

ELEVENTH EDITION

A History of the World's
Religions



DAVID S. NOSS

A HISTORY OF THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS

Eleventh Edition

David S. Noss

HEIDELBERG COLLEGE



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Dedication

The study of world religions needs to encompass the immediate and the existential as well as the rational—the empathic as well as the analytical. Serving as the editor of John's book has been on the one hand a challenge to emend each inaccuracy and enhance each strength, and on the other a profound experience of what it is like to look out on the world through the eyes of a wise person.



To John

Many carrel hours have I
Shadowed your judgments,
Rehearsed your tales,
Peered out beneath your brows
Upon neolithic skulls.

Watched the Mura-Mura
Cherish ancestral bones
Whirling the churinga
In echoing caves.
Felt your empathy for
Sikh and Jew and Muslim.

Then penciled out—with pain—
Genial judgments of the
Ardent Anglophile,
The irenic summarizer,
And the kindly euphemist.

Tried with gentleness
To re-skein convoluted thoughts,
To prune elegant perorations
Of toilsome length.

Humbled
through it all
By the vast scope,
The tough thoroughness,
And the generous spirit
You poured out
Upon these pages.

PREFACE

Just as the Nazi Holocaust incinerated naive assumptions about human nature and historical progress, so the flaming collapse of the World Trade Center in 2001 shattered assumptions about status quo, religion, and peace.

Those of us who inquire into the history of the world's religions soon become aware that from the perspective of some of the religions the study of history is bound to be fruitless. Religions are about “what matters most” and to some that means transcending the temporal and in effect abandoning the search for meaning in the historical scene. Picking up a book like this may signify a desire to confirm that view, but it is more likely to signify a kind of bias, an underlying hope that the transcendent/immanent may indeed manifest itself in historical events—that the study of any religion should include its historical influence in social/political arenas as, for example, ethical policy in regard to the earth's resources and the degree to which all of humankind is in its purview. Given our biases, our best course is to try to present the views of others fairly. Will knowledgeable believers find our characterizations accurate?

My elder brother, John B. Noss, spent ten years preparing the first (1949) edition of this book. At that time he found that most publications in the field tended to focus on the biographies of the founders and then jumped to comparing and evaluating the religions' contemporary practices. His preface to the first edition spoke of two special needs to be met: the first was to include “descriptive and interpretative details from the *original source materials*” and second “*to bridge the interval between the founding of religions and their present state*” (italics mine).

Those who have used successive editions will recognize an increasing attentiveness to those needs. Primary source materials are not spliced in as undigested chunks but carefully embedded in interpretative commentary. Now color-highlighted, and sometimes further emphasized in color-framed quotations, the sources gain even more of the prominence they deserve. Illustrations have come to play a larger part: in addition to classic art and architecture, there are now depictions of ceremonial realia and explanations of ritual practices. Extended teaching captions go beyond the perfunctory identifications of the subjects.

Resisting trends toward the abbreviating and “dumbing down” of college textbooks to accommodate diminished reading skills, this edition maintains a standard of thoroughness. Instead of abridgement, it offers enhancements: highlighted terms keyed to chapter-end glossaries, reinforcement of key ideas in color-framed quotations, line drawings to relieve solid columns of text, and the inclusion of some novels and light reading suggestions in the bibliography.

Many teachers find a kind of liberation in putting a thorough text in the hands of students. This ensures a ready and reliable reference, relieves the pressure on the instructor to “cover” everything in lectures, and frees up the class time for questions and discussions on topics of immediate interest.

The author is grateful for editorial assistance and expertise in ancient intellectual history generously contributed by David J. Noss of Washington, D.C. Special thanks are also due to Ross Miller, Carla Worner, and Louise Rothman of Prentice Hall and to Lee Shenkman and Janet Stone of Victory Productions.

