

THE PRIMAL RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD AND THEIR STUDY

Harold Turner
University of Aberdeen

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

they had none — neither doctrine, nor dogma, neither cultus nor system of worship, nor any being who could properly be called God. They had no idols.” And again, they had “no symptoms of religion . . . except it consists of a great variety of absurd and superstitious ceremonies.” Or, “The Maori has, perhaps, the lowest religious character of any human being.” It is plain that some of these commentators were unable to recognize religion in any forms other than their own, complete with “doctrine, dogma and system of worship”. Hear now a comment made a hundred years later, in the 1960s: “Maori religion was permeated with a sense of the sacred, yet there was a great gulf fixed between the human and the divine, for the Maori gods transcended human experience and terrestrial definition; there were highly developed specialists in theology, a splended sense of time and grand historic depth.” Even if the statement is regarded as a little high-flown, this commentator has seen something in a primal religion that the earlier men had missed entirely. And so one could go on, collecting views of primal religions around the world as they were seen by the first Europeans to meet them and exhibiting a whole range of theories — either no religion at all, or else merely superstition and witchcraft and magic, and, if not the result of human error and ignorance, then at best the elementary religious efforts of childish peoples or at worst the work of the devil who had led men into such grotesque or gruesome practices.

Six Feature Analysis

(1) Kinship with Nature

Having broken from such Western “error and ignorance” it is possible to construct a basic religious structure within which primal religions may be examined and which they will exemplify in varying degrees. Instead of the simple revelation and response structure and its ramifications, as used in the text referred to above, I offer here a six-feature framework to assist in the analysis and understanding of these religions. This framework could be considered in various orders but I will start with an aspect of primal religions that has attracted the attention of Western men in recent years, the ecological aspect. There is a profound sense in many primal societies that man is akin to nature, a child of Mother Earth and brother to the plants and animals which have their own spiritual existence and place in the universe. This is seen not only in the way plants and animals and indeed almost any object in the natural environment may enter into a totemic spiritual relationship with men or become tutelary and guardian spirits, but in the way the environment is used realistically and un sentimentally but with profound respect and reverence and without exploitation. Thus wanton destruction is often regarded as evil, like excessive accumulation, and the hunting of animals for fun or sport is quite inconceivable. The pine tree is felled and the bear is hunted and shot, but only for real human need and this does not disturb the basic harmony of the universe nor destroy the environment and a prayer of thanks may go to both the bear and the gods. Here is a profoundly religious attitude to man’s natural setting in the world.

(2) Human Weakness

As a second feature there is the deep sense that man is finite, weak and impure or sinful and stands in need of a power not his own. An earlier anthropologist, Marett, was referring to something like this when he spoke of "humility as the birth of religion" and as the basic religious attitude. Rudolf Otto is making the same point when he describes man's basic reaction to the Holy in terms of a sense of creaturehood. The Nuer of the southern Sudan declare that man is like an ant before God. In the Christian tradition the similitude has been that of the worm. This sense in primal peoples is no mere reflection of their lack of technological, economic and political power, which was painfully real; rather is it an authentic religious sensibility coupled with a realistic assessment of man's condition, a sensibility and an assessment that have been hidden from people like ourselves by the proliferation of our technical and socio-political power.

(3) Man Is Not Alone

The third feature is complementary to the second: the conviction that man is not alone in the universe for there is a spiritual world of powers or beings more powerful and ultimate than himself. Primal peoples live in a personalized universe, where there is a will behind events, so that one asks not *what* caused this or that, but *who* did it. These powers or beings belong to a transcendent dimension that surpasses the human realm and belongs to another world, and it is this very transcendence that is of vital importance, as we shall note in the next feature. The transcendent powers, however, are ambivalent. Not only is there the hierarchy of benevolent ancestors (if they can be regarded as transcendent) and of spirits, divinities and high gods, but there is also the range of evil spirits, of demons and malevolent divinities, and the lesser more earth-born occult powers of wizards and witches. Even the divinities and spirits normally benevolent are ambivalent and may prove hostile. But behind all the terrors of the evil spirit world there is the still greater comfort that men are not left alone in this mysterious universe and without direction, for there is the world of the gods and these provide the meaning and the model for all human needs and activities.

(4) Relations With Transcendent Powers

This conviction is completed by the fourth feature, the belief that men can enter into relationship with this benevolent spirit world and so share in its powers and blessings and receive protection from evil forces by these more-than-human helpers. Anything less than a transcendent helper would be inadequate, so that the last thing the primal peoples want is a merely man-made religion with gods of a human dimension – contrary to all the neat projectionist theories that explain religions away in these terms and ignore the primary testimony of so much of the data about religions. Across the primal world there seems to be a longing for the true life of man that is not yet achieved and that can come only from the gods. Towards this blessing and

harmony the gods have given men religious specialists (although not all primal systems have these) and special powerful rituals and correct sacrifices and proper customs. We should not be blinded by criticism of this as "mechanistic and ritualistic" and so miss the profound emphasis on the transcendent source of true life and practical salvation.

