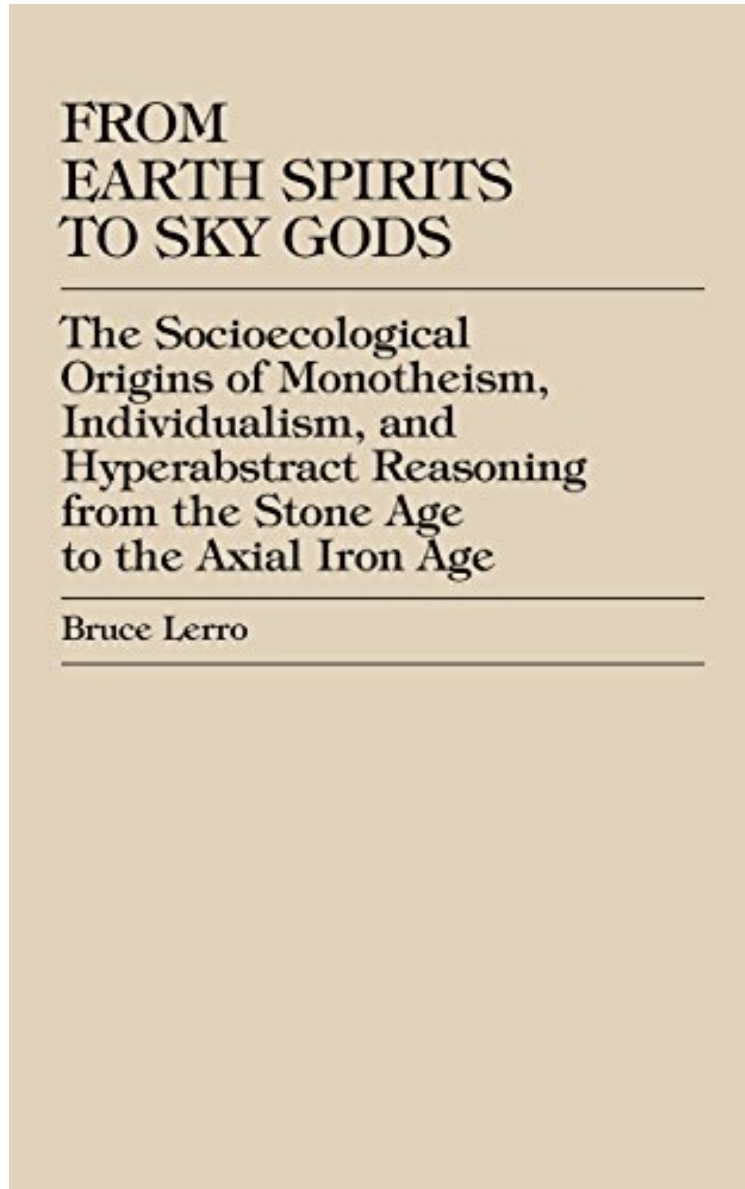


[Mobile book] From Earth Spirits to Sky Gods: The Socioecological Origins of Monotheism, Individualism, and Hyper-Abstract Reasoning, From the Stone Age to the Axial Iron Age

From Earth Spirits to Sky Gods: The Socioecological Origins of Monotheism, Individualism, and Hyper-Abstract Reasoning, From the Stone Age to the Axial Iron Age

Bruce Lerro

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Bruce Lerro : From Earth Spirits to Sky Gods: The Socioecological Origins of Monotheism, Individualism, and Hyper-Abstract Reasoning, From the Stone Age to the Axial Iron Age before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised *From Earth Spirits to Sky Gods: The Socioecological Origins of Monotheism, Individualism, and Hyper-Abstract Reasoning, From the Stone Age to the Axial Iron Age*:

