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## THE FIRST RELIGION OF MANKIND

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THE GREATEST PORTION OF THE TIMESPAN ENCOMPASSING MANKIND'S EXISTENCE on earth is enshrouded in what it is customary to call "prehistory." Untold hundreds of millennia and thousands of generations of human communities passed by before the first written records would provide a key to the thoughts and activities of our first ancestors. And yet those mute ages were by no means static, for by the time the ancient Mesopotamians developed cuneiform writing around 3500 B.C., much of the world had already been peopled, many cultures had grown up, migrated, supplanted others, and been transformed by interaction with their neighbors. Consequently the application of the term prehistory to those ages is in a sense misleading, for history began with the first man.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed a remarkable outpouring of scholarship aimed at ascertaining some of the features of those obscured ages. The science of archaeology was perfected, with keen attention being given to the discovery of skeletal remains and artifacts. But material objects alone cannot suffice for the reconstruction of a culture. Assigning a function to many of the objects uncovered at a site can remain a highly speculative art without the guide of written records, which shed so much light on a civilization. And when the goal being pursued is the piecing together of something intellectual and emotional, like the religious beliefs of primeval cultures, then material remains are of particularly limited use.

Nevertheless, a good number of the scholars who approached the study of ancient man were interested in precisely that topic: the question of the origin of religious beliefs. Many of their names are famous even today, despite the ephemeral nature of most of their theories. Among them one would find Sir James Frazer, author of *The Golden Bough*; the Indologist Max Muller; the positivist sociologist Emile Durkheim; and the anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor.<sup>1</sup>

The scientific milieu which they inhabited was of course dominated by the evolutionary hypotheses of Charles Darwin and his followers, so it should not be surprising that most of the students of the history of religion attempted to employ Darwinian ideas in the service of their reconstructions of religious development. At the same time, the colonial and missionary activities of Western European countries had resulted in a great wealth of information on the practices and beliefs of primitive cultures only recently discovered. The concepts of fetishism, totemism, animism, and the like fascinated the theorizers and added much supporting evidence for the doctrines they were constructing. Those doctrines rested largely on the premise that refined or spiritual ideas about religion can only appear at the last stage of an evolutionary road which starts with crude or materialistic beliefs. Thus monotheism, or the recognition and worship of a Supreme Being who is eternal, omniscient and all-good, is an idea which is simply beyond the capabilities of primitive people, and could emerge only alongside the relatively advanced civilizations of the Mediterranean in historic times.

Indeed, one French anthropologist went so far as to posit that primitive man thinks "pre-logically," so that it would be *a priori* impossible for him to reason to the concept of a Supreme Being. Unable to associate cause and ef-

fect, he is doomed to the worship of sticks and stones, and to see the world as a riot of weird phenomena. Along the same lines, it was confidently predicted by various scientists that, sooner or later, some tribe would be discovered which had not developed a language, able to communicate only by means of grunts and gestures. Needless to say, by the 1920s, such tendentious ideas had been thoroughly routed by the advance of anthropological research. No serious scientist today would doubt the common origin and identity of nature of all human beings, and the so-called primitives have demonstrated that their mental acumen is no less developed than that of their university-trained interrogators.

Most of the evolutionary hypotheses were more subtle, however. At the risk of greatly simplifying their arguments, which are expounded in lengthy volumes, I will briefly outline two well-known examples, one representing the French sociological outlook, the other characteristic of the English anthropological school.

In his famous work *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim notes the existence of a “totemic” social organization among tribes of Central Australia. (A totem is an animal or object which is regarded as an ancestor or protector of a particular family or tribe. It is now understood to be more of a social than a religious concept.) The tribe rallies around this sacred symbol, the source of all efficacious power, gradually elevating it to the status of a god. The primitive mind is unable to reason to the deeper meaning of the totem which is its serving as a standard bearer for the collectivity, which for Durkheim is the true divinity.

How could the emblem of the group have been able to become the figure of this quasi-divinity, if the group and the divinity were two distinct realities? The god of the clan, the totemic principle, can therefore be nothing else than the clan itself, personified and represented to the imagination under the visible form of the animal or vegetable which serves as totem.<sup>2</sup>



*Ancient Egyptian gods*

trials, among whom totemism is much less significant a feature of their society.

On the other hand, E. B. Tylor opted for animism as the earliest religion of man. The argument, which he develops in his epochal *Primitive Culture*, runs as follows. Early man was conscious of the difference between living and dead beings, and of the apparent activity of the soul or spirit outside the body during sleep. From those phenomena he derived the idea of soul or spirit, but not content with ascribing it to man alone, he further assumed that all objects, animate and inanimate, likewise possessed (or were possessed by) spirits. These spirits would explain the origin of fetishism, and also of nature worship. Each tree, star, stream, and especially the sun and moon, have their spirits, requiring some form of worship. Alongside them are the ancestor spirits, also demanding to be propitiated. Eventually a process of gradual merging takes place, resulting first in the pantheon of divinities worshipped by the Indo-Europeans, and then the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans. Ultimately a single god, a Supreme Being, emerges from the crowd to dominate the other deities, and forms the basis of the modern great religions.

