all probability it constituted their conception of divine providence, the transcendent universal good, greater than themselves and the source of all bounty and beneficence, controlling their destiny. This concept of deity at once above and within the world was not very far removed from what in our idiom could be described as both transcendent and immanent.

Whether it involved any idea of a theistic supreme being, as has been conjectured, is very difficult to determine. It is true that among preliterate primitive peoples today there is a widespread belief in a high god in association with lesser spiritual beings such as totems, culture heroes, ancestors and localized gods. He stands head and shoulders above them as a shadowy otiose figure [i.e., “one with no useful result or practical purpose”], but as he is not intimately concerned with everyday affairs it is mainly from the lesser divinities that supernatural aid is sought.

It has to be remembered, moreover, that the primitive mind had a very limited capacity and could hardly conceive of the higher attributes of gods and spirits. Natural processes could not have been personified and interpreted in theistic and animistic terms, until conceptual thought emerged in the way that Tylor and Frazer and the evolutionary school contended, when they declared that in their judgment the “minimum definition of religion” was “the belief in spiritual beings”.

From this beginning animism was alleged to have developed into polytheism when, as Frazer affirmed, the innumerable spirits in “every tree and flower, every brook and river, every breeze that blew and every cloud that flecked with silvery white the blue expanse of heaven” were conceived of as departmental gods. Then the spirits in all the trees were personified as a Silvanus, or god of the woods in general, or an Aeolus, the single god of the winds. By a further generalization and abstraction “the instinctive craving of the mind after simplification and unification of its ideas” caused the many localized and departmentalized gods to be deposed in favor of one supreme creator and controller of all things. In this way polytheism evolved into monotheism with a single sovereign lord of heaven and earth (Frazer, *The Worship of Nature*, 1926, p.9f)

**The Concept of Deity.** This speculation was in line with the evolutionary thought of the period in which it arose, but it has now become apparent that it was too neat and tidy, too specialized and intellectualized an approach, to explain accurately the origin and development of religion and of the concept of deity.

The starting point of religion must be sought in something more comprehensive: in a belief in a sacred power which transcends the universe and is its ground and support. This may not have been personified, and so it would seem to have been a vague conception of providence as a creative and recreative power operating in the food quest, sex, fertility, birth, death, and the sequence of the seasons. When the idea of this potency acquired an independent life of its own in its various aspects and functions, it found expression in spiritual beings, ghosts of the dead and departmentalized divinities. These had many different shapes and forms, and characteristic features and functions of their own, emerging from a common providential source, incalculable, strong and good, determining the operations of nature and the destinies of humanity, at once above and within the world of time and space.

The recurrence of this conception of deity in all states of culture and phases of religious development from prehistoric times onwards suggests that it arose spontaneously. It was the expression of some inborn thought and feeling, rather than a developed kind of knowledge about the universe and natural phenomena. Its highest expression undoubtedly has been in its monotheistic idea of god as the sole creator and sustainer of all things. So far from polytheism passing into monotheism, speculation about the cosmos and its processes led to the peopling of the natural order with a multitude of spirits and gods, making the supreme being a very vague and inoperative figure obscured in the mist of animism and polytheism, unless it became a pantheistic impersonal absolute as in Hinduism in India and elsewhere in the Far East. In the other higher religions, to be considered later in this volume, a genuine monotheism was firmly established, notably in Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Under Paleolithic conditions the notion of providence was much more within the capacity of this stage of prehistoric mentality than speculation about the animation of nature in relation to spiritual beings and departmentalized divinities organized on a personalized hierarchal basis, or of one wholly exclusive living god like the Aten in Egypt, Ahura Mazda in Iran, Yahweh in Israel, and Allah in the Islamic world, or the Trinity in unity in Christendom.

