

LESSON 2

PRIMITIVE RELIGION

Introduction

By "primitive religion" we do not mean the religion of the earliest human beings. For the purposes of this book primitive religion refers to the religion of certain people who are living today in various parts of the world. In this study, "primitive" refers to type of culture and not to time of existence. The people whose religion is being discussed in this lesson have a very simple material culture. Usually, they cannot read or write. They still live very much as their Stone Age ancestors lived before them. And in general, they still retain their Stone Age religion even though they accept certain aspects of modern civilization. For example, the Tarahumara Indians in Chihuahua, Mexico still live very much as their Stone Age ancestors did. However, if you visit one of their dwellings, you may find present such items as coffee tins, plastic buckets or other useful modern items.

Primitive people as they have been defined in the previous paragraph can be found in both hemispheres and in many countries. Some examples of primitive people are various Negro and Negroid tribes of Africa, the Ainu of Japan, some hill tribes of India, Eskimoes, and Aboriginal Indian tribes of the Americas. But it must be pointed out that not all Indian tribes of the Americas remained in a primitive state. Some Indian groups had reached a high level of civilization by the fifteenth century when they were discovered and exploited by Western man.

The term "primitive" is not meant to imply mental inferiority. Until recently, even in scholarly writings on primitive religion, it was often assumed that the mental ability of primitive people was by nature different from and inferior to that of modern "civilized" man. Many people felt that the primitive represented a lower stage of human evolution. Some believed that the mind of the primitive was not equal to that of modern mankind. Modern civilization largely held that the primitive mind was underdeveloped. The primitive had the mind of a child or a prelogical mind. This mistaken notion still persists, even in writings on primitive religion. No doubt the common attitude among those who are not acquainted with the scientific study of man called anthropology is to view the primitive as mentally inferior. However, there is plenty of anthropological and sociological evidence to refute such notions. Noss declares:

The "group mind" is a convenient fiction of earlier sociology; and there is now ample evidence to show that primitives, while perhaps on the whole

Circle the correct answer.

Primitive religion refers to:

- the religion of the earliest human beings
- the religion of certain people living today
- the time of existence

(Compare your answer with the text.)

The term "primitive" is not meant to imply mental _____.

(inferiority)

There is plenty of anthropological and sociological evidence to _____ such notions.

(refute)

unanalytical and non-logical, are capable of both inductive and deductive reasoning and therefore of a rational ordering of their lives. Moreover, gifted or atypical individuals — the analogues of geniuses and talented eccentrics in other cultures — may in rare instances add new content to the old traditions and thus expand the range of thought and action. On the whole, however, tradition and custom are closely followed.¹

The student needs to understand that primitive people do not think like so-called civilized man. Studies by anthropologists have shown that this difference is due to cultural and social environment. These factors condition the thought processes of primitive people.

"Primitive credulity" is a term used by scholars to describe the mental attitude of primitive people. This simply means that primitive people live in the world of sensory experience. Primitive people are not critical of their sensations. They accept them at face value. This way of thinking leads to some fantastic notions. Things are true to the primitive person because his senses tell him they are true. What seems real is real to these people.

The religion of primitives is marked by a great amount of superstition and simplicity when compared to the religions of modern man. They have no sacred scriptures, because most of them have no written language. Most primitive religions do not have well-built temples and monuments, because many of them do not have permanently settled homes. Yet these primitives have well-defined religious traditions, beliefs, and rituals which are passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth. These beliefs are extremely important to these people, and they hold tenaciously to them. Their religion has provided the primitive people with social unity, with patterns of ethical behaviour, and with some sense of security.

So, how can we define "primitive" for the purpose of this book? John B. Noss states that "primitive" refers to "those smaller, less informed, and more isolated societies whose technology is not as highly developed as in 'civilized' societies and whose religious systems are regarded by all in the group, without exception, as indispensable to social harmony and satisfactory adaptation to the immediate environment."²

Primitive man's religion grows out of his experience of the world around him. Charles S. Braden graphically describes the world faced by the primitive people.

