

## THE PRIMAL RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD AND THEIR STUDY

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Until recently, the religions of some two to three hundred million people of the world were usually forgotten in the survey books on world religions and in the congresses and journals and courses of the scholars and teachers in religion. We have been busy with the Christian tradition and then with these so-called "world religions" and we have left the religions of the tribal societies to the anthropologists. After all, these were apparently all in pre-literate peoples, therefore there was no literature to study and these highly conservative societies had no history worth talking about and what passed for religion was mostly a mixture of magic and superstition.

Now we are witnessing the beginnings of a discovery of this neglected area of man's religions. The anthropologists, aided by some of the outstanding missionary scholars, have opened up the complex religious systems of the world's tribal peoples and revealed the complexities of ritual, the profundities of myth and world view, the richness of symbol and the sheer spirituality of many of these long despised religions. In addition the current disillusionment with much Western culture has led to a fresh interest in the culture and therefore in the religious dimensions of the "primitive" societies that have maintained a simpler existence in closer contact with nature.

### Terminology

But before we start talking of primitive religions we have to examine the most appropriate name for this area of religions. 'Primitive' itself will not do any longer; it is too evaluative in a derogatory sense and quite unacceptable to the people to whom it has been applied. One of the first principles in religious studies is that the terms used should, if at all possible, be acceptable to the people described by them. On this basis many other words used for this field must be banned: heathen, pagan, savage, superstitious, magical, mumbo-jumbo, juju, fetishism, lower, witchcraft, even native. 'Tribal' may be acceptable to North American Indians and others but is quite unacceptable now in Africa and we need one term for use anywhere in the world. The commonest alternative has been 'animist', but this is misleadingly inaccurate when so many of these peoples have

a High God and perhaps a pantheon of major divinities as well as a range of lesser spirits. Likewise "ethnic" is inaccurate (what of the Jews and Sikhs?) and so is "pre-literate", for I would include the popular religions of Greece, Rome and much of the ancient Near East as essentially the tribal religions of these areas, associated with sophisticated civilizations. "Non-historical?" – but these religions have their histories, even if difficult to discover. "Traditional?" – but this label, though the common one used for such studies in Africa, is nevertheless not a distinguishing term since all religions are traditional and in Africa alone Christianity and Islam are just as traditional in certain areas as any tribal religions are elsewhere. Eliade uses the word "archaic" and while I think these religions are archaic in principle, in the sense of having no indefinite future as viable religious systems in a modernizing world, it is offensive to the people involved and inappropriate where their religious life is still vigorously in action.

What then remains? taking a cue from the positive meaning of some uses of the word primitive (as in "the primitive Church") and borrowing overtones from various cognate words such as primeval, primordial and primary, the term primal has been coming into use as the most satisfactory term available. Here it conveys two ideas: that these religious systems are in fact the most basic or fundamental religious forms in the overall religious history of mankind and that they have preceded and contributed to the other great religious systems. In other words, there are important senses in which they are both primary and prior; they represent a common religious heritage of humanity.

We then need a term for all the other kinds of religion, those that have commonly been called higher, world, historical, or great. I use the term universal, in the sense that religions of this kind are universal either in intention (as with Islam and Christianity and increasingly some of the others) or in potential – it is conceivable that they could become widespread religions over many races and areas in a way that is quite inconceivable for any of the primal religions. In fact this would appear to be the most specific distinction between the two groups, for the primal religions are ethno-centric and non-missionary by their nature. They may borrow from one another both rituals and myths and divinities, but they do not set out to convert one another as the universal religions have done, increasingly do, or conceivably might do.

To these two terms, primal and universal, there are three other words needed as a basic working vocabulary; folk religion, superstition and magic. The first of these refers to the popular or village or peasant religion that has a remarkable similarity across the world, that has much in common with many primal religions, but which is not a self-contained system, for it exists in symbiotic relationship with one of the universal religions in its more orthodox and sophisticated forms. The second term, superstition, should be kept for those aspects of once-living religious systems that are not quite dead, that still have some spiritual voltage in them, the left-overs from the past that have

no place in the living systems of the present; in their original context they made sense, but now they seem crude and irrational except to those who fear to abandon them. Magic, too, needs its own proper sense, of a positive nature. It reflects man's freedom and initiative in setting out to control and change his world by harnessing its mysterious powers to his own purposes. That makes it sound like a primitive science, but its world view is more akin to that of religion: there are mysterious powers to which man can relate; these powers are abroad in the world for both good and evil; and the physical can be the vehicle of spiritual power. That certainly sounds more like religion, and however much magic and religion are mixed up together, and probably always will be, they should be at least conceptually distinguished in terms of their ultimate reference point – the will of the gods for religion and of men for magic.

#### A Religious Model For The Authentically Religious

Equipped with these terms we can then study primal religions as religions in their own right and for this we need a religious model so that we are studying them as religions and not on the basis of some other model, be it ethical, anthropological or sociological. Religion is not identical with morality, with culture, or with society. However closely it may and ought to be bound up with these, the distinctive features of religion escape us if we reduce it to any or all of these other categories. The religious model will depend upon what we mean by religion and I myself lean to a narrower more specific meaning rather than to the many popular meanings that run out into everything under the sun. I have adopted this, and used a religious model, in my one elementary attempt to study primal religions in a way different from the approaches used in the social sciences – in the school text book, *Living Tribal Religions* (we had to use tribal instead of primal to make plain what it was about!) This religious model regards religion as existing in the interplay between revelation of the transcendent and the response of the human. Some would no doubt write this model off as "too Christian", but any model has to be capable of at least including and doing justice to the Christian religion and I would be prepared to offer a theological statement of why an adequate model, for all religions, should be influenced by the Christian religion. The important thing, however, is that one should be using a religious model of some kind.

