

## Chapter One: On the Origins of Gods

*And the things that we fear  
Are a weapon to be held against us*

Neil Peart, 'The Weapon'

Man<sup>1</sup> is afraid of dying. From the first time we open our eyes to the last breath we take, we live with that fear. It lies at the bottom of all of our actions. When in mortal danger, we can become phenomenally agile, strong and ruthless in our attempts to avert death. This is no coincidence, as the survival instinct is literally bred into us. We *want* to live, and this generally excludes dying as an option. We are not special this way, as every living thing wants to stay alive.

What is special about us is that we are self-aware. Although, seemingly, many try to avoid it, we continually think. In an environment that is universally dangerous, we tend to think a lot about survival. At the dawn of humanity, the world was exceedingly dangerous: you could die quickly from exposure, a predator, an infected minor injury, or starvation. Life was hard, precious. People had to continually forage to sustain themselves. Hunger was a common guest. The average life expectancy during the Neolithic age (~12'000 BC) was short (about twenty years). The desire to live longer ('forever') with less hardship was as universal then as it is today.

Back then, immediate needs prevented deep thinking. Discovering *how* things work was more important than finding out *why*. Theoretical knowledge may have given you a warm feeling. Practical application gave an immediate advantage. Understanding *how* something worked meant having a better chance

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<sup>1</sup> Woman too. Yet, since most religions tend to relegate women to the problem bin, I chose to blame the male, 'problem-solving' half of the world for inventing religion. Women take their share of the blame, but since most of the time they add to religion by way of (forced) submission to men, I feel it is considerably smaller.

to survive. From the day the first human saw the light of day, we strive to understand how things work. Understanding ‘how’ means increasing security; security means a better chance to survive<sup>2</sup>.

But how can a Paleolithic nomad possibly understand Lightning, Flood or Season? He can’t. So, to allow his mind to focus on other, more pressing needs, he wraps everything he can’t explain into something he can safely disregard: a supernatural construct that he calls ‘Gods’, ‘Spirits’ or ‘Demons’. It doesn’t explain anything, but it effectively short-circuits his desire to understand, keeping the nomad’s inquisitive mind free to try and explain other things. To this day we have this important ability. It’s called prioritization, and it is a central survival skill.

Man is superstitious. Although not a useful trait today, millions of years of evolution and natural selection have ingrained that deeply into humans – because it once *was* important for survival. It is the last vestiges of our progenitors squatting somewhere in the open, and noticing, at the edge of their vision, something moving in the shadows.

It may have been the wind, or it may have been a predator. Our progenitor can choose to stay or flee. Over time, those that flee are those that survive, while those that stay are eaten when the wind turns out to have fangs. Those that live have a chance to procreate. Millions of years later humanity rises – with a deeply ingrained predisposition to jump if something moves just out of sight. In stark contrast to everything that came before, though, humans are self-aware, and things not only move at the edge of our vision, but also at the edge of our imagination. And so we instinctively believe that there is more beyond our senses, something supernatural. Something that has power, and that can potentially threaten us.

Man wants to be secure. One of humankind’s more prominent, and sometimes embarrassing, traits is that we are always curious, sometimes downright nosy. We continually want to find out what’s going on. If we see a small group of people congregate and look at something, we instinctively want to walk over to see for ourselves what’s happening. This once was a very useful trait, as it turns an unknown, and potentially dangerous situation into a known, and therefore manageable, risk. Knowledge about what is happening around you means a significant increase in security.

Man wants to control. If you can control something, you are less exposed to pure chance. Control over something gives you security. Seasons, for example,

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<sup>2</sup> You may not be surprised to find that security, sex and sustenance are the two fundamental levels of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, which can be used to explain basic human behavior

are very important to understand if you live outside the equatorial regions. Hit the best time to plant and sow in spring, and you and your family have a year of riches. If you gain control over seasons, you gain a significant advantage. So how can you gain control over springtime? By controlling whatever controls is. But how do you control Gods, Spirits, or Demons? That is going to be tricky, but a good first step would be to find someone who can speak, or can otherwise communicate, with these supernatural beings. The next step would probably be to find out what these beings want, and how they can be threatened, appeased or bribed. If you look beneath all sophistication of religions today, you will find that they are still nothing more than mankind's first attempts to control springtime and lightning.