Picture for a moment that world as it presented itself to man. It was a world in which dangerous beasts lurked in the forest awaiting their prey; venomous reptiles lay hidden in the rocks or grass; sudden

The mental attitude is called _____

(primitive, credulity)

Briefly describe primitive religion.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

Primitive man's religion grows out of his experience of the _____ him.

(world, around)

¹ John B. Noss, *Men's Religions* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1963), p. ii.

² Noss, p. 3.

flashes of fire leaped out of the sky at him; vast crashing and rumbling noises at times filled the heavens; swift, rushing winds swept across his path; trees were caught up and flung down before him or perchance upon him; rivers rose up out of their banks and engulfed him; or the earth quaked and great issues opened before him. In the midst of a strong vigorous life, weakness overtook him. He burned with raging fevers; wild delirium overcame him — if by good fortune he awakened afterward, he was weak and helpless. None of these things could he control. They were powers he could not tame.³

Thus, primitive man's religion has grown out of his attempt to understand, explain, and control his world. This lesson examines primitive religion.

The Components of Primitive Religion

The sacred

Primitive people have a high regard for the sacred. A place, person, thing, ritual or event may be considered sacred. A primitive person approaches anything he considers to be sacred with an attitude that combines respect and caution. In the mind of the primitive person, the sacred has supernatural power. The power of the sacred can bless or destroy. And one's attitude towards the sacred may determine whether good or bad will occur. One's good fortune or misfortune may be determined by what one thinks towards the sacred. However, only well-qualified persons such as chiefs, shamans, priests, and heads of families deal with the sacred without harm, except in very rare instances. The primitive person, therefore, approaches the sacred with a sense of holy mystery, awe, reverence, and devout fear.

Anxiety in ritual

The fundamental basis of religious ritual is the anxiety created in the presence of the sacred. According to anthropologists, this anxiety exists in two forms. (1) There is a *primary anxiety*. This form of anxiety is created by crises or strains in the life of an individual or the community. This situation therefore brings about rituals whose purpose is to provide comfort and reassurance to the people. (2) A *secondary anxiety* arises from fear that the ritual was not performed soon enough or that it was not done properly. This anxiety then calls for further rituals of purification and expiation. Hence, fear, apprehension, and anxiety keep individuals practising these rituals, for they are afraid of what may happen to them or their group if they do not continue these practices.

Mana

Anthropologists have adopted the Melanesian term *mana* to describe a belief common to primitive people. *Mana* is the belief in an unseen but powerful force in the

Primitive people highly regard the _____.

(sacred)

Name two forms of anxiety formed in the presence of the sacred.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

³ Charles S. Braden, *The World's Religions* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954), p. 21.

world. This force manifests itself mysteriously in certain objects to give them uncommon excellence or power. The primitive believes this force can be seen in the inanimate objects of nature, but is most apt to assert itself in animals and persons. The power can be transferred from one person or thing to another. It may be productive either of good or evil. The mysterious happenings of the natural world may be the cause for the development of this belief. When a stone rolls from the side of a mountain and strikes or injures someone, it may seem to have mysterious power. Or, when one person appears immune to a plague or disease, he may appear to have some strange force in his body.

Thus, one can see that belief in *mana* plays an important role in primitive religion. Among primitive peoples, the belief in this mysterious power helps to explain all events.

Animism

Animism is the belief in spiritual beings resident in persons and things. Inanimate and animate objects are believed to possess their own individual spirits or souls, some of these being good and some evil.

The worship of spirits within things or creatures is the primitive's attempt to stay on good terms with the spirit within that which he worships. This is commonly called idolatry. The primitive may worship most anything in which he perceives power or spiritual presence: stones, especially those of unusual shape or those fashioned for implements or weapons; plants and trees, as representing the mysterious productivity of nature upon which human life depends; and animals, which furnish man with food and clothing and with which he feels kinship.

