IX. The Primal Religions

This book has dealt with the major historical religions. Historical religions have sacred texts and a cumulative tradition that builds and develops. The Christianity of the Middle Ages is not that of the Apostolic Church any more than NeoConfucianism is the Confucianism its founder taught, though in both cases strong continuities can be discerned.

The historical religions now pretty much blanket the earth, but chronologically they form only the tip of the religious iceberg; for they span less than four thousand years as compared with the three million years or so of the religions that preceded them. During that immense time span people lived their religion in an importantly different mode, which must have shaped their sensibilities significantly. We shall call their religious pattern primal because it came first, but alternatively we shall refer to it as tribal because its groupings were invariably small, or oral because writing was unknown to them. This mode of religiosity continues in Africa, Australia, Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands, Siberia, and among the Indians of North and South America. Its numbers are diminishing, but we devote this final substantive chapter to them, partly to pay them tribute but also for the contrasting light they can throw on the historical religions that have engaged us. What was, and in the places just mentioned still is, the religion of peoples who live in small communities, on subsistent economies that are the direct product of their own efforts, and without depending on writing? Without hope of doing justice to the subject, and skirting almost entirely the continental and intracontinental differences among them, we shall try to catch a
glimpse of human religiousness in its earliest mode. It is a more-than-academic exercise, for we can be sure that remnants of this mode survive as psychic traces in our deep unconscious. There is also the possibility that we might learn from them, for tribes may have retained insights and virtues that urbanized, industrial civilizations have allowed to fall by the wayside.

The Australian Experience

We can begin by putting behind us the nineteenth-century prejudice that later means better, a view that may hold for technology, but not for religion. History does show that social roles become more differentiated as societies grow in size and complexity. Lines between clergy and laity get drawn, and divisions between sacred and secular come to view; in this respect later societies resemble later biological species, which develop differentiated limbs and organs. But in both cases life was present from the start, and in the religious case it is a mistake to assume that later historical expressions are nobler than earlier ones. If God does not evolve, neither, it seems, does homo religiosus, not in any important respect. Mircea Eliade came to believe that archaic peoples are more spiritual than their descendants because, clothed as they are in leaves and skins and nourished directly by the fruits of the earth, they are unencumbered by external devices. However that may be, everything that we find flowering in the historical religions—monotheism, for example—is prefigured in the primal ones in faint but discernible patterns.

The muted character of distinctions in the primal religions—distinctions that in the historical religions explode into opposites, such as heaven and hell, or samsara and nirvana—provides a fitting entry into our subject and one that is nicely illustrated by the religion of the Australian aborigines. Australia is the only continent that did not undergo the Neolithic experience, which elsewhere began about 10,000 B.C. and witnessed the invention of farming and technically advanced stone implements. This exemption places the Australian aborigines closest among extant peoples to the earth's original human inhabitants, with the negligible exception of a tiny tribe in the Philippines, the Tassaday, whose authenticity is disputed. The world of aboriginal religion is a single one. We shall see that other primal religions resemble it in this respect, but the "antiquity" of the aborigines makes the sharpest division in their world—every world includes divisions of some sort—seem subdued in comparison to its counterparts in other primal cosmologies.

The distinction we have in mind is that between the aborigines' ordinary life and what anthropologists began by calling their "mythic world" (le monde mythique; Lévy-Bruhl) but now refer to by the aborigines' own term, "the Dreaming." This latter term has the advantage of indicating that there are not two worlds, but instead a single world that can be experienced in different ways.

The world that the aborigines ordinarily experience is measured out by time; the seasons cycle, and generations come and go. Meanwhile, the backdrop for this unending procession is stable. Time does not touch it, for it is "everywhen." Legendary figures people this backdrop world. They are not gods; they are much like ourselves, while at the same time being larger than life. What gives them their exceptional status is that they originated, or better, instituted, the paradigmatic acts of which daily life consists. They were geniuses for having molded and thereby modeled life's essential conditions—male and female; human, bird, fish, and the like—and its essential activities such as hunting, gathering, war, and love.

