
Most West African religions have a high-god who is also a sky-god. But he is often a withdrawn high god, a *deus otiosus*. There is an apparent contradiction between the supremacy of the high-god and his withdrawal from concern with the world. The attributes assigned to him heighten this effect of contradiction. He is said to be at the origin of things, often as a creator, he is all-knowing and all-powerful, he introduces order into the chaos of the universe, he is the final arbiter of right and wrong. . . . But in spite of these attributes the high-god is not usually directly worshipped, he has no priests and no shrines are dedicated to him; people may make a token offering to him in every sacrifice but hardly ever do they offer a sacrifice exclusively to him.\(^2\)

O'Connell attempts to resolve this apparent contradiction by approaching the problem through the interpretations of two historians of religion, Mircea Eliade and Raffaele Pettazzoni. He quotes Eliade's contribution to this problem from his *Patterns in Comparative Religion*.


What is clear is that the Supreme sky god every where gives place to other religious forms. The morphology of this substitution may vary, but its meaning is in each case partly the same; it is a movement away from the transcendence and passivity of sky being towards more dynamic, active and easily accessible forms. One might say that we are observing a “progressive descent of the sacred into the concrete”; man’s life and his immediate natural surroundings come more and more to have the value of sacred things. His belief in *mana*, *orenda*, *wakan*, etc., animism, totemism, devotion to the spirits of the dead and local divinities, and so on, place man in quite a different religious attitude from that which he held towards the Supreme Being of the sky. The very structure of religions is changed. . . Every substitution marks a victory for the dynamic, dramatic forms, so rich in mythological meaning, over the Supreme Being of the sky who is exalted, but passive and remote . . . the supreme divinities of the sky are constantly pushed to the periphery of the religious life where they are almost ignored; other sacred forces, nearer to man, fill the leading role.3

Pettazzonei’s analysis of this same phenomenon is given as follows:

How can we explain this *otiositas*, which contrasts so strikingly with the dynamic character of the Creator? It has been supposed that we have here a secondary development, a kind of elimination of the Creator in the face of other deities who in the end pushed him into the background. It may, however, be the case that *otiositas* itself belongs to the essential nature of creative Beings, and is in a way the complement of their creative activity. The world once made and the cosmos established, the Creator’s work is as good as done. Any further intervention on his part would not be only superfluous but possibly dangerous since any change in the cosmos might allow it to fall back into chaos. Once the world is made, the existential function of the Creator could be nothing but prolonging its duration and ensuring its unaltered and unalterable stability. The *otiositas* of the creative Being, this *wu-wei*, so to call this sort of instinctive presence, is the most favourable condition and the one naturally best suited to maintain the *status quo*. This, I think, is what the idleness of creative Supreme Beings signify; it is due not so much to their character as Supreme Beings as to their being Creators.4

O’Connell makes the following objections and qualifications to these approaches. Pettazzonei’s approach proves too much, for if the high god withdraws because there is nothing more for him to do after his original creation then it is difficult to explain why the high god in West Africa who is the ultimate upholder of the ethical order is thought to intervene to restore justice in the creation or why he is appealed to in cases of extreme distress and, lastly, why the lesser gods are understood as channels through which man makes contact with the high god. If Pettazzonei’s thesis is correct, then, says, O’Con_

3 Quoted by O’Connell from Mircea Eliade’s, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (English Trans.) (New York, 1958), pp. 52, 43.

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nell, "he [the high god] should be completely withdrawn ever since creation."6

O’Connell accepts a part of Eliade’s thesis. Eliade is right, according to him, in insisting on the worshipers’ concern with the concrete and accessible lesser gods, but this concern points only to what he refers to as psychological—"But while the lesser gods loom larger psychologically in people’s minds. . . ." The lesser gods are associated with creation, but the worshipers know that they are not responsible for it. In extreme situations the appeal is made “over the heads” of these beings. Furthermore Eliade’s thesis does not account “for the careful handling of myths of beginning and creation and for the reciting of these myths so as to guarantee the stability and order of things . . . contrary to Eliade’s thesis we want to hold that the lesser gods come forward not because they manage to push the high-god into the background but because he himself withdraws and leaves the scene to these beings whose natures are known and whose interventions can be predicted.”7