Tylor’s thesis is a classic example of unadulterated evolutionism. His grand conception of the origin and growth of religions also represents the highest refinement of what is called the psychological approach to the problem. It is based on a mental, as opposed to a historical, reconstruction of the most likely steps taken by man in devising his religious worldview, as the following excerpt indicates:

The animism of the lower tribes, self-contained and self-supporting, maintained in close contact with that direct evidence of the senses on which

it appears to be originally based, is a system which might quite reasonably exist among mankind, had they never anywhere risen above the savage condition. Now it does not seem that the animism of the higher nations stands in a connexion so direct and complete with their mental state. It is by no means so closely limited to doctrines evidenced by simple contemplation of nature.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of spirit is everywhere self-evident to man, and animism is a widespread religious phenomenon. On the other hand, the concept of God requires subtler reasoning. One then seeks to locate the intermediate rungs constituting the steps on the evolutionary ladder from the one to the other.

But as a psychological theory, it was especially vulnerable to a comparison with the growing mass of ethnological data emerging from research into the culture and beliefs of primitive people. Thus it was only a matter of time before the animist doctrine would face searching criticism, and the man who laid the axe to its roots was himself a former intellectual disciple of Tylor, the Scottish litterateur and folklorist Andrew Lang.

Just before the turn of the century Lang published *The Making of Religion*, a breezily written but cogently argued refutation of Tylor's theories. The first half of the book is devoted to the enumeration and discussion of many parapsychological phenomena for which he observes that the scientific theories of his day were unable to account. After deflating scientific egos in general, he then proceeds to attack the dogma of evolutionism by appealing to the recorded beliefs of various tribes. His accuracy in picking out what a later, more scientific, methodology would indicate with far greater certainty to be the most primitive tribes was quite creditable for his time.

For instance, he cites the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego, whose absence of a social hierarchy and of a priesthood militates against the argument of Herbert Spencer, an ardent evolutionist, that ancestor worship, particularly of the ghosts of medicine men, preceded the idea of God. And yet they fear an all-good deity who proscribes the practice of unethical acts among the Fuegians. Similarly, the aborigines of Southeast Australia, although they recognize various grades of spirit, reserve their worship for Darmulun, an ethical, all-seeing deity.

The Andamanese, Bushmen, and Melanesians are also called to witness against the all-pervasiveness of animist worship.

Cautious not to overstate his case, however, he observes:

It is impossible to prove, historically, which of the two main elements in belief - the idea of an Eternal Being or Beings, or the idea of surviving ghosts - came first into the minds of men. The idea of primeval Eternal Beings, as understood by savages, does not depend on, or require, the ghost theory. But as we almost always find ghosts and a Supreme Being together, where we find either, among the lowest savages, we have no historical ground for asserting that either is prior to the other.<sup>4</sup>

Time will uncover more information about the relative abundance of each kind of being, and the absence of either in the data at hand is not conclusive evidence that the belief is not there somewhere, perhaps revealed only in mysteries inaccessible to foreigners. Continuing, he notes that it is usually the Supreme Being whose presence is hidden in the background, relegated to the role of *deus otiosus*: "But if the idea of a universal Father and Maker came last in evolution, as a refinement, then, of course, it ought to be the newest, and therefore the most fashionable and potent."<sup>5</sup> That would suggest a greater antiquity for the higher deity, contrary to what the evolutionists held. And then he turns the psychological argument around:

That god thrives best who is most suited to his environment. Whether an easy-going, hungry ghost-god with a liking for his family, or a moral Creator not to be bribed, is better suited to an environment of not especially scrupulous savages, any man can decide. Whether a set of not particularly scrupulous savages *will* readily evolve a moral unbribeable Creator, when they have a serviceable family ghost-god eager to oblige, is a question as easily resolved.... [E]verything we know of human nature, and of evolution, assures us that the Father, or Maker, or Ancient of Days came first; the ghost-gods last.<sup>6</sup>



Lang's critique took the wind out of religious evolutionism as a hypothesis (though not as a popular belief, for the works of Durkheim, Spencer, Huxley, Tylor and their epigones are all better known today than Lang's), but it did not place the concept of the "High God of Low Races" on a firm scientific basis. At the turn of the century, both ethnology and comparative religion remained very speculative sciences. If one wished to buttress a theory, it was standard procedure to correlate apparently parallel or similar features of different cultures in support of the theory, regardless of the possibility that the cultures were totally unrelated. Even far into the twentieth century, many distinguished scholars have been tempted to follow this facile method to prove some tenuous, or downright implausible, thesis. One need only mention as an example Prof. E. O. James, whose line of thought betrayed an unfortunate inability to extricate himself from the spell cast by Frazer.<sup>7</sup>

The scientific basis for the comparative study of cultures was established largely through the efforts of Franz Boas, Clark Wissler, Robert Lowie and Alfred Kroeber in the United States and Fritz Graebner in Germany, all of them ethnologists, though Graebner was a historian by training. Particularly important for subsequent work in the area of the history of religions is Graebner's contribution, for soon after he published his *Method of Ethnology* in 1911, it came into the hands of one of the most prodigious scholars the field of religious studies has yet to produce, the German-Austrian philologist turned ethnologist, Wilhelm Schmidt.

Schmidt, a priest of the Society of the Divine Word, had already distinguished himself with a study of native Australian languages when he digested and ruminated on the scientific principles enunciated by Graebner. Not content to be merely a follower, however, he soon elaborated on the work of his mentor, eventually publishing his own definitive handbook on the subject. Schmidt attempted to place ethnology on sure scientific grounds as a "science of the mind," a study of the rational activity of man in societies which come in contact with each other in some chronological order. Following Graebner, he postulated various criteria (largely revolving around the types and quantity of similar artifacts and cultural patterns) indicating a historical juncture between societies which may have long since separated, even to the far reaches of the earth. Only by rigorous application of those criteria could an attempt be made with some hope of success "to reach back over the epochs

of written history, far back into those distant millennia of mankind's past history, and with their help to construct the objective succession of events and thereby the actual genesis of culture among the different peoples."<sup>8</sup> Of especial interest to Schmidt were the various primitive peoples, for they represented the "survivals" of the primeval inhabitants of the earth, and as such, can give the ethnologist tremendous insights into how mankind's first representatives lived and thought.

