

Lecture 15: Primal Religions

We come now to the last part of our course and to the fourth and final family of religions. The specific focus of this module will be on the traditions of the Native Americans—more precisely, the beliefs and practices of the Plains Indians. This is a group of American Indian peoples that includes such tribes as the Sioux, the Shoshone, the Cheyenne, and the Crow, whose traditional lands occupied the present-day states of North and South Dakota, Montana, and Wyoming. As with each of the other modules, I've assigned a selection from *A Book of Saints*; it comes in this case from the autobiography of a Crow Indian medicine man named Thomas Yellowtail (1903-93). In previous sections of the course I haven't referred to the *Saints*—or not at least extensively—until my last lecture here in *Paths of Return* and the corresponding YouTube presentation. But in this case, in order to follow my remarks, it would be a good idea if you'd go ahead and begin reading that assignment right away. Starting next time, with Lecture 16, I'll be talking about some doctrines and spiritual practices that pertain specifically to the Crow and other Plains Indians, and it would be very useful for you to have Yellowtail's reflections in mind. For now, though, I want to get us started in a more general way with some words about the larger class or category of religions to which the American Indian traditions belong.

In discussing Islam, I pointed out that its family has been called several things: western, Semitic, Abrahamic, and monotheistic. A number of different labels can be used to describe the present family as well. The title of this lecture refers to them as the “primal” religions, but you'll find scholars who use instead the terms “tribal”, “oral”, or “shamanistic”. They're *tribal* because they're normally found among small groups of indigenous or native peoples whose forms of social organization are based in large part on kinship and family ties. They're *oral* religions because the people who practice them traditionally had no written language and hence no sacred texts or scriptures. (I'll say more about this distinctive point below.) And they're *shamanistic* religions because of the important role played by a spiritual authority called the *shaman* or “medicine man”, a person who is said to be able to travel outside his physical body and who is noted for his paranormal powers of healing. I'll have more to say about this enigmatic figure in my next lecture.

Of all these descriptive terms, however, the word *primal* is probably the best for our purposes because it signals one of the most important differences between all the religions in this

family and all the other religions we've considered up to this point. The religions that we've considered so far have all been in the broad category of *historical* traditions. We've broken them down, of course, into geographical areas: South Asian, East Asian, and Western. But whether you're talking about Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism, or Islam—or Christianity for that matter—all these traditions have been of the historical variety. What this means, of course, is that they were either founded by specific historical figures (like Siddhartha Gautama, Confucius, Lao Tzu, Jesus, or Muhammad) or else their beginnings were in some other way connected with more or less datable events (like the Exodus in the case of Judaism or the settling of the Indus River valley in the case of Hinduism). And so we can say, at least in rough terms, when all of these religions began.

This last family is quite different, however. Native Americans and other primal religious peoples practice a kind of religion that is *prehistoric* in character. Spatially speaking, the historical religions are today the dominant kinds of religion in the world, blanketing almost all the earth. But temporally speaking, if you measure importance in terms of sheer longevity, the religions we've examined so far are just the tip of the chronological iceberg. Islam goes back roughly 1400 years; Christianity, 2000 years; Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, 2500 hundred years; Judaism, 4000 years (if we date it to the time of Abraham); and Hinduism, between 4000 and 4500 years—dating it to the Aryan emigration to India, as most scholars do, and leaving aside for now the conviction of traditional Hindus that their religion is eternal, a *sanâtana dharma*. By contrast the Plains Indians of the North American continent—to pick just one primal group—have been practicing their traditions, at least according to some scholars, for around 60,000 years, ever since their theorized migration across the ancient land bridge between present-day Russia and Alaska. As for primal religions in general, many anthropologists and paleontologists now suggest that these traditions may actually stretch back as far as three *million* years, to the time of Neanderthal man and his cousins. Now of course, these numbers are highly speculative; they're based in part on the radiometric dating of religious artifacts and other evidence gleaned from burial sites and ancient centers of worship, and this technique of dating is itself based in turn upon certain debatable assumptions. But if (for the sake of the argument) we assume that these estimates are even close to accurate, the major spiritual traditions of today's world, the ones most religious people practice, turn out to be just a blip on the chronological screen.