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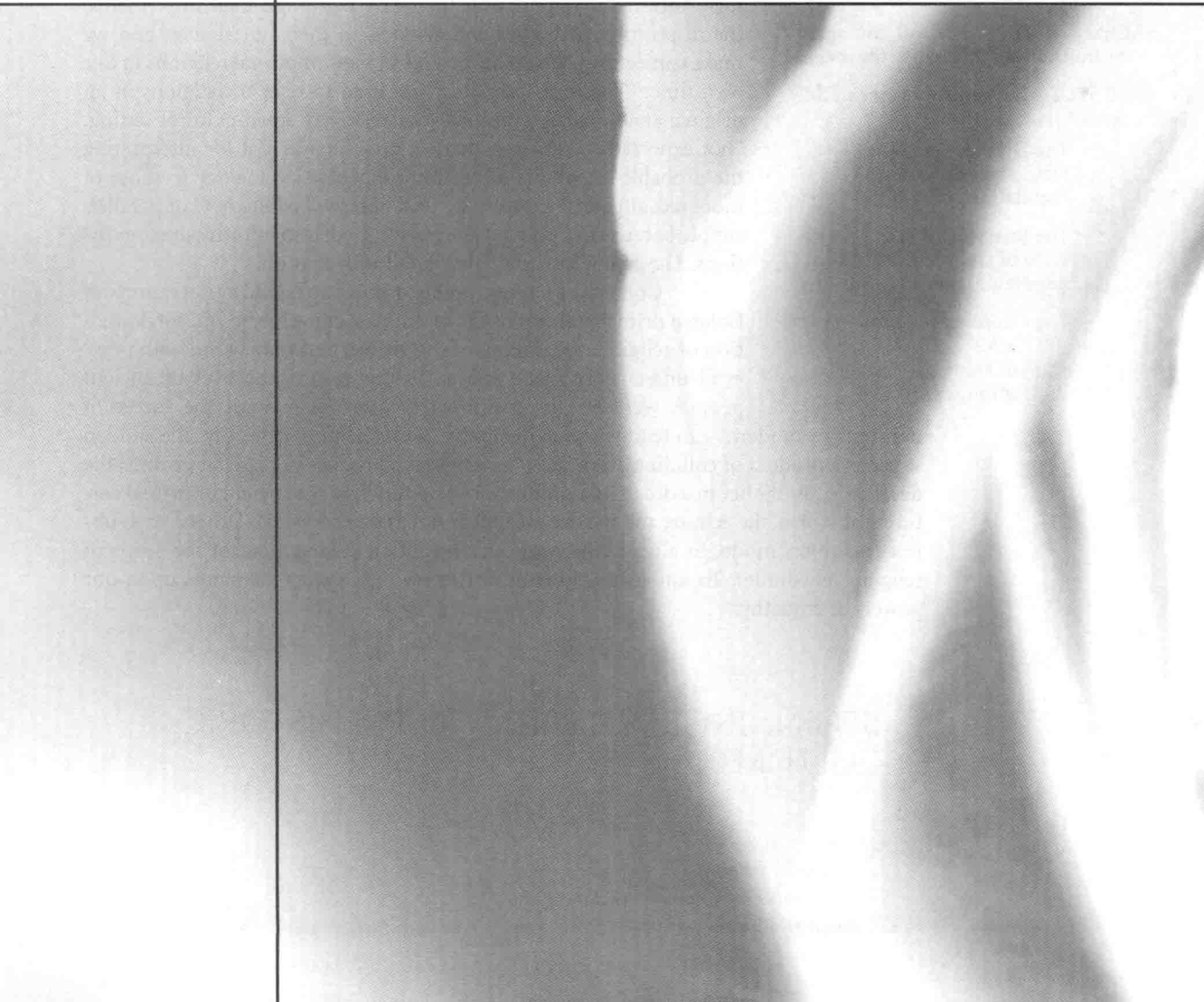
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Part 1