**Early Mother-Goddesses.** Whether or not the mother-goddess was actually the earliest attempt to give expression to the concept of deity, as we have seen, her symbolism was the most prominent feature in this aspect of prehistoric religion in the Upper Paleolithic Age with its sculptured 'Venuses' and other emblems in the decorated caves. Subsequently, this life-symbol became the central feature in the cult of the Great Mother in the Ancient Near East, the Aegean, Crete, and Western Asia, and when the king was identified with the sky as the source of transcendental vitality and beneficence, the queen was equated with the earth as the immanent principle essential to the bestowal of providential bounty. Therefore, as he was reborn as the gods he embodied by his consecration, so his consort became the mother-goddess in one or other of her several capacities as the creatrix, having been the dominant figure in the earlier cult.

As the Great Mother became more clearly defined, and consciousness of the duality of male and female in procreation was recognized increasingly, from being the Unmarried Mother personifying the divine principle in maternity she became associated with the young god as her son and consort. Then, while she remained the crucial figure, the goddess cult assumed a twofold aspect in the ancient seasonal drama in which both the partners in generation played their respective roles of creative energy, the one female and receptive, the other male and active. From Neolithic times onward, phallic emblems were increasingly prevalent, though maternal imagery was predominant in Western Asia and the eastern Mediterranean, where in the first instance the male god was subordinate to the goddess.

**The Struggle for Life.** In the primeval and perennial struggle between the two opposed forces in the seasonal sequence, manifest in the creative powers of spring and the autumnal decline, the goddess was always supreme because she was the source of life, and her male partner was only secondarily her spouse. In short, the creative powers were secondary and dependent upon forces over which man had but a limited measure of control. All life was born unto death, and even the Great Mother became a tragic figure, as many myths portray her pursuing her search for her lover-son amid lamentation and woe.

But behind this pessimistic view of the world and the natural order lay the earlier conception, going back to the Old Stone Age, of the control of the cosmic forces by a transcendent providence which sustained the universe and its operations, as these were observed and understood, and was felt to be responsive to human needs by means of religion or magic. It was not, however, only to secure the means of subsistence and to advance with hope and confidence on life's journey that supernatural aid was sought by prehistoric people. Already they had begun to look forward to a continuous existence beyond the grave, and to make provision for the requirements of the afterlife.

From the above, Dear, I trust you see how difficult it is to reach a decision, based on archaeological data, about the origin of the concept of an "afterlife". For stone-age people, the data include skeletons in various positions and sometimes with nearby red ochreous powder or some implements or trinkets, "fertility figurines", and some crude paintings on cave walls. From such data, many conjectures follow, and though I don't know enough to criticize such conjectures, please at least notice that they are conjectures.

For me, anthropological studies of primitive tribes have been more satisfying. Maybe part of that satisfaction, however, is just from my own experiences with "Native (or Aboriginal) Americans", e.g., their amazing totem poles with which I became familiar as a kid – and maybe even from my memories of the biased reports about the "Indians" in the "Cowboy and

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Indian Movies” that I’d watch when I was a kid. At any rate, after reading some of the anthropological studies about primitive tribes, then much of the archaeological data (e.g., the ~4,000 year old paintings of people and animals at rock-shelters throughout the Pecos River region of southwest Texas and northern Mexico that seem to include drawings of the hallucinatory parts of the jippsom weed and the peyote cactus, the ~20-40,000 year old cave paintings of animals in France, the ~75,000 year old set of beads recently found at the Blombos cave in South Africa, and even older paraphernalia found with skeletons in ancient graves, etc.) seem to fit neatly into a consistent picture of primitive people “hooked on the supernatural”.

To illustrate what I mean, please consider the following speculations proposed by Joseph McCabe in his amazing book entitled *The Story of Religious Controversy* (written in 1921 and which you can find by typing the book’s title and the author’s name into a good internet search engine).<sup>5</sup> At the outset, let me note that, although I’m skeptical about a few aspects of McCabe hypothesis (aspects that I’ll show you soon), yet I admire his intelligent method of investigation. Specifically, rather than rely just on historical and archaeological data, McCabe investigated the then-current ideas of some primitive people. In the previous chapter, in a way, I tried to do similar (by trying to understand the thoughts of children, whom I used as surrogates for primitive people), but McCabe’s method is much more defensible. In particular, in his book he gives information from anthropological studies of primitive tribes that had been found in Tierra del Fuego (off the Southern tip of South America), in Tasmania (off the Southern tip of Australia), and in Central Brazil.

