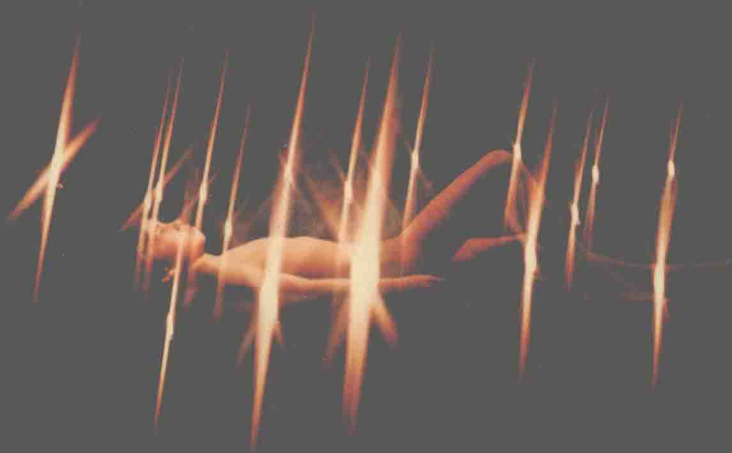


THE RELIGION

A NOVEL BY
NICHOLAS CONDÉ



THE
RELIGION
NICHOLAS CONDÉ



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FOR CONSTANCE JANIS
*the only person to whom this
could possibly be dedicated*

We moderns are now living in the age of chaos. Our understanding of myth is quite degenerate, but the revelations of the new age of gods have already begun. . . .

The scientist is like an explorer climbing a mountain: giddy from the heights and thin atmosphere, he feels a premature elation and thinks that he can reach out and grab the stars. And then he climbs to the top and sees that even higher peaks await him in the distance and that the stars are so far beyond his grasp that they will never become light under the nails of his Heaven-scraping fingers.

WILLIAM IRWIN THOMPSON
*The Time Falling Bodies
Take to Light: Mythology,
Sexuality, and the Origins of Culture*

BOOK ONE

Yaguo

(The Initiate)

Chapter 1

“LOOK, DADDY,” Chris Jamison said as he ran up holding out his open palm. “An arrowhead!”

Cal Jamison leaned over and looked at the object lying in the hand of his seven-year-old son. It was just an ordinary stone, burnished and worn to a vaguely triangular shape by the weather. You could find a million of them in Central Park. But Cal saw his son’s eyes sparkling with excitement, and nodded approval.

“The Mohawks came through New York on their way north,” Cal said. “And the Senecas.”

“Lucky, huh?” Chris said. “I found it right off.”

Chris plopped the stone into a paper bag he had saved from his Good Humor, then ran away to scour more of the dusty ground bordering the footpath.

Let him believe, Cal thought. The flash of enthusiasm Chris had shown at the discovery of his “arrowhead” was all too rare these days. More often the boy sat silently, morose and given to long listless spells of staring out windows or even at walls.

Had the move to New York been a mistake?

For the hundredth time since they’d arrived twelve days ago, Cal asked himself the question. Although the change of scene alone could hardly be blamed for the boy’s moodiness, no doubt the adjustment was difficult. Chris had been more comfortable with the easygoing rhythms of life in New Mexico. At five he had started horseback riding, had sat in the saddle like a natural. And he had loved the camping trips to the mesas and deserts outside Taos, avidly hunting for *real* Indian artifacts. Chris could roam

there, explore, have some free rein—not like in the city, where you hardly dared let a kid out of your sight for a second.

Cal glanced off to the side of the asphalt path to assure himself that his son was safely in view. There he was, kneeling under a bush, depositing another pebble in his bag. The sun had caught his face in relief, and with his light brown hair hanging straight over his forehead he looked so much like Laurie. Too much. The resemblance was almost physically painful to see—the same fair skin, the lanky too-thin build, and, more than anything, the eyes, the big wide green eyes.

Cal almost called to him, but Chris was involved in what he was doing. Well, at least this part of the day was working out.