Finally O’Connell summarizes his own position by reinterpreting Eliade and Pettazzoni. It seems as if the nature of the high god can be explained by “a conjunction of relative indiscernibility of features and almighty power.”8 It is through his almighty power that he has created the universe, but just because of this power there is a loss of preciseness regarding his concrete features. The worshipers are thus unsure of the all-powerfulness and all-purity of this high god and would rather deal with lesser beings who can be known more precisely and intimately. “These gods are warm blooded, and sometimes wanton. Their personalities invite humans to enter into intercourse and even familiarity with them. Though they are connected with the creator-god, they do not—unlike him—involve the kind of all purity that shows up the anguish of human guilt and makes it too difficult to bear. So they can become the intermediaries that they are considered to be in most of the religions.”9

Two commentaries on this article, one by E. O. James10 and the other by Robin Horton11 of the Anthropology Department, London University, have been printed in subsequent issues of Man. Horton’s commentary is the more substantial and critical in tone. James seems to be in general agreement with the position of O’Connell, though

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6 O’Connell, op. cit., p. 68.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., p. 69.
10 Man, Art. No. 178, p. 106.
11 Man, Art. No. 219, pp. 137–140.
he does supplement his point of view with additional details. I shall not go into a discussion of Horton’s rather lengthy critique; I will, however, mention one aspect of this critique which should be of primary interest to historians of religion. In proposing an alternative orientation, Horton suggests that we should attempt to “make a careful distinction between those features of the African high god which are constant, and those which are variable.” It is precisely this factor which is missing in O’Connell’s interpretation. Perhaps a different interpretation would have resulted if O’Connell had dealt with this issue. For the historian of religion this issue may be stated as the problem of “history” and “religion.” By “history” I mean the particular temporal-spatial cultural situation in which man responds to that which is sacred and by “religion” I mean the structure of the myth, symbol, or religious response through which man apprehends the sacred. The historian of religions is interested in understanding the enduring structure of these responses—a structure which may be discerned regardless of the history and culture in which they appear. These religious structures enable us to speak of the specific religious meaning which is intended by these myths and symbols. Religious apprehensions and responses occur in history and thus the meaning of any religious symbol must be sought in the enhancement and re-evaluation of the history and culture in which it occurs. The issue simply stated is the interdependence of phenomenology and history.

O’Connell, in my opinion, did not pay enough attention to either history or phenomenological structure. While the problem of the high god presents itself in many religious systems, it cannot be discussed without references to particular religions and cultures. Though the title of his article refers to West African religion, he makes only passing references to particular examples of West African religion and tends to give an overly intellectualistic and ethical interpretation to these forms. I propose in this discussion of the high god, first, to pay attention to the historical situation which seems to be indicated by the myths and, secondly, to deal with the religious meaning of the high god as a specifically religious phenomenon.

12 I recommend Horton’s article as a careful analysis of O’Connell’s position. In many respects I agree with his commentary, especially in his critique of O’Connell’s understanding of the essentially moral element in the high god. Horton seems to pay much closer attention to the specific elements in the myths concerning the high god and is thus not tempted by a too intellectualist interpretation.

13 This is especially true of his discussion of the separation motif in a West African myth. He speaks of the high god’s withdrawal as a result of being hit by a pestle while a woman was pounding yams. No significance is given to the fact that the high god withdraws because of the action of a woman, nor to the fact that the woman was pounding yams.
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J. Zwernemann has given us a résumé of the structure of the sky-god among the Voltaic tribes.\textsuperscript{14} His résumé covers the Mosi-Dagombo, the Atakora, the Gurunsi, and the Gurma groups and includes over twenty-five tribes. After an analysis of this phenomenon in these tribes, he makes the following conclusions concerning the sky-god of the Voltaic peoples: (1) There is a linguistic and religious association of the sky-god with the sun. Atmospheric phenomena are often attributes of the sky-god. (2) The sky-god is a creator. He possesses the power of life and death. (3) Prayer and sacrifices are made to him, but generally his cult is weak. He is in the background because it is necessary to serve the intermediary deities, for example, earth, ancestors. (4) The conception of a divine couple formed by the sky-god and earth-goddess is a general characteristic of all of the tribes.