We are inclined to say that when the Arunta go hunting they mime the exploits of the first and archetypal hunter, but this distinguishes them from their archetype too sharply. It is better to say that they enter the mold of their archetype so completely that each becomes the First Hunter; no distinction remains. Similarly for other activities, from basket weaving to lovemaking. Only while they are conforming their actions to the model of some archetypal hero do the Arunta feel that they are truly alive, for in those roles they are immortal. The occasions on which they slip from such molds are quite meaningless, for time immediately devours those occasions and reduces them to nothingness.

We can see from this that 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. Mythic beings are not addressed, propitiated, or beseeched. The line that divides the human from those beings is broad in principle, but it can be easily erased, for it disappears in the moment of ritual merger when everywhen becomes now. Here there are no priests, no congrega-
tions, no mediating officiants, no spectators. There is only the Dreaming and conformance to it.

Parallels to the Dreaming motif abound, but nowhere with outlines quite as sharp as those in the Australian prototype. Though this difference is small, it is the only one in the population of the primal religions that we will mention. For the rest of the chapter we will be occupied with features that the primal religions share, and which set them apart as a group from the historical religions that have been this book's focus. The next section will consider their "orality"—a word invented to designate a mode of life in which words are spoken only, never written—and the distinctive ways they conceive of space and time. Other commonalities will emerge when their world view is outlined.

Orality, Place, and Time

Orality. Literacy, we have noted, is unknown to the primal religions. To be sure, it has now visited some of them; but this changes little in our inquiry for, when it arrives, leaders usually shelter their tribe's sacred lore from its encroachments. To commit living myth and legend to lifeless script, they assume, would be to imprison it and sound its death knell. It is not easy for people who value writing to fathom their instinct here, but if we try we can perhaps catch a glimpse of why they consider writing to be not just a competitor to exclusive orality but one that threatens the virtues it bestows.

We can begin with the versatility of the spoken over the written word. Speech is a part of a speaker's life, and as such shares that life's vitality. This gives it a flexibility that can be tailored to speaker and bearer alike. Familiar themes can be enlivened by fresh diction. Rhythm can be introduced, together with intonations, pauses, and accentuations, until speaking borders on chanting, and storytelling emerges as a high art. Dialect and delivery can be added to flesh out characters that are being described, and when animal postures and gaits are mimed and their noises simulated, we are into theater. Silence can be invoked to heighten tension or suspense, and can even be used to indicate that the narrator has interrupted the story to engage in private prayer.

This much is obvious, but it scarcely touches on the distinctive genius of primal orality. For if we go no further than this, we leave the door open for advocates of writing to respond, "Fine; let's have both," which of course is what the historical religions do have; their scriptures share the stage with homilies, songs, pages, and morality plays. We do not understand the distinctiveness of primal orality until we confront its exclusiveness, the way it views writing not as a supplement to speaking but its foe. For once introduced, writing does not leave the virtues of orality intact. In important ways it undermines them.

Chief among the endowments that exclusive reliance on speech confers is human memory. Literate peoples grow slack in recall. "Why should I tax myself when I can find what I need written down somewhere?" is the lettered attitude toward memory. It is not difficult to see that things would be different if libraries were not available. The memories of blind people, for example, are legendary; and we can add this report from the New Hebrides: "The children are educated by listening and watching. . . . Without writing, memory is perfect, tradition exact. . . . The thousand myths which every child learns (often word perfect, and one story may last for hours) are a whole library." And what do they think of us? "The natives easily learn to write after white impact. They regard writing as a curious and useless performance. They say: 'Cannot a man remember and speak?'"

To help us comprehend what life without writing would be like, we might try visualizing our forebears as bands of blind Homers who gather each evening around their fire after the day's work is accomplished. Everything that their ancestors learned with difficulty, from healing herbs to stirring legends, is now stored in their collective minds, and there only. Would they not cherish the heritage their conversation sustains? Would they not revere it and rehearse it endlessly, each supplementing and correcting the accounts of others?