McCabe reports the following about these tribes, learned during the 1800s (before their minds were “contaminated” by “missionaries”).

1. For the primitive tribe in Tierra del Fuego:  
“They have neither hope nor fear beyond the grave. For them there is neither God, nor good, nor evil, nor spirits to fear – apart from the ‘phantoms’ that may injure them in this world. Death is the end of existence...”

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<sup>5</sup> You might still be able to find McCabe’s book at: <http://www.holysmoke.org/an/tan07.htm>.

2. For the primitive tribe in Tasmania:  
 “No trace can be found of any religious usage, or even sentiment, among them; unless indeed we may call by that name the dread of a malignant and destructive spirit that seems to have been their predominant, if not their only feeling on the subject.”
3. For the primitive tribe in Central Brazil:  
 “They merely regard the sun as a good principle (but do not worship it), and the moon as a maleficent agent, and the storm as full of evil spirits. Beyond that, they have no religion.”

Now, Dear, let me quote McCabe’s conclusions [in which I’ve added some italics and some notes in square brackets] about these and other primitive people, in the first paragraph of which he specifically rejects the speculation that I proposed in the previous chapter:

Before I [McCabe] made this investigation into the beliefs of the lowest peoples, I considered that it was probably the sun and moon, the fire and the storm, that first impressed the imagination of early man and begot a religious feeling. *It is clear that this is not so. Before man got wit enough to speculate on the cause of movements in nature, he believed in his own soul.*

And we get a very clear idea why they suppose that there is a part of a man that lives on. Their word for it [what our culture calls a ‘soul’] is commonly ‘shadow,’ or it is a ‘little red thing,’ like a man’s shadow on water. Of the nine peoples I have described [in his book], three plainly have no idea of survival [beyond death], two are very doubtful, four (the higher in culture) have an intense belief in it. Of the four who do definitely believe in survival, two call the surviving part of a man ‘shadow,’ and the other two say that it is a red object, though I cannot find the translation of their name for it. We shall see that even at higher levels *tribes still give the name ‘shadow’ to the soul.*

So it appears that there is more meaning than we thought in the phrase “shades of our ancestors”! I do not wish to press any particular theory of the origin as an exclusive and universal fact, but these lowly peoples very clearly suggest that *religion began with a crude speculation of primitive man about his own shadow.*

If we try to put ourselves in the mental atmosphere of a very lowly savage, we can understand it. He is incapable of abstract ideas. His mind is thoroughly concrete. A vague general animation of nature is quite beyond him. *He does not speculate on causes of movements.* But definite concrete things begin to prick his curiosity. The sun and moon are too conspicuous, too solitary in the sky, too striking in their daily movements across it, to be ignored. He begins to have a feeling of wonder about them, though not a definite opinion or speculation. But his own shadow is so near to

him hourly, so weird in its movements, so plainly a double of himself, that it would be likely enough to be the first thing in nature he speculated about.

Primitive man at this level had not the slightest idea of the sun's share in the matter. No sun, no shadow, of course; but he had only to look into a pool or river to see it again, an exact duplicate of himself. It drew back into himself, spread out from himself, went with him everywhere. *He must really be two beings: a body and a shadow. This gave him a clue to death. The shadow-part had gone away.*

*But it seems likely that dreams intervened here. While he slept on the ground, some part of him was out in the forest or on the river: the shadow-part. We saw that the Brazilians who believed most intensely in spirits were great dreamers; though their word for the soul was 'shadow.' The shadow-part wandered at night. When a man was found dead, his shadow-part had not returned to the body. It still wandered, especially at night, when everybody's shadow wandered. The world of the savage became peopled with shadows. So many men died.*