Sometimes you'll find people using yet another descriptive term and calling these ancient religions "archaic", but I find this term misleading. The word "archaic" suggests something that's worn out or outmoded, merely a thing of the past and no longer relevant for people today. But this is certainly not true of the primal religions, which have survived in many places right down to our time. Of course it certainly *is* the case—and it's crucial we stress this fact—that the primal peoples of the earth have been vastly reduced in their numbers by the pressures of modern civilization, many of them being pushed to the margins, into the less "developed" and less hospitable parts of the planet. And yet they're by no means extinct, and though in the minority a number of primal groups remain spiritually viable. It's still possible to find at least small pockets of primal peoples still practicing their ancient religions in a variety of places throughout the world. We'll be focusing on the native religions of North America, but there are related groups in Central and South America among the descendants of the Mayans, Incas, and Aztecs; there are primal peoples in the Polynesian Islands of the South Pacific and Australia; and sub-Saharan Africa remains rather extensively populated by tribal peoples. Needless to say, it's precisely because of this huge geographical range that I'm obliged to symbolize the primal family, in my "pie" diagram, as concentric circles embracing the entire world.

But to return to my point: "archaic" is not the best word, and so I'll be sticking to the term "primal" instead. "Primal" stresses the extreme antiquity and priority of these religions but without implying that they're passé or irrelevant. *Primal* (from the Latin *primus*) simply means "first", and there seems little reason to doubt that these are indeed among the first religions ever practiced by human beings. Most scholars agree that to encounter one of the primal societies and to study its religious traditions is to take a step back into our own most distant past and to glimpse perhaps what man's relationship with God might have been like in its very earliest mode. Some people go even further and suggest that what we find among primal peoples may be a dim vestige or remnant of the way people lived before the Fall. All of the historical traditions we've studied include some sort of teaching concerning a "Golden Age": the Hindus (as you may remember) call it the *Krita Yuga* (see Lecture 6); the Chinese speak about the benevolent reign of a distant, legendary figure called the Yellow Emperor; the western religions refer to this original state of innocence under the label of Eden or Paradise. Of course, the historical religions are also unanimous in their belief that man long ago turned away from this early perfection and is now in a state of ignorance (Hinduism and Buddhism), or of imbalance (Taoism), or of rebellion (Islam). It has seemed to some writers

that what we discover as we study the life of primal people bears a remarkable resemblance to descriptions of this Golden Age. But even if you find this notion too far-fetched or Romantic, it's certainly true that primal cultures have a great deal to teach us about a simpler, more natural kind of life. For these are people whom history passed by. Not only is theirs a prehistoric worldview; it's also, more importantly, an a-historical worldview—a perspective almost entirely unaffected by the major, epoch-making changes that have influenced the rest of our planet. In the case of the Australian aborigines, for example, we're talking about a society that has not only never experienced the scientific and industrial revolutions or the "computer age"; the evidence suggests they didn't even pass through what anthropologists call the Neolithic Period, which began elsewhere in the world around 10,000 B.C. and which witnessed the beginnings of farming and the invention of technically advanced stone implements. This fact has led some scholars to speculate that aboriginal culture may be the closest of all living people to that of the earth's first human beings.

In the remainder of this lecture, I would like to say a few things about some of the features or characteristics that we find in *all* of the primal religions, characteristics they have in common and that set them apart from the traditions we've explored so far. And then we'll begin looking more closely and specifically at the Plains Indians in my next lecture. We've already seen that the primal religions stand out from the crowd by virtue of their great antiquity. But what else makes them distinctive? A good answer to that question involves four points.

