

Primal Religions and Primal Religion in the Dialogue Between Faith and Culture

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The "Death of God" era is already gone. Our world, inspite of its advances in science and technology, and the mastery of the forces and resources of the Universe, is not happy. The culture of today provides us with an immense amount of pleasurable experiences, yet the joy and peace of vital achievement is absent from our life. The failure is in man himself, who can and in many cases, does mishandle his great culture by transforming it into an instrument of torture. In the process of seeking instant pleasure and material profit, man sees himself and his fellowmen as dumb, dry, loveless, and lifeless tools. Then the innermost longing for God in him makes man revolt. The legacy of the past and the present religious environment tell man that he came from, and is meant to arrive in heaven. Present day man might not obey God, but he remembers Him and somewhat intuits Him as alive perhaps a little better than the men of other ages. No other epoch in history has witnessed the springing up of so many new religions and movements.

Some may wonder why our article is entitled "**Primal Religions and Primal Religion.**" "*Religions*" stands for one thing and "*Religion*" for another. In this piece we will talk about both of them.

The word *Religion* is derived from the Latin language. Etymologically, it is composed of the particle *Re* – meaning repetition or reinforcement – and of the noun *Legio*, a substantive of the radical "*Leg*" – missing to appropriate to oneself something valued. The Latin expression "*flores legere*," for example, means "to pick up flowers."

The Romans used terms such as "*religio Patriae*" for patriotism, "*religio parentum*" for filial piety, "*religio militiae*" for military discipline, and "*religio deorum*" for the worship of the deities. This last expression was the most frequently used and the one better understood. Thus "*Religion*" came to designate the public and recognized service to God.

Religion is most probably the subject matter most talked about in our days. Everybody seems to ignore that we all understand religion to be man's vital concern about God, "the sacred", the Divine in all its manifestations. As a result, everybody finds time to think and to say something about religion, but some precision is needed.

Religion is sometimes reduced to the emotional excitement experienced by some individuals or multitudes in their dealing with God and with the sacred. So we qualify Mrs. X as a very religious lady, because we see her very frequently in the church taking part with enthusiasm in the liturgical services. Theologians, philosophers and educators talk and write much on the moral rectitude in man's behavior towards God and the sacred, that is, on the virtue of religion. Travelers, archeologists, and historians likewise describe, conduct research, and elaborate on how people live with God and the sacred, through relics implements, ruins, documents or the societies they visit or study. These specialists are interested in the "peculiar manners" that make up the institutions recognized as the religions in said countries.

Religion-*Feeling* and Religion-*Virtue* might be external and objective manifestations, but in themselves they are personal and subjective; while Religion-*Institution* is an external reality that stands by itself, even if it is meant to be lived internally. We should define Religion-*Institution* as a fixed, accepted and transmitted set of persons, concepts, actions, practices and means towards acknowledging, honoring the sacred – the divinity – and communing with it.

Religion-*Institution* is a vital human phenomenon. Because humanity has a vast temporal and spatial history it is affected by an almost infinite number of conditionals. The History of Religions is testimony of an almost infinite number of religions. Scholars classify them into categories to facilitate the study and understanding of their nature and eventual mutual influences. An apparently favorable mode of classification of religions adopts as criterion the level

in culture that the particular religion presupposes. The basis of this criterion is the fact that finds in his religion the understanding he has of himself and of the world surrounding him. This understanding is conditioned by his culture.

Prehistoric culture and religion have to be discarded because of the scanty signs and relics left.

Primitive, natural, civilized and philosophical are the cultural levels in which Man must be trained in order to be able to handle the resources of his world, in as much as they are subjected to scientific and technical elaboration. Religions have been categorized accordingly as *Primitive*, *Natural*, *Civilized* and *Philosophical*. Still another category should be added to account for the institutions in which tenets, means, ways and organized functions are believed to have come from a direct intervention of the divinity. This is *Revealed* religion.