What is important for us to understand here is the impact of this ongoing, empowering seminar on its participants. Everyone feeds the living reservoir of knowledge, while receiving in return its answering flow of information that shapes and stocks their lives. Each member of the tribe becomes its walking library. To see this as a genuine alternative to the advantages of reading, we can listen to an early adventurer in Africa who reported, "My trusted friend and companion was an old man who could not read or write, though well versed in stories of the past. The old chiefs listened enthralled.
Under the present system of [colonial] education there is grave risk that much of this may be lost." Another traveler to Africa pointed out that "unlike the English system in which one could pass one's life without coming into contact with poetry, the Uraon tribal system uses poetry as a vital appendix to dancing, marriages and the cultivation of a crop—functions in which all Uraons join as a part of their tribal life. If we have to single out the factor which caused the decline of English village culture, we should have to say it was literacy." If exclusive orality protects human memory, it also guards against other two depletions. The first of these is the capacity to sense the sacred through nonverbal channels. Because writing can grapple with meanings explicitly, sacred texts tend to gravitate to positions of such eminence as to be considered the preeminent if not exclusive channel of revelation. This eclipses other means of divine disclosure. Oral traditions do not fall into this trap. The invisibility of their texts, which is to say their myths, leaves their eyes free to scan for other sacred portents, virgin nature and sacred art being the prime examples. In the Middle Ages, when Europe was even less lettered than China, "the ignorant and unlettered man could read the meaning of sculptures that now only trained archaeologists can interpret." Finally, because writing has no limits, it can proliferate to the point where people get lost in its endless corridors. Secondary material comes to blur what is important. Minds become waterlogged with information and narrowed through specialization. Memory is protected against such cripplings. Being embedded in life, life calls it to count at every turn, and what is useless and irrelevant is quickly weeded out.

We can summarize the gifts of exclusive orality by quoting anthropologist Paul Radin. "The disorientation in our whole psychic life and in our whole apprehension of the external realities produced by the invention of the alphabet, the whole tendency of which has been to elevate thought and thinking to the rank of the exclusive proof of all verities, never occurred among [tribal] peoples."

**Place versus Space.** A second distinguishing feature of primal religion is its embeddedness in place. Place is not space. Whereas space is abstract, place is concrete. A cubic yard of space is identical wherever we calculate it, but no two places are alike, as Stephen Foster's refrain, "There's no place like home," attests.

Many historical religions are attached to places; Judaism and Shinto, both of which began as primal religions, come immediately to mind. No historical religion, however, is embedded in place to the extent that tribal religions are. Two anecdotes, both drawn from the Onondaga tribe of the Hau de no sau nee (the Six Nations in upstate New York), can serve to make this point.

Oren Lyons was the first Onondagan to enter college. When he returned to his reservation for his first vacation, his uncle proposed a fishing trip on a lake. Once he had his nephew in the middle of the lake where he wanted him, he began to interrogate him. "Well, Oren," he said, "you've been to college; you must be pretty smart now from all they've been teaching you. Let me ask you a question. Who are you?" Taken aback by the question, Oren fumbled for an answer. "What do you mean, who am I? Why, I'm your nephew, of course." His uncle rejected his answer and repeated his question. Successively, the nephew ventured that he was Oren Lyons, an Onondagan, a human being, a man, a young man, all to no avail. When his uncle had reduced him to silence and he asked to be informed as to who he was, his uncle said, "Do you see that bluff over there? Oren, you are that bluff. And that giant pine on the other shore? Oren, you are that pine. And this water that supports our boat? You are this water."

The second anecdote comes from the same tribe. An outdoor ceremony in which this author was included opened with a prayer that lasted for fifty minutes. No eyes were closed; on the contrary, everyone seemed to be actively looking around. As the prayer was offered in native tongue, I could understand nothing of it. When I later asked its content, I was told that the entire prayer had been devoted to naming everything in sight, animate and "inanimate," with the invisible spirits of the area included, inviting them to join in the occasion and bless its proceedings.