(5) Man's Afterlife

The fifth feature is the way in which the primal systems develop this outlook still further. Man's relationship with the gods, his kinship with them indeed, is such that he shares their life and power not only in this world but also beyond death, which is not the end. In primal religious traditions with the shaman figure, here is the person who has seen into the invisible world and the realm of the dead and brought back word of what lies beyond death. In the majority of these religions the ancestors, the "living dead", remain united in affection and in mutual obligations with the "living living". Indeed, the ancestors figure so prominently in the first level or region of the spirit world that they seem to create an ancestral cult and to obscure the spirit beings before whom they otherwise serve as mediators between the transcendent and the human. Life therefore is full of hope, for the living and the dead will be reunited and both will share in the immortality of the gods.

(6) The Physical As Sacramental Of The Spiritual

As a sixth and final feature, we note the conviction that the "physical" acts as the vehicle for "spiritual" power, in other words, that men live in a sacramental universe where there is no sharp dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual. Hence the development and importance of the whole range of ritual and cult paraphernalia, healing objects and materials and, indeed, the fetishes and charms used in magic, for this practice also operates with the same conviction. In addition, there is the belief that the physical realm is meant to be patterned on the model of the spiritual world beyond, like all other things connected with the life of man in this world, which is therefore conceived as a microcosm of the macrocosm. The one set of powers, principles and patterns runs through all things on earth and in the heavens and welds them into a unified cosmic system. This monistic view may be qualified by an ethical dualism in respect of good and evil, but even here the sacramental functions of the physical remain.

The six-point structure may be used for the understanding of other kinds of religion besides the primal and will be found readily applicable to the Christian tradition. Not all primal traditions will exhibit every feature and their emphases across the various features will vary, but we do have a tool to help us see what they are all about, their inner rationale and the spiritual realities behind the poverty, crudity, ignorance or immoralities of their external expressions.

Variety Among Primal Religions

From this structural approach we may turn to consider the variety across the primal religions in terms of their varying emphases.

At one end of the scale we find primal religions of a profoundly elevated and spiritual nature, as in the case of the Plains Indians of North America or of the Nuer of the Sudan. The Nuer have one Supreme Being, Kwoth, a moral creator god and such a strong sense of the immanence of this transcendent being throughout the lesser spirits and nature itself that no sanctuaries are erected to him. This corresponds with the conviction that, although there are important sacrifices of their oxen, outward rituals are of lesser significance, for it is the inward state of the person making the sacrifice that is important. Here is a refined and complex religious system and among the Nuer, magic and witchcraft play a very small part.

At the other end of the scale there are peoples with a very anthropocentric and pragmatic religion, such as the Elema in the delta area of Papua (described by F.E. Williams). Here religious ritual sought the maintenance and promotion of human welfare, especially in its material aspects. Instead of submission to higher powers there was the effort to impose human will upon the spirits so that they helped in the attainment of the desired ends. Similarly the religion of the Effutu around Winneba in Ghana has been intensely utilitarian, little concerned with the moral or spiritual improvement of man or society or with a happy afterlife, but aiming at protection from misfortune, the attainment of health, prosperity, peace, success in ordinary activities and long life. Religion that is being used in this way may readily pass over into magic (and this seems to be the case in some more extreme examples) or it may vanish in any identifiable form. Indeed, there do seem to be some primal societies which, to all intents and purposes, have no religion. Thus the Siriono of eastern Bolivia, a hunter-gatherer society with a very primitive technology, have no religious practitioners, healers or even magicians, no sacred myths, group rituals, cult of the dead, ceremonial songs or imitative magic. The central activity is food-finding and religion has no part to play in this. There is nothing so strange about these developments if we pause to recognize the contemporary Western replacement of religion by magic and the occult or its central activity of material acquisition. It is more understandable in the case of primal societies which live so much on the margins of survival than it is in our modern affluent societies. What is remarkable is the sheer spirituality of the religion of so many primal peoples who might have been expected to have little thought for anything but the next meal.