PRIMAL RELIGIONS

"Some people are now using the word "*Primal*." This means religions that are prior to those we call "universal" religions. "They are the religions of one tribe or people who realize that other people have their own gods and systems," writes Harold Turner hinting that the denomination "primitive" is not a welcome one, as it might be understood in the sense of rudimentary, insufficient, incomplete or improvised. He ends by saying that these "primal religions" "... are serious efforts by adult peoples to create and preserve a spiritual system which can sustain them in both life and earth." (Harold Turner, "World of the Spirits," in *World's Religions*. A Lion Book. 1982, pp. 126-132).

Said "spiritual systems" are found all over the world, as all over the world there are communities of men living by the beliefs of their forefathers, or their respective "primal religions." All countries in Asia, including the Philippines, are the home of quite a number of such communities, each one of them, with their own primal religion.

That the "primal religions" are not behavioral entities fancied at random by some early clever men is demonstrated by the fact of their presence in every corner of the world. They have same fundamental structure although realized and articulated by local means and conditions. Such realization and articulation imply a dialogue

between the surrounding world and the reasoning man. All men are basically the same; but the living conditions vary with the localities.

We must begin by admitting the impossibility of pinpointing the origins of religion in humanity through paleontological, historical or phenomenological processes. The data at our disposal, besides being utterly scanty and fragmentary, are limited to the structure of the surface of the Earth and the distribution of humanity on it. These data do not provide any information as to the beginning of man's life on earth.

However sound philosophical reflection can go further. Early man, who was not yet distracted by the comforts and complications of progress, had to enter into a direct dialogue with the heavens, the earth and the sea wherein he abides. This dialogue was for him necessary and vital. He lived on the resources the world offers by the work of his hands. In the process of the dialogue man encountered powers and forces challenging his efforts or responding to them in some overwhelming manner. He was conscious that his own powers came from his nature; then he concluded that in the universe there were natures, or there was a nature, from which the overpowering forces emanated. Man did not see nature or natures, neither did he perceive the nature within himself, the reality of whose existence he certified by his own conscious actions; but he was conscious of the reality of experiencing their influence. Thus he became certain of their existence.

A sensitive reflection on the work of one of the forces emanating from the nature or natures showed to the early man that he does not come into being at random. From his own way of operating, man came to deduce that such is the way an intelligent being operates. He then becomes convinced that his world, and he himself, and the interaction integrating them into a functional universe are the work of an intelligent entity.

Henceforth, the dialogue is between the intelligent man and the intelligent entity evident, not mysterious; generous, not terrible; approachable, not horrible; powerful, high and majestic and gracious and benevolent as would befit the source and origin of life and beauty. That intelligent entity is, in the mind of the early man, the "sacred," the "deity," deserving all honor and glory. In order to address and converse with his sovereign partners – early man devised a name

derived from the most striking phenomenon evidencing its influence, be it *IO* among the Polynesians or *URANOS* among the Prehellenic Populations. He would also dedicate a spot, mountain, rock, spring, tree of imposing appearance as a sanctuary; but in whatever place and under whatever name the intelligent entity would be understood and approached as the "Father from beyond" whom the *Aeta* or *Negrito* from our own Philippines, from some inner valleys of Thailand, Indian Madagascar or Africa greetss with sparkling eyes as the sun rises over the horizon every morning.

Early man was sincere, and, when the "sacred" showed its presence in a manner external and visible he answered by expressing with external words, positions, movements, actions, operations his acknowledgment, reverence, love, gratitude, submission and service to the "sacred." Henceforth, we now see *Primal Religion* as a manner of man's living springing up spontaneously from man's capability of seeing the truth, man's bent towards loving goodness, man's desire to enjoy beauty and the splendor of well-being, that are demands and aspirations fully alive in the soul of early man. The constant recurrence of the dialogue implied the reiteration and the transmission, the institutionalization in other words, of the external manifestation of reverence towards the "sacred." We must conclude therefore that the *Primal Religion* is an institution in the life of humanity that has its origin in the vital and necessary dialogue of man with his world.

