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**James McClenon. *Wondrous Healing: Shamanism, Human Evolution, and the Origin of Religion*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002. Pp. x + 216. \$40.00 (Cloth); \$19.95 (Paper).**

[1] One of the most pressing questions for social scientists in the nineteenth century was that of origins. While biologists sought the origin of species, social scientists sought the origins of social institutions such as marriage, kinship, family, and religion. These quests were gradually abandoned due to a lack of empirical data and the breaking of the cultural evolutionary paradigm by such social theories as functionalism, which sought to understand society by its internal mechanisms of cohesion, and historical particularism, which examined traceable social development rather than speculating on institutional origins. Ultimately the stringent requirements of empirical verifiability and the focus on fieldwork cooled the social scientists' ardor for origins.

[2] The interest in origins of human behavior was revived in the 1970s with the emergence of such theories as sociobiology, whose main proponent was Edward O. Wilson, and biogrammar, a theory of Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox that stated that human behavior is indeed genetically encoded. It is more interesting and timely that the author focuses on shamanism, making the text not only a study of origins but also a potential sanctioning of the revival of a behavior which has become politically charged: the growth of shamanic practice. Many indigenous people claim that this set of beliefs belongs exclusively to their cultural patrimony and want to exclude non-Natives from its specific practice. The text contends that shamanism is inherent in our biological roots and thus a universal practice. While this book focuses entirely on the biological origins of shamanism, it is an artifact of a larger cultural fascination with the "other" which began with the age of romanticism and exploration.

[3] From my vantage as a cultural anthropologist, James McClenon's text is well written and stimulating, but essentially problematic. Even the publisher describes it as "controversial and daring," because it revisits the contention that biological evolution can account for both the origin and continuity of cultural elements in general, specifically, in this study, the origins of religion. McClenon claims that shamanism is the first religious form, theorizing that ritual

healing "has had evolutionary impact, shaping the biological propensity for religious belief and ritual" (4). Evolutionarily, according to the author, those who were most susceptible to hypnotism would likely be cured by placebo and hypnotic suggestion offered by shamans. These people would also be the most likely to be helped through difficult birthing processes, provided the source of difficulty was psychosomatic rather than biological. Ultimately these successful adapters or, if you will, bio-cultural mutations, survive, reproduce and pass on their genes, which, according to the author, encodes susceptibility to hypnosis. Shamans themselves are individuals who are biologically predisposed to hypnosis and anomalous experience. Thus religion, which the author links in its primary form as intimately connected to healing, is ultimately genetically based, at least in its origins. Religion has an evolutionary impact according to this theory, because it provides a survival mechanism that favors those who are suggestible and therefore curable, more likely to live to maturity and pass on their genes.

[4] The rest of the text is used to bolster this notion by presenting the author's search for proof of his theory in the literature on human evolution, the study of primates, speculation about proto-humans, examination of ethnography, reflection on personal experiences such as fire walking, creating his own behavioral evolutionary scenarios, and analysis of data on paranormal experiences he himself has gathered in the field as well as data provided by students in his classes. His language about his beliefs waffles between doctrinaire statement of fact and carefully couched speculation.

[5] The author makes some remarkable claims about early humans and proto-humans such as "shamanic healing has probably been used for 30,000 years" (8) and that hominids probably practiced a form of shamanism. There is no indication why 30,000 should be the magic number. He also claims that shamanism did not spread from society to society but was formed spontaneously through the universal evolutionary process of the natural selection for those with a propensity towards anomalous experience and thus curability. Historical particularists would clearly take exception to this assumption, pointing to the traceable diffusion of such beliefs as 19th century spiritualism. The author critiques the nineteenth century social theories of the religions origins, claiming that only a biological explanation of origins can be scientifically valid and dismissing them as purely speculative and without material evidence. To his credit he does not completely reject the effects of culture. He also critiques anthropology as too particularistic and unable to look at the larger evolutionary picture and the consistency of this form of religion across cultures. He complains that anthropology has been reluctant to look at the paranormal and physiological consequences of ritual, forgetting the works of such scholars as Rodney Needham, Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, each of whom studied these very things. Despite his statistics on percentages of people susceptible to hypnosis and paranormal experience, he fails to empirically isolate an identifiable gene or genes that account for these phenomena, looking only at effects without solid evidence of causes.

[6] While I am quite intrigued by the work because of its broadly speculative nature and interesting propositions, the work remains problematic. The author separates out shamanism from its cultural embeddedness and treats it as a thing-in-itself. Thus we neither understand how a particular culture understands shamanism, religion, hypnotism or healing, nor discern whether what is anomalous in one culture is normal and unremarkable in another.

[7] There are glaring research flaws as well. The author tells us how his translator in Okinawa believed that all spiritual healing is based in hypnotic process (58), but McClennon never considers how this strong belief might color his translators' work and results and simply play into his preconceptions. He also uses student data, but he does not explain how he prevents his own strong theoretical position from predisposing his students to their mentor's biases.

[8] What I find fascinating about the work is that it fits so well with a contemporary social interest in shamanism, as well as a broad modern infatuation with the "primitive" that dates back to the age of romanticism and its desire to return to the roots of religion to rediscover its primal authenticity. The latest manifestation of this drive is found in many elements of what is loosely called the New Age movement. While it is highly probable that, early in human history, there were religious practitioners and healers and that the two functions very well could have overlapped, why select the term "shamanism" which itself is from a specific language (Tungus) and describes a very specific set of behaviors? The author replies that indeed shamanism was and remains universal and warns against the particularism that isolates this phenomenon. The work does closely match current interest not only in the theoretical origins of shamanism but also in its revival among societies that have no historical continuity to shamanic practice. Of course the author will argue that the roots are not historical or cultural but, in fact, biological. The present day revival is not the explicit agenda of this author in this work which is decidedly sociobiological and psychobiological in its orientation, but the larger social context of the revival of "primal" religion is clearly a motivation for this interest.

[9] The author, quite aware of the controversial nature of his theory, ends the work with a defense of his stance. Ultimately I found the work provocative and challenging, although given the stance of cultural anthropology and the current state of genetic research and understanding, I cannot prove or disprove his basic theory. It is good to have paradigms nudged even if they are not successfully shifted. He provides some interesting data that certainly would catch student interest and he presents a coherent argument. The work does bring to life a series of classic oppositions in the social sciences, which researchers have struggled with since its inception: the relationship of individuals to society, personal experience to social learning, and, most of all, biology to culture. This is a work that more stirs the pot than puts a lid on it, and thus it would be fascinating reading for students already well versed in these basic issues, as well as those interested in religion, its origins, and, dare I say naturally, in shamanism.

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