Earlier they had gone to the zoo. Cal had thought it would make an ideal outing, a chance to show Chris the bright side of moving to a new home—give him some relief from the upheaval and the thousand-and-one chores. But Chris had reacted badly to seeing the animals. He had become sullen and withdrawn, rebuffing Cal's every attempt to cheer him with a balloon or pony ride or a box of Cracker Jacks.

Then, in front of a cage occupied by two Asian water buffalo, Chris had looked up misty-eyed at his father and uttered a single word:

“Remember?”

“Remember what, Bean?”

“You know,” Chris had said, turning away.

And then Cal was struck by a long overdue awareness: the monkeys and buffalo and all the other exotic animals were reminding Chris of *her*—of past summers when they would all go together on field trips to Burma or Ceylon or the Philippines, and, while Cal gathered his data, Laurie and Chris would see the magical sights together.

Yes, he remembered. All of it. Visions of Laurie laughing when an old Magaluk tribesman showed her the tiny monkey he had trained to play dice. The frosted chocolate birthday cake she had made for Bibo, their translator in Burma, with ingredients scrounged from God-knows-where. And the way she was always befriending wonderful old characters in the markets and bazaars and the lobbies of hotels that had seen their last glory in the days of Empire. It was in fact a leftover colonial, a not-so-Great White Hunter named Eccles, who had provided the genesis for Chris's nickname. Eccles had been in the habit of calling everyone in his immediate vicinity “old bean.” When he had applied the sobriquet

to Chris, then only four years old, Laurie had told the Englishman he was going too far—a child of four could hardly be called “old” anything. Henceforth, she had insisted with mock outrage, Chris would have to be called simply “Bean.” And the name had stuck.

Cal had stopped using it for awhile after his wife’s death, until one day Chris complained that he missed it. Another way of saying he missed her, of course. The name was a piece of her, too, a piece that Chris did not have to surrender for burial. So its use was revived. In memoriam.

“I remember, Bean,” Cal said quietly as they stood watching the water buffalo.

They left the zoo immediately afterwards and began rambling through the rest of the park.



Six months ago Cal Jamison had been professor of anthropology at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. With five years in the position behind him, and a growing reputation as an authority on Asian and Pacific cultures, Cal was regarded as a leading light in the anthropology department, and essential leavening on a faculty where almost everyone else was concentrating on the American Indian. He had a sabbatical coming up, and with whispers already reaching his ears that he would be voted tenure, he had no thought of ever moving elsewhere. Laurie, his wife, had been no less content. An artistically gifted woman, she had found in the umber hues of the Southwest landscape an inspiration for her watercolors, and in the last year her pictures had begun selling for prices approaching four figures. She had taken up weaving, too, translating her designs into wall hangings. In the university community she and Cal were considered the perfect couple, blessed not only with talent and intelligence and style, but also with uncommon good looks—both fair, with Cal’s straw-blond hair and tall athletic build perfectly complementing Laurie’s liteness. Sometimes, sitting on the porch, listening to the click of Laurie’s loom and watching Chris play at her feet, Cal would wonder what he had done to deserve his luck. His marriage seemed nearly as perfect to him as it did to everyone else.

Then suddenly it was over, Laurie’s life ended by what the insurance companies listed on their actuarial tables as the “leading cause of death” and called simply “an accident in the home.”

Cal found it impossible to stay where he had been so content, where they had been content together. Their house was an adobe

and glass design built to their specifications. The color of the land was like one of her paintings, and the views through the windows constantly taunted him with how much living she had left undone. And there was for Cal the constant thought, freighted with intolerable guilt, that the accident didn't have to happen.

There were practical considerations, too. In the sprawling environment of Albuquerque, "single parenting" loomed as a lonely and rigorous prospect. It would be easier in a big city, Cal thought, especially New York, where he could call on some help and emotional support from Laurie's older sister, Ricki.

