

Part 3, Paper 88, Fetishes, Ch... Magic, Brilliant Evening Star

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

lucky charms, ancient belief, spirit inhabitation, fetishism definition, supernatural spectrum, early humans, volcano fetishes, animal fetishes, cow dung reverence, totemism, social cohesion, magic origins, love charms, effigy influence, modern superstitions

SPEAKERS

Sarah, John

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Sarah 00:00

Okay, so, like, have you ever worn, like, one of those lucky charms? You know, like, maybe there's a certain coin you always carry around, or a piece of jewelry?
- J

John 00:09

Oh, yeah, definitely. It's
- S

Sarah 00:10

like you're tapping into this ancient thing, right, this belief system that's like, hardwired into us, you know, this idea that spirits can actually inhabit objects, and that's what we're gonna be diving into today, okay, going like way deep into the history of belief itself, from, you know, fetishes to flags.
- J

John 00:31

I love it.
- S

Sarah 00:32

Get ready for some serious aha moments. So when we talk about fetishism, okay, it's easy to get the wrong idea, right? Yeah, and

J John 00:40

you might be surprised to learn that it isn't about like, worshiping the object itself, right? It's more about the spirit that's like, believed to reside within it. Okay, so think of it this way, that rabbit's foot you've got. It's not really about the fur. It's more about the spirit or the essence of luck it's supposed to contain. Oh, okay,

S Sarah 00:57

so it's not just about like, ghosts then, right? We're talking like a whole spectrum of the supernatural, like my Great Aunt Edna's spirit to like a grumpy rain cloud just hanging out in a pebble, you've got

J John 01:09

it. Yeah. And it all comes back to early humans trying to understand this world they couldn't explain, right? Imagine trying to understand disease or like natural disasters, oh yeah, even just bad luck, without any concept of science, it's a lot. So spirits residing in objects provided a framework, a way to make sense of the unexplainable. So

S Sarah 01:32

it's kind of like my crops failed because I insulted the Spirit of that rock over there, exactly.

J John 01:36

But here's where it gets really fascinating, the sheer variety of things that became, you know, fetishes, of course, you got the predictable ones, but then it gets really interesting, like, what? Why volcanoes, but not mountains, for instance? Oh, that's

S Sarah 01:50

a good question. I mean, mountains seem pretty fetish worthy to me. Well, you

J John 01:53

got to think volcanoes were active, unpredictable, dangerous. They commanded a certain respect mountains, not so much. Yeah,

S Sarah 02:04

I can see that. But what about animals? Okay, sure, those seem like, you know, a more relatable kind of fetish at least to ours. Animals

relatable kind of fetish, at least to ours. Animals

J John 02:11

were huge, and again, it goes back to fear or the uncanny, like the Parsis in ancient Persia, if they saw a dog eating human flesh, which honestly is pretty unsettling. Yeah, I'm not gonna lie, that dog would become taboo, really, as if it absorbs some of the human spirit just by consuming the body.

S Sarah 02:31

So not your average house pet. Then, Okay, this next one's a bit of a head scratcher for me. Tell me about the cow, because apparently it wasn't as straightforward as you'd think, Oh, the

J John 02:40

cow is a perfect example of how complex, even contradictory, these belief systems could be. Okay, in some cultures, cows were almost godlike, revered, but drinking their milk that was taboo. What but, get this? They're excrement, highly prized, thought to be like, incredibly potent

S Sarah 02:59

Wait, hold up. They're worshiping cow dung, but they won't touch a glass of milk. Exactly what's the logic there? You

J John 03:05

gotta remember, it's all about the spirit, right? The essence within the object, milk, being life giving, may have been too sacred for everyday use, okay? But cow dung, that could be associated with fertility, the Earth's ability to provide interesting. It's all about the associations humans were making back then.

S Sarah 03:22

Okay, I think I'm starting to see the method behind the apparent madness here. So we've gone from random pebbles to powerful volcanoes, even to taboo fruits. It seems like almost anything could have this spiritual significance, right? But how do we go from these kind of personal fetishes, like a rabbit's foot in your pocket, to those shared symbols we see today, you know, like flags or national emblem,

J John 03:47

that's where the need for social cohesion comes in. Okay? As humans started forming those

that's where the need for social cohesion comes in. Okay? As humans started forming those bigger groups, those individual beliefs, had to evolve into something more, well, collective, right?