But how probable is the equation between primitive (today's simplest cultures) and primeval (the chronologically oldest)? Although there has been some controversy about this subject, it is generally agreed today that the comparison, within limits, is a valid one. A simple economic structure, and a lack of technological advances are hallmarks of a primitive society, which typically subsists as a nomadic hunter-gatherer community. The population of such a tribe may be on the order of one hundred or so, a number which historians of technology recognize as below the critical minimum required for specialization of tasks. With everyone engaged in the same two time-consuming occupations (the men as hunters and the women as gatherers) little opportunity is available for technological breakthroughs. A society can persist for untold generations at the same level of material sophistication. One verifiable example of such a static society is that of the Yamana tribe in Tierra del Fuego on the southern tip of South America. Archaeological finds indicate that the Yamana were the first to people their region around 2000 years ago, and artifacts excavated in the twentieth century show no sign of advance in tool-making over that timespan.

Thus when one looks at the remains of earlier human habitations, stretching back over hundreds of thousands of years, it need not evoke too much surprise that the same Stone Age tools have remained in use. Another very vivid and specific example can be adduced in support of the identification of the primitive and the primeval. Shortly after the turn of the century, Emil Bachler discovered a curious cache of bear skulls in the recesses of three caves in the Swiss Alps. The geological evidence pointed to an age of around 150,000 years for the finds, which appeared to be the remains of a ritual enacted by Neanderthal man. Herbert Kohn remarks:

The most important find was in the front part of the third cave. Here there was a sort of table or stone chest with a lid of flat stones. Inside there was a number of skulls, some carefully surrounded with small stones, others lying on special slabs

of their own, and one in particular standing out amongst them. It lay on a stone slab, the same size as the skull itself, and around the skull were placed small slabs of stone which exactly followed its shape. Other stones stood round it protecting it from pressure. There were limb-bones of the cave bear laid under its snout. We surely have here a cult-locality, a sanctuary, a holy place, a place for the sacrifice of animal skulls.<sup>9</sup>

How can we be sure? Interestingly, the exact same ritual has been re-enacted countless times in the modern era by primitive tribes inhabiting the desolate lands inside the Arctic Circle. It is customary for the nomadic Gilyaks of Siberia and the Ainu of Hokkaido to engage in a sacrificial “bear festival” wherein a captive bear is slaughtered and decapitated, its skull being preserved with some of its bones in a special area. Ethnologists who have investigated both these tribes since the 1880s report that their religious beliefs are predicated on the existence of an all-good, invisible Supreme Being.<sup>10</sup> Given the striking identity of the tangible ritual remains, the assumption that Neanderthal man also believed in a Supreme Being gains considerable credibility. The problem of identifying who are the primitive tribes in the modern world is a less contentious issue. Schmidt, for example, gives an interesting catalogue of traits (bodily decorations, lack of a stone tool industry, the way fire is produced, the simplicity of musical and pictorial arts, funeral customs and societal structure), all of which demonstrate the extreme primitiveness of the pygmy tribes vis-a-vis the Australian aborigines.<sup>11</sup> Disregarding those functionalist anthropologists to whom history is an inconsequential variable in studying human culture, all major schools of thought are in fairly good agreement as to which societies are the most primitive, and so, are the best guides to early man’s way of life. It should be emphasized, however, that today’s primitives are not assumed to be exact facsimiles of their ancestors. Much of their folklore, for instance, while being transmitted faithfully from generation to generation, has slowly been transformed. Thus, ancient knowledge may be corrupted by later accretions from neighboring tribes. The pre-Aryan primitives of Central India are a case in point: their myths are unquestionably of primeval origin, but an overlay of Hinduism, spurred in good part by their adoption of an Indo-Aryan tongue, has exercised a subtle transformation in various elements of their beliefs. So the study of surviving primitives is more likely to provide us with an echo, rather than a clear picture, of early man’s culture.

Another point bears mentioning as well. As twentieth century civilization has made further encroachments around the globe, the outposts of primitive peoples have correspondingly shrunk. Indeed anthropologists may be said to have discovered the importance of studying primitives just barely in time to salvage any knowledge of them. A great amount of fieldwork was carried out during the 1920s that would be impossible to replicate today, because many of the primitive tribes have since disappeared from the face of the earth due to a combination of disease, dispersion and intermarriage with other tribes. Typically, the most primitive races had occupied the fringes of the continents, slowly pushed thither by the pressure of advancing more civilized peoples. Their habitations were in places like Tierra del Fuego, the dense forests of Central Africa, the Philippines and Malaysia, the frozen reaches of Siberia, and the extreme southeast of Australia. Some, such as the Tasmanians, were completely exterminated before they could be studied.

