CHAPTER FOUR

Shamans, Priests, and Prophets

Where and how do religious leaders get their power? What is the distinction between a shaman and a priest, or a prophet and a priest? How do sorcerers, diviners, and magicians differ? This chapter introduces the topic of religious specialists.

Any member of society may approach the supernatural on an individual basis; for example, a person may kneel to the ground, all alone, and recite a prayer for help from the spiritual world. But the religions of the world, whether small, animistic cults, or the "great faiths," also have intermediaries: religious people who, acting as part-time or full-time specialists, intervene on behalf of an individual client or an entire community. Paul Radin (1937: 107) argued that the development of religion can be traced to the social roles undertaken by each of these "priest-thinkers"—at once, a philosopher of religion, a theologian of beliefs, a person who is the recognized master of worship.

If all religions appear to have specialists, anthropologists have also found that some societies place more emphasis on these religious experts than others do. Robert Textor has noted, for example, that the societies that are more likely to have religious specialists tend to produce food rather than collect it, use money as a medium of exchange, and display different social classes and a complex political system (1967). In other words, the more complex the society, the greater is the likelihood of having religious intermediaries.

The anthropological literature devoted to religious specialists is extensive. However, careful reading suggests that many writers, especially in the past, imposed definitions of religious roles (such as shaman or priest) that may only loosely have had anything to do with the experience of participants. Rather than insisting on a single, correct definition of "shaman," for example, it might be most useful to recognize the limitations of scholarly vocabulary and focus on the particularities of any given example. Because of limitations on the application of biomedical (Western) therapy in the Third World, traditional doctors play a crucial role in healing (Hepburn 1988: 68). Shamans, for example, have duties and religious obligations that differ from society to society, although their basic duty of curing through the use of the supernatural is accepted by anthropologists. J. M. Atkinson's review article, "Shamanisms Today" (1992), demonstrates the continuing importance of shamanic practices in the contemporary non-Western world. The same kinds of differences exist in the tasks performed by prophets, priests, sorcerers, and others designated as "intermediaries" with the supernatural.

In addition to the definitional problem associated with specialists, anthropologists must also determine whether to place the tasks performed by these experts under the rubric of "the religious" or to create other categories for such activities. Is the performance of magic, witchcraft, and sorcery "religious" behavior, or are these examples of nonreligious, indeed antireligious acts? If those who practice these acts are outside the religious realm, then what, if any, connection do they have with the sacred? The real question becomes, What is religion? In Western culture, witchcraft, magic, and sorcery are assigned to the occult and are considered outside of and, ordinarily, counter to religion. In the

non-Western world, however, specialists who take part in these kinds of activities are often considered to be important parts of the total religious belief system. It is a common view in Africa south of the Sahara that people are often designated witches by God, and that sorcerers and magicians receive their power from the spirit world—that is, from supernatural agencies controlled by God. In these terms, is drawing upon supernatural aid from shamans, priests, or prophets more "religious" than turning to magicians, sorcerers, and other specialists who also call upon supernatural agents but for different ends? In light of these questions, anthropologists have found it necessary to consider all specialists whose power emanates from supernatural agents to be in the realm of the religious, although some specialists serve, whereas others harm society through their actions.

Because not all societies contain identical religious specialists, determining why certain specialists exist and others do not is important to our understanding of the structure of a society and its supernatural world, as well as of the causal forces behind good and bad fortune. In societies where witches do not exist, for example, it is frequently malicious ghosts or ancestors who are believed to bring misfortune and illness. In such cases, elders may play an important role as diviners, in contrast to the diviner specialists that exist in other groups. Such data not only aid our understanding of supernatural causation and specialization but also demonstrate the connection between the social structure of the living—the position of the elder in society—and that of the ancestor or ghost in the afterworld.

The difficulty in making distinctions among non-Western specialists may be further realized by considering the position of the religious layleader in the United States. Although not a specialist in the traditional sense, this individual is nevertheless more involved and usually more knowledgeable than the typical church member. Is the layleader significantly different from any non-Western examples of part-time religious specialists? The problem of the degree of participation comes to mind—part-time versus full-time—accompanied by the complicating factor of training—formal versus on-the-job learning, as well as the overall institutional context and history of the activity. Making distinctions such as these is an important part of analytic accounts of religious functionaries.

The five articles that follow tell us much about the religious specialist. Victor W. Turner's lead-off essay introduces the basic terms for different types of religious specialists, as conventionally used by anthropologists regardless of the part of the world under study.

Piers Vitebsky provides an overview of shamanism as understood by anthropologists, focusing on the Inuit and Sora, and with attention to intellectual disagreements over definitions.

Reflecting on research in Peru, Michael Fobes Brown rejects romanticized views of shamanism, reminding readers of the anxiety and violence that may accompany the phenomenon.

The fourth article, by Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, provides a detailed account of priesthood among the Kogi of Colombia. The author focuses on the lengthy and elaborate training young men must undergo to become priests.

Mark R. Mullins concludes the chapter by examining a contemporary prophet, Shoko Asahara, who led Japan's Aum Shinrikyo movement in its tragic assault on Tokyo's subway system in 1995.

References

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