One more overriding factor had contributed to his decision to relocate to New York. Kate was here—Kathryn Clay, the famous woman anthropologist under whom he had studied in his own undergraduate days at Columbia. Kate had inspired Cal in his choice of career, made him her protégé, then virtually adopted him as a son. After Laurie's death, Cal had turned naturally to Kate. It was late in the academic year, positions elsewhere were already filled. Kate was only a professor emeritus now, but nevertheless she had retained her clout. She had been able, in the light of Cal's excellent qualifications, to see that a niche was found for him at Columbia.

No, it wasn't a mistake to come here. You couldn't think in terms of right and wrong when there hadn't really been a choice. He was simply where he had to be—where life, and death, had put him.



For most of the afternoon Cal had let Chris go wherever his appetite for rock collecting took him, satisfied to trail along and observe the park's teeming Sunday spectacle. Roller skaters wearing sequined shorts and hats with puffed satin wings sewn to the crown like Mercury's, joggers of all shapes and ages, a magician in clown makeup, a sidewalk juggler in baggy red pants with blue suspenders crowded the esplanade in front of the bandshell. And Jamaican musicians, their hair in the knotted braids called dreadlocks, playing "Moon River" on steel drums in front of the statue of Alice in Wonderland.

Wonderland indeed, Cal thought as he paused and listened to the song. What would future anthropologists make of this culture when they dug back into time?

Cal glanced over to the clump of bushes where Chris was rooting around.

His heart skipped a beat. *Gone!* Where was Chris?

Swiveling rapidly in all directions, he spotted his son about twenty yards away, snooping along the side of a path that dropped steeply between two stands of trees.

"Bean!" he called. "Wait there!"

But the music must have drowned him out, because Chris kept moving away, oblivious.

Cal started running down the slope and shouted again, but Chris disappeared around a bend in the path.

Cal ran faster and cursed himself for not laying down the ground rules to Chris before they ventured out into the park. *Stay where I can see you at all times. No wandering off.* Cal hadn't wanted to paint the city too black too soon; Chris had enough terrors to cope with at the moment without being told he'd been plunked down in a place of rampant danger and violence. So the warnings had been postponed. Foolish, Cal thought now. You couldn't be too careful. Only a couple of days ago in the *Times* there had been a story about a child who'd set out from his home one afternoon merely to walk to another apartment building across the street for a music lesson. The little boy had vanished as if into thin air. After working on the case for three months, the police had yet to turn up a single lead, a single helpful witness.

Cal rounded the bend at full steam, his mind already forming the little lecture he'd give Chris.

But the path that stretched out straight ahead for thirty yards was empty except for a woman wheeling a baby in a stroller and a pair of young girls in outrageous "punk" get-up, their hair dyed lavender.

Cal's alarm was rekindled. Chris hadn't been moving fast enough to reach the next bend in the path. He must have gone exploring in the trees. But on which side? Darting up and down the path, Cal peered between the trees on both sides, looking in vain for a flash of Chris's yellow Muppet T-shirt through the green. Then he ran to the girls and the woman with the stroller, asking if they had noticed a little boy heading away from the path—"about so high, brown hair, yellow shirt?"

No help.

Now the panic really began to build. If he pursued Chris in the wrong direction, they'd miss each other completely.

Wait a minute, Cal thought, it was Central Park, thousands of people around. Some samaritan would take a lost and crying kid under his wing and put him into the hands of the police. But being

lost would still be traumatic for Chris. His mother had suddenly dropped off the earth; he was doubly dependent on having his father right there when he needed him.

Cal made a random choice and plunged into the foliage on the right side of the path.

He wasn't more than a few yards in when he saw the bushes ahead already thinning toward a clearing. A couple yards more and he could see people, a group of them, and the royal blue side-panel of a car, a spinning red light on its—

Police!

Oh Jesus no, something had happened.

So quickly?

Cal pushed frantically through the shrubbery, snagging a cuff and tearing it loose. The branch of a bush snapped back and stung his cheek.

Then he broke into the open, an area of parched and trampled grass about the size of a tennis court. The clearing was almost completely enclosed by greenery, though off to one side the bushes were sparse and a flattened swath showed the point of entry for the police cruiser parked just ahead of Cal.