Polytheism

The belief in many gods is called polytheism. In primitive religion, animism tends to merge into polytheism. That is, spirit-worship is accompanied by the worship of deities who are more than the run-of-the-mill spiritual presences. Often these are gods of the water, air, fire, sky and heavenly bodies. This worship is a recognition of the powers of the universe and their significance for man as a dependent being. Often some "high-god" is recognized as the father and ruler of the gods and creator of the universe. This belief is thought by some scholars to be an evidence of a primitive revelation of the one God.

Religion in magic

Many attempts have been made to distinguish between rituals of magic and those of religion. But to little avail. Religion and magic are so intertwined that they cannot be separated. They must be seen as two distinguishable aspects of the rituals used in primitive societies.

Magic

The use of magic is prominent in primitive religion.

A belief in an unseen but powerful force in the world is called _____. It asserts itself in certain objects, such as _____ and _____.

(*mana, animals, persons*)

Give the purpose of *mana*.

(*Compare your answer with the text.*)

Give three examples of animism.

(*Compare your answers with the text.*)

The belief in many gods is called _____.

(*polytheism*)

Magic may be loosely defined as the attempt to control or to bend the powers of the world to man's will. Certain acts, performances, rituals, and verbal formulas are used to accomplish this end. Even though it is difficult to separate magic and religion, magic can be discerned when the religious performers are attempting to force things to happen rather than asking that they do.

The practice of magic in primitive religion takes many forms. Natural magic is the use of devices that assume that the spirits react like people. For example, one may beat a gong to frighten evil spirits away. Sympathetic or mimetic magic is based on the association of ideas. That is, look-alikes act alike. Thus, if one imitates that which he seeks to control, one can induce the person or thing to give forth the desired reaction. An example might be North American Indians who attempt to induce rain for their crops during a drought by certain rain dances and other rituals designed to cause the clouds to give forth the rain they have been withholding. Another example might be the drawing of a picture in which arrows pierce the hunted animal. This act works to insure success in the hunt about to take place.

Black magic is another form of magic used by primitive people. In some places it may be called voodoo or obeah. This form of magic is used to bring about some terrible thing on one's enemy. For example, grave dirt may be thrown in an enemy's yard to injure him.

Another prominent form magic takes is shamanism. This word is derived from Siberian religion. It refers to witch-doctors, medicine-men, and such. In Siberian religion, this person is known as a shaman. Since the shaman is typical of all witch-doctors, medicine-men, exorcists, and sorcerers, anthropologists call it shamanism. The shaman's duty is to work himself into a frenzy of spirit-possession. By doing this it is believed that he establishes control over certain spirits, especially those of disease and death. The shaman wants to gain control over these spirits either to drive them into people (bedevilment or bewitchment) or to expel them from people (exorcism).

Fetishism is also a form of magic practised by primitive people. This practice makes use of the power in certain objects. These objects are known as "fetishes." The power in the fetish is used to exert influence on spiritual powers. Some objects, such as misshapen sticks, may possess power of their own. Others may be "charged" with power, possibly by a shaman.

There is also popular magic. The shaman or priests are not necessary for this form of magic. Popular magic is the endeavour of the ordinary people to prevent the spirit-powers from harming the individual or the group, or to make them serve the interests of the group. This magic can take the form of two procedures. (1) *Aversive magic* is the ritual whereby the group removes guilt by transferring it to a scapegoat. For example, islanders may set a boat adrift in the sea to remove their guilt. (2) *Productive magic* on the other hand uses ritual to bring

Humans try to manipulate the powers of the world by the use of _____.

(magic)

Distinguish between natural magic and mimetic magic. Give examples.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

Define shamanism.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

The use of the power in certain objects is known as _____.

(fetishism)

List two types of popular magic.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

about social or individual well-being. The fertility rights practised by primitive groups are a good example of this.