There is another important trait in humanity, which is closely linked to our survival instinct: profiteering. It is important to remember that profiteering, from an evolutionary perspective, is simply another effective method to improve your chance to survive. Making the most of a windfall (be it coming across a fresh carcass or finding water) is essential to survival.

Again, in humans, the difference is self-awareness. Humans can profit not only from immediate, physical luck, they can exploit situations and behavioral knowledge. And that behavioral knowledge isn't limited to migration patterns of herd beasts.

In 1876, Karl Marx published 'Das Kapital', which is largely regarded as a good recipe for Communism. Now, Communism, like the 'Perpetuum Mobile'<sup>3</sup> is a great idea. You may be shocked to read this, but I believe that Communism may well be the ideal society. Except of course, for one flaw: humans will never be able to live it. Like the 'Perpetuum Mobile', Communism is an interesting, but impossible idea.

But why can't human society live communism? Because every human has a strong, bred-in instinct to profiteer, to glean even the tiniest advantage over everyone else by exploiting whatever chance, whenever possible. In a society of sufficient size, this effect quickly snowballs, and invariably any society attempting Communism will end up like North Korea: with brutal dictators that have everything, and suffering masses of have-nothings.

Now, back at the dawn of civilization, a few slightly quicker-witted people knew that to explain the unexplainable, one needed to speak to gods. Since understanding these unexplainable things was so important, there was an

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<sup>3</sup> A device that, without input, moves forever. It is a physical impossibility – it violates the first and/or second law of thermodynamics. In spite of this, even today there are people who try to build one.

immediate job opening for anyone who demonstrably could talk to gods. Being quicker on the uptake they also realized that they don't really have to have the ability to speak to gods – they only needed to *convincingly claim* to be able to do that – perhaps by showing that they have found a way to curry useful favors from them – say, they could heal an ailment, predict the future or bring much-needed rain. If they convinced people that they could do that, they gained an important job – and prestige. Prestige is a distinct advantage in any society. So if you were a smooth talker<sup>4</sup> with a keen sense for your surroundings and had an active imagination, you were primed to talk yourself into an important position. Thus the shaman, the 'spirit-walker' and 'talkers to the otherworldly' was born. And he was a con man.

Initially, this may even have been a legitimate belief: humans are pre-disposed to discover patterns, and well-meaning, smart but primitive men may have truthfully believed that they discovered a way to control a god/spirit/demon when they danced on solstice to beg the sun to return.

But that is unlikely: at one point in time, there must have been the first shaman – humanity did not spring into existence with shamans already fully grown and performing rituals. Before the first shaman got his 'job' there was no shaman. So, one would wonder, during the time the first shaman grew up – there was no shamanistic ritual on solstice. The shaman-to-be *must* have seen that the sun was returning every year all by itself. After all, we are good at pattern recognition, and when the days start getting longer and warmer, that is kind of hard to miss. Yet, at some time the first shaman decided to install a ritual during winter solstice.

So it seems more likely that the shamans were the first humans to professionally exploit man's belief in the super-natural.

Shamans proliferated. Spring comes every year, and every year the shaman can claim this as his success, the results of his pleadings with gods. His prestige rises, and prestige means ample opportunity to procreate. Usually one of his own offspring becomes shaman himself, learning the 'secrets' of the trade. It is entirely possible that from the second generation on the shamans earnestly believed in their 'trade'; that they actually conversed with, and to a degree controlled, supernatural beings. Even if the 'original' shaman knew that he was a con artist.

Now, it wouldn't have been too long before another crafty mind – figuratively speaking, of course, because arithmetic wasn't invented yet – put

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<sup>4</sup> Scientists believe that Homo sapiens developed speech less than 200'000 years ago; the first con artist probably emerged one day later.

together one and one and came up with two: Religion. This has happened independently everywhere in the world, million times over: once people start worshipping a supernatural being, someone finds a way to institutionalize it. But why is this progression from believing one silly thing (the god that controls rain) to a whole religion almost natural? It's quite simple: Profiteering, coupled with a sharp mind. Again.