Beyond the car stood a couple of policemen and a small ring of people, their attention directed toward something on the ground.

Cal charged around to the other side of the squad car.

And ran practically straight into Chris, who stood on the fringe of the crowd.

Relief and anger flooded simultaneously through Cal, and scolding words began to form on his lips. But as he reached out to grab Chris's shoulder, his glance took in the area around which the crowd had collected.

His hand froze in midair and the words died in his throat as he stared at the patch of ground.

On a bed of leafy branches lay the carcasses of several animals. The largest, a goat with a coal-black hide, had been decapitated, and the severed head had been skewered atop a short stake that was sunk into the ground at the center of the branches. Around the base of the stake lay the other dead animals—two large turtles, a gray cat, and a white rooster. All had been killed in the same manner as the goat, although their heads had simply been flung carelessly aside.

Cal cringed at the sight. Colonies of ants were swarming over the dried blood of the animals, and over a little heap of gore that Cal realized was the goat's innards. In the hot sun of the June afternoon the stench of decay was beginning to foul the air.

One of the two policemen had gone to the trunk of the police cruiser for some metal stanchions and a length of rope, and he was now busy erecting a cordon. The other policeman stood beside the car's open door, holding the microphone of a two-way radio.

"Yeah, yeah, the same crazy bullshit," he was saying into the mike. "With a goat this time."

An amplified squawk, unintelligible at any distance from the car, answered from the radio's speaker.

"Nah, Sarge, hours old," said the cop. "A couple of kids found it about fifteen, twenty minutes ago." He glanced toward two teenage boys who stood nearby, holding Frisbees and shifting restlessly from one foot to the other. "Yeah, I'll do that. Will you get Sanitation on this?" There was another scratchy squawk. The cop acknowledged it and tossed the mike onto the seat of the car. Then, pulling a notebook from his hip pocket, he called the Frisbee players aside and began interviewing them.

"C'mon, Bean," Cal said, tapping his son on the shoulder. "We've seen enough."

The tableau of slaughtered animals could only be disturbing for a child; Cal was anxious to pull Chris away.

But Chris remained transfixed by the sight. "Wait, Daddy," he answered without turning around.

Cal debated. Insist? Fight it through? That might only give the incident more weight. As long as Chris didn't appear troubled or disgusted maybe it was better to let him satisfy his curiosity.

The mood of the bystanders, hardened observers of the city's excesses, became jocular and mocking as the shock began to wear off.

"Must have been quite a picnic," said a healthily tanned man who had come up behind Cal. "I've been saying for years they ought to have barbecue pits in the park."

"Whattaya think it was?" asked a small pugnacious woman holding a small pugnacious dog on a leash.

"A Board of Estimate meeting, maybe," said a gray-haired man smoking a pipe.

The policeman by the cordon waved his arms. "All right, let's break it up," he said. "Show's over." When the crowds lingered stubbornly, he raised his voice. "C'mon, c'mon, citizens. It's a beautiful day. Y'got better things to do than stare at this garbage."

The onlookers began drifting away.

"That's it, Chris." Cal laid a hand lightly on his son's shoulder.

Chris pulled away and went up to the cop. "What was it for?" he asked.

"Search me, sonny," the cop said, and moved to join his partner.

Then, from somewhere behind him, Cal heard a voice say very softly, "For the gods."

He turned around. A thin, brown-skinned man dressed in black pants and a plain white shirt, like an off-duty waiter, was standing there alone. The other bystanders were gone.

"It was done for the gods," the man repeated, as if answering Chris's question, only he was speaking too quietly for Chris to hear. "*Comprende, señor?*" He gave Cal a tightly puckered smile and walked away.

Cal's gaze followed the stranger until he disappeared into the trees. Yes, Cal thought, that was probably it—a ritual slaughter of some kind. There were all kinds of crazy cults running around these days.

He turned back to see that Chris had ducked under the cordon and was down on all fours, circling the dead animals for a closer look.

"Christopher!" Cal announced harshly. "That's enough now! Let's go!"

