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Primalordial Beginnings

Class 1

The early development of our species:

The beginnings of religion may have preceded the the first member of our species -- Homo Sapiens. Neanderthals reverently buried their dead with a ritual that seems to show that they anticipated life after death, in some form. They might have had based this belief on some concept of the supernatural.

Many scientists believe (but many creation scientists reject) the concept that our Homo Sapiens ancestors went through a number of changes in their transition from pre-human to fully human. This separated our distant ancestors from all other animal species in the world. At some point, humans:

- Attained a fully developed self-consciousness.
- Developed a moral sense.
- Developed a spirit of community that was much more advanced than any other species.
- Developed methods of precise communication -- again much more highly developed than other species had attained.
- Became aware of the finite nature of their life span, and of their own impending death.
- Developed an enlarged brain with a very different internal structure. This facilitated abstract thinking. Unfortunately, the size of the brain made childbirth much more difficult and hazardous for both woman and fetus.

According to most paleontologists and anthropologists, fully developed humans with these abilities and knowledge emerged, perhaps fifty thousand to one hundred thousand years ago.

Many North Americans reject the theory of evolution, and believe in creation science, based on Genesis -- the first book in the Torah and the Bible. They believe that the world and its animal species were created by God, fully formed, between the years 4000 and 8000 BCE. It is worth observing that supporters of both the theory of evolution and of creation science share common beliefs in some of the developmental stages of humans -- namely:

- The development of a moral sense.
- An awareness of their personal death.
- Painful and hazardous childbirth.

The first few chapters of the *Book of Genesis*, describe how God created Adam from mud. He appears to have not been fully differentiated from the animal kingdom at his point. In fact, in one of the strangest passages in the Bible, God tried unsuccessfully to find a mate for him from among the other animal species. God created Eve at this time. Both can be described as proto-human. They had no moral sense; no knowledge of good and evil; they were thus missing certain qualities that we possess today.

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God apparently wanted the couple to stay in this pre-human, innocent, partly developed condition. In Genesis 2:17, he ordered Adam and Eve to not eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and threatened them with death if they did. They ate the fruit anyway, and presumably became full humans at that point:

- Capable of recognizing the difference between good and evil.
- Capable of developing an ethical sense.
- Being aware of their own impending personal death.

God cursed the couple, telling Eve that "*in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children.*"

The problems of being fully human:

Paul Tillich, one of the most remarkable theologians of the 20th century called this realization of impending death "*the shock of nonbeing.*" Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis called it "*the trauma of self-consciousness.*"¹ Humanity was never the same. We picked up awareness and knowledge. But we lost ignorance and a sense of innocence. Bishop John Selby Spang wrote:

*"It is that human capacity to be fully self-conscious that marks Homo sapiens as different from any other form of life in the natural world. That separating difference is what fills human beings with a sense of dread. Anxiety, says Paul Tillich, is born in the human recognition of finitude. It is therefore as omnipresent as humanity itself. To be human is to experience self-consciousness, to know separation, to be made aware of limits and to contemplate ends. One cannot be human, therefore, without being filled with chronic anxiety. It sounds depressing, but surely it is true."*²

Self-consciousness was a remarkable development. All earlier animals lacked this ability. They were born with a set of instinctive responses that enabled them to function independently at an early age. They matured, met their needs for food and water, mated, struggled against the elements, and eventually died -- often violently. They "*had no conscious awareness of who they were or what they were doing...when the time came to die, they did so without anticipatory fear or grief. Having no conscious sense that they actually existed or 'were,' and thus lacking a conscious memory of the past or anticipation of the future, they had no sense that they were destined 'not to be.'*"³ But humans became different. They were born with advanced reasoning abilities and few instincts. They remained helpless for many years as their parents taught them the accumulated knowledge of the tribe. Each generation was able to build upon their parent's knowledge base to generate new techniques of coping, planning methods, tools, more cooperative social

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structures, etc. We advanced as a species by leaps and bounds. But our distant ancestors suffered great anxiety, because they felt helpless, insignificant, and insecure in the face of natural forces and their own finite lifespan. People do not like chronic anxiety. Some coping mechanism had to be developed.

Animism:

Many theologians and anthropologists feel that our first fully human ancestors developed primitive concepts of God in order to lessen their anxiety about the future. Thus began the first religion, Animism. This was, and is, typically found in hunter-gatherer societies.

Having developed self-consciousness in themselves, they may have assumed that the rest of the world was equally self-conscious. They began to believe that the rocks, mountains, rivers, sun, moon, trees, land animals, birds, etc. all contained vital powers, each animated by a spirit. *"Those animating spirits might be benevolent or demonic, but in either case they were assumed to be personal, to have selfhood, to be in charge of their particular area of life, to be capable of responding to human need and to be in possession of supernatural power."* ⁴ Village chiefs, shamans and native healers played leadership roles in this religion. Human anxiety dissipated somewhat as our distant ancestors felt more in control of nature. Religion gave them assurance, confidence, and peace of mind.

It is important to realize that no consensus exists of the source of this first religion:

- Animists are often told a set of ancient stories by the elders that describes the origin of their group and their religious beliefs.
- Others regard these stories as myths. They feel it is obvious that Animists' beliefs were invented by humans in response to a societal need. Their God did not create humans. Rather, humans created the concept of spirits, including perhaps a great spirit God.

Since Animists are greatly outnumbered by monotheists, polytheists and other later-developing religions, there is a near consensus that Animists' ancestors created their God, spirits, and myths; God did not reveal them to the tribes.

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Fertility religions:

When hunting and gathering was replaced by agriculture and the raising of domesticated animals, a major change occurred in religious life. Fertility of the crops, animals, and tribe became of paramount importance. Fertility was seen as clearly feminine in nature; only female humans and other animals can produce offspring. that the group's religion tended to be centered on a matriarchal Goddess: the Earth Mother, Great Goddess or Great Mother.

In Europe, archaeologists have found remains of an "old European" culture. Although the interpretation of archaeological evidence is controversial, many scientists believe that the society worshipped a female fertility goddess, sometimes with a male consort. This culture lasted for tens of thousands of years. They generally lived in peace; they had few defensive fortifications. Males and females were treated equally, at least during burial rituals.

Neopagans form the fifth or sixth largest religious group in the U.S. They base their beliefs and practices partly on ancient Pagan beliefs. Wiccans, for example, have derived their deities, seasonal days of celebration, and some theological beliefs from the ancient Celtic people. They follow many aspects of early fertility religions.

It is important to realize that no consensus exists about the origin of fertility religions:

- Some Wiccans believe that their beliefs were passed down from the Celts to themselves in a continuous line for over two millennia. Others believe that Wicca is a recent development, initially created in the 1940's from a variety of sources.
- Most people disagree. They are quite confident that the beliefs of fertility religions were invented by humans in response to a societal need: the guarantee of high fertility rates among their crops, animals and tribal members. They conclude that the fertility Goddess did not create humans. Rather, humans created the concept of the fertility goddess;