The Shaman had prestige for his 'service' (which, over the years, when knowledge about how stars and sunrise relate to imminent spring grew, was actually useful). But his service did not give him something most people crave: influence, and ultimately, power.

To have that, at the time, you needed something tangible to threaten others with. Since everyone is universally afraid of death, influencing people usually meant threatening violence. The problem is, of course, threatening violence is only an option for physically strong people, else your threat ends painfully indeed, perhaps together with you.

But anyone who works the superstitions of his people for their own livelihood eventually, if not invariably, figures out a way to exploit his people's fear of death, *without* appearing as a threat himself.

Let's try and walk through the thought process of someone who invents a religion. In all likelihood this person was a shaman himself. At the very least it was someone who realized that he could gain influence by exploiting his people's fear of death and desire for better life. He knew

- people believe in the supernatural, or they wouldn't keep the shaman around
- the shaman has prestige because he talks to the supernatural
- people are universally afraid of dying
- people wish that their lives were easier

He perhaps even suspected that the Shaman was a con man – or at least knew that his shamanistic skills were entirely from this world. So he developed his own con and wrapped it in a story<sup>5</sup> similar to this: In his own talks with The Supernatural, the storyteller had learned that people's lives don't end with death. Instead, they begin a new life in the 'spirit-world'. How they lived in that

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<sup>5</sup> An alternate version doesn't even require malice. The shaman may have had a particularly vivid dream; accidentally/purposefully inhaled hallucinogenic smoke from mushrooms, or simply ran a high fever - maybe after being caught in the rain he successfully danced for. He may have mistaken this as a word from the realm of the supernatural

afterworld – in luxury or agony – entirely depended on how the people treated the storyteller.

Now, he wouldn't have told the last part that transparently – people were primitive, not stupid<sup>6</sup>. But he might have suggested food sacrifice, full-time employment of the storyteller as Godman, and a place for worship. His people were happy because it was what they *wanted* to hear. No longer faced with eternal death, they chose to believe the nicer alternative<sup>7</sup>. To maximize his windfall, the Godman's stories over time became grander, his implied punishments for maltreatment graver. With every day, his influence over people, now real, grew. He was able to tell people what they should, and what they should not do – without ever so much as lifting a club. That is real, tangible power.

After the first natural deaths in his group, the Godman, now probably better called 'priest', realized another important fact: whatever it was he promised for the afterworld – no-one ever came back and complained. In fact, no-one came back, period. And that meant that he could never be held accountable for whatever he told about the afterlife. Yet he had real power. Power for nothing. Chicks for free<sup>8</sup>. Religion had arrived.

The important point here is that no real gods were ever required to create a religion. Gods (or Spirits or Demons) are required to maintain a threat *inside* the belief system you sell to your people. They are by no means the cause of religion – they are the effect.

What *was* required is some gullibility, or at least some desire to believe a comforting tale, a real fear of death, and a young species of sentient beings clawing their way out of the jungle into civilization. In their quest for knowledge, humans (quite logically) supposed super-beings as cause for super-human events

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<sup>6</sup> I should note that from a standpoint of human development, 50'000 years are next to nothing. Humans at that time had the same, or nearly the same, intelligence as we have today. If you somehow time-warped a baby from 50'000 BC into the present, and it grew up like any other person, that time-warped stoneager would be indistinguishable from his/her modern friends - both intellectually and physically. On average, the late-stone-age humans were as intelligent as we are today. They weren't 'stupid' - they merely lacked the knowledge we have today.

<sup>7</sup> So for how long did mankind believe in some kind of afterlife? This question is surprisingly easy to answer through a sometimes endearing, sometimes frightening but exclusively human custom: Grave goods. Giving the dead items of value (which prevented their continued use by the community) only makes sense if people thought that the deceased benefited from them. By definition, a deceased is dead, and can only profit from gifts if they somehow lived on – in an afterlife. Evidence for intentional grave goods dates back to at least 12'000 BC. Before that, mankind produced mostly artifacts that rot, and therefore can't be recovered today. This proves that humans believed in the afterlife for at least 14'000 years, probably much longer.