1. *No "profane" vs. sacred.* The first thing one notices is that for primal peoples religion is not a separate or distinct part of life, something that can be divided up or set off from the other parts. In the case of the historical religions, a distinction can be made between a person's explicitly religious beliefs and actions, on the one hand, and those parts of her life that are more mundane, on the other—a distinction in other words between the sacred and the profane. The word "profane" is derived from two Latin words, *pro* (which means "in front of") and *fanum* (which refers to a "temple"); something profane is therefore something existing beyond or outside the precincts of a temple or other religious enclosure. Even the most devout Hindu or Christian or Muslim is going to admit that there's a difference between her religious practices (such as spending time in meditation, receiving Holy Communion, or going on pilgrimage) and her other occupations in life; and between certain holy places (like a temple, a church, or a mosque) and her place of business; and again between special religious times (let's say the birthday of Krishna, Lent, or Ramadan)

and other “normal” or regular times. But this isn’t so, or not at least so starkly so, when we turn to the primal cultures. In their case there’s really no such thing as a “profane” aspect of life, for there’s nothing outside or beyond the scope of the sacred. Religion is instead an all-pervasive force, and every action and every moment is experienced as a kind of sacrament. Special seasons, places, and practices may still be observed as having a particular quality or mode of holiness, but this holiness naturally spills over into all of a person’s daily affairs: hunting, eating, making war and making love, fashioning tools and shelter, and so on. These are not just the various things one does to ensure survival. They are all of them deeply religious acts. I hope this first feature will come through to you in *A Book of Saints* as the Crow medicine man Thomas Yellowtail describes himself and the various religious practices of his tribe. I suggest you take special note of the way in which his rather homey or folksy account of his life experiences is wedded to his descriptions of his people’s religion. You’ll discover that it’s all one seamless fabric for him.

2. *Oral and “illiterate”*. A second distinctive feature of a primal society is its almost exclusive use of oral language. Communication is strictly by word of mouth, and when it comes to religion this means that there are no scriptures, no sacred writings like the *Bhagavad Gîtâ*, *Tao Te Ching*, Qur’an, or Bible. If you decided to undertake an in-depth study of the teachings of the primal traditions, you would find that they almost all take the form of stories, stories that have been written down, not by the tribal peoples themselves, but by anthropologists and other western scholars. The reason for this is that many primal peoples, those at least who are still living in their traditional ways and within the context of their indigenous cultures, are often illiterate. We have to be careful in using this word, however, because for us “illiterate” tends to be a term of reproach, a term used to describe someone who doesn’t know how to read or write the language he speaks. But in the case of primal societies, the situation is entirely different in that there’s actually no written language at all—or at least there wasn’t in times past, though now in some cases enterprising anthropologists have developed alphabets for these ancient, oral tongues. Even now, however, when such alphabets are increasingly common, primal peoples as a rule refuse to put their most sacred doctrines into written form, preferring instead to pass them down by word of mouth.

There are a couple of reasons for this. First is the obvious fact that spoken words are made out of breath. In order to articulate the sound of a word, air must pass out of your lungs and across your vocal chords. Now for many traditional peoples—in this case I’m actually including those

who practice one or another of the *historical* religions, not just members of the primal family—air or breath is understood to be closely associated with the human spirit, and by extension with the Divine Spirit. Among the western religions, we see etymological evidence of this in the Hebrew *ruach*, the Greek *pneuma*, the Latin *spiritus*, and the Arabic *ruh*, all of which have the triple meaning of “breath”, “wind”, and “spirit”. Quite apart from the particular term we may use, however, all of our speech, being woven of breath, is by its very nature the carrier or vehicle of a spiritual power. According to primal religious people, *what* we wish to communicate should not be divorced from the breath we say it *with* lest a crucial ingredient in the meaning be lost.