It is interesting to note the prevailing ethical and social traits of these tribes. They are almost invariably monogamous, with marital fidelity being “rather the rule than the exception.” Their government might be described best as a gerontocracy, though due to their small size, no formal rule need exist. Social duties, especially of youth toward their elders, are highly developed, often through initiation rites. Property rights, admittedly less extensive for nomadic peoples, are recognized, and a developed gift trade (a precursor to barter) is regularly practiced.<sup>12</sup>

Before proceeding to an exposition of what the religious beliefs of the primitive peoples are, a criticism occasionally levelled against the evidence (or more precisely, against some of the evidence-gatherers) must be faced. Much, but by no means all, of the fieldwork among various primitives was undertaken by missionaries, especially priests of Schmidt’s order, the Society of the Divine Word. Might they not have tampered with the evidence to put monotheism in a favorable light for apologetic reasons? First of all, that possibility was not given very much credence by the major non-religious anthropologists (e.g., Robert Lowie and Alfred Kroeber) who recognized the scientific acumen and scrupulous interest in the truth exhibited by such famous priest-ethnologists as Paul Schebesta and Martin Gusinde. Secondly, as Wilhelm Koppers, another S.V.D. priest and professor of anthropology at the University of Vienna, stated in re-

sponse to such criticism:

Followers of other schools of thought, notably evolutionists, have, it is true, from time to time accused us of forcing the issue, of deducing original monotheism directly from the facts under discussion. We can only repudiate the misconception of scientific method which they attribute to us and deny that such was ever our intent. We take our stand on the following points: Christian revelation teaches that the first man had knowledge of one God. It is by no means necessary to establish the existence of monotheism among primitive races in order to prove the truth of revelation within the ambit of religious apologetics.<sup>13</sup>

He goes on to point out that it is possible, and has indeed been shown to have taken place among some South Sea islanders, that belief in one God has been lost in a primitive society. Ultimately it is the results, not the methodology, of their immense worldwide researches which have been so troubling to exponents of religious evolution.

There is also another problem peculiar to the delicate task of ascertaining religious beliefs, even in those cases where scientifically-trained ethnologists were able to establish that a primitive society was free from outside contamination. As Schmidt recognized it:

The very fact that these religions have never developed any further, and therefore have stood still, means that they have undergone that fossilization and loss of inner vitality which is inseparably connected with such a state of rest, and is especially fatal to anything so essentially spiritual as religion. For this reason alone, therefore, it is out of the question to expect now from these forms all the warmth and richness which belonged to the first beginnings of religion.<sup>14</sup>

One of the hallmarks of civilization is the use of fire. And yet in the twentieth century two tribes were known to exist, one the Bambuti pygmies of Central Africa and the other the Andaman Islanders in the Gulf of

Bengal, who did not know how to make a fire, though they could tend one. Yet E. H. Man, the most authoritative student of the Andamanese, reported that they believe their high deity, Puluga, to be invisible, and to be the judge of all men after they die. Furthermore, they believe:

2. He was never born and is immortal.
3. By him the world and all the objects, animate and inanimate, were created, excepting only the powers of evil.
4. He is regarded as omniscient, knowing even the thoughts of their hearts.
5. He is angered by the commission of certain sins, while to those in pain or distress he is pitiful, and sometimes deigns to afford relief.<sup>15</sup>

  
*“Christian revelation teaches that the first man had knowledge of one God. It is by no means necessary to establish the existence of monotheism among primitive races in order to prove the truth of revelation within the ambit of religious apologetics.”*  


Even allowing for the introduction of Western phraseology which might have somewhat colored the transcription of their beliefs, these primitives' God has little in common with the gods assigned to them by the evolutionary hypothesis. Granted many of the tribes cannot explain whence their beliefs arose: they have simply been handed on to them from of old. As Alexandre LeRoy, himself a close observer of African primitives

during a long missionary career, points out, their ideas are not codified, nor are they speculative thinkers:

The natives, for their own part, do not put the question to themselves. Evidently they have no idea of *ens a se* any more than they have of eternity or of distinct creation *ex nihilo*.<sup>16</sup>

If we look at the remnants of primitive tribes inhabiting Tierra del Fuego, a similar picture emerges. The Halakwulups, the most ancient among them, believe in a spiritual God who antedates all of the physical creation. This God, being all-good, is ever watchful of mankind, rewarding the good and punishing evildoers. Yet an element of distance also marks their religion, for they never pray to Him. The Selknam are more specific about God's attributes. He is called the One in Heaven and is the first creator and lawgiver.

After death the soul travels to heaven and remains there, in the abode where God dwells and to which his first man, K'enos, was summoned. Souls can never return to earth. Only the spirit of a sorcerer remains in this world, roving restlessly about until a new young shaman assimilates it into himself.<sup>17</sup>

This tribe also sets aside a small “first fruits” offering before eating, though aware that the One in Heaven does not need any physical nourishment.

The Yamana tribe were a most difficult people from whom to extract information about their beliefs. A Protestant missionary family long resident among them learned their language and customs but always assumed them to be irreligious. Only a 1921 visit by Fr. Koppers and Gusinde, during which they were initiated as members of the tribe, resulted in their being introduced to the natives' belief in Watauinaiwa, the Ancient One, whose attributes parallel the Selknam's God, and who is prayed to on all occasions, though not figuring prominently in their myths, which they had previously divulged. Koppers enumerates many of their prayers of petition and thanksgiving, as well as their laments and complaints in which Watauinaiwa is addressed. Any suggestions that this God could have derived from the Anglican missionaries' futile attempts to convert the tribe were vigorously denied by the natives, whose statements were corroborated by philological evidence in the prayers as well. Koppers sums up as follows:

The elements that must be taken into consideration are all in favour of the authenticity, the genuinely indigenous character of the belief in Watauinaiwa. There is really nothing against it except the dogmatism that has been fostered by naive theological evolutionism of the old-fashioned type.... For dogmatists of this school discoveries such as we made among the Yamana and other primitive peoples are, to say the least of it, disconcerting; they cannot be fitted into the system, into the “*a priori*” argument that has been raised to the dignity of a dogma.”<sup>18</sup>

If we turn our attention to the northern California tribes which by common consent represent the earliest strata of society on the North American continent, a noble conception of a High God again emerges, this time with a clear idea of a creation. Indeed what especially impressed Schmidt about their narratives is the “fact

that quite a number of them have reached the highest summit of the idea of creation, denied even to Aristotle, viz. the belief in *creatio ex nihilo*, only by the will of the all-powerful Creator.”<sup>19</sup>

They posit not only a Creator but also a First Ancestor, clearly subsidiary to the Creator, but who is responsible for directly instructing the rest of mankind. The Maidu tribe also speak of an adversary, the Coyote, who eventually entices mankind (though not the First Ancestor) away from the Creator. Some excerpts from their creation story follow:

In the beginning there was no sun, no moon, no stars. All was dark and everywhere there was only water. A raft came floating on the water. It came from the north, and in it were two persons [assistants to the Creator].... Then from the sky a rope of feathers was let down, and down the rope came World-Chief ... His face was covered and was never seen, but his body shone like the sun.

He is interrogated by the Turtle, his assistant, who is ordered to dive to the bottom of the waters and bring up some mud, from which the Creator fashions the world.

They came ashore and Turtle said: “Can't you make a light, so that I can see?” Then the Creator said: “Look that way to the east! I am going to tell my sister to come up!” Then it began to grow light, and day began to break; then the Herald began to shout loudly, and the sun came up.... After the sun went down, the Herald began to cry and shout again, and it grew very dark. World-Chief said: “I will tell my brother to come up.” Then the moon arose. Then the Creator asked Turtle and the Herald: “How do you like it?” and they both answered: “It is very good.”

The Creator goes on to form the stars and birds and trees and animals. And then: “He took dark red earth, mixed it with water, and made two figures, one a man and one a woman.” Eventually the Coyote brings evil and death into the world. Schmidt comments:

Coyote is a mysterious person. He came out of the ground while the Creator was about, but it is not mentioned whence he came. His dismal greatness is attested by the mysterious fact that, while no other could see the face of the Creator, it is said that he could see it. But he has no power whatever to do anything positive and good.<sup>20</sup>

Equally impressive is the creation story of the Lenape-Delaware Indians, an eastern branch of the Algonquin tribe, also regarded as being of ancient stock. It begins:

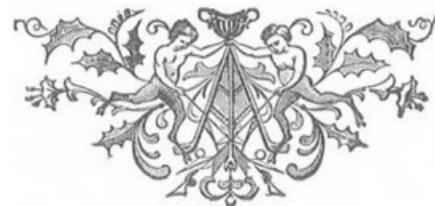
1. At first, in that place, in all times, above the earth,
2. On the earth was an extended fog, and there the Great Manitu was,
3. At first, for ever, lost in space, everywhere, the Great Manitu was,
4. He made the extended land and the sky.
5. He made the sun, the moon, the stars,
6. He made them all to move evenly.
7. Then the wind blew violently, and it cleared, and the water flowed off far and strong,
8. And groups of new islands grew and then remained:
9. Then spoke the Great Manitu, a manitu to manitus,
10. To beings, mortals, souls, and all,
11. And ever he was a manitu to men, and he was their grandfather.<sup>21</sup>

The chief investigator of this tribe, an American ethnologist named Frank Speck, went so far as to say that:

The worship of the Supreme Deity and the lesser deities in Delaware offers a noteworthy correspondence to holy adoration, in the Roman Church to *latría* [the cult given to God] and *dítília* [the cult given to the saints]. Were it not for the fact that the Delawares were never under the ministrations of Roman Catholic evangelists, it might seem that the Indians attempted an interpretation of the forms of Catholicism in their own terms, compromising with Christianity by refusing conversion and baptism but assimilating part of the doctrine.<sup>22</sup>

A number of ethnologists resisted the implications which followed from the mass of data being accumulated by Schmidt and his collaborators, who since 1906 had the scholarly journal *Anthropos* in which to air their findings. And in the meantime Schmidt himself was embarking on his opus magnum *On the Origin of the Idea of God*, a twelve volume monument to Germanic thoroughness which explored every piece of evidence bearing on primitive man's religious concepts. Chief among the critics were Robert Lowie, a German-American who was, by his own admission, not philosophically averse to the drift of the monotheist evidence; and Paul Radin, who cham-