Let us turn immediately to the last two points. If the high god withdraws or is pushed into the background by lesser deities, these lesser deities must be understood, in the words of Eliade, as “part and parcel of the discoveries which man has been led to make about himself and his world.”\textsuperscript{15} One should be able to document these discoveries in the history of any particular culture, for no culture continues to worship only a high god. In every case of the religious life there is already a development from the high god to more specific deities. The divine-couple motif in myth is obviously a symbol of fertility, and in the case of West African culture it is most probably a symbol of fertility in the form of agriculture. It is difficult to know when agriculture was discovered or invented by the West Africans. George P. Murdock has recently put forward the theory that there was an independent discovery of agriculture in West Africa.\textsuperscript{16} Murdock believes that the Mande (Manding) represent the nuclear cultural group in West Africa and that the Voltaic and Plateau Nigerians are instances of the diffusion of this nuclear Mande culture. Alimen describes the neolithic of West Africa as a coming-together of the Caspian culture of hunters, fishers, and pastoralists with the Tumbian agriculturalists from equatorial Africa. The Tumbian culture tended to become stronger as the Caspian culture grew weaker.\textsuperscript{17} Finally, Baumann has delineated three types of agriculture in Africa, an old


hoe culture which is probably autochthonous and is dominated by women; a higher hoe culture in which men do most of the work along with women; and a plough culture which represents the diffusion of European and Asiatic elements. Baumann recognizes that the old autochthonous hoe culture, which he calls "Old Sudanese," is itself a culture innovation in West Africa. "For instance, it appears from many hunting legends, myths, and masked dances that the old-Sudanese were once, in remote ages, something other than soil cultivators."  

It is impossible to know precisely what type of religion the presoil cultivators practiced, but if they were nomads, it is quite possible that worship of the Supreme Being as a sky-god loomed quite large in their religious life. The development from this form of religion, if we follow Baumann and Alimen, would be in the form of an early form of agriculture. This old form of agriculture is referred to by Baumann as the "Old Sudanic" culture in Africa. Baumann and Alimen think that this form of agriculture was diffused from the equatorial region of Africa, whereas Murdock holds to a belief in its independent discovery among the Mande. In any case this early form of West African agriculture seems to have been matriarchal in form. Baumann's second stage of agriculture in Africa is represented by the younger Sudanic culture, a high-grade Asiatic cultural diffusion which gained a hold in Africa in Abyssinia and pushed westward into the West Sudan. This culture emphasized the dominance of the male in agricultural activities and displaced to a great extent the matriarchal elements of the Old Sudanic culture. The withdrawal of the high god in West African culture may be directly related to these new discoveries.  

The transition from the Old Sudanic to the younger Sudanic culture seems to be documented in the mythical and religiopolitical and social structures of West Africa. Zwernemann in his description of the sky-god among the Konkomba confesses the confusion of mythological forms in the figure of Wumbor.  


19 Ibid., p. 300.

20 Baumann, op. cit., p. 296, thinks that it is quite possible to detect a backward movement of agriculture—a movement away from agricultural work by both sexes to a situation in which only one sex practices agriculture. In some cases this has been caused by the conquest of cattle-breeders. In this connection it is interesting to note that the Dinka of the central Nile basin in the Southern Sudan have a myth which portrays the sky-god’s withdrawal as a result of being hit by a woman’s grain pounding pestle. On the other hand, Dinka religion is permeated by homologies between the cosmos and cattle (see Geoffrey Lienhardt, Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka [Oxford, 1961]).
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Chez les Konkomba les conceptions ne sont pas absolument claires. D'un côté Wumbor est le créateur de toute chose, y compris la terre, dont Wumbor est aussi le maître, mais d'un côté, Wumbor n'est que le fils de la terre, Ketink, et du ciel-atmosphère, Ketalagabon. ... Les conceptions de Wumbor comme fils du ciel-atmosphère, comme héros-civilisateur et comme dieu atmosphérique lui-même nous montrent que le Wumbor d'aujourd'hui résulte d'une fusion de plusieurs personnages.21