Now, Dear, let me repeat the obvious point: the great difficulty of attempting to apply the scientific method to such studies is that it's extremely difficult (if not impossible) to test hypotheses. For example, unless a new primitive tribe is discovered, I don't know how to test McCabe's hypothesis that ideas about "immortal souls" originated from the primitive people's ideas about their own shadows, optical reflections, and dreams. But I readily admit that McCabe's hypothesis is more defensible than the speculation that I proposed in the prior chapter (related to the principle of causality), because McCabe's hypothesis is based on more data.

Yet, I should also admit to a few lingering doubts about McCabe's hypothesis – though maybe I'm just "splitting hairs". Thus, it could be argued that primitive people, in fact, first learned to rely on the principle of causality, for otherwise they would not have sought a "cause" of their shadows, reflections, and dreams. Also, it bothers me somewhat that McCabe doesn't attribute more of the origin of ideas about souls and spirits to people's fears, in particular, their fears of death and of the dark (populated by "scary things that go bump in the night"). In addition, let me quote the conclusion by Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939) from his book *Moses and Monotheism*:

Man found that he was faced with the acceptance of "spiritual" forces, that is to say, such forces as cannot be apprehended by the senses, particularly not by sight, and yet having undoubted, even extremely strong, effects. If we may trust to language, it was the movement of the air that provided the image of spirituality, since *the spirit*

borrowed its name from the breath of wind (*animus, spiritus*, Hebrew: *ruach* = smoke).

And I must admit to rather liking Freud's idea – in part because, ever since I was a kid, I was fairly certain that the priests were blowing a lot of (hot) air [☺], and in part because, after doing decades of research on the fringes of meteorology (even, for a few years, being an associate professor of Atmospheric Sciences), I'm certain not only that the winds are totally natural but also that the forces that drive them are thoroughly known.

But pushing remaining uncertainties aside for now, let me push on to show you McCabe's hypotheses about how "spirits" slowly evolved into "gods".

*The clue to the evolution of gods is... the rise of man to tribal organizations under chiefs. When men become hunters and fighters, the strong or cunning man gets chosen as leader. He becomes a chief. The leadership becomes hereditary. And, as the spirit-world is a duplicate of the living world, there are more powerful spirits in the world beyond the grave. Famous ancestors or former members of the tribe rise in the memory above all the ordinary spirits, who are individually forgotten. They are on the way to become gods. But it is a very gradual process, with all sorts of shades of belief, all degrees of "godness", so to say.*

McCabe's idea that gods "evolved" is, as a minimum, an interesting hypothesis. As I'll show you in later chapters, Dear, his suggestion certainly is supported by the evolution of the idea that Jesus was a god.

McCabe goes on to suggest how the priests gained power:

*We see the rise from a crowd of spirits to a few outstanding spirits which, under the fostering influences of the priests, became what we may call gods. We see the nature-gods gradually... rising to importance above deified ancestors. We see rude huts over chief's remains or fetishes growing into carved temples. We see priesthoods gaining in power, wealth, and organization. We see the departed spirits gradually acquiring a home, at first in the forest or beyond the hills or in some other vague place, then underground, then with the great spirits in the sky. We see, in fine, a strong tendency everywhere for one great spirit, and it is very commonly the sky-god, to predominate. The whole story of man's religious evolution lies before us, not in a dead and speculative chronicle, but in living remnants of the various ages through which the race has passed...*

*The facts give no indication whatever of a religious instinct, an inner sense or urge, or whatever new name one invented. From beginning to end it is a question "of drawing wrong inferences from observed facts" – the shadow, the dream, the nightmare, disease, death, the movements of wind and river, the rain, the sun and*

moon, the annual birth and death of vegetation. *The only urge beyond the subtle urge of priesthoods [to gain power]... is the curiosity of man.* He itches to explain things. From beginning to end religion is an explanation or interpretation of obscure and dark things.