pioned a theory of monotheism as a philosophy understood only by a priestly caste, not by a whole tribe. Radin's attacks were largely ad hominem. He berated Schmidt for pursuing an "essentially theological" program, and condescendingly called his scholarship "a contribution to Catholic dogmatics." And he twitted Martin Gusinde for obtaining his information on the Fuegian Selknam deity from a single source. (He failed, however, to address the case where numerous contacts made during an extensive field trip among the Yamana revealed a near identical belief in a Supreme Being.) Yet while Radin himself offered a list of the most primitive tribes in the world which was essentially identical with Schmidt's, he blithely proceeded to critically examine the beliefs of none of them.<sup>23</sup> Robert Lowie, writing in 1924, before the publication of the results of Paul Schebesta's field trips among the Central African and Malaysian pygmies, similarly gave only a cursory glance at the data concerning pygmy tribes and declared the effort of Schmidt to be too elusive to pronounce favorably on.<sup>24</sup> But of Lowie and others (and this would apply to Radin as well), Schmidt himself, who spoke favorably of Lowie's general scholarship, observed that they "laboured under the disadvantage that the detailed investigations upon which they based their methodological positions were all within the boundaries of North American ethnology."<sup>25</sup> Radin's hypothesis about different mentalities amongst tribesmen being able to assimilate different degrees of religious concepts is belied by the preponderance of data. While admitting that "men of outstanding religious gifts" might more deeply grasp monotheism, there is simply no reason to suppose that those of average mental endowments could not, and have not, also been believers.<sup>26</sup>



We have already seen instances in South and North American primitives of a lively consciousness of a Supreme Being. A brief look at another tribe, the Bhils of Central India, will round out the picture of worldwide adherence to monotheism discovered by Schmidt and his associates.

The Bhils are that tribe referred to earlier in this essay as having absorbed some overlays of Hinduism into their cosmogony. As Koppers notes, any "idea of a personal God creating the world out of nothing is one

that runs counter to almost every system evolved by the Hindu mentality.” And yet the Bhils have just such a creation story, a good indicator of its ancient origin. It starts with the deity, Bhagwan, being alone. Then he created various lesser deities.

But then there came the Evil Spirit asking: “What work are you doing for Bhagwan?” Then the gods replied: “We hold aloft Bhagwan’s light.” Then the Evil Spirit asked them further questions about the reward they received. The gods replied: “Bhagwan gives us a reward.” Then the Evil Spirit asked: “What happiness is there in Bhagwan’s house?” And the gods, considering a while, replied: “There is everlasting bliss.”

But the Evil Spirit persists in tempting the gods to do no work so that they will be like Bhagwan, who “has no need to work.” And Bhagwan, angered, casts them down to the earth, but being alone again, decides to create man. He admonishes man, however, to act properly and he will be rewarded. Otherwise he will meet the same fate as the disobedient gods, for “Bhagwan alone is your Lord and no other.”<sup>27</sup>

When pressed as to the means by which the world was created, the tribesmen professed ignorance, only asserting that it was Bhagwan’s will which caused it to happen.

The similarity between creation stories culled from tribes far removed from each other, with the account of creation as given in Scripture is well-nigh remarkable. It is worth pausing at this juncture to ponder the likelihood of this being due to chance. First of all, it should be emphasized that most higher cultures, e.g., the Egyptians, Babylonians and Hindus, have much more elaborate, and indeed bizarre, accounts of the organization of the world. (One hesitates to use the term creation, since strictly speaking the concept is alien to their mythologies.) Also, no one seriously suggests the contamination of an original deposit of mythology by contact with Christianity. Could the stories remain as eloquent reminders of an original common store of knowledge before the human diaspora over the face of the earth? Or is it more likely that coincidence, or the inherent logic of the human mind, could produce the same explanations in each primitive tribe? Most anthropologists tend to accept diffusion of technology rather than simultaneous invention, as a likely explanation for the appearance of similar objects in different locations. Presumably the

same should hold for myths as well.

Interestingly even some distinguished Catholic scholars in the English-speaking world viewed the evidence with a skeptical (one might even say an uncomprehending) eye, especially the tie-in between primitive and primeval societies. Rev. John M. Cooper of Catholic University of America, a very influential anthropologist, claimed in 1929 that “at the remotest period back to which we can reach, magic, manism, animism, and theism were already well established in the culture of the race.”<sup>28</sup> He regarded any theory assuming a degeneration from an original monotheism to a series of baser religious beliefs as unsupportable. And Christopher Dawson, in a work first published in 1928, while devoting a chapter to the religious ideas prevalent among hunting peoples, nowhere alludes to the monotheist beliefs of surviving primitives, implying either unfamiliarity with the phenomenon or a presumption that it is irrelevant to his account.<sup>29</sup> Even more surprising is the omission of any reference to the data on their beliefs in his 1947 Gifford Lectures.<sup>30</sup> Finally, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, probably the most distinguished of all English-speaking Catholic anthropologists, professed his skepticism of the demonstration of the historical priority of monotheism, but in his lectures on the main lines of thought on early religions, he dispenses with a critique of Schmidt:

Because, although Schmidt, a man of forceful personality as well as of great learning, built up for himself a school in Vienna, this school has disintegrated since his death; and I doubt whether today there are many who would defend his chronological reconstructions, which were another attempt to discover the origin of religion where in the circumstances science does not provide us with the means of ascertaining it.<sup>31</sup>

Undoubtedly some of Evans-Pritchard’s scruples about Schmidt’s thesis arise from the fact that not all primitive tribes hold beliefs which are easily identifiable as monotheistic, as the following example illustrates.