The figure of Wumbor shows the transformation of an atmospheric sky deity into the figure of a fecundator and a cultural hero. Germaine Dieterlen has collected a myth which she believes portrays the general structure for the social organization and religious life of all West African groups.22 In this myth the homology is made between the seed fonio (Digitaris exilis) and the creation and ordering of the cosmos. There is also an emphasis on the world egg, twinnness, bisexuality, and androgyny as creative principle. Baumann has suggested that these emphases in the myth have reference to the religious meaning of the powerful antithetical symbols of sexuality and that their origin lies in the Oriental and Mediterranean cultures.23 Following his interpretation of African hoe culture, it is likely that these elements have come into West Africa with the younger Sudanic culture. If Baumann is correct in his judgment concerning the antithetical sexual symbolism it is safe to conclude that those West African myths which emphasize the world egg, twinnness, bisexuality, and androgyny portray the tension and resolution of the older Sudanic and younger Sudanic cultures in West Africa.

The role of the queen-mother in the state of the Akan of Ghana may also be interpreted as a method of resolving the matriarchal/patriarchal tension: "The actual ruling of the state, state affairs, in particular war is left in the hands of her son, the king, the exponent of the masculine principle in life. Nevertheless the queen mother was, and in some respects still is, the most important person in the state. In olden days she had a decisive voice in all state affairs and could influence the decisions taken by the king and his counselors."24 The prominence of concrete fertility deities thus seem to be related to the discovery or diffusion of agriculture in West Africa. The prominence of these lesser deities and cults of fertility cannot be understood apart from the historical-religious discoveries in this cultural area.


We have, however, dealt only with two types of agriculture in West Africa. I have only made a suggestion concerning the transition from what may have been a cult of the high god to the more concrete fertility deities. I have buttressed my speculation concerning the possibility of a cult of the sky god with the research of cultural historians and archeologists. It is important to note that the old high-god symbolism has persisted throughout this rather dynamic history. This persistence of the high-god symbolism has taken place through the transference of some of the attributes of the high god to the sun. If we turn to the first point of Zwernemann's conclusion, we see the religious expression of this transfer. The sky-god is identified or associated with the sun. It is clear that we are here confronted by what Eliade has called the "solarization" of the supreme being.25 Eliade points out that this solarization of the sky deity does not mean that the deity has taken on form. However this may be, it is the solarization of the Supreme Being which opens its structure to concrete embodiment in more specific cults and deities. The sun takes over the role of fecundator and other sacred personages are born. This is not always the case. Baumann has pointed out that among the Ewe an old earth-goddess has assimilated herself to the sky-god in one of her aspects, while still preserving her character as an earth deity.26 Among the Akan, the king is a representative of the Sun. Meyerowitz tells us that the "king, who represents the Sungod and impersonates him on earth, is therefore made the dynamic centre in the state, which in olden days was constructed after the likeness of the world as it was known to the early Akan."27

It may be that sacral-political office of the Akan king represents in relationship to the queen-mother the assimilation of an old matrarchal structure to a younger Sudanic patriarchal form. The sun thus symbolizes the religious manner in which power and transcendence is transmitted into concrete forms. Among the Dogon the sun does not play a large role as a creative being. This role has been taken over by the water genii, the Nommo; however, Ogotemmeli, the old Dogon philosopher always wished to give an idea of the grandeur of the sun in his mythological descriptions. At one place he attempted to estimate the dimensions of the sun. "Some people, he said, estimate that it is as big as the camp, that would make it thirty ells. In reality

25 Ibid.
27 Myerowitz, op. cit., p. 57.
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it is bigger. Its surface exceeds the district of Sanga.”28 The grandeur of the sun is thus related to its wide and almost inexhaustible extension. The sun seems in this case to approximate the power and absoluteness of the celestial Supreme Being. Meyerowitz’s discussion of the dead king leads us again back to the sky. “The divine king who has gone ‘elsewhere’ lives on in the sky,’ where his divine kra has joined Nyame’s.”29 The sun hardly, if ever, becomes among the West African simply another one of the concrete deities. Though a fecundator he seems more related to the Supreme Being in the form of a high god of the sky.