Divination

The power of the shaman to contact the spirit-world and gain valuable information from them about events in the present and the future is known as divination. The shaman is the only one who can obtain this information. At times divination has a religious aspect. The shaman receives divine inspiration either through dreams and visions or the oracles such as those the ancient Greeks believed. The reading of omens is another aspect of divination. This means that the shaman is able to obtain meaning from the flight of birds, the sound of thunder, and other like phenomena. Divination is virtually universal among primitive societies.

Taboo

The idea of taboo is related to magic. Certain objects or persons are considered taboo because of some close association with mysterious power or spiritual presence. Contact with the person or thing considered taboo must be avoided at all costs. Dead bodies, women in childbirth, blood and spittle are examples of common taboos. However, taboos may vary from location to location and from tradition to tradition. The person of the chief is nearly always taboo, at least as long as he is able to lead the tribe.

Purification rites

Purification rites are necessary to remove the pollution caused by taboo violation or other defilement. Washing in water or blood is a common means of purification; but there are many others, such as jumping through fire, fasting, shaving, and the like.

Sacrifice

Nearly all primitive cultures practise sacrifice. This ritual is the attempt to attain or maintain a state of harmony with the spiritual powers by giving up something of value. The main idea of sacrifice is to appease an angry god, but there are also several other motives. Copeland writes: "Sacrifice goes beyond magic to a more purely religious impulse or at least to the recognition that some spiritual powers cannot be controlled, but only entreated."⁴

Prayer

Prayer is associated with sacrifice, but not exclusively so. It may be a ritual prayer or incantation, the repetition of which may carry its own power. Or it may be the spontaneous utterance to some named or nameless power in a moment of danger and the dread of death. Usually, in the religion of primitive people, prayer is intensely concerned with some human need.

The principal practitioner in divination is the _____.

(shaman)

Magic and _____ are _____.

(taboo, related)

Taboo violations and other defilements require _____ rites.

(purification)

Sacrifice is practised by nearly all _____ cultures.

(primitive)

⁴ E. Luther Copeland, *Christianity and World Religions* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1963), p. 18.

Ancestor worship

Many primitive cultures have developed customs, traditions, and rituals to prevent the dead from returning to the village or dwelling. It has been reported that certain Africans along the Congo scatter thorns on the grave and upon the path leading back to the village. This practice serves to prick the feet of the dead and prevent their return. Primitives want to prevent the return of the dead, because they perceive them as enemies to their living. But the dead are not always so. Often they are friendly. Chinese civilization is built on the belief that ancestral spirits want to help their descendants, and will do so, if only the living pay them proper regard.

Thus the custom of placing offerings on or in the grave has arisen. Primitives believe that food and drink are as much a need of the dead as of the living. Weapons, clothing, and every kind of precious object are placed in the grave. All this is done to placate or assist the dead.

Totemism

When a tribe selects an animal (or sometimes a plant) as a symbol of the social unity and identity of the tribe, it is called totemism. The word "totem" means group. Totemism may reflect the sense of man's intimate relation to other parts of creation, either by resemblance or dependence. That is, the tribe may feel that its totem animal, by its courage or cunning or some other trait, represents the character of the tribe. Or, the animal may be a present or past chief source of food for the tribe.

Mythology

Myths play a large and significant role among the primitive religions. Their main purpose is to explain the meaning of things. Noss states: "Myth...serves the very necessary function of providing sanctions for tribal custom and belief."⁵ Myths spring from the imagination or the dreams of primitive people or both. These stories grow and become more highly developed through frequent repetition. These stories then give the people more satisfactory answers to puzzling questions.

Whether the myths are literally true is unimportant to these people. What really counts is do they communicate to the primitive a spiritual truth or psychological satisfaction? Actually, sometimes the myth-makers hit upon (or have a revelation of?) a profound truth; as for example, the myth of an Indonesian tribe, re-enacted repeatedly in tribal ritual that the life of the world depends on the sacrifice and death of a god.