SOME PRIMAL AND BYGONE RELIGIONS



Religion in Prehistoric and Primal Cultures

FACTS IN BRIEF

WORLDWIDE POPULATION IN PRIMAL CULTURES: *ca. 94 million*

SACRED TRADITION: *Oral, pictorial, or transmitted through artifacts*

CASE STUDIES: *Primal cultures of the recent past:*

The Dieri of Australia
Date of study, *ca. 1865*
Population, *ca. 10,000*

The BaVenda of South Africa
Date of study, *ca. 1920*
Population, *ca. 150,000*

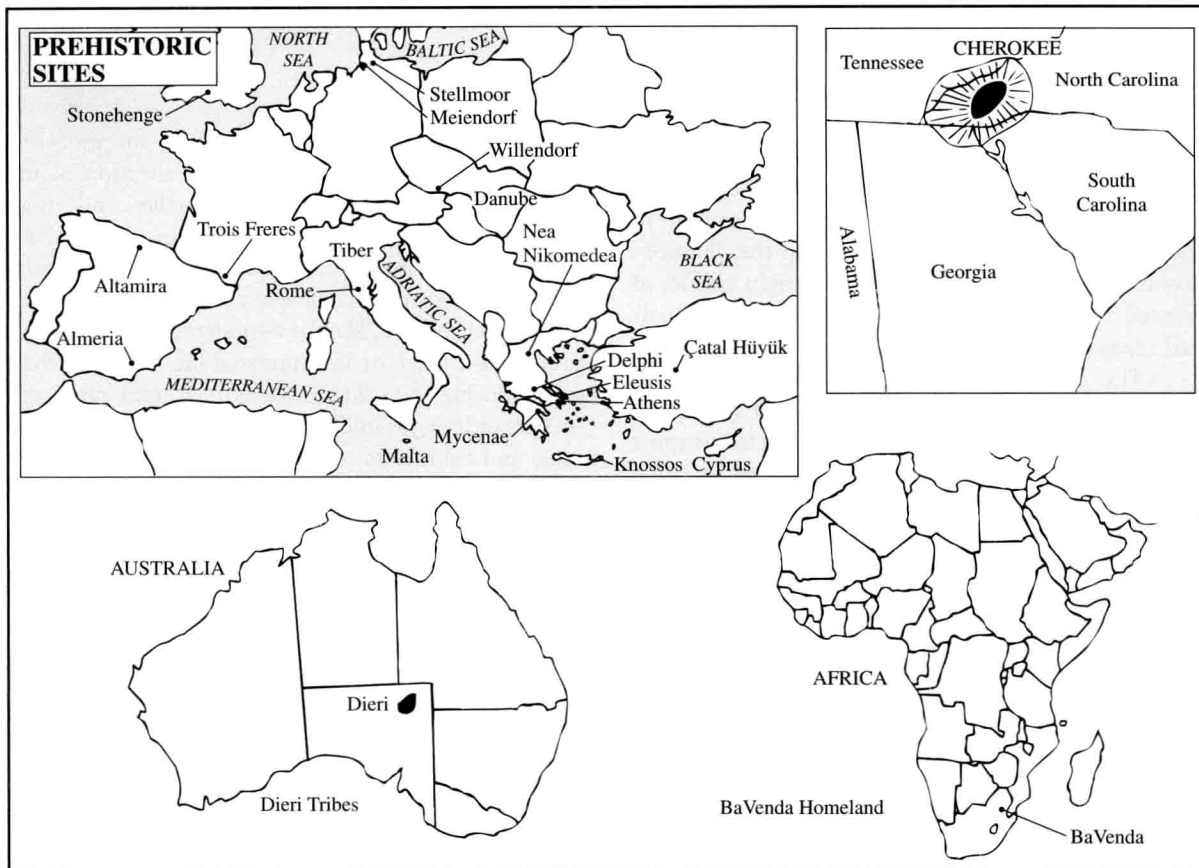
The Cherokees of Southeastern U.S.A.
Date of study, *ca. 1825*
Population, *ca. 18,000*

None of us can hope to see the world through the eyes of our prehistoric ancestors. We pore over their cave paintings, their implements, the disposition of bodies and artifacts in their burial sites, and we make conjectures. We do have a clearer view of primal religions in our own time. (The term *primal* is here used to refer to religions in an original state, that is, confined to a relatively small cultural setting, “not exported.”) Although there is no clear warrant for interpreting the probable intentions of prehistoric people by analogy to those of more recent primal cultures, we find ourselves taking note of parallels simply because there are no alternative models to inform our suppositions. The analogies should be viewed with caution.