I have presented this cultural-historical material to show that the variable features in the structure of the high god are related to the historical situation of the West Africans. I have used the term “related” advisedly. I do not mean to say that the religion of West Africa is just a reflection of their history. The history of West Africa is a history of new discoveries of reality. These discoveries are apprehended religiously or mythically. This explains the religious evaluation of the events of West African history.

The religious or mythic apprehension is the constant feature in the structure of the high god, or for that matter, any other religious symbol. O’Connell seemed to have limited his interpretation to this aspect of religious symbolism. I have taken the position that an adequate interpretation requires a discussion of both history and religious experience.

We might legitimately begin this part of our discussion by asking what, from the strictly religious point of view, does the high god symbolize. For Eliade, the Supreme Being of a celestial structure seems to represent the archetypal norm of the religious experience par excellence.

Even before any religious values have been set upon the sky it reveals its transcendence. The sky symbolizes transcendence, power, and the changelessness simply by being there. It exists because it is high, infinite, immovable, powerful.

That the mere fact of being high, of being high up, means being powerful (in the religious sense), and being as such filled with the sacred, is shown by the very etymology of some of the god’s name.30

The very structure of the celestial Supreme Being seems to be a correlate of the optimum religious experience. Compare, for example, Joachim Wach’s four formal criteria for authentic religious experience.

29 Meyerowitz, op. cit., p. 63.
30 Eliade, Patterns . . . , p. 39. (Italics mine.)
1. Religious experience is a response to what is experienced as ultimate reality; that is, in religious experience we react not to any single or finite phenomenon, material or otherwise, but to what we realize as undergirding and conditioning all that constitutes our world of experience.

2. Religious experience is a total response of the total being to what is apprehended as ultimate reality. . .

3. Religious experience is the most intense experience of which man is capable. . .

4. Religious experience is practical, that is to say it involves an imperative, a commitment which impels man to act.31

For Eliade the vault of the sky and its religious symbolism is the most profound and at the same time the simplest symbol of transcendence and ultimacy. This symbolism can evoke what Rudolf Otto has called the mysterium tremendum—the otherness and awesomeness of ultimate reality or the religious desire to be related and identified with this power in the form of mysterium fascinans. It is true that most religious symbols are able to evoke these responses. Eliade himself speaks of “primary intuition of earth as a religious form . . . the first realization of the religious significance of earth was indistinct.”32

The difference, however, between this primary intuition of the earth as a religious form and the primary intuition of the sky is that the earth in this religious experience “is the cosmos—repository of a wealth of sacred forces.”33 It is the foundation of every expression of existence. The sky, on the other hand, “needs no aid from mythological imagination or conceptual elaboration to be seen as the divine sphere.”34

The exfoliation of the latencies within the earth produces the concrete, dynamic, and dramatic character of lesser deities and religious symbolisms. The atmospheric deities which are associated with the structure of the celestial high god do not, however, represent a “tendency towards the concrete.”35 Eliade is careful to point out that the solarization of the celestial high god is not a case of the production of divine forms. The most primary intuition of the sky as a religious structure among the most archaic peoples already allows us to see the totality of the meaning of this religious symbolism, and this totality corresponds to the most profound religious experience. Wherever the religious experience associated with this type of symbolism occurs, we have a tendency toward monotheism. Paul Radin rightly associates

32 Eliade, Patterns . . . , p. 242.
33 Ibid., p. 54.
34 Ibid., p. 54.
“monotheism” among primitive peoples with certain types of men, for it is always the exceptional person, the religious genius, who is capable of the most profound and intense religious experience, and this type of man is found in every period and culture.

Raffaele Pettazzoni in one of his latest discussions of the problem of the Supreme Being offers an alternative view. Pettazzoni has distinguished three types of supreme beings, the Celestial Supreme Being, Mother Earth, and the Lord of animals. Each one of these types has its own history and phenomenology. Neither seems to be an exemplary model for the others. They are all aspects of the more fundamental religious form of supreme being. The religious form of the Supreme Being springs from man’s existential anxiety. This existential anxiety will take on a religious form which is consistent with the culture and historical circumstances in which it occurs.