Strength And Weakness

There is also great variety in the historical development of primal religions, especially after their contact with the powerful and sophisticated societies usually associated with the universal religions. Many of the primals have proved exceedingly vulnerable and as public and viable religious systems they have rapidly collapsed and are

now gone for ever. This has happened widely in Africa, especially in East Africa, as it has in Polynesia, although much remains of the underlying world view with its attitudes to power and mythological time even within the Christian systems that have been accepted. On the other hand there are primal religious systems that have proved exceedingly resistant and strong, as with the Hopi Indians of Arizona. After over four centuries surrounded by Western peoples and subject to the missionary efforts of successive waves of both Catholics and Protestants, the Hopi societies, rituals and beliefs are still alive and well. We are told also of a very religious Guarani people in Bolivia with a mystical faith of their own which has steadily rejected the Catholic faith since the Spanish arrived over four centuries ago and not even developed syncretistic forms that might have been encouraged by their own indigenous millennial hopes and the corresponding Christian teaching. Likewise the West African religions transplanted with the slaves to the Caribbean and to Brazil have survived even these vicissitudes without major changes.

Certainly the Western assumption that all primal religions were fragile and would collapse after contact with a modern and Christian civilization has been proved wrong. Some survive by gradual adaptation to new situations and influences. Certain Australian aboriginal mythologies are said to reveal this process as they come to place more emphasis upon events and upon living figures rather than upon sacred places and the land, i.e. to deal more with historical possibilities. There may even be a dramatic development, as with the emergence of a new high god in the space of one generation before 1955 among the Nyakyusa of Tanzania. Most striking of all, perhaps, is the history of the Mwari cult in Rhodesia over the last four or so centuries. Mwari began as the rather remote divinity of a small tribe, with the limited functions of rain-giving. Now he is a trans-tribal God across the Shona-speaking peoples, in closer more personal relationship with his worshippers, providing not only rain but also healing, and in the recent political situation in Rhodesia, giving both morale and unity to African peoples. Here is a primal religion very much alive and clearly relevant to the changing historical situation, serving as a basis for the modern African nationalist movement. Whether this development could continue with the Mwari cult as the official public religious system of an African-dominated Zimbabwe state is more than doubtful. No other modern nation in Africa or elsewhere has been able to so treat its own indigenous primal religion, for, as we suggested above, this kind of religion is inherently archaic and unable to form the basis for a modern community that employs a scientific world view. It is true that some new African states have attempted to revive indigenous primal religious practices for political purposes, as did President Tombalbaye in Tchad from 1973 until his assassination in 1975. Similar revivals contrived for other than authentically religious purposes have occurred among African and North American Indian elites as part of their cultural identity, but genuine religion cannot be so manipulated and the future of primal religions does not lie in this direction.

The future for the primals lies as a component within the folk religions of all cultures, or in a wider sense as part of the permanent religious heritage of all mankind. More specifically, the primal religions will continue as one of the components in the new syncretistic and neo-primal religious movements that will form the subject of the next paper, or else as sporadic revivals or unexpected survivals like the current Shango cult among the Yoruba in Nigeria.

Educational Potential

(1) Freedom from Involvement

However this may be, the primal religions have many contributions to make as a major section within modern religious studies and we should examine these more closely. In the first place, they are specially suited to free the highly committed deeply involved Christian or other student for the serious and appreciative study of other traditions than his own. There need be no fear of betraying one's own loyalties or laying oneself open to conversion to another faith, for, as we have stressed above, the primals are non-missionary and the teacher will not turn out to have been a primal's evangelist in disguise. Neither teacher nor student will be emotionally involved, unless the latter should be an Australian aborigine or New Zealand Maori or otherwise identified with an indigenous race and culture. Then the situation can be met by avoiding in the first place the local primal systems and choosing a major example with good literature available from some far-off continent. Thus, classes in Australia and New Zealand could do well to start with the Plains Indians of the U.S.A. about whom first class materials are available (e.g. the many writings of Professor A. Hultkrantz of Stockholm).

(2) Difference From Familiar Forms

As a second contribution the primals provide a type of religion very different from the kind of religion that will be most familiar to the great majority of students. Unlike the great Asian religions with their known histories, scriptures, institutions and sophisticated cultures and powerful civilizations (just like Christianity), here we are dealing with very different overt forms, often crude or naive, set in smaller and simpler societies where it is sometimes hard to identify the religious dimension as such. On the face of it we can understand why nineteenth century Europeans said there was no religion here, or at best a pack of superstitions and mumbo-jumbo. If we can get modern Western students to take this kind of religion seriously and to discover something of its authentic nature and real spirituality, then we have made the great breakthrough in matters of attitude and appreciation in religious studies. Recently at an English university the same film of the religious activities of an American Indian tribe was shown separately to students of archaeology and then to students of religious studies. The first group often laughed at the queer and superstitious things they saw in the film. The second group never laughed, but some commented on how well the film illustrated various religious forms and phenomena they had been studying and some were deeply moved at this experience of the inner spiritual life of another people.

(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.