It would be wrong to think that attention to detail (in this second anecdote) and to ancestral setting (in the first) makes this notion of place confining. When the Australian Kurnai go on walkabouts, the concreteness of place goes with them. The springs and major trees and rocks that they encounter are not interchangeable with others of their kind; each triggers memories of the legendary events they were a part of. The Navajos do not even need to leave home for their sense of place to balloon. By fashioning their dwellings to the world's shape, their buildings draw the world into their homes. The pillars that support their roofs are named for, and thus identified with,
deities that support the entire cosmos: Earth, Mountain Woman, Water Woman, and Corn Woman.

In the opening pages of *The Savage Mind*, Claude Lévi-Strauss quotes a native thinker as remarking, penetratingly, that “all sacred things must have their place.” The observation argues that location in place—not any place, but in each and every instance the exact and rightful place—is a feature of sanctity. “Being in their place,” Lévi-Strauss continues, “is what makes [objects] sacred; for if they were taken out of their place, even in thought, the entire order of the universe would be destroyed.”

**Eternal time.** In contrast to the historical religions of the West, which are messianically forward looking, primal religions give the appearance of looking toward the past. That is not altogether wrong, and from the Western perspective, where time is linear, there is no other way to put the matter. But primal time is not linear; a straight line that moves from the past, through the present, into the future. It is not even cyclical as the Asian religions tend to regard it, turning in the way the world turns and seasons cycle. Primal time is atemporal; an eternal now. To speak of atemporal or timeless time is paradoxical, but the paradox can be relieved if we see that primal time focuses on causal rather than chronological sequence; for primal peoples, “past” means preeminently closer to the originating Source of things. That the Source precedes the present is of secondary importance.

The word Source is used here to refer to the gods who, where they did not actually create the world, ordered it and gave it its viable structure. Those gods continue to exist, of course, but that does not shift interest to the present, for the past continues to be considered the Golden Age. When divine creation had suffered no ravages of time and mismanagement, the world was as it should be. That is no longer the case, for a certain enfeeblement has occurred; thus steps are needed to restore the world to its original condition. “For religious man of the archaic cultures,” Mirea Eliade writes, “the world is renewed annually; in other words, with each new year it recovers its original sanctity, the sanctity that it possessed when it came from the Creator’s hands.”

Altars are erected that simulate the world’s original shape, and the mandating words the gods uttered on the day the world was created are faithfully repeated. We can liken such rites of renewal to telephone poles that boost sagging cables. The annual Sun Dance of the Plains Indians is called the Dance for World and Life Renewal. Individual tasks, too, need renewing. For example, the Polynesian Island of Tikopia has a ritual for repairing boats. In it a boat is repaired, not because it needs repair but ritualistically, “according to specifications,” as we might say, which in this case means the way the gods demonstrated the repair of boats. The ritual recharges this important island activity with significance and at the same time reinstates standards that may have slipped.

If we stopped here we would have said nothing distinctive about the primal view of time, for historical religions too have renewal rites, these being a feature of their primal heritage that they have retained. All of them have solstice festivals of some sort to reverse the winter’s darkness, as well as “easters” to abet nature’s rebirth. In Taiwan the Taoist festival Chiao effects renewal through rituals that span a sixty-year cycle, for just as nature needs to be revived each spring, so too must the greater cosmos be renewed on the scale of a human lifespan. Everyone participates in these rites. Preparations for a given phase of the cycle can take years, and the financial outlay is enormous.

For a feature of the primal view of time that the historical religions have largely abandoned, we can turn to the way it tends to rank order beings according to their proximity to their divine source. Thus animals are often venerated for their “anteriority,” and among animals the otter’s relative stupidity leads the Winnebagos to infer that it was created last. This principle applies to the human species as well; its pioneers are revered over their descendants, who are regarded as something of epigones. Primal peoples respect their elders enormously.

