

An Outline Review
of
Huston Smith's
The World's Religions

(Our Great Wisdom Traditions)

Chapter IX. The Primal Religions

The historical religions span less than four thousand years as compared with the three million years or so the religions that preceded them. This mode of religiosity continues in Africa, Australia, Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands, Siberia, and among the Indians of North and South America.

Tribes without depending on writing may have retained insights and virtues that urbanized, industrial civilizations have allowed to fall by the wayside.

Part One: The Australian Experience.

God does not evolve; everything that we find flowering in the historical religions - monotheism, for example - is prefigure in the primal ones in faint but discernable patterns.

The muted character of distinctions in the primal religions is nicely illustrated by the religion of the Australian aborigines.

Aboriginal religion turns not on worship but on identification, a "participation in," and acting out of, archetypal paradigms. The

entire life of the aborigine, insofar as it rises above triviality and becomes authentic, is ritual.

Here there are no priests, no congregations, no mediating officiants, no spectators. There is only the Dreaming and conformance to it.

Part Two: Features that the Primal Religions Share

A. Orality, Place, and Time.

1. Orality - Literacy is unknown to the primal religions

Exclusive orality protects human memory.

It increases the capacity to sense the sacred through nonverbal channels such as virgin nature and sacred art.

Not being written, information that is useless and irrelevant is quickly weeded out.

2. Place versus Space - Primal religion is embedded in place.

No historical religion, not even Judaism and Shinto, is embedded in place to the extent that tribal religions are.

The exact and rightful place is a feature of sanctity.

3. Eternal time

Primal time is a temporal; an eternal now.

For primal peoples, "past" means preeminently closer to the originating Source of things. Closer-to-the-source means to be in some sense better.

B. The Primal World.

Primal peoples are embedded in their world, starting with their tribe. They are related to their own tribe almost the way that a biological organ is related to its host's body.

The tribe is embedded in nature.

Even the line between animate and "inanimate" is broken. Rocks are alive.

Everything is alive; nature extends itself to enter deeply into them, infusing them in order to be fathomed by them.

In the primal world there is an absence of a line separating this world from another world that stands over and against it. In historical religions this division emerges and much comes to be made of it.

Primal peoples are oriented to a single cosmos, which sustains them like a living womb.

The overriding goal of salvation that dominates the historical religions is virtually absent from Primal people.

C. The Symbolic Mind.

A common stereotype pegs primal religions as polytheistic. The issue is not whether tribal peoples explicitly identify a Supreme Being who coordinates the gods but instead, whether they sense such a being whether they name and personify it or not. The evidence suggests that they do.

The most important single feature of living primal spirituality is its symbolist mentality, a vision that sees the things of the world as transparent to their divine source.

Mysticism and symbolism are more frequently utilized among

them than among Western Europeans today. Only when we have fully grasped the mystic and symbolic meaning inherent in most activities of primitive man can we hope to understand him.

This section should not end without mentioning a distinctive personality type, the shaman. They are heavily engaged in healing, and appear to have preternatural powers to foretell the future and discern lost objects.

Part Three: Conclusion.

Though millions would now like to see the primal way of life continue, it seems unlikely that it will do so.

There is still time for us to learn some things from them.