Conjectures about prehistoric cultures and observations of isolated primal cultures in the recent past converge on one vital function of religion: the linking of the visible, everyday world with powerful unseen forces and spirits. In this regard, the lives of ancient peoples were far more intimately interwoven with the forces of nature than moderns can readily conceptualize. It is our habit to objectify: the sudden storm is a product of colliding air masses; an eclipse is a product of planetary orbits; the deceased grandfather in a dream is a product of brain function. In ancient or primal cultures the storm, the eclipse, and the dream appear not as objects but as “others” in a subject-to-subject mode. In a profound sense this meant an enlargement of the scope of religious encounter. To understand such a worldview puts special demands upon our powers of empathy.

I. BEGINNINGS: RELIGION IN PREHISTORIC CULTURES

*O ancient cousin,
O Neanderthaler!
What shapes beguiled, what shadows fled across
Your early mind?*



Prehistoric and Primal Sites

*Here are your bones,
And hollow crumbled skull,
And here your shapen flints—the last inert
Mute witnesses to so long vanished strength.*

*What loves had you,
What words to speak,
What worships,
Cousin?*

—J.B. Noss

If we could find answers to these questions, they might help us determine when and how religion began. If the attribution “religious” requires evidence of regularized practices apparently aimed at making sense of the world and controlling nonhuman forces, then the Neanderthals may have been the first to be identifiably

religious. Perhaps they were not, but their immediate predecessors (*Homo habilis*, *erectus*, and *heidelbergensis*)—though they left us shaped stone tools, weapons, fire pits, and collections of human skulls—did not leave us a comparable amount of evidence.

The Old Stone Age: Neanderthals

The Neanderthal people, who flourished from 230,000 down to 30,000 years ago over an area stretching from southern Spain across Europe to Hungary and Israel, are regarded today as probably a separate species, replaced by *Homo sapiens* rather than blending into it. Nevertheless, their graves furnish the earliest clear evidence of religious practice in the Old Stone Age.

Some of the dead were given careful burial. Alongside the bodies, which were usually in a crouch-

ing position, there were food offerings (of which broken bones remain) and flint implements—hand axes, awls, and chipped scrapers. It is generally assumed that such objects were left to serve the dead in an afterlife. Other grave offerings were less utilitarian and more purely expressive: a body in the Shanidar cave in Iraq was covered with at least eight species of flowers! There also are signs of other forms of ritualized veneration.

The Neanderthals apparently treated the cave bear with special reverence. They hunted it at great peril to themselves and seem to have respected its spirit even after it was dead. They appear to have set aside certain cave bear skulls, without removing the brains—a great delicacy—and also certain long (or marrow) bones, and to have placed them with special care in their caves on elevated slabs of stone, on shelves, or in niches, probably in order to make them the center of some kind of ritual. Whether their bear cult, if it was such, was a propitiation of the bear spirit during a ritual feast, a form of hunting magic to ensure the success of the next hunt, or a sacrifice or votive offering to some divinity having to do with the interrelations of human and bear is a matter of conjecture.

Another subject of debate is the Neanderthal treatment of human skulls. Some of the skulls are found, singly or in series, without the accompaniment of the other bones of the body, each decapitated and opened at the base in such a way as to suggest that the brains were extracted and eaten. The evidence is inconclusive about whether the emptied skulls were placed in a ritual position for memorial rites or whether the Neanderthal people were headhunters who ate the brains in some sacramental way of sacrificial victims, the newly dead, or enemies to acquire the soul force in them. The fact that not all bodies were buried intact and that large bones of the human body were often split open to the marrow suggests that human cadavers were a source of food, whether or not they were sometimes consumed in a ritual fashion.

When we come to the later and higher culture levels of the Old Stone Age, beginning 30,000 years ago—to the period of the so-called Cro-Magnon people of Europe and their African and Asian peers—we are left in less doubt about the precise nature of Old Stone Age religious conviction and practice.

