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## DREAMS THROUGH THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

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“Explain all that,” said the Mock Turtle.

“No, no! The adventures first,” said the Gryphon in an impatient tone: “explanations take such a dreadful time.”

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

### Dreams and Religion

The most widespread and longest-standing interest humans have taken in dreams has been in their religious meaning. People in virtually every culture throughout history have reported dreams of gods, spirits, and demons. People have looked to their dream experiences for insights about the soul, the afterlife, and the destiny of both individual and communal existence. They have drawn upon their dreams for spiritual guidance to heal their suffering, to overcome their troubles, and to pursue a good, fulfilling life. Likewise, people from the modern West<sup>1</sup> have also taken a deep interest in the religious meaning of dreams. Many modern Westerners have looked at the ways that dreams can motivate religious belief, either reinforcing adherence to an established religious tradition or spurring the pursuit of new spiritual ideals. Like people from other cultures, modern Westerners have tried to understand how to interpret dreams, how to distinguish dreams that may be religiously meaningful from dreams that are trivial or insignificant, and how to learn from their dreams what makes for a fulfilling life.

In this work we will focus on dreams and religious meaning in modern Western culture, critically examining the most important twentieth-century theories on this subject. As we conduct this examination we will come up against a number of difficulties, problems, and mysteries—as with dreams themselves, nothing in the study of dreams is simple or self-

evident. We will therefore need a great deal of patience, a deep capacity for critical self-reflection, and a healthy respect for ambiguity. We will also need the aid of guides from outside the study of dreams to help us overcome the difficulties we will encounter within the areas of dream research. These guides will enable us to pursue the ultimate goal of this work: to develop a new approach to the religious meaning of dreams, an approach that is theoretically sound, practically useful, and appropriate to the distinctive nature of modern Western culture.

To begin, we need to undertake a brief historical review of the various ways that different cultures and traditions have understood the religious meaning of dreams.<sup>2</sup> Such a review could easily expand into a book of its own, so we will have to content ourselves with discussing only a few prominent examples (additional examples and references will be provided in the endnotes to this chapter). I have loosely organized these examples into the following three categories: dreams of the divine and the demonic; dreams influencing religious practices and beliefs; and theories of interpreting religiously meaningful dreams.<sup>3</sup>

### Dreams of the Divine and the Demonic

People from countless religious traditions have reported dreams of gods, spirits, saints, and various other divine powers. A religious poem from the ancient Near Eastern kingdom of Akkadia describes a young prince's afflictions, which have brought him near death; the god Marduk comes to him in a series of three dreams and restores the prince to health (Oppenheim 1956, 217, 250). In Homer's *Odyssey* the goddess Athena appears to Penelope in a dream, calming her sorrow and reassuring her that Odysseus will soon return (Homer 4.772ff.). Athena also makes a dream visit to the young princess Nausikaa, just before Nausikaa encounters a naked, bedraggled Odysseus washed up from the sea; in the princess's dream Athena proclaims, "Maidenhood must end!" (Homer 6.1ff.) The Jewish patriarch Jacob has a dream vision of a great ladder spanning heaven and earth, with angels ascending and descending it (Gen. 28.10–22). The Sufi mystic Shamsoddin Lahihi (d. 1506) describes a visionary dream in which he soars into Heaven, "like an arrow shooting forth from the bow" and sees "that the entire universe, in the structure it presents, consists of light" (Corbin 1966, 396–97). Bishop Bruno of Toul, later Pope Leo IX, is reported to have had the following dream:

[He] saw in his dream a deformed old woman who haunted him with great persistency and treated him with great familiarity. She was

hideously ugly, clothed in filthy rags, her hair dishevelled and altogether he could scarce recognize in her the human form. Disgusted with her general appearance Bruno tried to avoid her; but the more he shrunk from her the more she clung to him. Annoyed at this importunity, Bruno made the sign of the cross; whereupon she fell to the earth as dead and rose up again lovely as an angel. (Brook 1987, 227)

Many Australian aboriginal tribes believe that the spirits of dead people visit the living in their dreams. These spirits provide dreamers with special knowledge, songs, and magical charms (Howitt 1904, 434–42). Similarly, many Native Americans tell of dreams in which appear the spirits of great ancestors, of animals, and of natural forces like the wind and the sun (Kenton 1929).<sup>4</sup>