The Semang pygmies were studied exhaustively by Paul Schebesta in the 1920s. Schebesta was, as previously noted, a member of the Divine Word missionary order, but it is instructive to hear how his research was characterized some fifty years after his field work, given the reflexive denigration so often encountered in the modern literature of their contributions to the discipline of ethnology. In his introduction to Schebesta’s first account

of his stay among the Malaysian pygmy tribes, Geoffrey Benjamin notes that:

His undoubted skill as an anthropological field-worker (biological and socio-cultural) led him to portray each of the cultures he studied in an admirably objective manner... Schebesta's accounts of Negrito religion are among the best things in the work.<sup>32</sup>

In examining those accounts, one finds that these tribes, too, recognized a Supreme Being, a God of thunder who has made everything and who demands a blood sacrifice of men to atone for their sins (the sacrifice involves making a small incision in the leg and offering the spilled blood to the Supreme Being, whose name and attributes vary somewhat from one local tribe to the next). Admittedly the Semang God is often provided with a household complete with wife and children and other relatives. But even these people have creation stories involving a single, all-powerful deity who fashioned all men and animals. Yet when questioned as to his identity, different tribesmen gave partially conflicting answers, some suggesting that deity's son (or brother) as the Creator, while the highest God was inactive. Nevertheless this evidence was duly incorporated in Schmidt's analysis, with its individual anomalies intact. It is more impressive then that a strong critic of much of Schmidt's ideas on reconstructing the historical stages in cultural development could say that:

The fact that many of the most primitive tribes of hunters and food-gatherers believe in some kind of high deity has been confirmed by subsequent research and can hardly be doubted. The same applies to many of Schmidt's conclusions concerning the moral standards and social behavior of primitive tribes.<sup>33</sup>

Obviously no matter what the preponderance of monotheism among primitive tribes in the world today, no absolute proof about primeval man's religious beliefs can be constructed. But we are at the threshold of a pointer to the existence of God, an anthropological argument based on the remarkable imprint He has left on the minds of the most isolated peoples on the face of the earth. Is it likely that so many primitive peoples would independently bypass the allurements of animism and the

appeal of magic to develop the notion of a High God, a Supreme Being, a Creator of all? Ernest Brandewie, the most recent commentator on the work of Schmidt, attempts to argue that it is likely, indeed should be expected that man's powers of reason should lead him everywhere to monotheism.<sup>34</sup> But Koppers had thirty years previously already countered that argument.

If a grasp of the relation between cause and effect is really so decisive a factor in arriving at the knowledge of God, why does it often fail lamentably in

both individuals and nations with a highly developed intellectual life? We need only think of the individual Indo-Aryan peoples: the Romans, Greeks, Teutons, Indians, etc., or the fate of theism among the highly civilized Semites and Hamites, the Chinese and the Japanese.

Generally speaking, the perception of the essential points shows a tendency to grow increasingly dimmer.<sup>35</sup>

And further:

Is it not highly improbable that the least developed and mentally most primitive human beings should by the unaided light of their own intelligence have been able to recognize and even to a certain extent to define, the purpose of man's existence and that of the world surrounding him? We may well doubt it. We must even do so, when we consider how comparatively uniform as regards fundamentals is the religion of all these primitive peoples.<sup>36</sup>

Could it rather be that we are facing an echo, analogous to that echo of radiation discovered by astronomers which pointed to a primordial explosion of the universe, except that this conscious echo points to the revelation of God Himself to his first human creatures? In order for the echo to survive the countless opportuni-



*The Greek gods Artemis and Apollo*

es for tergiversation which time proffered our human ancestors:

something tremendous must have presented itself to them, an experience which gripped and shook their whole being to its inmost depths, and which in its overwhelming power immediately caused that unity and solidarity in their religion.

This something cannot have been a merely subjective process within man himself; for it would have produced neither the power and the coherent solidarity of that religion as a whole, nor the clarity and stability of its beliefs and forms of worship. Neither can it have been a purely impersonal, uncommon experience; else it would be even more inexplicable how from these purely impersonal entities such effects of power, stability, and clarity could have been exerted upon the personalities of these people.

No; it must have been a tremendous, mighty personality that presented itself to them: capable of captivating their intellect with luminous truths, of binding their will by high and noble moral commands, and of winning their hearts through ravishing beauty and goodness.<sup>37</sup>

That God did indeed reveal himself to our first parents is part of Sacred Scripture; how He did so is not spelled out so clearly.<sup>38</sup> And whatever their rational natures would have led them to deduce about morality and God's existence and creative act, those deductions would have been more emphatically engrained in them by that Self-revelation.

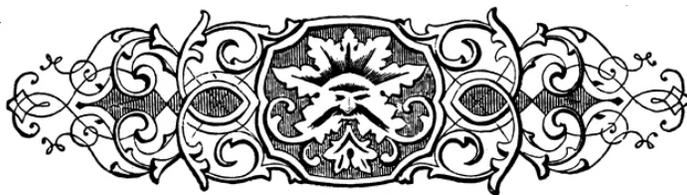
As generation succeeded generation, and the content of the revelation was passed on by oral tradition, it could not help but be garbled. Tribes multiplied, and so did habitats. Some branches of humanity even died out against a backdrop of major climatic changes over the globe. But the echo, growing dimmer over time, has continued to reverberate, and remained long enough an element in one portion of mankind's heritage to be

recognized by representatives of another people, the Judaeo-Christian, who were privileged to be granted further revelations over time.

Finally one must ask, why has this intriguing indicator of God's existence been so underappreciated in the past few decades? And why is it no longer a staple of Christian apologetics, as it once was? For one, no one can deny that Schmidt's reputation has experienced a decline since his death in 1954, and the death of his collaborators in the next decade or so. Paul Leser, himself a student of Fritz Graebner, enumerates some reasons for that unfortunate fact, particularly the interdisciplinary nature of his research, which pre-empted most narrowly trained scholars from following Schmidt down his various avenues of inquiry, as well as his writing in German (though many of his works were, in fact, translated into English).<sup>39</sup> And sadly, with their passing, they can no longer fend off the caricaturizations of their immense scholarship which serve to salve the consciences of too many scientists who remain queasy before a cultural anthropological question with such a weighty conclusion looming in its apparent answer.