East Asians do likewise with their filial piety and ancestor worship; and it can be remarked in passing that Taoism and its Japanese cousin Shinto are the historical religions that across the board have remained closest to their primal roots. But to stay with the primal religions, it is not going too far to say that they think of their gods in more or less ancestral terms. Human ancestors are viewed as prolongations of the tribe’s earliest ancestors, who were divine. This makes them a bridge that connects the current generation with its first and supreme ancestor; one thinks again of Shinto, where the Emperor is the direct descendant of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, and the Japanese people are her indirect descendants. Standing closer to the gods
than does the present generation, ancestors are seen as inheriting more of their virtues, which makes them models for conduct. Exempt from the complications of life that devotion introduces, ancestors are thought to enjoy a wholeness of character that their offspring lack. The assumption probably arises not from Freud's postulate of subconscious idealizations of parental figures, but from deeper regions of intuition; from an instinctive ontological recognition that closer-to-the-source means to be in some sense better. In any case, all that has been said of the ancestors applies to some extent to elders of the current generation. Even the childlikeness and naiveté of their later years tends to be regarded as an advance toward the state of paradisiacal righteousness that preceded the world's decline. Toward the close of his life, Black Elk, a shaman of the Oglala Sioux, often fell to all fours to play with toddlers. "We have much in common," he said. "They have just come from the Great Mysterious and I am about to return to it."

We turn now to other features of primal religion that are embedded in its worldview. In sketching that view we continue to use broad strokes, confining ourselves to features that remain relatively constant beneath the variety of concrete cosmologies through which they find expression.

**The Primal World**

A useful place to begin is with the embeddedness of primal peoples in their world. This starts with their tribe, apart from which they sense little independent identity. The web of tribal relationships sustains them psychologically and energizes every aspect of their life. To be separated from the tribe threatens them with death, not only physically but psychologically as well. Other tribes might be viewed as alien and even hostile, but to their own tribe they are related in almost the way that a biological organ is related to its host's body.

As for the tribe, it is embedded in nature, and again so solidly that the line between the two is not easy to establish. Indeed, in the case of totemism it does not exist. We shall continue with totemism in a moment, but let us first note the route we shall be taking. The contrary of embeddedness is a world of scissions and segregations, so we shall approach the embeddedness of primal life by noticing the relative absence of these in its world. Totemism is a fitting place to begin, because it shows primal peoples disregarding altogether the division between animal and human.

In totemism a human tribe is joined to an animal species in a social and ceremonial whole that gives them a common life. The totem animal bonds the human members of its clan distinctively to one another, while acting as their mate, friend, guardian, and helper, for it is of their "flesh." They, in return, respect it and refuse to injure it unless in dire distress. The totem animal serves as the clan's emblem, and at the same time symbolizes the ancestor or hero whom the members commemorate. It also symbolizes the life force of the species, for the health of which the human members of the totem are ritually responsible. All this springs from the conviction that human beings and nature belong to a single order. Rituals for increasing the totem species do not stem from standing apart from nature and attempting to control it. They are, instead, expressions of human needs, specifically the need for the normal order of nature to be preserved. They are ways of cooperating with nature at those seasons when the increase of a particular species, or when rainfall for that matter, should occur. Rather than being attempts to produce extraordinary effects or control nature magically, primal rites work mainly to maintain the regular and normal; they are rituals of cooperation. As such they have both economic and psychological sides. While articulating economic facts and needs, they also sustain confidence in the processes of nature, spiritually conceived and determined, and renew hope for the future.

