

J. S. Erskine

## A RELIGION OF THE GOLDEN AGE

Ancient traditions place the Golden Age at the creation of man. Today we place it more prosaically in the Upper Paleolithic period, roughly 40,000-10,000 B.C., during which *Homo sapiens* achieved a level of stature and intelligence which has never been exceeded. Since then our progress has been in culture and society rather than in the improvement of the individual.

The human brain developed slowly, and during the Lower Paleolithic period smaller-brained races were in the majority and were limited to the areas of the world that suffered little or no winter. In the intervals between ice-ages, adventurous hunters moved northward into open lands rich in game though exacting in climate. Here larger brains and stature were needed, and several types of big-brained men developed in the colder areas of Eurasia and Africa, while smaller-brained men remained in the tropics, adapting themselves rather to heat and a greater variety of parasites and predators.

It is unlikely that small-brained man lacked religion, since his behaviour had become too complex to rely upon instincts. However, the first trace of religion in man has been found in Neanderthal man, capable and intelligent people, the first to wear skin clothing and to bury their dead. A related people moved even farther northward on the steppes where greater agility and more elaborate culture were needed. In the latter half of the Wurm ice-age, the cold became more severe, and many of these hunters scattered, some to the caves of southern Europe and northern Africa, others to Alaska by way of the Bering Sea, at that time dry, and some later to Australia.

Today we consider all mankind to be *Homo sapiens*, and it is often assumed that big-brained hunters exterminated the small-brained, but there is little evidence of this, while small-brained types are found in all races. Mankind has never shown unwillingness to mate with anything human, and it would have been very difficult for steppe hunters to make a living in tropical forest without assistants with local knowledge, and a hybrid stock would probably be more resistant to local diseases and conditions.

What else did these hunters bring with them? In recent years, glotto-chronology has given us estimates of the dates when languages separated from

each other, and this has never been older than the Upper Paleolithic period. No doubt, small-brained man used language long before this, but it is perhaps to the point that ancient races, such as the Congo pygmies and the Bushmen, have adopted languages from their neighbours in the same way that they have borrowed many of their skills. Possibly a more developed language was as advantageous to them as an improved tool.

Some of the finest bifacial spearpoints come from the Solutrean caves of France, from Egypt, from the American prairies and the Maritime Provinces, and yet are almost similar. Smaller bifacials turn up in many other places in the same period. Fragments of custom and culture are widely scattered. The Micmac wigwam faces its door to the south to make use of the sunlight. The men turn to the right, the women to the left. It is not surprising that such a convention should be found in other Algonkian tribes and even in the Eskimos, but it turns up also among the Kalahari Bushmen, Iron-age Britons, in Jewish synagogues and in Orthodox churches. How is it that the Indians tell many of the same stories as Uncle Remus and the Nancy tales of Jamaica, and have the same tricksters, the rabbit and the spider? Is it accidental that the name of the Bear was given to the same constellation by the Greeks and the Micmacs?

Perhaps the purest descendants of the Upper Paleolithic are the American Indians, since they found two continents free from earlier races and large enough to maintain a population of hunters. In Eurasia, as the ice melted away, forests returned and the crowded and diminished herds moved northward, followed by some of the hunters. Those who remained in the south had to turn to an increase of vegetable diet, which led on to agriculture, or they protected the remaining herds and became pastoral. Much the same development took place in Mexico and South America where game was less common, and they, too, "in the sweat of their faces ate bread". But in the north, until the invasion of Mexican and European cultures, the Indians were able to continue the life of their ancestors of the Golden Age.

It is unfortunate that no one attempted to understand and record the religion of the Micmac Indians until they had passed two centuries as Christians, and, when legends and myths were gathered later, they were usually treated as amusing tales for children. With the vanity of the omniscient, missionaries tramped down the old religion so effectually that today few Micmacs will mention the name of Glooscap, once their god, and the word *Mandu*, their form of *manitou* or "god", has been distorted to mean "devil". Yet this has been the religion of the Golden Age.

Wallis considered that the Micmacs had been sun-worshippers since they

paid their respects to the rising sun, *abaniaqh*, from which came the name of their ancestral tribe, the Abnaki, but the sun played no great part in their mythology. In the beginning there were Glooscap the good and his brother Wolf the evil. (In other tribes these two were born from the sun, but that detail has been lost here.) Each could be killed only by a specific plant. Wolf sought to learn Glooscap's deadly secret, but Glooscap, the wiser, learned Wolf's secret and lied about his own and when Wolf tried in vain to kill him, he struck Wolf with the fatal fern-root and killed him. This tale must have pleased many others than Indians, since the pattern appears in the death of Balder, Achilles and Sigurd, and the fratricidal brothers are known in Cain and Abel, Osiris and Set, the Dioscuri, Romulus and Remus, and Atrik and Eirik.

Glooscap was the creator of the world, animals and man, and the patron of the Micmacs, yet in some stories he was also a trickster like Loks the wolverine. At times, Glooscap was a giant, paddling Merigomish Big Island as his canoe or wetting the soles of his moccasins in wading across Minas Basin, or throwing the Five Islands at the Great Beaver. At other times, he was of human size and wary of the magic of witches. The dangerous uncertainty of nature took the form of the *megoomwazee*, elves of the woods and rocks, though sometimes in animal guise. The more dangerous winter blizzard was seen as Gugwes, the cannibal giant of the north. Animals were respected and killed with their permission. The bear was most nearly divine and, when he had been killed, the wigwam was slit to make a door for him, since his door, like his flesh, must never be touched by women. Moose-bones must never be given to dogs or beaver-bones be dropped into water, since such insults would make them unwilling to be killed.