People in a number of cultures have also reported frightening, nightmarish dreams of devils, demons, evil spirits, and the more destructive aspects of the divine. The *Rig Veda*, one of the oldest written texts in history, contains a number of hymns that refer to the evil spirits that afflict people in their dreams (O’Flaherty 1981, 218, 288, 292). The Babylonian epic *Gilgamesh* describes a series of harrowing nightmares that plague the hero: in the last of these nightmares,

The heavens cried out; earth roared.  
Daylight vanished and darkness issued forth.  
Lightning flashed, fire broke out,  
Clouds swelled; it rained death.  
The glow disappeared, the fire went out,  
[And all that] had fallen turned to ashes.

(Gardner and Maier 1984, 140)

In the Old Testament Job is besieged by awful, terrifying dreams; he pleads with God, saying “When I say, ‘My bed will comfort me, my couch will ease my complaint,’ then thou dost scare me with dreams and terrify me with visions, so that I would choose strangling and death rather than my bones” (Job 7.13–15). The Greek God Zeus sends Agamemnon a “lying dream” in the *Iliad*, a seemingly encouraging dream that convinces the warrior to engage in a battle which actually leads to his death (Homer 1951, 2.5ff.) Through the Middle Ages, Christian convents in Europe were afflicted by epidemics of nightmares, in which demonic succubi attacked nuns in their dreams (Jones 1951, 84). The early Puritan leader John Bunyan tells of recurrent childhood nightmares in which he is haunted by “the apparitions of Devils and wicked spirits, who . . . labored to draw me away with them” (Hill 1967, 100). Contemporary Moroccans often report dreams of jinn (Islamic demons); a frequent dream visitor is

the she-demon *Asiah Qandisha*, a jinn who may take the form of a beauty or a hag but who always has feet of a camel or some other hoofed animal (Crapanzano 1975, 147).<sup>5</sup>

Many times the founder of a new religious movement will describe a dream that had a decisive influence in motivating him or her to lead the new movement. Guatama Buddha is said to have had a series of five dreams that directed him towards the path of enlightenment (Wayman 1967, 7). Muhammed's religious mission, as well as portions of the Koran, were revealed to him in a dream (Bland 1877, 120). The founders of many Melanesian Cargo Cults, nineteenth- and twentieth-century religious movements that anticipate the arrival of gods bearing new wealth, were inspired by their dreams (Burridge 1960; Stephen 1979). The Jamaican prophet Kapo discovered his mission as the leader of a new Afro-Christian religious movement in two dreams when he was twelve years old; in the first dream Jesus takes a bottle and anoints Kapo from head to foot, and in the second seventy-two angels with trumpets tell Kapo to go out and preach to his community (Lanternari 1975, 226–28). Moses Armah, founder of the Action Church among the Nzema people of Southwest Ghana, was inspired by a series of revelatory dreams, in one of which he is instructed to reject a long banana and to eat a short one—meaning, he believed, that he must reject the established churches and found a new one himself (Lanternari 1975, 224–26).<sup>6</sup>

Just as dreams have motivated people to found new religious movements, so dreams have also led people to convert to an established religious tradition. Buddhist monks frequently used the interpretation of an Oriental king's dream as a means of converting the king and his realm to Buddhism (O'Flaherty 1984, 37). Satuq Bughra Khan (d. 955), an Arab tribal chief, led his people into the Islamic community based on a dream in which he was commanded by heaven to convert to Islam (von Grunebaum 1966, 13–14). Emmanual Swedenborg initiated his explorations of Christian mysticism after he had a series of revelatory dreams (Toksvig 1948).<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the history of religions a major interest in dreams has been in their prophetic powers. Many religious traditions have stories and legends of dreams that foretell the future, revealing the fates of both individuals and communities.<sup>8</sup> Among the dreams that are prophetic of individual destinies, one of the most common themes is the birth of a great spiritual leader. There are many accounts of pregnant women dreaming of the religiously momentous future of their soon-to-be-born child. In the Jainist tradition the mothers of spiritual heroes are said to dream a series of fourteen special dreams the night of their conception (Sharma and Siegel 1980, 3). Buddha's mother is said to have dreamed of a white elephant entering her womb, the elephant being a common Indian symbol of

greatness, stability, and strength (Wayman 1967, 2; Sharma and Siegel 1980, 27–28). The mother of the second Abbasid caliph al-Mansur (d. 775) saw in a dream “a lion come from her loins, crouch with a roar, and beat the ground with its tail. Other lions arose on all sides and pressed towards him, each coming to prostrate himself” (Fahd 1966, 352). Monica, the mother of Augustine of Hippo (d. 430), had the following dream, which preceded not his physical birth but what she saw as his spiritual rebirth as a Christian:

She dreamed that she was standing on a wooden rule, and coming towards her in a halo of splendour she saw a young man who smiled at her in joy, although she herself was sad and quite consumed with grief. He asked her the reason for her sorrow and her daily tears, not because he did not know, but because he had something to tell her, for this is what happens in visions. When she replied that her tears were for the soul I had lost, he told her to take heart for, if she looked carefully, she would see that where she was, there also was I. And when she looked, she saw me standing beside her on the same rule. (Augustine 1961, *Confessions*, bk. 3, chap. 11)<sup>9</sup>

Another common theme of prophetic dreams relates to the other end of the life cycle, namely death. Myths and religious texts from all over the world present dreams in which individual deaths are foretold. In *Gilgamesh* the hero's companion, Enkidu, has a dream in which he is taken to the underworld, “to the house of ashes,” presaging his death (Gardner and Maier 1984, 177–82). The Egyptian baker's dream, which Joseph interprets in Genesis, chapter 40, indicates that he will be executed by the Pharaoh. Confucius reportedly received a premonition of his coming death in a dream, in which “he saw himself seated between the two pillars of the platform in front of his house, receiving offerings due to the dead”; he died seven days later (Laufer 1931, 211). Perpetua of Carthage, a third-century Christian martyr, had the following dream while in prison awaiting her execution:

I saw a ladder of tremendous height, made of bronze, reaching all the way to the heavens, but it was so narrow that only one person could climb up at a time. To the side of the ladder were attached all sorts of metal weapons: swords, spears, hooks, daggers, spikes; so that if anyone tried to climb up carelessly or without paying attention, he would be mangled and his flesh would adhere to the weapons. At the foot of the ladder lay a dragon of enormous size, and it would attack those who tried to climb up and terrify and so discourage them from trying. “He

will not harm me," I said, "in the name of Christ." Slowly, as though he were afraid of me, the dragon stuck his head out from underneath the ladder. Using it as my first step, I trod on his head and went up. Then I saw an immense garden, and in it a grey-haired man sat in shepherd's clothes. Tall he was, and milking sheep. He called me over to him and gave me a mouthful of the curds he was drawing; and I took it into my cupped hands and ate it. And all those who stood around said, "Amen!" At the sound of this word I woke up, with the taste of something sweet still in my mouth. (Miller 1986, 156)<sup>10</sup>

Dreams have also been seen as prophetic of a community's destiny. Such dreams are reported most often in situations where a community is threatened by some conflict or danger. The book of Genesis shows Abram when he fled from Egypt and was trying to lead the Jewish people through the wilderness to safety; he performed a sacrifice to God, and when the sun went down

A deep sleep fell on Abram; and lo, a dread and great darkness fell upon him. Then the Lord said to Abram, "Know of a surety that your descendants will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs, and will be slaves there, and they will be oppressed for four hundred years; but I will bring judgement on the nation which they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions." (Gen. 15.12–15)<sup>11</sup>

Often such prophetic dreams come in the midst of war. The Babylonian king Ashburnipal's troops feared crossing a raging river; but the king is said to have had a dream of the goddess Ishtar promising to protect their passage, and his dream served to reassure the troops and to revitalize their campaign (Oppenheim 1956, 209, 249). In the Indian epic the *Mahabharata*, the Pandava brothers have dreams the night before a great battle in which various omens appear, indicating their impending victory (O'Flaherty 1984, 31–35). Muhammed mentions that God sent him a dream before the battle at Badr and that in the dream God had intentionally portrayed the enemy as a small band, so as not to discourage Muhammed and his greatly outnumbered troops (Koran 8.43–46).<sup>12</sup>