Totemism itself is not universal among tribal peoples, but they all share its nonchalance concerning the animal/human division. Animals and birds are frequently referred to as "peoples," and in certain circumstances animals and humans can exchange forms and convert to their opposite numbers. The division between animal and vegetable is equally muted. For plants have spirits like the rest of us. The following anecdote can illustrate this; it was related to the author by the father of a student who was involved. At one point the art department of Arizona State University decided to offer a course on basket weaving, and approached a neighboring Indian reservation for an instructor. The tribe proposed its masterweaver, an old woman, for the position. The entire course turned out to consist of trips to the plants that provided the fibers for her baskets, where myths involving the plants were recounted and supplicating songs and prayers were memorized. There was no weaving.
The progression of the preceding paragraph reaches its logical term when we note that even the line between animate and "inanimate" is perforated. Rocks are alive. Under certain conditions they are believed to be able to talk, and at times—as in the case of Ayers Rock in Australia—they are considered divine. It is easy to see how this absence of discontinuities produces embeddedness. Primal peoples are not blind to nature's differences; they are famous for their powers of observation. The point is rather that they see distinctions as bridges instead of barriers. Fertility cycles, along with the ceremonies that celebrate and sustain them, establish a creative harmony between humanity and its setting, with myths confirming the symbiosis at every turn. Male and female contribute equally to the cosmic life force. All beings, not overlooking heavenly bodies and the elements of wind and rain, are brothers and sisters. Everything is alive, and each depends in ways on all the others. As we continue this meditation on embeddedness, there comes a point where the order reverses itself and we begin to think, not of primal peoples as embedded in nature, but of nature, seeking itself, as extending itself to enter deeply into them, infusing them in order to be fathomed by them.

Turning from the world's structure to human activities, we are again struck by the relative absence of compartmentalizations between them. For example, "Among the languages of American Indians there is no word for 'art,' because for Indians everything is art." Equally, everything is, in its way, religious. This means that to learn of primal religion, we can start anywhere, with paintings, dance, drama, poetry, songs, dwellings, or even utensils and other artifacts. Or we could study the daily doings of its peoples, which are also not separated in sacred and profane. A hunter, for example, does not set out simply to assure his tribes' hunger. He launches on a complex of meditative acts, all of which—whether preparatory prayer and purification, pursuit of the quarry, or the sacramental manner by which the animal is slain and subsequently treated—are imbued with sanctity. An inquirer who lived with Black Elk for two years reported the latter's assertion that hunting is—Black Elk did not say represents, the reporter emphasized—life's quest for ultimate truth; the quest requires preparatory prayer and sacrificial purification. "The diligently followed tracks are signs or intimations of the goal, and the final contact or identity with the quarry is the realization of Truth, the ultimate goal of life."  

Thus far we have been noting the absence of sharp divisions within the primal world, but another absence is, if anything, more telling: namely, the absence of a line separating this world from another world that stands over and against it. In the historical religions this division emerges and much comes to be made of it. Plato, speaking philosophically for Greek religion, presents the body as a tomb. The Hebrew Scriptures contrast the created world with a holy, righteous, transcendent Lord. For Hinduism the world is maya, only marginally real. The Buddha likened the world to a burning house from which escape is imperative. An apocryphal account has Jesus saying, "The world is a bridge; pass over, but build no house upon it." The Koran compares the world to vegetation that will be quickly harvested or turn to straw. In Japan Master Taishi called the world a lie against which only the Buddha is true. World devaluation figures prominently in the historical religions.

In primal ones divisions of such severity never appear; there is, for example, nothing like the notion of creation ex nihilo. Primal peoples are, we are emphasizing, oriented to a single cosmos, which sustains them like a living womb. Because they assume that it exists to nurture them, they have no disposition to challenge it, defy it, refashion it, or escape from it. It is not a place of exile or pilgrimage, though pilgrimages take place within it. Its space is not homogeneous; the home has a number of rooms, we might say, some of which are normally invisible. But together they constitute a single domicile. Primal peoples are concerned with the maintenance of personal, social, and cosmic harmony, and with attaining specific goods—rain, harvest, children, health—as people always are. But the overriding goal of salvation that dominates the historical religions is virtually absent from them, and life after death tends to be a shadowy semi-existence in some vaguely designated place in their single domain.

The Symbolic Mind

A summary of the primal world as thus far sketched shows its internal divisions to be provisional and there to be no transcendent reality that relativizes it. All of this, however, would amount to a string of zeros without a digit to confer value on them were we not to introduce the divine source from which the world is believed to
issue, or in other versions, divine arrangers who bring order out of chaos. The presence of these divinities raises the question of theism in the primal traditions, and it must be considered carefully, for the issue is a subtle one.