The first effect of such a model should be to display the primal religions as authentically religious, displaying the main features of religion as this is viewed in whatever model is used. This will become clearer if one collects a wide sample of statements, especially from nineteenth century sources, which regard this aspect of tribal life as anything but religious. Consider, for example, these comments about the New Zealand Maoris. In 1865, a chaplain to the British Forces engaged in the "Maori Wars" declared that the Maori "has not changed his religion; he never had any religion to change. . . . . (only) ancient superstitions." Others wrote that "Religion . . . . .

### (3) Religion In Its Basic Forms

The pedagogical value of the primal religions is especially evident in the way they demonstrate the basic phenomenological forms and functions of religion in a readily accessible way, without too much preliminary equipment such as language or special vocabulary. This may be seen in a textbook such as William Howells' *The Heathens*, despite an execrable title due not to a missionary but to an anthropologist! There can be few better introductions to religious studies in the modern mode than, say, a one term's course on the primal religions, with one particular people as the case-study, to demonstrate the place in religions of worship and awe, symbols, myth and ritual, sacraments, prayer and sacrifice, sacred places and religious specialists and other such basic religious forms or manifestations. The primals are also important in having generated most of the great methods and theories in the study of religion, as set out in Evans-Pritchard's *Theories of Primitive Religion* (pace the term!) or in Eric Sharpe's book of 1975; but this is a more sophisticated exercise.

### (4) The Primals Entry Into World History

There is also a contemporary historical reason for this kind of study. The world of the primal societies is turning over in our day, with millions of people being drawn for the first time into the main stream of world history, now that there is in fact only one stream. We can no longer study the "native peoples" in their world, while we remain secure and separate in our world. We now affect one another for good or ill and needs must learn to enter into dialogue with people from these other primal world views and cultures. Missionaries of the better sort and others abroad have always had to do this, but now we all need this understanding and appreciation, and especially of the religious dimension of the life of the tribal peoples. No longer can we regard these as childish peoples with baby religions. They are mature human beings with their own insights into life, their own profound thinkers, seers, mystics, saints and reformers and their own contribution to make to the spiritual experience of mankind.

Which of us, for example, can fail to be moved and even to learn when we read Dr. A. Capell's report of an Australian Aboriginal ceremony. I gave it as summarised by A. C. Bouquet in *The Christian Faith and Non-Christian Religions* (again, pace the "non-Christian"): "...each member of the congregation, after some preliminary chanting, reverently produced a piece of pearl shell of great beauty, laid it on a cloth which had been spread out and then gazed at it, chanting quietly and ending with a soft long-drawn-out 'Ah!' - followed by silence. The pearl shell is a sacred object which symbolises the water from which it comes and water is life-giving, so that the shell symbolises the mysterious source of life . . . the rapturous hush and intense devotion . . . could only be compared with that at a Catholic service of benediction, when the monstrance is elevated."

### (5) Special Relationship With Christianity

It is therefore perhaps no surprise to discover that the form of religion that might seem farthest removed from the Christian has in fact had a closer relationship with it than any other. This provides another reason for the educational importance of the primals. The relationship is apparent once we examine the history of the spread of the Christian faith and discover that it has had no major expansion into the areas of the great culture-religions of Asia or into Islamic areas, and that its major extensions have been solely into the societies with primal religious systems. There was first the Mediterranean world, which I have classified as primal in religion; then the tribal peoples of Europe; then in modern times those of Black Africa and Oceania. The American Indians, north and south, have also been brought for the most part within the Christian fold in some sense, but they are a minority in their areas. The parts of Asia where Christianity has advanced most has again been where tribal cultures have predominated - in the Philippines, in Korea with its shamanistic religious forms and among the hill tribals of South East Asia, Taiwan and India. It is the people of the primal religions who have made the greatest response and I cannot think that this is solely due to their fragility or inadequacies as compared with the great Asian religions, as if Christianity can deal only with religions that are an easy knock-down. There seem to be affinities between the Christian and the primal traditions, an affinity that perhaps appears in the common reactions when Christian missions first arrive ("this is what we have been waiting for") and that is further evident in the vast range of new religious movements born from the interaction between the primals and Christianity and in no comparable degree in the reaction of primal religions to their meeting with the other universal religions.

This theme, however, provides our next subject. It is sufficient here to note the paradox that the particular kind of religion that has made the greatest response to Christianity has been the least studied and appreciated in religious studies in the countries within the Christian tradition. But the need for this kind of study and its educational and religious potential, are now being recognized and we shall see considerable development in this direction in the next decade.

As a concrete conclusion, let me recommend as a start and for its point of view, an essay on this subject by a "dinkum Aussie", E. G. Newing's *Religions in Pre-literary Societies* in J. N. D. Anderson (ed.), *The World's Religions* 1975, pp. 11-48.