The value of dreams in foretelling the future of a community's welfare has led many cultures to institute special dream practices in order to make the most effective use of this prophetic resource. Royal courts throughout the ancient Near East employed dream interpreters to reveal the meanings of the king's dreams (Oppenheim 1956). Each morning after prayers Muhammed asked his assembled followers what they had dreamed, to glean from them any messages from God (Fahd, 1959). In

fourteenth-century China dreams were used to guide important political and legal decisions:

It was obligatory for all officials of higher ranks when entering a walled city to pass the first night in the temple of the city god, in order to receive his instructions in a dream. In case of a difficult point in law judges will spend the night in the city god's temple, in the hope that the god will appear to them in a dream and enlighten them on the case in question. (Laufer 1931, 211)

The Blackfoot people of North America held an annual festival in which they married a young woman, representing the moon, to the Sun god; the day after the festival's climax, the woman was to tell her dreams, which were reported to the whole community (Frazer [1890] 1959, 132). The Iroquois people believed that anyone's dreams could be relevant to the tribe's welfare; significant dreams were reported to the community's leaders, and often the whole tribe was moved to action by the demands of one person's dream (Wallace 1958).<sup>13</sup>

#### Dreams Influencing Religious Practices and Beliefs

Such dreams of powerful divine beings have had a great impact on the practices and beliefs of many religious traditions. Religious rituals, prayers, myths, and doctrines have all been directly shaped by dream experiences. One of the most direct ties between dreams and religious practice appears in dream incubation rites—rites by which people actively try to evoke visits from the gods in their dreams. Dream incubation rites are found in a wide variety of religious traditions. There is extensive evidence of these rites in Greek and ancient Near Eastern cultures, where temples devoted to dream incubation flourished for hundreds of years (Hamilton 1906; Dodds 1951; Edelstein and Edelstein 1975; Meier 1967). The main concerns at these temples were to incubate dreams that would reveal prophetic knowledge or would promote the religious healing of a physical ailment (often impotence or infertility). People would undergo a series of ritual purifications, recite prayers to the temple's deity, and then sleep in a special sanctuary; in the morning they would report their dreams to temple officials, who would interpret them.

Similar dream incubation rites have been practiced in other religious traditions. Muslim dream incubation is known as *istikhara*; in it, people desiring a prophetic dream are to recite a special prayer, then lie down on their left sides and go to sleep holding onto their left ears (LeCerf 1966;

Fahd 1959). Medieval European Christians believed that on St. Agnes's night (January 21) young people who said a series of Paternosters before sleeping would dream of their future spouse (Seafeld 1877, 94). Youths of the Ojibwa people of North America left their villages to undergo "dream fasts," in which they slept on special raised platforms, chanted religious songs, and awaited a dream that would reveal their individual guardian spirit (Radin 1936).<sup>14</sup>

Just as people engaged in various religious rites to cultivate dreams of the divine, they also employed different rites and prayers to avoid having evil dreams or to be rid of the bad influences of such dreams. The *Rig Veda* contains this prayer to the sky god Varuna: "If . . . a friend has spoken of danger to me in a dream to frighten me, or if a thief should waylay us, or a wolf—protect us from that, Varuna" (O'Flaherty 1981, 218). An Egyptian dream book suggests that a person who has suffered a bad dream should say a prayer to the goddess Isis and then rub fresh herbs moistened with beer and myrrh on his face (Lewis 1976, 15). The Islamic dream authority Ibn Sirin taught that evil dreams can be avoided by reciting certain verses of the Koran and saying the following prayer before going to sleep: "O Lord, I fly for refuge unto Thee from the evil of unsound dreams, and from the artifices of Satan in sleeping and waking" (Bland 1856, 129).<sup>15</sup>