A common stereotype pegs primal religions as polytheistic, and this is not altogether wrong if the word tokens that the divine can conceal in hallowed places and alight on specific objects. But this has nothing to do with the flat, Olympian, and Mediterranean polytheism generally that the Bible had to contend with; nor does it militate against a single Ultimate of which the many gods are instantiations or expressions. Wilhelm Schmidt's twelve-volume *Ur sprung der Gott esidee*, concluded that every then-known tribe—the work was published between 1912 and 1955—had its High God who lives and works through its deities. The Yoruba of West Africa, for example, never rank their Supreme Being, Olodimawe, with lesser divinities (orisa), nor do the Edo confuse Osanobuwa with the ebo. Even if Schmidt overstated the case, however, this scarcely matters; for the issue is not whether tribal peoples explicitly identify a Supreme Being who coordinates the gods but instead, whether they sense such a being as whether they name and personify it or not. The evidence suggests that they do. As the Navajo artist Carl Gorman points out: "Some researchers into Navajo religion say that we have no supreme God because he is not named. This is not so. The Supreme Being is not named because he is unknowable. He is simply the Unknown Power. We worship him through his creation for he is everything in his creation. The various forms of creation have some of his spirit within them." One can call this pan- or poly-monotheism if one wishes. The fact remains that though primal religions affirm the divine Unity less exclusively, and in some cases seem even to veil it, they contain nothing that is strictly comparable to the anthropomorphic polytheism of the early Europeans. It is just that the holy, the sacred, the *wakan* as the Sioux call it, need not be exclusively attached, or consciously attached at all, to a distinguishable Supreme Being.

Something may even be lost by so attaching it, that loss being the removal of holiness from things that are other than the God that is factored out. This brings us to what is probably the most important single feature of living primal spirituality; namely, what has been called its symbolist mentality. The symbolist vision sees the things of the world as transparent to their divine source. Whether that source is specified or not, the world's objects are open to its light. Physical sight presents the water in a lake in existential isolation, for as far as the eye reports, the body of water exists as a reality in its own right. From there modern thought may go on to reason that the water is composed of oxygen and hydrogen, and if a spiritual gloss is desired it may attribute to the water allegorical significance. Normally, however, modernity recognizes no ontological connection between material things and their metaphysical, spiritual roots. In this respect primal peoples are better metaphysicians, though their metaphysics, where articulated—we have seen that it need not be—is naturally of mythic cast. When ethnologists declared that for the Algonquins "there is no manitu [spirit] outside the world of appearances," this simply meant that they were unaware that for the primal mind appearances never exist entirely on their own. As the friend of Black Elk whom we have already mentioned puts the point:

It is often difficult for those who look on the tradition of the Red Man from the outside or through the "educated" mind to understand that no object is what it appears to be, but it is simply the pale shadow of a Reality. It is for this reason that every created object is wakan, holy, and has a power according to the loftiness of the spiritual reality that it reflects. The Indian humbles himself before the whole of creation because all visible things were created before him and, being older than he, deserve respect.

A student of the Musicas in the high Andes of Columbia confirms this point: "All primordial men saw the 'more' in the 'less,' in the sense that the landscape was for them a reflection of a superior reality which 'contained' the physical reality; they added, may one say, to the latter, a 'spiritual dimension' which escapes modern man."

Paul Radin, who was mentioned earlier, was as impatient as any anthropologist with the "erroneous impression" that primal people are mystics across the board. He insisted that we find among them, as among us, "two general types of temperament: the man of action and the thinker, the type which lives fairly exclusively on what might be called a motor level and the type that demands explanations and derives pleasure from some form of speculative thinking." Yet he would "not for a moment," he said, "deny that mysticism and symbolism are more frequently utilized among them than among West-
ern Europeans today. . . . Only when we have fully grasped the mystic and symbolic meanings inherent in most of the activities of primitive man can we hope to understand him." 17 As an example of what he was referring to, we can cite the tribesman who pointed out that the circles in spider webs are sticky, whereas its radii are not. This means, he said, that if you wander from side to side in life you get stuck, but if you move toward its center you don’t.