The encounter and dialogue between man and the "sacred" did not only happen once; it is continuous occurrence. Then, as man developed his manner of approaching his world from the most simple manner of primal recognition to that of the most complex philosophical perspective, an almost infinite number of religions came to existence. The sense of veneration for the past and the conditions of life have combined to induce a great number of human communities to perpetuate the simple forms of *Primal Religion* created by their respective forefathers.

Mircea Eliade in his *Traité d'histoire des Religions* masterfully collects, studies and systematizes the manifestations of the "sacred" that induced the early man to an initial dialogue of worship, or from which developed the so called universal religions. He gives to those manifestations the name of *Hierophanies*, from the Greek *Hieron*, sacred, and *Phania* manifestations, and proceeds to classify it into: *Cosmic Hierophanies*, beings or happenings in the sky, the waters,

the earth, or the seas; *Biological Hierophanies*, wonders in the constitution and functioning of life; and *Topical Hierophanies*, marvelous incidents connected with individual persons, places or times wherein the constitution and laws of nature appear twisted or broken. He ends his research with a remarkable statement: "For the time being we limit ourselves to state that almost all the religious positions of man come given to him from the primitive times." This implies, that no matter how perfect and developed are the sets of tenets identifying the deities and their powers and interventions, the sets of rituals for venerating and communing with the gods, the sets of states and endowments of men dealing with the deities and the sets of beliefs and practices related to life after death that might be found in developed religions of any place, the *Primal Religions* of the locality have to be taken into consideration in order to be able to retrieve the authentic approach of the local man to his world and to his "sacred," to his Culture and to his Faith.

PRIMAL RELIGION

It was stated previously that "*primal religions*" means one thing and "primal religion" another. In "*primal religions*" the object of interest is the institution for serving God, while in "primal religion" the vital act is to be considered.

"The word "*Primal*" also means *primary* or *basic*," writes Turner (*o.c.*, p. 130).

One day Jesus was confronted with the problem of different conflicting religions and gave us the best notion of *Primal Religion*. He was resting by the Well of Jacob and had in view Mount Garizim, the sanctuary of the Samaritans. A woman from nearby Sichar came to draw water and He asked her to serve him some; but the woman objected because of the religious enmity existing between Samaritans and Jews. During the conversation she recognized in Him a prophet, the woman threw to Him the problem: "Our forefathers worshipped in this mountain and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where it will be proper to worship." Jesus said: "Believe me, woman, the time is coming when you will worship the Father neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know, we worship what we do know; for salvation comes from the Jews. But the hour is coming – indeed it is already here – when true worshippers will

worship the Father in spirit and in truth, that is the kind of worshiper the Father seeks. God is spirit and those who worship, most worship in spirit and in truth." (John 4, 21-23)

The last statement of Jesus is the clear existential notion of *Primal Religion*: Worship of the Father in spirit and in truth." Man worships God whom he recognizes as his Father, when he expresses through vital actions or operations his conscious relationship with Him. Those vital actions or operations might be the simple throwing of a flower or the most complicated ritual consisting of a solemn immolation and disposal of a bull, but the truth of the relationship reveals that man acknowledges that he and his world belong to God. The effort exerted in the performance of the vital action or operation might be long and strenuous, as a pilgrimage, or light and pleasant, as the lifting of the right hand towards the rising sun, yet the enthusiasm, the spirit of both the pilgrim and the negrito is their heartfelt eagerness to come closer to their beloved God.

Primal Religion, basis and gist of all religions, is a relationship with God who is adored, loved and served in an honest-to-goodness way. Existentially and historically, it is the *Faith* of humanity that has to be brought into any dialogue aiming at the integral human and social development.