A second reason for avoiding written language is the primal belief that there is a real, ontological identity between a word and what it refers to. Words are not simply conventional sounds that arbitrarily mean certain things, which is the way we modern westerners, and western-educated people, tend to look at language. We assume there’s nothing especially “cat-like” about the word *cat*, for example. But for a primal person, words are symbolic representations of the objects they point to; they are *re-presentations* because they really *make present* the things they mean. Language therefore has a kind of incantatory power, like a magic spell. This is why Native Americans often refuse to mention the name of a person after he dies, and it’s why spiritual truths and sacred formulas are never written down. It would be like trying to put God in a box.

One final point here. It’s easy to think of illiterate people as being somehow less intelligent, but in fact, as a result of not writing things down, primal peoples often develop prodigious memories for detail and are able to recite *verbatim* certain legends, myths, and tribal histories that would fill hundreds of pages of printed text. Elderly people in these societies often know dozens of stories by heart, each of which might last several hours in the telling. They’re like walking libraries. If you’ve studied the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, you may remember that in one of his dialogues he’s very critical of those who suppose that writing is an unmitigated good. The invention of writing, he says, produces “forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, discourages the use of their own memory within them.” And then, speaking to the imagined inventor of written language, he says, “You have invented an elixir not of memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom” (*Phaedrus*, 275A). This seems to me a salutary observation for people like us who take excessive pride in our “book learning”!

3. *Cyclical Time*. In my opening lecture in the last module of the course, when I was describing the common characteristics of the western or Abrahamic religions, I spoke about their linear conception of time: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are basically alike in their representation of history as a straight line, extending from past to present and then forward into the future, with no breaks or reversals. The primal peoples of the world see time very differently, and if you were to picture it, it would be a circle, where the end simply rejoins the beginning. I've mentioned the prehistoric and a-historic character of these traditions—how on the one hand they came before the beginnings of recorded history and how on the other hand they've been largely unaffected by the significant events of that history. I can take yet a further step and say that they're also *trans*-historic in nature. In other words their point of view is beyond time—at least as you and I probably picture it and feel its flow. Theirs is a viewpoint that “surrounds” our time line in much the same way as a circle surrounds its diameter. In these religions there's simply no such thing as progress, development, or unprecedented change. There are changes, of course. Primal peoples are not oblivious to the phenomena of locomotion or growth or decay. But from their perspective these changes always involve an eventual return to their starting point, so that nothing truly “new” ever happens.

This way of envisioning things often results for such people in an almost total indifference to what we regard as a “schedule”. A good friend of mine tells the story of inviting several leaders of the Iroquois nation to an ecumenical religious conference in New York some years ago. They said they'd be happy to come as soon as they'd concluded one of their annual festivals. So he asked them the obvious question: When would their meeting be finished? Well, we can't really say, they replied. Apparently, the festival always involves the retelling of an ancient myth concerning the birth of their people, and while the recitation (they said) usually takes around eight days or so, if any disagreements were to arise among the old-timers as to the exact details of the legend, they would have to pause until consensus was reached, and there was no telling how long this might take. But of course they'd come to his conference, they promised, as soon as they could. My friend says it took him a long time to explain to them that the other ecumenical participants would not necessarily still be at the meeting when the Indians finally arrived! This anecdote will perhaps also help you see what I meant in stressing the “oral” character of these traditions. From the point of view of these Native American leaders, there could be no question of putting their story into writing; that would be a violation of its sacred truth and power. And so the only way to make

certain no errors crept in was periodically to recite the whole tale in a setting where the memories of the old people could serve to double-check everything for accuracy.

From the primal perspective all the significant changes in life take a cyclical or circular form. Great attention is paid, for example, to the cycles of the seasons and the way time always returns to the place it began: spring is followed by summer, summer by fall, fall by winter, and winter once again by spring. The same thing holds with regard to the cycle of the days: dawn leads to day, day to dusk, dusk to night, and night to another dawn. Or again we see the same pattern in the cycle of living things, where birth is followed by youth, youth by adulthood, adulthood by old age, and old age by another new birth. The primal belief is that in each of these cycles, whether of the seasonal or diurnal or “life-cycle” variety, all of time is summed up and recapitulated, so that spring, dawn, and birth are each experienced as a return to the very beginning of the world. Moreover—and this is very important—these patterns of cyclical repetition are always understood by the primal mind to be closely linked to the sacred presence and power of the Divine. This is why their spiritual teachings often take the form of stories about certain gods, ancestors, or sacred animals whose very actions are experienced in the cycles themselves. As a point of reference that might be more familiar to you, one also gets at least a taste of this cyclical perspective in some of the ancient myths of Greece and Rome, as for example in the story of Ceres (Demeter), Persephone, and Hades. I’ll tell you this story in my YouTube lecture.