<sup>8</sup> with apologies to Mark Knopfler

like lightning and floods. Smart, but decidedly normal-humans cleverly exploited this by creating a story that creatively glued together actual knowledge, wild speculation, and primitive longings for a better, longer life. As imaginatively, clever, and varied these tales were, they invariably explained how the world came to be, how the gods, spirits and demons controlled vital aspects of life, and how life continues after death. *Because that is what people want to hear.*

Now, of course it isn't *that* simple to start a religion. Even though most people are gullible, and it *is* easy to start a religion on laughably silly stories (see Mormonism<sup>9</sup> or Scientology<sup>10</sup>), the climate for a religion must be right for it to take off.

This is because people may be gullible – but they definitely are pragmatic. If the Godman founded his new religion at a bad point in time – say when a drought hit the region – and people started to suffer, the Godman may either have been held accountable for that (a fitting irony), or people may have realized that the Godman was eating out of the same pot, but was putting nothing into it. In both cases it meant the end of that particular religion, because promises of a lush afterlife are less important when your stomach is growling and your young are howling.

Therefore it is safe to say that thousands, if not millions of religions were started in the past fifty millennia. Of them, only those survived that had the right mixture of vague promise and threat, and were started at a time of relative prosperity<sup>11</sup>. Those that did survive and became popular enough started to grow

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<sup>9</sup> Mormonism a.k.a 'Latter Day Saints' was invented in the 1820s by Joseph Smith, Jr., a con man who earned money by using 'seer stones' to locate gold treasure (that, alas, never existed). At that time he also claimed an Angel visited him and told him of the location of a book of golden plates. Smith contends that he was told to retrieve the book and translate it. Sadly, only he himself and his closest associates ever saw that book. This translation, for some reason written in fake 17<sup>th</sup> century English, is the foundation of the Mormon's belief. To sum up: a supernatural 'treasure hunter' claims to have been contacted by the supernatural who reveal to him the location of a super-treasure? It seems Smith was too lazy to change his con...

<sup>10</sup> Science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard invented Scientology around 1952. Previously, Hubbard was on the record having said that 'you don't get rich writing science fiction. If you want to get rich, you start a religion'. Later, he put that into practice: Scientology is a science-fiction-themed religion involving 1960's area aliens. In Scientology you pay massive sums of money to the 'church' in order to advance through levels. Entertainingly, at some level (and more than \$100'000 after you joined), you are told the story of the super-villain Xenu (also called Xemu) – which is a lot more inventive than the tired old story of a benevolent super-alien that conventional religions tell. At least Hubbard is more creative than Smith.

<sup>11</sup> Actually, this is not entirely correct: a religion that was invented at the *very end* of a rough patch – perhaps in a desperate attempt to end a drought – that was followed by a time of prosperity was *even more* likely to survive. This is of course because people tend to see cause and effect in unrelated events. In that case it looked to these people as if their rain dance caused the

simply because they were popular. Quick to clue in on something of perceived value (hello, profiteering trait!), people would join a 'successful' religion. At the time, religions had few downsides – once you discounted paying the upkeep of its priests – and (as we'll see later) offered a number of advantages. And so religions spread. At some point in our past, probably well before 10'000 BC, there was some kind of shamanism or religion wherever humans lived. This of course does not prove that these gods exist – merely that people are gullible, and want to believe that someone powerful is looking out for them. It also proves that there is always someone who is willing to take the rest of the group for a ride (which makes is so surprising that Marx, who was no stranger to people's fears, desires and abilities, still went ahead writing "Das Kapital". He must have known that Communism could never work. I guess it's another affirmation of the fact that even the brightest can be incredibly stupid).

From the very first religion invented at the dawn of civilization to today, they only vary in superficial features like number and shape of the Gods, and the breadth of what they try to explain. Over time, religions would become streamlined, simplified, and increasingly aggressive to better serve the needs of their priests. Yet, beneath all the extravagant flash like re-birth, water parting to give way to whole people, snakes devouring the sun, fiery chariots traversing the skies, and mysterious ferrymen crossing rivers of the dead, they all come down to only this: a scared, hungry, superstitious, primitive yet brightly intelligent nomad trying to make sense of thunder, lightning and death.

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drought to end; continuing their god worship looked as if it ushered in a time of riches. People are smart – and just found 'proof' that their ritual worked, and their gods existed.