The Micmac concept of the after-life is uncertain, and it is possible that all the attentions paid to the dead were due to fear of his ghost. This does not mean that there was no family affection, but ghosts were dangerous. Like the cavemen of the Upper Paleolithic, they respected only the bones of the dead. Gifts were put into the grave, and thereafter the name of the deceased must not be spoken for fear of attracting the ghost. Magic was not limited to Medicine-men. Where life was dangerous and uncertain, it was necessary to have complete self-confidence, so every man practised a certain amount of magic and forgot the occasions when it failed to work.

It has often been noticed that Micmac legends resemble some of the Scandinavian myths, and this has been attributed to the Vinland Norse or to the Eskimos. Loks, the mischief-maker, suggests in name Loki, the mischief-maker. Glooscap's fishing for whales from his canoe was close in detail to

Thor's fishing for the world-entwining serpent on the bottom of the sea. It may be noticed that Thor and Loki belong to the Asgard pantheon, the oldest that has survived in the Norse legends, that of the sky-gods and the powers of earth. Yet the Asgard concept is less old than the Micmac pantheon in which only Glooscap has human form and behaviour, but Asgard belongs more nearly to Upper Paleolithic hunters than to its successors, although the principal gods continued in these. Following it came the pantheon of fertility, that of The Golden Bough, the rising dependence upon agriculture and the bounty of the earth goddess, a period of cannibalism and human sacrifice. Later still was the pantheon of war, ruled by Odin, when man had learned that the most profitable game was man himself.

Resemblances to Genesis have been attributed to missionaries, but this is doubtful. Indians told Champlain that Glooscap had made men from arrows; three centuries later, a Micmac told Wallis that Glooscap had made man from clay, a common explanation in other tribes. During the Great Flood, Glooscap came out with swimming animals in his canoe and sent one after the other to seek the bottom of the sea until the fourth, muskrat, brought up a clod of mud from which Glooscap fashioned the world. Such a myth is world-wide and must have come with the Indians across the Bering Sea. If ever we can date with assurance the various crossings of Indian ancestors into America, we may be able to date the original myths.

Indian tribes share these myths in varied form, but not all are limited to the pre-Asgard pantheon. Athabaskan tribes, thought to have arrived more recently, have much more violent myths, which may be due to their often aggressive customs or may have been brought from a disturbed Asia. The corn-worship of the Maya and the Aztecs has some resemblance to the fertility pantheon of the Fertile Crescent and yet may have developed similar customs with the crops. But the religion of the Micmacs was designed for a world of animals and men, joyous because it fitted the inherited instincts of man in spite of the threats of winter, Gugwes, magic and starvation. So, through many thousand years this religion remained satisfactory, unchallenged by overcrowding or a failure of food.

It has been suggested that the comic Norse myths, such as the dressing of Thor as bride for a giant, may have been added after the acceptance of Christianity, but it has also been pointed out that similar ridicule has occurred also in Christianity, as in the Festival of Fools. The value of religion lies in its bonding of a community into an effective pattern of behaviour. Its promises of protection and success give needed confidence and strengthen the com-

munity, sometimes at the expense of the individual. The fact that the statements of religion spring only from the visions of prophets is beside the point so long as people accept them and profit by them. However, it rarely, if ever, happens that a religion remains unquestioned. Leaders seem always to become tainted by selfishness; the society recognizes this, and the first result is ridicule, the second revolt. The Micmac religion had very little of the Trickster revolt, which may be due to its isolated position. Until the encroachment of agriculture, around 500 B.C., warfare was a minor factor in life. To the last the chief was both medicine-man and leader in war, so mockery of the old gods was much less than among expanding and shifting agricultural tribes.

But now Glooscap has disappeared. A legend tells that the French captured him and placed him in the muzzle of a cannon and exploded it, leaving him undisturbed. It was not so much the Europeans who killed him but the Micmas themselves who sold their culture for metal tools and brandy and accepted Christianity with these. But gods do not die quickly. The dam of the Great Beaver still curves around Cape Split where Glooscap broke it open. Once Glooscap paddled the Bird Island as his canoe, but it ran aground. He waded ashore, pulling it behind him, but he was too strong, and it tore apart as one may see. Micmacs still find the tiny footprints of *megoomwazee* on the sand and hear their thin voices in the clefts of the cliffs. Blake would have understood what these things meant to a people whose country this was. "And did those feet in ancient times/walk on Cape Breton's mountains green?"

It has been a great step from the Golden Age to the reserves and a new religion, but not all is forgotten. A Micmac friend who approved of my interest in his people, told me where He (no name mentioned) had dug his own grave on an island. He told his people to open the grave in a hundred years and he would tell them the future of the Micmacs. At the time appointed, several men set out in a canoe, but before they reached the island their courage failed and they turned back. There was a great clap of thunder from the empty sky, and they fled. However, if I were to go there and open the grave, I could learn all things. I was grateful for the information, but I left Him in peace. It was good to know that he had not wholly perished.

#### SOURCES

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