In summary, Dear, I admit to feeling my own incompetence upon reading McCabe's hypotheses.

Apparently, however, other people have either not seen or ignored McCabe's ideas. In particular, as I wandered around the internet to try to find other hypotheses (using the search phrase: "origin of the god idea"), I was impressed by a summary and critique of such ideas written in an essay by the civil-rights leader Martin Luther King, but I was disappointed that King didn't mention McCabe. You can easily find King's essay on the internet, Dear, by typing its title: "The Origin of Religion in the Race" (by which he meant "the Human Race"). He wrote this essay for his college course "The Philosophy of Religion" – and received a grade of "A". Below, I'll quote some from King's essay, but before I do, let me show you the meaning of some terms that he uses – as well as some ideas that he neglects to mention.

In his essay, King comments on 'animism', but omits comments on the closely related concept of 'shamanism'. In my dictionary, 'animism' is defined as

1. the doctrine that all life is produced by a spiritual force separate from matter
2. the belief that all natural phenomena have souls independent of their physical being
3. a belief in the existence of spirits, demons, etc.

Also, my dictionary gives for 'shamanism':

1. the religion of certain peoples of NE Asia, based on a belief in good and evil spirits who can be influenced only by the shamans
2. any similar religion, as of some American Indians and Eskimos.

But if you search on the internet, Dear, I expect that you'll conclude that the above two definitions don't adequately convey the concepts in either animism or shamanism. Especially unsatisfactory is the hint, in the above definition, that shamanism was restricted to NE Asia (and their descendants who migrated to America) – although maybe the author of the above definition was purposefully restricting the reference to current religions (but even then, the definition might not be accurate, because I suspect that such

religions are still “alive” in Africa and S. America). In any event, here let me devote a little space to additional descriptions of both animism and shamanism.

If McCabe is right, the origin of animism (derived from the Latin word *anima*, meaning ‘soul’) – and therefore the origin of the concept of a soul – was probably in shadows, optical reflections, and especially dreams. Thus, when people dream, it’s as if “they” leave their bodies, the “they” thereby conceived to be “souls”. In a dream, “you” can become involved in some fanciful activity, and yet all evidence suggests that your body stayed behind (e.g., in bed). The idea then apparently evolved that people had “souls”, which were usually constrained by their bodies but which could be released in dreams (and in death).

By this reasoning (based on zero data!), it then followed that “souls” lived forever – and much of all religions deals with (and has always dealt with) preparing one’s “soul” for its next journey, after it breaks free of the confines of its current body – although why anyone would want one’s subconscious mind to continue, without one’s conscious mind, has always perplexed me! Anyway, Dear, animism (“the doctrine that all life is produced by a spiritual force separate from matter”) can therefore be described as the basic premiss of all organized religions.

As for shamanism, there are many definitions. As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, you can find on the internet the definition that shamanism is whatever shamans do – but that’s not a very revealing definition! What a shaman (or shamaness) did (and still does) is attempt to communicate with the “souls” or “spirits” – assumed to exist everywhere in the environment, from the “spirits” of physical features and phenomena (from lakes to mountains to thunderstorms) to the “souls” of the dead (an activity called necromancy, derived from the Greek words *nekros*, meaning ‘corpse’ and *manicia*, meaning ‘divination’). In general, shamanism is the belief that gods or spirits or souls are everywhere; therefore, shamanism could justifiably be described as the original religion of all humans and shamans could justifiably be described as the original priests.

Now, let me turn to King's essay. I would encourage you to read it, Dear, because it shows King's competence even as a student.<sup>6</sup> In an earlier draft of this chapter, I quoted his entire essay, but then I became rather concerned about all the "nasty" copyright comments on the web page (e.g., at <http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/copyright.htm>). Therefore, here let me comment on three aspects of his essay (and I'll assume that you read it all).