This section should not end without mentioning a distinctive personality type, the shaman—widespread but not universal in tribal societies—who can bypass symbolism and perceive spiritual realities directly. We can think of shamans as spiritual savants, savant being defined as a person whose talents, be they in music (Mozart), drama (Shakespeare), mathematics, or whatever domain, are exceptional to the point of belonging to a different order of magnitude. Subject to severe physical and emotional traumas in their early years, shamans are able to heal themselves and reordinate their lives in ways that place psychic if not cosmic powers at their disposal. These powers enable them to engage with spirits, both good and evil, drawing power from the former and battling the latter where need be. They are heavily engaged in healing, and appear to have preternatural powers to foretell the future and discern lost objects.

**Conclusion**

As between the primal and the historical religions, time seems to be on the side of the latter, for though millions would now like to see the primal way of life continue, it seems unlikely that it will do so. "Civilization" is seductive where not imperious, and we cannot quarantine the primal peoples who remain, preserving them for anthropologists to study and the rest of us to romanticize as symbols of our lost paradise. How industrial peoples will comport themselves toward the primal in what seems to be the short time they have left on this planet will be the final topic of this chapter.

The historical religions have largely abandoned their earlier missionary designs on "the heathen," as they were once disparagingly referred to. If anything, the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction, toward romanticizing the primal. Dismayed by the relentless utilitarianism of technological society and its seeming inability to contain its power to destroy both people and planet, citified peoples have come to hope that a fundamentally different way of life is possible, and they latch onto primal peoples to support that hope. Guilt enters the picture too, as the descendants of those who had power face up to the ways their forbears looked down on, despoiled, and destroyed those who lacked it. Whether things could have gone differently, given what the conquerors then understood and the seemingly irresistible disposition of those who possess power to abuse it, we shall never know. What we do know, and it is at least to our credit that we now confess it, is that there was holocaust on a global scale.

On the positive side we can note that we now recognize that we were mistaken in our assessment of these people. Primal peoples are not primitive and uncivilized, much less savage. They are not backward; they are different. They are not impaired; they are apart. With this realization in place and disparagement of the primal behind us, we return for a moment to our current propensity to romanticize these people, for there is an aspect of that impulse that is not widely understood.

Disenchantment with the complexities and mistakes of industrial life, the scission between human beings and nature it has effected, and the bitter fruits that that scission has borne, have (as we were saying) produced by way of reaction the image of tribal peoples as wholly natural. We regard them as sons and daughters of the earth and sky, brothers and sisters of animals and plants, who live by nature’s ways and do not upset the delicate balances of their ecological zones; gentle hunting folk who are still in touch with the magic and myth that we ourselves so badly need. Seeing them thus, we assume that our ancestors resembled them in these respects and we celebrate them as our heroes. There is a deep, unconscious reason for this bent of thought. Every people, ourselves not excepted, needs to think well of its origins; it is part of having a healthy self-image. So modern peoples, who are no longer confident that God created them, transfer some of God’s nobility to the source from which they assume that they did derive, namely early humankind. This is the deepest impulse behind “the myth of the noble savage” that the eighteenth century invented.

What may be hoped is that we are now ready to put both prejudice and idealization behind us. If we are, perhaps we can live out our numbered years of planetary partnership in mutual respect, guided
by the dream of one primal spokesman that "we may be brothers after all." If we succeed in doing this, there is still time for us to learn some things from them. For, tabling shortcomings that are not the issue here, it is not romantic to affirm what John Collier, one time United States Commissioner of Indian Affairs, said of his charges:

They had what the world has lost: the ancient, lost reverence and passion for human personality joined with the ancient, lost reverence and passion for the earth and its web of life. Since before the Stone Age they have tended that passion as a central, sacred fire. It should be our long hope to renew it in us all.18

Suggestions for Further Reading


Notes

6. Related to the author by Chief Oren Lyons.
15. From a letter written by Joseph Epes Brown, quoted in Schuon, The Feathered Sun, 47.