Another realm of religious practice in which dreams have historically played a major role is in initiation. Dream experiences have in many cultures been used to initiate people into new religious truths, new stages of spiritual awareness, or new religious vocations. The Hindu Upanishads suggest that recognizing how we create our own dream worlds can be a means of recognizing how we create the world of our waking consciousness—a crucial realization on the path towards Enlightenment (O'Flaherty 1984, 17). Tibetan Buddhists have developed yogic techniques to control or "purify" dreams in order to attain higher stages of consciousness (Wayman 1967, 11). The *Zohar*, one of the major texts in Jewish mysticism, views dreams as spiritual journeys in which the dreamer's soul strives to be united with God; the details of each dream reflects the difficulties, obstacles, and demonic powers that the soul has encountered on its journey towards God (Bilu 1979, 446). Shaikh Ahmad Ahsa'i, founder of a nineteenth-century Islamic reformist movement, had a series of visionary dreams during his adolescence that revealed to him the essentials of Shi'ite theosophy (Corbin 1966, 402–3). Many Sufi mystics began their spiritual pursuits because of a special dream in which a religious guide appears and beckons the dreamer (Corbin 1966, 385–86). Contemporary Pakistanis still have dreams of this type, initiating them into the Sufi brotherhood (Ewing 1989).



Dreams are one of the primary means by which shamans of Siberia and Central Asia are initiated into their vocation; these dreams tend to involve extremely violent bodily dismemberment, followed by a renewal of the organs and a revelation of various shamanic teachings (Eliade 1964). The training of a religious healer among the Diegueno of North America reaches its climax in a series of drug-induced initiatory dreams in which the candidate learns of his secret medicine name (Toffelmier and Luomala 1936, 214). Similar initiatory dream experiences occur among the Arunta of Australia (Spencer and Gillen 1904) and the Ojibwa (Radin 1936), the Iroquois (Wallace 1958), and Mohave (Benedict 1922) of North America.<sup>16</sup>

Dreams have also been a source of countless innovations in religious practice. The creation of new temples, rites, songs, and myths in many different cultures have been inspired by dreams. The Sumerian king Gudea had a dream in which a huge god, reaching from earth to heaven, orders Gudea to build a temple to the god (Oppenheim 1956, 245–46). Thutmose IV, an Egyptian king, fell asleep in the shadow of the Sphinx monument and dreamed that the Sphinx asked him to repair the statue, which had been damaged by the desert sands (Oppenheim 1956, 251). The Shi'ite leader Mir Damad had a dream in which the first Islamic Imam taught him a "prayer of protection" (Corbin 1966, 399–400). Mohave shamans learn of special ritual curing songs and of various other healing powers through their dreams (Devereux 1957, 1036). The Navaho make new variations in their traditional myths based on certain individual dream experiences (Morgan 1932). Melanesian peoples are inspired in their dreams to create new magical charms, ceremonial spirit masks, and ritual dances (Stephen 1979, 8–9).<sup>17</sup>

Along with influencing religious practices, dreams have had a tremendous impact on religious beliefs, such as beliefs about the nature of the soul. Orphic philosophers of Greece believed that dreams freed the soul from its imprisonment in the body and allowed it to roam about the world (Dodds 1951, 135ff.). Similarly, the Christian bishop Synesios states that in dreaming the soul is "disengaged from the tumult of the senses, which only bring to it troubles without end from without" and is thus able to perceive God's truths with special clarity (Lewis 1976, 84). Al Razi, a medieval Islamic dream authority, said that dreaming enables the soul to travel to the realm of the angels and gain knowledge of things concealed from our waking minds (Bland 1856, 145). The Ainu, a people inhabiting a series of islands north of Japan, believe that in dreams the soul is released to visit the spirits of the dead (Ohnuki-Tierney 1987). The Iroquois people believe that dreams are the best means of learning of the soul's true desires, which must be fulfilled immediately (Wallace 1958, 236).<sup>18</sup>

### The Interpretation of Religiously Meaningful Dreams

Despite all the valuable contributions dreams have made to religious and spiritual traditions, despite the revelations from divine powers, the prophetic insights into the future, the development of new religious rites and beliefs that dreams have provided, one practical problem has vexed people in virtually every religious tradition: how does one make *sense* of dreams? Dreams tend to be strange, enigmatic, and perplexing; their meanings are rarely plain and straightforward. How then can one learn from good, divinely inspired dreams, protect oneself from evil, demonic dreams, and dispense with trivial, insignificant dreams?<sup>19</sup> How can one accurately *interpret* a dream's true meanings?