### **1. The 'value' of religion.**

The last paragraph of King's essay made me "swallow hard". The paragraph's first sentence is: "If, however, it can be proved that the origin of religion in the race was very crude we need not despair..." In this quotation, the word "despair" seems prejudicial: one would "despair" about the "crude" origin of religion only if one has the prejudice that religion is currently "not crude". I have the opposite prejudice!

In the next sentence, King states: "The question of origins is relatively independent of the question of values." In general, I can easily agree with that statement, but implicit in it (as it's used by King), is the (unjustified!) assumption that religion has value. I'll spend a substantial portion of this book refuting that unjustified assumption – though I might be willing to grant religion its value in providing humanity with some convenient swear words! In addition, I admit that religion has provided people with "a sense of community" and that leaders have used this "community spirit" to steer the community in sometimes "useful" directions (just as King did, to fight segregation), but in reality, it's the "sense of community" that is the key – and that sense needn't (and shouldn't!) be based on nonsense about "the supernatural".

Then, King compounds the above two ideas in his third sentence: "If religion can be traced back to lowly origins, that should not in itself be regarded as prejudicial to its real value in the higher states of its development..." In this sentence, I choke on both "real value" (what 'real value'?) and "higher states of its development" (what 'higher states'?) – but it will take me many chapters to show you, Dear, my reasons for choking on those phrases.

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<sup>6</sup> It's available at, e.g., [http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/papers/vol1/510209-The\\_Origin\\_of\\_Religion\\_in\\_the\\_Race.htm](http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/papers/vol1/510209-The_Origin_of_Religion_in_the_Race.htm).

King then compares the “value” of religion to that of “science”, which really starts me coughing:

If religion can be traced back to lowly origins, that should not in itself be regarded as prejudicial to its real value in the higher stages of its development, or to its relative value even at the lower stages, any more than the fact that science and art have sprung from most crude and unpromising beginnings should discredit the value of the final results or of the painful and often bungling efforts which have contributed to those results.

In a later chapter, Dear, I’ll comment more on differences between science and religion; here, let me just remark that the comparison that King proposes in the above quotation entirely misrepresents both the “value” and the nature of science: science is of value (to our trio of survival goals), because it summarizes knowledge, derived from data. In contrast, ideas about gods and souls summarize no data, such ideas therefore contains no knowledge, and therefore they are of zero value to our trio of survival goals – except for the clerics who profit from selling such snake oil!

Consequently, when I get to King’s final sentence, “It seems more *rational* to maintain that the final achievement enhances the worth of the crude beginnings than to say that the crudeness of the beginnings depreciates the value of the results”, I simply shake my head in sadness to see how inappropriately the concept of “rationality” is used. I’ll address this in a later chapter (see **R**, for Reason); here, let me just try to advise you, Dear, *not* to rely on reason: of course reason is a useful tool, but when you reach the end of any analysis, rely not on reason but on data.

Further, Dear, I want to repeat my disappointment that King didn’t mention McCabe, whose book was published 30 years before King wrote his essay. In fact, not only am I disappointed, I’m concerned that he didn’t mention McCabe, because of the possibility that McCabe’s book was “black listed” by the “divinity school” in which King studied. As I’ll show you in subsequent chapters (e.g., in **Yx**), priests have done that sort of thing for thousands of years: destroyed the books that criticize the priests – and, in many cases, the priests also destroyed the “authors” (e.g., by stoning them to death or burning them at the stake). That is, as I’ll show you, much of the history of the world has been a history of some people (particularly clerics) grabbing power over the people by controlling what they are “allowed” to think.