Even more sadly must one acknowledge the fastidiousness with which professed Christians flee from the concreteness of the God Who emerges from Schmidt's evidence. To the primitives, He is no mere mental construct but an ever-present, all-providing Father, and hence a contradiction of the import of too much contemporary theologizing.

Whatever the reasons may have been in the recent past, it would seem that the time has come to re-evaluate the significance of primitive man's belief in a Supreme Being, and for students of human origins and comparative religion to sift anew through the painstakingly gathered data that Wilhelm Schmidt had the insight to proclaim was a pointer to the existence of a loving God, the Creator and sustainer of all mankind.



## NOTES

1For an erudite critique of the suppositions of these and other theorists, see E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford, 1965).

2Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, tr. Joseph Swain (George Allen & Unwin, 1964, 5th ed.), p. 206.

3E. B. Tylor, *Religion in Primitive Culture*, Part II or “Primitive Culture” (Harper Torchbooks, 1958), pp. 442-443.

4Andrew Lang, *The Making of Religion* (AMS Press, reprint of 1898 ed.), p. 220.

5Ibid., p. 224.

6Ibid., p. 225.

7E. O. James, *The Beginnings of Religion* (Hutchinson’s University Library, n.d.).

8Wilhelm Schmidt, *The Culture Historical Method of Ethnology*, tr. S. A. Sieber (Fortuny’s, 1939), p. 13.

9Herbert Kohn, “The Problem of Primitive Monotheism,” in C. Hastings and D. Nicholl, eds., Selection II (Sheed & Ward, 1954), pp. 67-68.

10A discussion of ancient and modern bear ceremonials is given in Ivar Lissner, *Man, God and Magic*, tr. J. Maxwell Brownjohn (Putnam’s, 1961), pp. 120-194.

11See Ernest Brandewie, Wilhelm Schmidt and the Origin of the Idea of God (University Press of America, 1983), pp. 202-204.

12For a complete analysis of primitive social forms, see Sylvester Sieber and Franz Mueller, *The Social Life of Primitive Man* (Herder, 1941), especially pp. 21-103, and Eva Ross, *Social Origins* (Sheed & Ward, 1936).

13Wilhelm Koppers, *Primitive Man and His World Picture* (Sheed & Ward, 1952), p. 177.

14Wilhelm Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion*, tr. H. J. Rose (Cooper Square, 1972 reprint of 1931 ed.), p. 255.

15Quoted in Alexandre LeRoy, *The Religion of the Primitives* (Macmillan, 1922), p. 252.

16Ibid., p. 127.

17Lissner, op. cit., pp. 118-119.

18Koppers, op. cit., pp. 147-165; quote on p. 164.

19Wilhelm Schmidt, *High Gods in North America* (Oxford, 1933), p. 19.

20Ibid., pp. 34-39.

21Ibid., p. 74.

22Ibid., p. 78.

23Paul Radin, *Primitive Religion: Its Nature and Origin* (Hamish Hamilton, 1938), pp. 254-267.

24Robert Lowie, *Primitive Religion* (Boni and Liveright, 1924), pp. 124-133.

25Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion*, op. cit., p. 228.

26Typical of modern derivative treatments of the subject is Guy Swanson, *The Birth of the Gods* (Ann Arbor, 1962, 2nd ed.). Schmidt is misidentified as “an Austrian Jesuit,” and, using a veritable grab-bag approach to cursorily examining primitive societies, the author assumes “with most professional anthropologists, that existing evidence does not support Fr. Schmidt.” Interestingly, in his preface, Swanson cites Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms* as “part of the foundation on which I have built.”

27Koppers, op. cit., pp. 75-94.

28John Cooper, “Primitive Religion,” Ch. XIII in Albert Muntz, *Cultural Anthropology* (Bruce, 1934), p. 284.

29Christopher Dawson, *The Age of the Gods* (Howard Fertig, 1970 reprint of 1928 ed.), pp. 21-41.

30Published in book form as *Religion and Culture* (Meridian, 1958), pp. 40-42. Dawson’s anthropological interests seem to have been largely restricted to the great Americanists such as Boas, Kroeber, Lowie and Wissler. See John Mulloy, “Christopher Dawson and the American Anthropologists, Part I” in *The Dawson Newsletter*, Vol. IV, No. 2, Summer 1985, pp. 10-12.

31Evans-Pritchard, op. cit., p. 104.

32 Introduction to Paul Schebesta, *Among the Forest Dwarfs of Malaya* (Oxford, 1973). Information on the Semang religion is from the text.

33Robert Heine-Geldern, “One Hundred Years of Ethnological Theory in the German-Speaking Countries,”

*Current Anthropology*, Vol. 5, No. 5, Dec. 1964, p. 413.

34Brandewie, op. cit., p. 77.

35Koppers, op. cit., p. 182.

36Ibid., p. 183.

37Wilhelm Schmidt, *Primitive Revelation*, tr. Joseph Baierl (Herder, 1939), pp. 182-183.

38Ibid., p. 188. See also Otto Karrer, *Religions of Mankind*, tr. E. I. Watkin (Sheed & Ward, 1936), pp. 138-139.

39Preface to Brandewie, op. cit., p. v.