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Sarah 03:58

And that's where totemism comes in, right, where a whole tribe might adopt an animal as their like sacred symbol, precisely.

J

John 04:03

And totemism is really fascinating because it's this beautiful merging of the social and the religious. The totem animal wasn't just a symbol of the group, it was also a powerful entity, a protector, even a god.

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Sarah 04:16

So they're worshipping it, but also drawing this sense of shared identity from it exactly. It's like the ultimate team mascot. But there's another crucial step in this journey from fetish to flag, and it involves a word that still sparks, I don't know fascination today, magic,

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John 04:34

you know, when you think about it, magic wasn't that different from early science. Hold

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Sarah 04:38

on, are you saying like Merlin and Einstein were on the same wavelength,

J

John 04:43

not exactly, yeah, but think about the core goals of magic. You've got predicting the future. Okay, well, that's what you know meteorologists do every day, right? Yeah, I guess so. And then you've got influencing the environment, making things happen. That's agriculture, engineering, even medicine in. A Nutshell,

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Sarah 05:00

really, okay, I see where you're going with this. It

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John 05:02

all boils down to this magic. Just like science was driven by this very human desire to

all boils down to this magic, just like science was driven by this very human desire to understand and control the world around us. It's

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Sarah 05:13

just that they were working with a different set of tools, exactly a different world, instead of, like test tubes and equations, you've got spells and rituals, and you know exactly, but like, what kind of things were they trying to achieve with all this magic? I mean, what were they using it for? Well,

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John 05:27

let's start with something relatable, love.

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Sarah 05:29

Okay, everyone loves, love.

J

John 05:32

Love charms were incredibly popular. Oh, yeah, often made from bodily fluids.

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Sarah 05:36

Okay? Now that's a little less relatable, right? Maybe not first date material, probably not,

J

John 05:41

but hey, it just goes to show that people out then were looking for that love connection, just like we are today. That's

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Sarah 05:47

true. That's true. What about something a bit more practical, though? Okay, say

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John 05:50

you were trying to close a tough business deal. Okay, chewing on a piece of wood was thought to help soften the seller's resolve, really. Or if you really wanted to up the ante, you could try influencing someone through an effigy.

S Sarah 06:04
Wait, you mean, like a voodoo doll, similar

J John 06:07
idea, but instead of sticking pins in it, they might whisper prayers, offer gifts, okay, even harm the effigy in some way, all with the belief that it would directly impact the actual person. It's

S Sarah 06:17
like the ancient version of, I don't know, subtweeting someone, but with way higher stakes, right?

J John 06:23
And here's the thing, that whole idea of a connection between, you know, a representation of something and the real thing, yeah, that wasn't just limited to objects. Oh, really, take names, for example. Okay, in many cultures, names were seen as incredibly powerful, almost like an extension of the soul itself, actually speaking someone's name, especially a deity's name, that was serious business. Oh, wow, a delicate act, sometimes even dangerous. They thought

S Sarah 06:50
It's like that old saying, Speak of the devil, but like taken to a whole other level, exactly.

J John 06:54
And the thing is, for all its flaws or all its, you know, reliance on superstition, right, magic actually played a really important role in human intellectual development. How do you figure that? Think about it. Magic at its core, required observation. It required experimentation, trial and error, even if those experiments were based on, well, what we would now consider faulty assumptions. Okay, I guess that makes sense. It was that fundamental drive to understand how the world worked, to find the connections between cause and effect, that was the seed of scientific inquiry. So

S Sarah 07:27
while they were busy looking for answers and spells and potions, those early magicians were kind of like the original scientists, exactly.

J John 07:34

They just didn't have the right tools or the right framework, really, to decode what they were observing, right,

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Sarah 07:41

right? So if you trace that thread through history, you can actually see how these magical beliefs gradually evolved into, you know, more recognizable scientific disciplines. Precisely,

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John 07:52

take astrology, for example, with its careful observation of the stars and the planets, it eventually gave rise to astronomy. It's

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Sarah 07:59

like they were trying to read the universe like a giant, you know, celestial horoscope. And

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John 08:04

then you've got alchemy, the pursuit of the mythical Philosopher's Stone, the substance they believed could grant immortality and get this allow them to transmute elements. Talk about ambitious gold, right? They never quite managed to turn lead into gold, but those alchemists made huge strides in metallurgy, developed techniques that we still use today.