The Cro-Magnons

The Cro-Magnons were members of the species *Homo sapiens*, more fully developed in the direction of the species today and even somewhat taller and more rugged than the modern norm. They came into a milder climate than that which had made so hazardous the existence of the Neanderthal people whom they replaced. In the warmer months, like the Neanderthals before them, they lived a more or less nomadic life following their game; during the colder seasons they used caves and shelters or lean-tos under cliffs. They lived by gathering roots and wild fruits and by hunting, their larger prey being bison, aurochs, an occasional mammoth, and especially the reindeer and the wild horse. Evidence of the Neanderthals' hunting prowess has been found at their open-air camp, discovered at Solutré in south central France, where archaeologists have unearthed the bones of 100,000 horses, along with reindeer, mammoths, and bison—the remains of centuries of feasting. The Cro-Magnons never tamed and domesticated the horse, but they found it good eating. The horse, bearded and small, moved in large herds, was highly vulnerable to attack, and was not dangerous.

In a somewhat similar fashion as the Neanderthals, the Cro-Magnons buried their dead, choosing the same types of burial sites, not unnaturally, at the mouths of their grottos or near their shelters; they surrounded the body, which was usually placed under a protective stone slab, with ornaments such as shell bracelets and hair circlets, and with stone tools, weapons, and food. Because some of the bones found at the grave sites were charred, it is possible—but it is conjecture—that the survivors returned to the grave to feast with the dead during a supportive communal meal. Of great interest is the fact that they practiced the custom of painting or pouring red coloring matter (red ochre) on the body at burial, or at a later time on the bones during a second burial.

CAVE PAINTING: MAGIC FOR THE HUNT

Constantly surrounded as we are by casually produced pictures of every sort, it is difficult for us to comprehend the power that created images must have had for our prehistoric ancestors. Those paintings and engravings that survive were not casually produced. They



The Shaman

Les Trois Freres

(Courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History.)

required an investment of effort that could only have come from a strong sense of purpose.

Caves in the Franco Cantabrian region preserve marvels of Cro-Magnon art (40,000–10,000 B.C.E.). Paintings, clay figurines, and engravings on bone depict human figures, fertility symbols, and especially animals of the hunt: bison, reindeer, bears, and mammoths.

Many of the engravings and paintings were executed on the walls of gloomy caves by the light from torches or shallow soapstone lamps fed with fat. So far from the cave's mouth and in such nearly inaccessible places did the artists usually do their work that they could hardly have intended an everyday display of their murals. What then did they have in mind?

The answer that seems the most consistent with all the facts is that the practices of the Cro-Magnons included, to begin with, a religio-aesthetic impulse, the celebration of a sense of kinship and interaction between animal and human spirits, which Rachel Levy

calls “a participation in the splendour of the beasts which was of the nature of religion itself.”^{A*} But there seem to have been magico-religious purposes as well— attempts to control events. That there were specialists among them who were magicians (or even priests) seems beyond doubt. A vivid mural in the cavern of Les Trois Frères shows a masked man, with a long beard and human feet, who is arrayed in reindeer antlers, the ears of a stag, the paws of a bear, and the tail of a horse, and probably represents a well-known figure in primal communities, the *shaman*.^{**} a person who is especially attuned to the spirit world and called upon to deal with it on behalf of others. Whether or not the shamans were the actual artists, they probably led in ceremonies that made magical use of the paintings and clay figures. Just as in primal cultures of today it is believed that an image or a picture can be a magical substitute for the object of which it is the representation, so the Cro-Magnons may have felt that creating an image of an animal subjected it to the image maker's power. The magical use made of the realistic murals and plastic works of the Paleolithic era is suggested in several clear examples. In the cavern of Montespan there is a clay figure of a bear whose body is covered with representations of dart thrusts. Similarly, in the cavern of Niaux, an engraved and painted bison is marked with rudely painted outlines of spears and darts, mutely indicating the climax of some primeval hunt; evidently the excited Cro-Magnon hunters (gathering before the hunt?) ceremonially anticipated and ensured their success by having their leaders (shamans or priests?) paint representations of their hunting weapons upon the body of their intended quarry, so vividly pictured on the cave's wall.

THE FECUND GODDESS-MOTHER

Another motif quite different from magic for the hunt appears in Upper Paleolithic paintings and carvings.

*In this book the sources of all quotations are designated by a small capital letter, followed by a number if a book is quoted from more than once. Books quoted from are listed in the section “References for Quotations” and are designated by capital letters. This device is adopted for the convenience of readers and to save space.

**Terms appearing in the glossary at the end of each chapter are highlighted as they first appear in the text.