The simplest answer to these questions is to reject *all* dreams, no matter how meaningful or religiously significant they may appear to be. For example, Ecclesiastes expresses a deep skepticism toward dreams: "For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words . . . For when dreams increase, empty words grow many" (Eccl. 5.3, 7). Aristotle claims in *Propheying by Dreams* that "it is absurd to combine the idea that the sender of such dreams should be God with the fact that those to whom he sends them are not the best and wisest, but merely commonplace persons" (Aristotle 1941c, 462b). Lucretius, an Epicurean philosopher of Rome (95–55 B.C.), argues that dreams reflect only the preoccupations of the mind and have nothing prophetic or divine about them (Lewis 1976, 32). The Protestant reformer Martin Luther states that "I care nothing about visions and dreams. Although they seem to have meaning, yet I despise them and am content with the sure meaning and trustworthiness of Holy Scripture" (Luther 1945, 7.120). In *Leviathan*, philosopher Thomas Hobbes claims that dreams are caused by "an inward distemper" of the body and that it is impossible ever to verify if a person's dreams really are divinely inspired:

In a Common-wealth, a subject that has no certain and assured Revelation particularly to himself concerning the Will of God, is to obey for such, the Command of the Common-wealth: for if men were at liberty, to take for God's Commandments, their own dreams, and fancies, or the dreams and fancies of private men; scarce two men would agree upon what is God's Commandment; and yet in respect of them, every man would despise the Commandments of the Common-wealth. (Hobbes [1651] 1968, 90, 333)

A Baptist publication from the early nineteenth century in England rejects religiously meaningful dreams in the following terms:

If, therefore, we embark on the trackless ocean of dreams and phantoms of the imagination, we may wander far from the truth, and never see land again . . . [W]e are led to the conclusion that evil angels also effect their purposes by having access to the human mind, and if they can find their way to our imagination when the other mental powers are in lively exercise, there can be no doubt respecting their access to an excited imagination when reason and consciousness are not on the alert. (Seafield 1877, 116)<sup>20</sup>

An equally simple answer to the question of how to interpret the religious meaning in dreams is to refer to a “dream book,” that is, to a symbol dictionary, compiled by recognized authorities, that will automatically clarify any dream image. Such books, which are found in a wide variety of cultures, try to translate confusing, ambiguous dreams into clear, understandable messages. The *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, an early Hindu text, defines the meaning of various dream images; for example, “If a Brahmana takes some body in a chariot and shows him different strata of heaven in a dream, the seer gets an enhanced life and wealth . . . He, who in a dream, gnashes his teeth or sees some body wandering, suffers loss of health” (Bhattacharyya 1970, 32, 36). An ancient Assyrian dream book offers interpretations such as these:

If a man ascends to heaven and the gods bless him, this man will die.

If a man ascends to heaven and the gods curse him, this man will live long.

If he descends into the nether world and the dead appear, an evil spirit will seize this man; the man has received in the dream a reminder of the gods concerning impending doom.

If he descends into the nether world and the dead curse him, there is blessing for him upon the command of the deity, long days.

(Lewis 1976, 17–18)

A medieval Persian treatise states that seeing the dead in a dream means the dreamer “will be safe from sorrow and grief”; seeing the Prophet Muhammed indicates that “long and happy will be his [the dreamer’s] life; and blessed will he be both in this world and in the next” (Hosain 1932, 570–71).<sup>21</sup>

Simply rejecting all dreams or automatically reducing dream symbols to preordained definitions may be common practices, but they by no means exhaust the views of religious traditions towards dreams. On the contrary, a number of cultures have developed far more thoughtful,

sophisticated, and reflective means of dream interpretation. Many religious traditions and spiritual leaders are careful to respect the tremendous complexity of dreams, attending to the wide variety of factors that influence what dreams may mean and using a number of different approaches to interpret them. The following are some examples of relatively more sophisticated means of interpreting the religious meanings of dreams.