Primal Religion and Culture

Now, a closer look at World Culture shows that its very existence and development is intimately connected with religion. Remnants and relics of cults, amulets, tombs and burial offerings, and practices, drawings of ritual dances and so on left behind by the prehistoric early man are the monuments we possess of this culture. Sanctuaries, pyramids, temples and cathedrals mark the paths of progress together with sacred legends and epics, with codes of laws, poetry, music, art and even games consecrated to God and his service. Archives of the temples, inscriptions on their walls and writings of their priests are the main repositories preserving for posterity the memories of the cultural glories of the past.

When we gaze intently and intelligently at the world of culture, an overwhelming fact becomes obvious: No matter how different and far away from each other in race, time, habitat and religious tenets

were the masters, most of the cultural masterpieces have as subject matter a religious motive. The splendor of genial inspiration, common trait of all the religious masterpieces treasured by humanity, is the shining of the faith in the "sacred" of the master while casting into exquisite shape the beauty he sees in his subject.

The universal effectiveness of all the institutional religions, in the creation and development of human culture, springs forth, not from their tenets or functioning, but from the life of their basic *Primal Religion*.

Conclusion

A very serious question arises at this point. Following the usual procedure of scholars and researchers in History of Religions we have been looking into *Primal Religion* as if it was created and developed by man. But now, is it true that religion, whether primal or historical, is a purely man made entity?

Religion, whether institutional or personal, is a vital dialogue between man and his God. In such a dialogue God is not a dumb, silent partner. Being the creator of man and of the world with which the man has to dialogue with in order to live, His is the initiative. World-revered traditions and historical documentation combine in order to indicate that the History of Religions is a beautiful pattern of divine interventions calling man to converse with God.

It is not our intention to present a Theology of *Primal Religion*, because it will be beyond of the scope of our article; but we believe that a more profound study of early man of our days will be a necessary material for such a Theology.

Quite a number of "Early Men" in matters of religion live in our midst, as systems of education and behavior aiming at "the death of God" had brought them into existence. They are well educated men and are capable of expressing themselves. Let us read one of them.

The daily newspaper *South Morning Post* of Hong Kong in its January 13, 1946 issue published a poem found on the corpse of the American soldier Pfc. J.J.W. killed in the battle of Anzio (Italy) at the end of the Second World War.

WITH A FRIEND

Look, God, I have spoken to you,
 But now I want to say, "How do you do?"
 You see, God, they told me You didn't exist,
 And like a fool, I believed all this.

Last night from a shell hole I saw your sky
 And figured they had told me a lie;
 Had I taken time to see things You made
 I'd have known they weren't calling a spade a spade.

I wonder, God, if You'd shake my hand,
 Somehow I feel You will understand.
 Funny I have to come to this hellish place
 Before I had time to see your face.

Well, I guess there isn't much more to say
 But I'm, sure glad, God, that I met You today.
 I guess the zero hour will soon be here.
 But I'm not afraid since I know You're near.

There's the signal — I have to go.
 I like You lots, I want You to know.
 Look now, this will be a horrible fight.
 Who knows? I may come to your house tonight.

Though I wasn't friendly to You before,
 I wonder, God, if You'd wait at your door?
 Look, I'm crying — me — shedding tears!
 I wish I'd known You those many years.

Well, I have to go now, God, Good-bye!
 Strange, since I met You, I'm not afraid to die.

The excellent poet, who was told that God does not exist and who lived believing it, is an "early man" of our days. He finds himself alone between life and death. He feels moved to initiate a dialogue

with someone he addresses as “You,” “God,” “Friend” and whom he feels to be near. Then his “theology” flows: The “Friend” exists, because the visible sky is His and He had made things. The “Friend” is understanding and pardons the bygone neglect and offers a hand in friendship. He is near, that He is liked lots, that He will wait at the door. He was missed along many years and ...”since I met You. I’m not afraid to die.”

No, God is not dead. He will never be. At His sudden call the “early man” who lives inside every human being will initiate a dialogue with his surrounding world and within it will spring out and bloom the basic *Primal Religion*, the “Faith” of man adoring the Father in spirit and in truth. □