Chris blinked up at him, wide-eyed. But he offered no resistance. He folded his bag of "arrowheads," put it into his pocket, and came obediently to take Cal's hand.

Returning to the path, Cal waited for the questions and mentally worked through the answers that might satisfy the child's ever-present *why*.

Should he even attempt to explain cults? Chris had been exposed to enough genuine ritual on the field trips that he might grasp some of it.

But that would be taking this kind of aberrant behavior too seriously.

As it turned out, though, there was no need for explanations. Chris didn't refer to the bizarre scene again, didn't ask a thing about it. Not for the rest of the afternoon, nor on the long bus ride down to Kate's.

Not a single question.

Chapter 2

KATHRYN CLAY was twenty-four years old when she set out from New York on a tramp steamer heading for the Tokalau Islands in the South Pacific. Pictures taken by her friends before her journey showed a curly-haired young woman dressed in khaki pants and wearing a smile that seemed at once shy and determined. The Great Depression was paralyzing America, but the third-year graduate student from Sedalia, Missouri, armed only with a box of empty notebooks and undaunted curiosity, had a single goal in mind: to live in one of the world's most isolated and primitive societies and to bring back a new way of seeing how human beings lived. No one had been there before her; there were no maps, no guidebooks, no anthropological journals to tell her what she should look for, or what she might find.

Eighteen months later she returned with her notebooks full and wrote a book about what she had observed. The result was *Lessons of the Primitive: Love and Sex Among the Innocents*. She had composed a scholarly work, a study of the courtship and procreation customs of an unknown tribe in an unknown corner of the world. She hoped for the attention of other anthropologists, the sale of a few thousand copies to college libraries, and perhaps a teaching job in a world where women professors were as rare as the collection of tribal tools she had brought home.

Her modest hopes were more than fulfilled. Her vivid descriptions of a society totally free in its carnal appetites, where children were taught to be unashamed of their natural urges, promptly became a national sensation. *Love and Sex Among the Innocents* was

banned in Boston, decried in newspaper editorials, and denounced from the pulpits of every major city in America for encouraging moral corruption. At the same time it was hailed by her colleagues as a landmark, a classic work of anthropology, and proceeded through nineteen printings in its first year of publication.

Kathryn Clay was twenty-seven years old—and an international celebrity.

It had always amazed Cal that Kate, starting from such a high plateau at the beginning of her career, had managed to move on to even higher peaks. Journeys to other primitive islands, to the heart of Africa and the mountain villages of South America, had yielded an entire library of observations on tribal societies. In the half-century following her first spectacular success she wrote twenty-two books, but unlike most anthropologists, who concentrated on one tribe or country or theory, Kate's interests spanned the globe. She was devoted to studying all "the innocents," as she called those whose ancient customs had survived untainted by civilization. It was Kate's thesis, stated again and again in her work, that modern civilization, in its blind march toward Progress, was guilty of ignoring and even destroying invaluable ancient philosophies and customs. "We actually think we *own* the stars," she had written, "just because we reach them with rockets. We've lost a sense of where we fit into the Grand Design." Whether or not this was true, it was a persuasive notion when the so-called progress of modern life seemed to be leading the earth toward destruction. Kate Clay believed so fervently in her ideas that she was not content merely to write books read by millions. She traveled incessantly, lectured wherever she could find an audience; she played her celebrity like an instrument, using her outspokenness as a trademark. Probably no one had done more to bring a difficult scientific field before the general public.

Of course she had her detractors, those who said she had succeeded in popularizing herself and her work only by writing and talking so much about the sex lives of natives. And both her private life and her politics had caused her some trouble. She had been an outspoken feminist before Jane Fonda was in grade school. She had campaigned for birth control and the sexual rights of women long before either cause became fashionable. And she had been through four husbands, all older than herself—a literary critic, the famous anthropologist Quentin Kimball, a university president, and a shoe manufacturer. "I'm an expert on what makes a happy marriage," she playfully told interviewers. "I've had four of them, all perfect." Of course Kate's idea of marriage was telephoning long-distance