The sixty-eighth appendix of the *Athara Veda*, an Indian text from the sixth century A.D., has many of the characteristics of a classically simplistic dream book. However, it actually presents a much more nuanced account of dream interpretation than such symbol dictionaries are generally believed to offer. The *Athara Veda* suggests that different people will have different kinds of dreams according to their distinctive temperaments; thus dreams filled with heat, blood, lightning, and dryness indicate a “fiery” personality, while dreams of cool rivers, moons, and swans point to a “watery” personality. Dreams can come from different sources (some reflect the disturbance of bodily forces, while others are sent by the gods), so their meanings will differ accordingly. The *Athara Veda*’s designation of good and bad omens in dreams is not a random, arbitrary process but rather is directly related to important cultural values, ideals, and restrictions. And dreams are not granted any independent powers over humans; the *Athara Veda* states that if one has dreams but does not become aware of them, the dreams will come to nothing. This suggests that conscious reflection and interpretation of a dream is always necessary for its meanings to emerge (Wayman, 1967; O’Flaherty, 1984).

The Berakhot section of the Babylonian Talmud contains a variety of rabbinic stories, teachings, and reflections on dream interpretation. One common theme throughout this section is that interpreting dreams is an important but very difficult and complex matter. Dreams are always enigmatic and distorted, because “just as there is no wheat without straw, so there is no dream without worthless things” (Ber. 55a). Interpreters must be very careful, then, to separate the genuinely meaningful, revelatory aspects of a dream from the trivial, worthless aspects. A famous aphorism from Berakhot 55a, “A dream that is not interpreted is like a letter that is not read,” illustrates the emphasis rabbinic figures put on interpretation—without conscious elaboration, a dream’s meaning is lost. Most of the actual interpretations contained in Berakhot focus on language, for language is where divine revelation and personal existence meet. Some dreams are interpreted as verbal puns; for example, a dream in which the dreamer’s nose falls off is related to a common verbal expression relating noses and anger, so that the interpretation is that the dreamer has lost his anger (Ber. 56b). Other dreams are tied to Jewish scripture, relating words in dreams to important passages from the Torah (Ber. 56b–57a). The rab-

binic interpreters thus make sense of dreams by relating their imagery to the “shared symbolic code” provided by common language, cultural traditions, and sacred texts (Frieden 1990, 84).

Artemidorus of Daldus is perhaps the most famous dream interpreter of the ancient world. His great work the *Oneirocritica*, composed in the second century A.D., has served as the basis for countless popular dream books and symbol dictionaries. However, as Freud recognized (Freud [1900] 1965, 130), Artemidorus presents a surprisingly sophisticated approach to the interpretation of dreams. He insists that knowing the unique character and life circumstances of a dreamer is crucial to interpreting the meaning of his or her dream; the same dream will mean very different things if had by different people. For example, Artemidorus offers the example of a man dreaming that a woman is giving birth to him, and gives different interpretations according to whether the man is rich or poor, is a slave, an athlete, abroad on a trip, ill, involved in a legal dispute, has a wife who is or is not pregnant (23). Along with concentrating on the dreamer’s vocation, family relations, and social status, Artemidorus also examines the specific details of each dream; for again, the slightest difference can entirely alter the interpretation. Thus dreams of sexual relations with one’s mother are “complex and many-faceted, admitting of many a nice distinction . . . The mere act of intercourse is not enough by itself to indicate what is portended, but the different embraces and positions of the bodies make for different outcomes” (61–64). Furthermore, Artemidorus takes into account the particular customs, religious beliefs, and literary traditions of the dreamer’s culture when he interprets a dream.

Synesios, a Christian bishop of Ptolemais in the early fifth century, wrote a brief treatise *On Dreams* in which he discusses the value and importance of divinely-inspired, prophetic dreams. In the imaginative life of our dreams, he says, “we often enter into conversation with the gods: they warn us, answer us, and give us useful advice” (Lewis 1976, 82). Synesios denies the belief that spiritually meaningful dreams come only to the elite; “No one is privileged, either by sex, age, fortune, or profession; Sleep offers itself to all: it is an oracle always ready” (Lewis 1976, 83). Interpreting dreams is difficult, he states, because animal passions and the tumult of sense impressions disturb the imaginative sensitivities of our spirit. Synesios says that dream interpretation requires a calm, tranquil soul, a careful attention to details, and a great deal of experience. He rejects the common use of dream dictionaries—“Personally I ignore these books, and regard them as useless”—and stresses that the uniqueness of each individual soul implies that each person’s dreams will have unique meanings. Synesios argues:

We must not hope then to establish general rules: each one must search for his knowledge within himself. We should inscribe in our memory all that has come to us in our dreams . . . It is a novelty which will perhaps shock received ideas; but nevertheless, wherefore should we not complete the history of our days with that of our nights, and so retain a remembrance of our dual lives? (Lewis 1976, 86)

Islamic tradition contains many works of 'Ilm ul Tabir, or the science of dream interpretation. These works, which often refer to the earlier writings of Artemidorus and other Greek authors, describe in great detail the process of accurately interpreting dreams. Interpreters should be extremely familiar with the Koran, the many commentaries on it, and the traditions on various other religious matters. They should have an extensive knowledge of common proverbs, sayings, literary works, and linguistic usage (Bland 1877, 132). When presented with a dream, interpreters should learn of the dreamer's "age, country, . . . rank and condition in life, his profession, occupation, and habits; of everything related to him personally, and of all the circumstances, even the most trivial, connected with the [dream]" (Bland 1877, 133). The interpreter should then listen to the entire dream, in all its particulars, and examine each detail of the dream with great thoroughness:

Three things are to be considered with regard to the objects occurring in sleep: *Jins*, the genus or kind, as trees, birds, beasts, animate or inanimate objects, etc.; *Sanf*, the species, as, whether it be a Medlar or a Palm tree, and, of birds, whether a Peacock or an Ostrich; this will lead to a knowledge of the character and country of the dreamer, for, in the first of these two cases, he will be an Arab, ostriches and palms being unknown in Persia; and, in the other, a Persian, as medlars and peacocks are not found in Arabia. Thirdly, *Nua*, or the manner and circumstances of objects seen; how many in number, when, and where; how disposed, and how relating to one another. (Bland 1877, 136)

A modern Pentecostal church in western Uganda presents another case of a more complex approach to the religious meaning of dreams. This church, which merges Christian with traditional African spiritual beliefs, engages in group dream-telling as a regular part of worship—indeed, the dream-telling is “at the heart of [each] service” (Charsley 1973, 247). The church members believe that divine revelations in dreams are available to anyone, and so after a collective prayer the church leader invites people to tell their dreams. Individuals then recount their dreams, often in extensive detail and with great emotional intensity. Many of the dreams concern the

given church member's sinful condition, which needs to be revealed and confessed to the congregation. Such dreams are *not* always formally interpreted; rather, a ritual of church forgiving follows the recitation of the dream, serving to reincorporate the troubled individual back into the congregation. Members also recite dreams that address the concerns, problems, and welfare of the church itself. These dreams, which are considered valuable contributions to the vitality of the congregation, are examined by church leaders to discover what special messages from God the dreams reveal. For members of this African-Christian church, then, the "interpretation" of a dream does not focus exclusively on the individual and does not necessarily require an exact, point-by-point analysis. A dream's religious meanings emerge only in the process of the group's worship and prayer and always refer ultimately to the welfare of the congregation as a whole (Charsley 1973, 1987).

A final example of a more reflective, sophisticated approach to interpreting the religious meaning of dreams is provided by the Diegueno people of North America. The religious healers of the Diegueno have, among their other duties, the office of helping tribe members who are afflicted with troublesome dreams (Toffelmier and Luomala, 1936). The Diegueno distinguish among three different types of dream: accidental, common, and important. "Accidental" dreams are due to temporary physical problems and do not merit attention. "Common" dreams do not disturb the dreamer upon awakening and have meanings which anyone in the tribe can interpret. "Important" dreams, however, are both deeply troubling and difficult to understand, and they require the interpretive efforts of the religious healer. The healer will ask the dreamer to describe the dream freely, in as much detail as possible, and to tell of any relevant matters in the dreamer's waking life. The religious healer also considers the stresses Diegueno people face as their culture comes into contact with white American culture and how this is reflected in their dreams (Toffelmier and Luomala's fieldwork was done in southern California in 1934). The interpretations will often guide the dreamer towards traditional cultural and religious resources that can help the dreamer deal with these stresses. Thus for recurrent sexual dreams the healer will emphasize the ways in which the dreams are pointing the dreamer towards marriage with a suitable person in the tribe. For dreams of insistent, angry spirits, the healer will try to identify the spirit and learn which dead relative it represents; then he will determine what object the spirit has left behind and instruct the dreamer to burn that object as an addendum to the traditional Diegueno funeral rite.