Pettazzoni rejects G. van der Leeuw’s distinction between Yahweh and the Supreme Being. Van der Leeuw had contrasted Yahweh’s power, will, personality, jealousy, and intervention in human history with the Supreme Being’s distance and passivity. For Pettazzoni these apparent contradictions between the two sets of descriptions is resolved by seeing them as “two aspects of a unique two-sided structure, one cosmic and the other human: on the one side the creation of the world and its conservation in status quo, as a condition that guarantees the existence and endurance of the universe; on the other side the establishment of the social order and its restoration when man has subverted it.”

It is good to have an emphasis such as Pettazzoni’s made in this context. The analysis of religious structures should never be undertaken apart from history. I have insisted on the same point in this paper, but the specifically religious question still remains, even after we have dealt with history. Pettazzoni refers to this non-historical dimension of the problem when he speaks of existential anxiety. I should rather speak of revelation, for this term places the problem in its proper context. To be sure, the modalities through which the sacred is mediated to us are products of history, but we must ask whether the reality to which we respond through the various modalities is also just a symbolization of historical conditions. Is it not possible for the modalities of history to reveal to us something quite

36 Monotheism among Primitive People, Ethnol. Museum (Basel, Switzerland, 1954). (Also issued as Special Publication of Bollingen Foundation, No. 4).


38 Ibid., pp. 63-64.
fundamental about the nature of ultimate reality and at the same
time something quite fundamental about the nature of man? Eliade's
argument concerning the Celestial Supreme Being would lead us to
this conclusion. The celestial structure of the Supreme Being points
to something which is basic to the religious life as such—a desire for
transcendence and a total response to what is revealed as ultimate
reality. The abstract phrase "existential anxiety" would not enable
us to make this judgment.

Now it is a commonly held notion that the structure of the celestial
Supreme Being is most prevalent among pastoral nomads. The phys-
ical and religious accessibility of the phenomena of the sky among
these peoples leads one to this conclusion. However, two facts should
be borne in mind. First, we know of no tribe or culture that worships
only a celestial high god and, secondly, the celestial Supreme Being
occurs among peoples who are not pastoral nomads. I am suggesting
here that the religious meaning of the celestial Supreme Being or
high god is as much a product of religious experience as it is of history.
Religious experience seems to predicate a tendency toward a structure
which approximates the modality of the celestial high god. Historical
conditions may be the efficient cause, but not the prime cause in the
structural symbolism of the celestial high god.

Wach, in extending his first criterion for the authentic religious
experience, quoted William James's remarks on this subject: "It is
as if there were in the human consciousness a sense of reality, a feeling
of objective presence, a perception of what we may call 'something
there,' more deep and more general than any of the particular senses."39
It is this characteristic of the human consciousness which predisposes
man to have a specific religious experience. The structure of the
celestial Supreme Being or high god seems to correspond to this
primordial level of the human consciousness. If we can understand
how this religious phenomenon approximates a more fundamental
predisposition for religious experience, another factor emphasized by
Wach must be taken into account. His fourth criterion states that
religious experience is practical, that it involves an imperative, a

58. In this connection another psychological interpretation should be mentioned.
I refer to Rosemary Gordon's "God and the Deintegrates," Journal of Analytical
Psychology, VIII, No. 1 (1963), 25-43. Miss Gordon sees a correlation between
the "pieces of God" (the concrete and lesser deities who push the high god into
the background), and the psychological growth of the individual. "The diffraction
of God, just as the deintegration of the self, forms the basis for differentiation and
for the emergence of separateness and individuality" (p. 42). The importance of
this analysis is that it emphasizes the enduring morphology of the high-god as a
structure of the psyche. By this method she is able to avoid the intellectualistic
and ethical emphasis of O'Connell.

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commitment which impels man to act. This is followed by another proposition which states, “religious experience tends towards expression.” It is this element in the religious experience which may explain the withdrawal and substitution of the high god in favor of lesser deities who define the concrete dimensions of existence. The withdrawal of the high god,

the passage from “creator” to “fecundator,” this slipping of the omnipotence, transcendence and impassiveness into the dynamism, intensity, and drama of the new atmospheric, fertilizing, vegetation figures, is not without significance. It makes clear that one of the main factors in the lowering of people’s conception of God... is the more and more all-embracing importance of vital values and of “Life” in the outlook of economic man.41

Can it be the practical element in the religious experience and the overpowering need for expression which is alluded to in this historical summary?

