

The Spirit of Truth and The Spirit of Error

The Truths of Christianity Compared to: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Primitive Religion

© The Moody Bible Institute Of Chicago 1986

Compiled by Steven Cory

Quotations are from standard writings and leading teachers of this religion.

Primitive Religion

Primitive religion is the beliefs and practices of people who lack writing and have a simple, material culture. Apparently it has existed since the beginnings of mankind.

It is the religion of man without divine guidance, trying to make his peace with the terrifying and mysterious powers of nature. It can be said that primitive man lays bare the basic character of all men because he is stripped of the material benefits that often mask our need for God.

Probably most of the human race through the ages has adhered to primitive religion. It is still widely practiced today in its pure form among preliterate peoples; in addition, many members of major religions (including Christianity) partake of primitive thought and practice to varying degrees.

In the West there is now a great interest in primitive religion. Many think that modern secular man needs to recover primitive man's participation in the cycles of nature as well as his sense of the sacred.

Because primitive religion has developed over every continent among peoples who have no contact with each other, it is amazing that many basic similarities exist among primitive religions.

God

- Primitive peoples believe in a large number of gods, each reigning over a family, clan, village, or certain localities such as a river or a mountain. That belief has been called *henotheism*, meaning close adherence to a certain god while recognizing the existence of others. (The sailors in the book of Jonah, for example.)
- Most primitives do believe in one supreme, "high God, who is the first source of all existence. But that God is usually considered too distant to be concerned with the affairs of men.
- Primitive men are thus left to deal with local gods, who are generally lacking in mercy and love. Their ways are not always predictable, and primitive men are usually concerned either to appease their anger or to gain material favors from them.
- The gods are generally connected in some way with dead ancestors. That is, they relate to the tribe or clan and support the customs that have in the past kept the group functioning.

Man and the Universe

- Because of their lack of technology and scientific understanding, primitives trust that the universe is in control of the gods. Droughts, illnesses, and death pose great threats to primitive man, and his religion provides him to a certain degree with a feeling of security and a sense of control.
- It is thought that ancestors and the gods associated with them control human destiny, handing out

rewards and punishments for actions that help or hinder the group. Usually those gods and ancestors are themselves as mysterious and fearsome as the natural world.

- Like Hinduism and Buddhism, and unlike Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, the primitive world view is cyclical. There is no purpose to history; various ages repeat themselves with no final goal. That view arises from observation of the natural cycles of nature. Often primitives believe that only through their own ritual actions will the world order be maintained.
- Many primitives report that they follow customs and rituals without knowing why: tradition simply tells them that it has worked in the past.

Salvation and the Afterlife

- Often primitive religions teach that a messiah will some day come and bring in a reign of peace and prosperity for the tribe. Hopes for salvation generally relate to the group and to this world.
- There is little doctrine concerning the next life. A primitive man expects to merge with his ancestors in another world when he dies, but that other world is not vividly described, and it often is seen as just as full of trouble and confusion as this world.
- Salvation is thus piecemeal, relating to specific worldly distresses. It is not felt that a state of grace can be reached in any final way; there will always be new problems. Sacrifice -- most often blood sacrifice of animals -- is the usual means of atonement.
- Temporary escapes into the realm of "sacred time" (or "dream time") are possible. Through reenactments of mythological events primitive men mystically participate in the actions of gods and ancestral heroes. In that way they inject a sense of meaning into a chaotic world.
- The unenviable position of man without God is seen clearly in primitive man, who can only flee for short periods of time from a terrifying and purposeless existence.

Morals

- Survival of the group is of paramount importance. Without secular means of control (police, etc.), ways must be found to make group members adhere strictly to codes of conduct. Primitive people have developed communal ways of coping with the world, embodied in religious traditions they are fearful of changing.
- In many basic areas moral standards are much the same throughout the world. Lying, cheating, stealing, and murder are generally forbidden. But often those rules apply only within the group.
- Generally a sense of conscience is aroused only when some disaster occurs. If it is felt that an illness, for example, is the result of a wicked deed, then the person will repent to the god.
- Primitive morality is thus largely a matter of transactions, of acting in ways that will benefit the self and the community. Also, although primitive men are not devoid of natural feelings of love, their morality is largely legalistic. "Sins" are usually a matter of overstepping concrete rules, even when the reason for those rules is not understood.

Worship

- Worship also has the purpose of binding members of the community together, of giving them a sense of common purpose. (When people from different tribes with different gods meet, they usually speak in terms of the "high" god.)
- Totemism, the use of certain animals, plants, and even human artifacts such as skulls to contact the

spiritual realm, is common. Idolatry in a strict sense -- believing that an image or animal actually is a god -- is rare. Most often such worship is symbolic.

- Fasting, self-mortification, and drugs are used to attain states of trance. The purpose is sometimes to obtain communication from the world of spirits and at other times actually to participate in the life of the god, to "be" the god for a short period of time.
- Each group usually has at least one "holy man," who regularly makes journeys to the land of the gods and heroes for the good of the community.
- Power, rather than justice, love, or mercy, most often characterizes the object of worship.

Provided By: ChristianKonnections.com