21 of 21 people found the following review helpful. Challenging the Sky Gods By Richard Heinberg In the Axial Iron Age (starting around 600 bce), key individuals—the Greek philosophers, the Hebrew prophets, the Buddha, and Confucius—planted seeds that would grow to become Western civilization and classical civilizations of India and China. The origin of most of the core characteristics of civilization as we know it can be traced to developments in this period. Clearly, something important occurred then—some event or events that began a snowballing process of technological invention, social complexification, and the abstraction of human thought patterns—that has continued to this day. Thus, if we want to understand ourselves and our world, it is essential that we give attention to the events that occurred about 2500 years ago. A new book offers some of the clearest and most refreshing insight into this set of questions than any to date. *From Earth Spirits to Sky Gods* deserves careful reading by a broad audience. Lerro has read widely and has brought together the very best evidence and thinking on this subject. His book is a grand synthesis that, by illuminating a distant historical epoch, also throws light on the present. This work has the virtue of stating the author's perspective clearly at the outset. Lerro rejects both the ideology of progress (which holds that cultural change in the direction of increased complexity comes about because of some inherent evolutionary urge within human beings, or because of their efforts to improve their condition) and that of degeneration (which regards the development of civilization as a disaster resulting from greed or other moral lapses). Instead, he embraces the idea of improvised evolution, which holds that social trends are usually neither inevitable nor intended, but are simply responses to necessity—people doing what they must in order to deal with problems like population pressure and resource depletion. Lerro identifies ten trends in social systems from Paleolithic bands to Iron Age States—1) Increase in population 2) Increase in size of societies 3) Increase in variety of specialized goods 4) More advanced technology 5) Increase in social complexity 6) Increase in permanent home settlements 7) Increase in control over the biophysical environment 8) Growth in the specialized skills of labor 9) Increase in the proportion of work compared to leisure time for the average person 10) Increase in social differences in material wealth: ownership of property, tools, and people—and argues that these are "for the most part, the improvised outcomes of history." Lerro is seeking to describe not just transformations of material culture, but mutations in human thought patterns and religious perspectives as well, and to show how changes in the infrastructure, structure, and superstructure of a society are all bound together. In the first chapters, Lerro lays the groundwork by describing the differences between magic (the sacred systems common to hunter-gatherer and simple horticultural societies) and religion (which appears in agricultural states): whereas everyone in magical societies sees myths as literally true, the upper classes in religious societies see them as metaphors; in magical traditions, techniques for contacting the sacred dimension emphasize sensory saturation, whereas for upper classes in religious societies sensory austerity is emphasized; sacred experience for magical societies is experiential and practical, while for religious societies it is intellectual (for upper classes) and devotional (for lower classes); for magical groups, transmission of the tradition is oral, while for religions it is by means of written scriptures. The author then turns to the evolution of politics and economics—discussing stratification, surplus expropriation, and markets—to show how the appearance of the first religions was tied to prior transformations in economy and social structure. In a remarkable chapter titled "Places, Spaces, and Sensuality: Physical Locale and Sense Ratios in the Ancient World," Lerro notes that people in all societies differentiate "place" (sacralized areas of familiarity where needs for structure, security, and familiarity can be satisfied) from "space" (areas between places, or unexplored zones that are usually regarded as secular and objectivised). Lerro argues that people living in pre-Iron-Age magical societies seem to have valued places over spaces, and the proximate senses (touch, taste, smell, and hearing) over the long-distance sense of sight; meanwhile, people in the Axial Iron-Age religious societies tended to devalue place and valued the eye above the other sense organs. "[S]ocial structures have an impact on the organization of the senses," writes Lerro, since "the type of work people do and how much power they have over their work affect which of the senses they use." In addition to this change in sense ratios, the shift from Stone-Age to Iron-Age economies also seems to have entailed a mutation in humans' experience of self. "Individuals in all cultures, regardless of the level of social complexity, must build a social self," notes Lerro, and to do so entails mastering skills such as distinguishing the inner world from the outer world, learning language, suppressing biological urges, manipulating tools, learning roles, learning to think abstractly, and learning to decipher the codes—beliefs, morals, values, and customs—of society. "But," he argues, "this does not mean that all social selves are the same." The collectivist self of tribal peoples is more interdependent with society and nature, while the individualist self of people in complex societies is more independent, voluntary, contractual, and instrumental. Clearly, how people think is affected by their material culture. Thus, ultimately, "it is ecological, demographic, technological, economic, and political conditions that determine which cognitive stage is predominant in a society or whether a stage will appear at all. How people

reason is an adaptive response to historical transformations, not primarily a maturational unfolding of an individual." A final virtue of this book that is worth noting: it contains over forty charts that clearly summarize the ideas the author is conveying. This is an important work that will change the way readers regard civilization and social change. For anyone who believes that history holds keys to understanding the present, *From Earth Spirits to Sky Gods* should be required reading. --Richard Heinberg rheinberg@ogc.org

In this thought-provoking new book, Bruce Lerro offers a speculative reconstruction of the sacred beliefs and practices of cultures existing between 30,000 and 500 B.C.E. Lerro describes how material changes in various social formations including hunting-gathering bands and horticulturalists in villages were responsible for the shift from magic to realism, from the belief in earth spirits to faith in sky gods. Drawing from such diverse theorists as Marx and Engels, Vygotsky, Piaget, and George Herbert Mead, Lerro critiques and transforms mechanical, humanistic, new age, and countercultural perspectives on the history of sacred traditions. This study of comparative religion and mythology has important applications for the fields of archaeology, evolutionary anthropology, sociology, political science, and comparative psychology.

Well researched and teeming with ideas, Bruce Lerro's *From Earth Spirits to Sky Gods* makes an important contribution to Western cultural history. (ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment) This is a magnificent and original work with important implications for our understanding of social evolution. (Christopher Chase-Dunn, Johns Hopkins University) About the Author Bruce Lerro teaches psychology and sociology at John F. Kennedy University and Columbia College.