4. *Sacred Place*. I’ve just explained that the primal point of view tends to be indifferent to time—or at least time as modern western people understand it—and hence to anything resembling linear progress or development or “news”. As a counterpart to this disinterest, however, primal religions are typically very interested in space or place. Actually the second word, “place”, is probably a little more accurate. When people speak about *space*, they’re often referring to something fairly abstract, to the three-dimensional vacuum in which material things are supposed to exist, if not to “outer space”. *Place* on the other hand is more concrete. When I talk about a place, I mean something quite particular: this or that place and not just anywhere. In the primal perspective, the specific, concrete places or locations of one’s natural environment are often seen as having a special spiritual significance. *This* valley, *that* spring, *this* tree, or *that* rock formation are each understood by the primal man or woman to contain and transmit a special holy power or force, which the Plains Indians refer to as *wakan*. I’ll discuss this idea much more fully in the next lecture. For now it’s enough simply to say that for primal peoples every place, and indeed every

thing, in nature is sacred. This is not only the case for particular objects, like certain trees or pools of water, or for specific plants and animals. It's a way of looking at the world that embraces the very forces of nature as well, like the force of the wind or the heat of the sun. The six directions of the compass are also felt to be imbued with special spiritual qualities: North, South, East, West, Up (the Zenith), and Down (the Nadir) are all uniquely important, and each is responsible for transmitting a particular power of the Divine. You'll be hearing more about the spirituality of spatial directions when I tell you about the Plains Indian practice of praying with a pipe.

You could put it this way: for the primal religions Nature herself is a house of worship, like a Christian cathedral or Hindu temple or Muslim mosque. As Thomas Yellowtail says, "The Indians do not need a church to capture the presence of God, because He is all around us in Nature" (*A Book of Saints*, p. 131). Furthermore, within this natural shrine, all the creatures of the world are felt to be sacraments, containing and conveying what Christians mean when they talk about the "Real Presence" of God in the Eucharist or Holy Communion. The Christian theologian defines a sacrament, like Baptism or Communion, as a "visible sign of an invisible grace", and this is precisely how primal man looks at all the animals and plants and other creatures of Nature. They're manifestations of a mysteriously hidden and beneficent Power. Christ said, "Except a man eat of My flesh and drink of My blood, My life is not in him" (John 6:53), and Christians therefore believe that the bread and wine of Communion in some way communicate the living presence of the Son of God. The same sort of thing is going on in the primal perspective, except that in this case it's not just bread and wine but clouds and waterfalls and beavers' dams and eagles in flight that are experienced sacramentally—all of them regarded as God's sacred "body and blood".

When I discussed the various "Conceptions of the Divine" in the world's religions—in Lecture 4—I anticipated this moment by saying that the primal perspective tends toward *animism*, toward the idea that God is present in everything. Native Americans, you might say, are the inverse of the Taoists. Taoism, as I suggested some time ago, is a form of *panentheism*, where everything—the whole universe—exists inside the Divine, inside the *Tao*. In contrast to this, Plains Indian people are acutely sensitive to the existence of the Divine inside of everything else. One sees evidence of their theology—this close attunement to the presence of God in the natural environment—in the way the Indians pray. In my YouTube lecture, I'll tell you about a lengthy prayer I once heard Thomas Yellowtail deliver that beautifully illustrates this "sacramental" emphasis.