Christianity's Responsibility

Many things may be said in favour of primitive religion. (1) Primitive religion sets a standard for social and ethical behaviour and gives a measure of order and stability to tribal society. (2) Some aspects of primitive

Define ancestor worship. Give one example.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

The word "totem" means _____.

(group)

To primitives, myths explain the _____ of _____.

(meaning, things)

⁵ Noss, p. 28.

religion can be found in other religions, such as worship, prayer, and sacrifice. However, these practices are often degraded in primitive religion. (3) Some religious ideas and beliefs of primitive peoples are also truths held by mankind in general. These truths include belief in the afterlife, some recognition of sin, and certain ethical ideals, such as the value of love and sacrifice. Through these beliefs and the belief in the high-god, traces at least of original or general revelation are preserved.

Though these many things can be said in favour of primitive religion, there is much tragedy and much wrong. The primitive worshipper is controlled more by fear than he is by faith. That is the reason he sacrifices or casts thorns on a pathway. He believes he is surrounded by all kinds of spirits, and that many of these spirits are evil and intend to do him harm. Thus, primitive people live in bondage to fear and superstition.

When primitive people come to the knowledge of God in Christ, they experience a remarkable sense of relief and freedom from their former fears. They are no longer immobilized by their fears. One missionary told of a woman in Africa who was converted to Christ from animism. She exhibited a satisfying sense of freedom from her former fears when she cast out of her house and burned all of her former idols and fetishes.

Copeland reminds us that the meeting of modern society with primitive society is not a meeting with Christianity, but with secularism.⁶ The confrontation of primitive societies with technological society sets in motion a number of degenerative and disintegrative factors that have tragic results on these people.

Christians have, therefore, a major responsibility to understand the social and psychological factors involved in the transition from a primitive to a more complex culture. These people who stand confused between two worlds must be helped not only to find Christ as a personal Saviour. They must be helped also to find a new community of faith and love that will enable them to live as whole persons in a complicated society.

⁶ Copeland, p. 24.

Name two things that dominate the minds and lives of primitive people.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

What generally happens when primitive people turn to Christ?

(Compare your answer with the text.)

Is the following statement true or false?

Christians have no responsibility or obligation to help primitive societies make necessary transitions to the modern world.

(false)

Home Study Exercise

Basic activity (Levels 1, 2, and 3). After reading the study guide, answer the following questions.

1. According to the author, what is meant by "primitive religion"?

2. Show that the mind of the people living in the "primitive" condition is not inferior.

3. Define "primitive credulity."

4. Describe the religion of primitive people.

5. How do primitive people regard the sacred?

6. What part does anxiety play in primitive religion?

7. What is meant by *mana*?

8. Define animism. Give examples.

9. What is polytheism?

10. Define magic as used in primitive religious practices.

11. List forms of magic used in primitive religion.

12. What is meant by divination?

13. Give examples of ancestor worship.

14. What is the purpose of myths among primitive peoples?

15. What is Christianity's responsibility as it comes face to face with primitive peoples?

Supplementary activity (*Levels 2 and 3*). The following activities are based on the study guide.

1. What do anthropologists mean when they speak of "primitive people"? Give examples of these people from your part of the world.
2. What role does religion play in the life of "primitive people"?
3. Discuss ancestor worship. What is its role among "primitive societies"?
4. Write a paper that describes magic as it is used in "primitive religion."

Advanced activity (*Level 3*).

1. Analyze the practices of the Christian religion in your church and neighbouring Christian churches to discover forms of magic from "primitive religions" carried over into the practices of the Christian Church. What is your response to your discovery? Should these practices be continued? If so, why? If not, how would you propose to approach such an endeavour?
2. Write a complete report of your findings in the project given above and share in the student seminar.

Seminar Discussion

1. Discuss the existence of "primitive societies" in the modern world. Give examples. What is our Christian responsibility towards these people? What dangers exist for these people as more and more they come into contact with civilization?
2. Advanced students may report on their project.
3. Do you have "primitive societies" in your country? If so, discuss how the gospel can be taken to them. Make plans to reach out to these people in your land.