\* Go to other chapters *via*

## 2. Idea of 'mana' vs. fear

King seems to conclude that "mana" is the key to the origin of religion. He states:

Any satisfactory theory of the origin of religion must be able to account, not only for the prominence of magic and mysticism in religion, but also for the connection of these, from the beginning, with a vital moral element. Recent anthropology tends more and more to find this satisfactory theory in the conception of *mana*. Here the origin of religion is found in a pre-animistic period or stage characterized by a sense of awe in the presence of a diffused, indefinable, mysterious power or powers not regarded as personal. This potency has been given many names, but for the sake of uniformity, we may call it *mana*, as the Polynesians do, amongst whom this potency as such was first discovered by modern investigators.

He concludes:

The above brief study of the origin of religion in the light of anthropological research seems to culminate in the view that the most primitive religious idea is that of *mana*, that this arises in the actual ceremonial performances of the primitive groups, and that subsequently, as Marett says, "Gods start, in fact, as no more than portions of the ritual apparatus."

I don't buy it! For me, such a suggestion just doesn't "sit well". It's inconsistent with my observations both of animals and of children. I can imagine some Polynesian, living in some "tropical paradise", being awed by the bounty of "mana", and I can imagine some men in modern America being so comfortable that they feel "a sense of awe in the presence of a diffused, indefinable, mysterious power or powers" and want to be in touch with this "vital moral element", but I expect that Freud's and Volney's views (mentioned at the end of the previous chapter) are closer to reality.

That is, Dear, I suspect that, "in the beginning", fear was a more common factor in the formation of all religions than was any "awe" or "mana". I suspect that fear was of dominant importance not only because I know certain children who have been terrified by things that "go bump in the night" (including me, when I was a child!) but also because every time I see a rabbit in the desert, never once do I see him intrigued by his shadow, deifying his ancestors, worshiping any totems, or being awed by any "mana"; instead, he almost always seems overwhelmed by fear. I suspect that primitive humans were similarly fearful of almost everything, from lions to lightning, and from snakes to "things that go bump in the night".

For primitive people, the dark, death, and dreams must have been especially strange – assuming that primitive people dreamed. And I expect that they did dream, because, Dear, if you'll watch dogs, I expect that you'll also conclude that they seem to dream (moving their legs as if running and then making noises as if trying to bark). I further suspect that, ever-so-slowly (taking hundreds of thousands of years!), as people began to understand cause and effect, began to communicate, and began to try to understand and explain their experiences, their ideas of souls and spirits and gods slowly evolved, guided by the special interests of the priests.

### 3. Dangerous idea of 'magic'

Although I continue to be impressed with King's competence (even as a student!), I also was disappointed with what I consider to be his essay's superficial treatment of "magic", "miracles", and in general "the occult". To explain what I mean, let me start by quoting my dictionary's definitions of these words.

*magic* **1. a)** the use of charms, spells, and rituals in seeking or pretending to cause or control events, or govern certain natural or supernatural forces; sorcery; witchcraft **b)** such charms, spells, etc. **2.** any mysterious, seemingly inexplicable, or extraordinary power or influence **3.** the art or performing skill of producing baffling effects or illusions by sleight of hand, concealed apparatus, etc.

*miracle* **1.** an event or action that apparently contradicts known scientific laws and is hence thought to be due to supernatural causes, especially to an act of God **2.** a remarkable event or thing; marvel **3.** a wonderful example.

*occult* **1.** hidden; concealed **2.** secret; esoteric **3.** beyond human understanding; mysterious **4.** designating or of a certain alleged mystic arts, such as magic, alchemy, astrology, etc.

As examples, Dear, you have been taught about the "magical way" that Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon, about the various "miracles" Jesus allegedly accomplished (such as walking on water, healing the sick by the "laying on" of his hands, etc.), and the pinnacle of the occult: the way God snapped his fingers (or whatever) to create the universe!