The variable features in the structure and morphology of the high god are related to the constant and essential features of this form. I cannot agree with Horton’s understanding of these variable features. He believes that the worship of the high god is related to size of the population and its active contact with the wider world. He states: “We know that, in general, the lesser gods provide an interpretation of the special features of the microcosm formed by a limited population maintaining intensive social integration within a limited territorial area, whilst the high-god provides an interpretation of the world seen as a whole.”42

His other explanation of the variable features is described by the ascription-achievement variable. If the individual’s status is ascribed by ascription, the community will dictate his value symbol. Thus the idea of the lesser gods comes to the fore. If achievement plays the greater part in value determination, explanations of individual vicissitudes may refer not to the lesser deities but to the high god who is concerned with the wider order of things.

Both of these explanations are external to the subject matter under discussion. In addition, the first explanation is contrary to the historical factors. The symbolism and worship of the high god is most prevalent among pastoral nomads, relatively small groups of people. In general these peoples always manifest a suspicion of city life and agriculturalists—the basic factors in the growth of large, stable populations. It is precisely in the agricultural city centers that the worship of the high god is weakened by the proliferation of lesser deities.

40 Wach, op. cit., p. 33.
41 Eliade, Patterns . . . , p. 127.
42 Horton, op. cit., p. 134.
The second explanation is sociological, and though it may clarify the relationship between sociological categories and ethical values, it does not offer an adequate explanation of the religious symbolism. It is possible that Horton is here attempting to modify Radin's position concerning primitive monotheism. I would rather look for the explanations in history, because in history we are able to deal with the intrinsic relationship between the events of time and space and the enduring religious structure.

If certain cultic activities still center around the high god in West Africa, the religious-historical explanation may be seen in the assimilation of concrete lesser deities to a more basic structure of religious experience which had been revealed at one time in the history of West Africa. Baumann reports that for most of the West Sudanic peoples one can observe a double veneration of a sky deity and an earth deity, but in the majority of cases only the sky deities are the first creators, the earth deities creating only indirectly. He reports that the Bobo know a god, Dofini, who is a "dieu generateur." However, this creator god lives in the earth. Baumann explains this rather paradoxical situation by pointing to the strongly developed Old Sudanic cultural elements which still dominate among the Bobo. Baumann also interprets the use of caste formations in West Africa to the tension between an aristocratic clan which subjugated the older cultivators. This tension is expressed in the myth by the repression of the earth-cult and the identification of the ruling class with the sun-sky-god. Baumann's analysis is worked out along cultural historical lines. Religiously speaking, we are able to see the assimilation of the concrete deities to the power and transcendence of a sky-god. Even the old matriarchal god of the Bobo tends to take on some of the power of a sky-god.

The inheritance of the structure of the high god cannot be understood in purely historical terms. We have no myths from those West African peoples who discovered the high god, yet this structure continues in West Africa because it is that religious symbolism which approximates the religious experience par excellence.

Finally, a word should be said about monotheism. It is clear from a study of the history of religions that a monotheistic tendency exists in all religions. It is, however, only in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that this tendency has become the dominant characteristic of the religious life. The powerful word of God which descends to create the vital life forms of Genesis 1 is coupled with the powerful verbal

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43 Schöpfung und Urzeit . . . , pp. 146.
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ascent of the word by the prophets—a word which places all concrete forms of life under the dominion of the high god again.

I agree with Pettazzoni that monotheism is a rather late form of religion. It is late because the power of the high god is enhanced by taking unto himself again all of the particular powers which have been revealed since his withdrawal, but as a religious norm, it has always been there—an enduring structure of the religious experience itself.

The historian of religions may often be tempted to make a sharp dichotomy between history and religion. We must never forget that man is a spiritual being by virtue of history and that he is a historical being by virtue of his spiritual life. These two important dimensions must always be held together.