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Sarah 08:26

So from staring into cauldrons to peering through telescopes, from mixing potions to, you know, formulating equations, it's incredible how far our understanding of the world has come. It really is. But has it really though? I mean, we like to think that we're above all that superstition and stuff nowadays, but are we really that different from our ancestors, who, you know, believe that a well placed pebble could ward off evil? That's the

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John 08:51

million dollar question, isn't it, and that's what we'll be unpacking next. Because as much as we like to believe, we've evolved past magical thinking, echoes of those ancient beliefs are still very much alive and well in our modern world.

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Sarah 09:03

So we've journeyed from like spirits and pebbles all the way to, you know, the birth of science from magic, basically. And

J John 09:10

now for the real challenge, holding up that mirror to our own, you know, modern day beliefs, right? Because, you know, with all our modern advancements, do we still, you know, hold on to those, those little pieces, those remnants of magical thinking. It's more common than we think. Probably. I

S Sarah 09:26

know it's like we've mapped the genome we navigate with satellites, but I'm willing to bet that most of us have still like knocked on wood for good luck, or felt a chill when someone mentions the evil eye. You know exactly.

J John 09:39

And it's not just those, you know, those little rituals, yeah, the language itself, it betrays us. Think about it. We talk about being spellbound by a performance, right? Or possessed by an idea, or even inspiration, that's right. It's like that word is rooted in this belief that a divine spirit could, you know, enter you. You and like, give you creative powers.

S Sarah 10:02

It's like those terms are these linguistic fossils, echoes of a time when, you know magic wasn't just for fantasy novels, and let's not forget about luck, astrology, you know, the power of positive thinking.

J John 10:13

It's all like remnants of our fetishistic past, this desire to find like meaning and randomness, to control what we can't control to constant in human history, really,

S Sarah 10:25

it makes sense, though, right? I mean, we might not be offering sacrifices to volcano Gods these days, but that need to believe in, you know, something bigger than ourselves, yeah, something that can, like, I don't know, shape our destiny. Still. There

J John 10:36

it is, it is. It's



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Sarah 10:38

fascinating, isn't it? Yeah, so, okay, maybe those early humans weren't so far off the mark after all. What do you think they'd make of our world today? Though, can you imagine trying to explain, like the Internet to someone who thinks a rock has a spirit?

J

John 10:50

Oh, I know, or artificial intelligence? They'd probably fry their brains, right?

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Sarah 10:54

Although, knowing what we do now, maybe they'd find it strangely familiar. How so well, because we're still wrestling with the same big questions that they faced, right? What is consciousness? What are we doing here? What does it all mean? The tools have changed, right? But the questions themselves, they're timeless. Exactly makes you think it does. And, you know, those echoes of the past, I think they actually challenge us to really think critically about what we choose to believe. You know, absolutely

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John 11:20

take the cheese fingernails we talked about before, relics infused with this, like supernatural power, carefully

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Sarah 11:28

preserved, okay, morbid, but I'm with you now.

J

John 11:31

Fast forward to today. The obsession with celebrity culture, right? We collect their belongings, analyze their every move. We give them these, like, almost mythical qualities.

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Sarah 11:42

Are you saying that our fascination with, like, I don't know, a pop star's used tissue, isn't all that different from, you know, revering some chief's fingernail from centuries ago? Food for thought? Wouldn't

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John 11:55

you say that's unsettlingly

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Sarah 11:57

insightful, I gotta say. And it really

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John 11:59

makes you wonder, what will future generations think is magical about our beliefs and practices?

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Sarah 12:04

It's a humbling thought to be a part of this long, strange trip of human belief, and I think it reminds us that, you know, our understanding of the world, it's always evolving what we consider to be unshakable truth today might just be, you know, tomorrow's quaint superstition, exactly,

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John 12:21

and that's the beauty of it all, isn't it? We're not defined by where we've been, but by our willingness to keep exploring, to keep asking questions and to embrace that mystery of it all that

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Sarah 12:30

is beautifully said. And on that note, we'll leave you to ponder this 1000 years from now, what will our descendants consider magical about our beliefs and practices until next time, keep diving deep.