What bothers me in King's essay is his failure to comment on the essence of all magic, miracles, and (in general) the occult – and for that matter, also "mana". This essence is a failure to dig out and to understand the linkages between causes and effects. If people don't understand the cause of some effect, they can either dig until they do, or dismiss their ignorance by calling

\* Go to other chapters *via*

the linkage between cause and effect “a miracle” – or those who are “awed” by the “magical” linkage between cause and effect can call this linkage “mana”. Further, Dear, notice that “magic”, “miracles”, “the occult”, and even “mana” are all meaningless concepts until people have adopted, as a premiss, the principle of causality. Thus, for those people (if any!) who don’t admit that effects have causes, then nothing is “magical” – everything just is!

Consequently, I would have wished that King had addressed what seems to me to be obvious: first came primitive people’s acceptance of the principle of causality, probably that meant primitive people assigned various causes (or gods) to particularly significant (and probably fearful) effects, and only after those steps could the people introduce “wild and wooly ideas” (e.g., in the form of myths) to “explain” the (mysterious, miraculous, and awesome) linkages between causes and effects. And although it apparently wasn’t King’s “assignment” to go father with his essay, of course I wish he had. In particular, Dear, what I hope that you see is both the praise due our ancient ancestors and the criticism due so many primitive humans who live in modern times.

Thus, and again, our ancient ancestors deserve high praise for recognizing the principle of causality. Similar to little children, primitive people had only recently learned how to speak, they were busy naming things, and it is to their great credit that they inferred that all effects have their causes! Meanwhile, we certainly should “forgive” them for their failures to “fill in the blanks”, between causes and effects (with understanding rather than silly stories or myths), because not only were there a “mind boggling” number of effects observed but also the linkages between causes and effects are still found to be sometimes too difficult for humans to understand. Thus, describing how effects were related to causes was, in a way, “just details”, which our ancient ancestors filled in with their myths about gods and souls.

But on the other hand, for modern-day humans to continue to “believe” in these myths, to fail to investigate how effects are related to their causes, is evidence of defective minds. Thus, the essence of all “the occult” (magic, miracles, myths, and religions) is the failure to “fill in the blanks”, to determine and to demonstrate the details of how effects are related to their causes. For example, how did Joseph Smith’s “seer stone” permit him to read a different language: did it contain a micro-processor (the “guts” of a modern computer, invented about 150 years after Smith used his seer stone)

that provided instant translation? How did Jesus walk on water: did he wear waterproof shoes big enough to displace enough water? And how did God create the universe?

Dear: the essence of all science is to try to understand the linkages between causes and effects; in contrast, the essence of all religions is the clinging to “explanations” of these linkages invented by our primitive ancestors. And if you wonder how modern-day humans could continue to “believe” in the occult (i.e., continue to accept what is obviously totally fabricated, primitive, “balderdash” linking causes to effects), then recognize that there are many potential causes. Some modern-day humans have intellectual abilities no greater than small children. Some modern-day humans have damaged their brains with chemicals. Some modern-day humans have experienced some trauma that has made them too fearful to think for themselves. Some modern-day humans are so puzzled by some linkages between causes and effects that are still difficult to understand (e.g., how the universe managed to create itself via a symmetry-breaking fluctuation in a total void, leading to the “Big Bang”) that they give up trying and, instead, yield to worshipping their ignorance. And some modern-day humans have yet to break free from their childhood indoctrinations.

But of these groups of people, Dear, don’t worry too much about the last mentioned group: one of these days they’ll stop for a few minutes to think about things for themselves. Then, just as when a certain grandchild decided that “the Santa Claus thing” is silly, such people will realize that all ideas about gods and souls are equally silly. I expect that, eventually, all people will see that primitive ideas of gods and souls were mistakes and that priests, in pursuit of their own power, are just pathetic purveyors of primitive ignorance. Would that anyone who uses the word “God” to “explain” anything would, instead, have sufficient courage and honesty to replace the word “God” with the words “I dunno” – and would that anyone who uses the word “soul” would replace it with the words “DNA molecule”! Stated differently, souls and gods aren’t supernatural, they’re the epitome of superficiality. And stated still differently, there’s no profit in introducing ideas about gods and souls – save for the profits thereby made by the priests and “profits”.