DIALOGUE WITH PRIMAL RELIGIONS

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It is only in fairly recent times that we have come to speak about '*primal*' religions. A generation ago people in the West, including missionaries, spoke without embarrassment about 'paganism'. In doing so they were referring mainly to what is now called 'primal religion'. The word 'pagan' comes from a Latin word which means 'a rural person'. The word has been used for centuries in a derogatory way. It suggested that the religious beliefs of people living in 'country' areas or far from the so-called centre of civilisation are backward and misguided.

In recent times we have largely dropped the word 'paganism' from our vocabulary. It was replaced at first by the word 'animism', and then by the phrase 'traditional religions'. Nowadays, it is more acceptable to refer to 'primal religion(s)'. In line with this change of language comes a major alteration in the value we place on the traditional religious beliefs of, say, the Aboriginal Peoples of Australia, the indigenous peoples of North, Central, and South America, the peoples of Africa and of the Pacific, the ancient Celts, the so-called 'Tribals' of Asian countries, etc. One of the most significant changes in the whole area of the approach to religion and culture is the high regard in which these traditional or 'primal' religions are now held. In fact, we have reached a point where the uncritical rejection of these religions is often replaced with an equally uncritical adoption of their beliefs, values and practices.

ROOTEDNESS—IN NATURE AND IN THE COMMUNITY

To have some understanding of the spiritual experience of 'primal' peoples one needs to appreciate that for them *family* has a truly religious significance. There is a much stronger family solidarity than is customary in the West. And the 'family' extends far more widely than the nuclear family. Furthermore, those who have died recently are seen as part of the family and treated almost as

though they were still alive[1]. The more remote ancestors also play a vital role in the community; for the sense of being linked to them gives people a feeling of 'connectedness', of being situated within a continuum of family life which goes on from one generation to the next. So the connection with the ancestors is a key component in giving meaning to people's lives—it provides them with a sense of being rooted in the past and hope for the future.

Primal' religion gives people not only a sense of being linked to the ancestors but also a feeling of 'connectedness' with the animal and plant world. One aspect of this is that certain categories of animal are given a sacred significance, and certain trees or rocks or caves or rivers are seen as 'holy'. But beyond that there is a sense of being part of Nature as a whole and belonging to a living vibrant cosmos which has mysterious 'laws' of its own which we can perhaps glimpse and sometimes use to our advantage but never fully understand. These people have a very strong sense of the spirit world and of the active presence of divine or quasi-divine beings at work in our world. For them there is no sharp boundary between the spirit world and everyday life. Their world is alive with the presence of spirit.

There is a very significant difference between the Western and the primal ways of explaining what we see happening in the world. We in the West are content with a 'scientific' understanding of causality. Most primal peoples, by contrast, look for a *personal* explanation. Suppose, for instance, that a person is contracting malaria much more frequently than in the past. Western people are content with the explanation that people have failed to eliminate the usual breeding places of mosquitoes can hatch out. Primal people find such an impersonal explanation quite unsatisfactory. For them, it does not answer the key question why one person becomes ill while another is spared. For primal believers there must be a more personal cause. So their key question is: '*who* sent the mosquitoes?' In other words, they are not satisfied with an explanation which focuses on *how* the sickness occurred; they want to know *why* it happened.

DIALOGUE?

How can we engage in dialogue with primal religion? There are few, if any, spokespersons who have been appointed as its *official* representatives. There are, however, some gifted writers and critics who have taken on the task of reflecting on their primal roots and articulating a partial interpretation of that 'world' to modern Western (or Westernised) society. Perhaps the most outstanding of these is the Nobel prize-winning Nigerian author Wole Soyinka, who has gone some way towards developing a very profound and sophisticated theology of certain parts of Yoruba traditional religion[2]. For the most part, however, it has been left to Western anthropologists and ethnologists to give us some account of primal religions. Most of them focus very narrowly on the details of the rituals and beliefs of a particular ethnic group. Occasionally, however, one or other of these scholars ventures to make some rather sweeping generalisations about primal religion, backed up by somewhat fragmentary evidence.

It is clear that in the case of primal religion we have to depend a great deal on the kind of 'inner dialogue' which I described in Chapter 1 above. We may now and then be privileged to meet somebody who holds on to the primal religious mentality and can articulate it in language that we can understand. But, for the most part, the dialogue has to go on *inside* us, as we struggle to be open to the values and beliefs which are embodied in people's behaviour rather than formally articulated. It is likely that it is in the effort to inculturate the Christian faith in indigenous cultures that we will begin to get some sense of the values of primal religion. (It is, of course, fairly easy to meet Western people who have decided to 'go back' to what they consider to be Celtic religion or ancient Earth religion; but there is a danger that the religious beliefs and practices of such people may owe as much to their own imagination and desires as to the historical reality.)

Primal religion puts little emphasis on formal articulated doctrine. It operates more in the sphere of myth, ritual, and celebration. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that traditional ritual ceremonies (incorporating *dances*, singing, sagas, and poetic myths) are the primal equivalent to the *creeds* by which we Christians define our religion. So, if we want to have inner or outer dialogue with primal religion we may have to pay less attention to our *ideas* and more to what we are *experiencing* and what is going on in our bodies and in our relationships with others.

An important first step in dialogue with primal religion is to recognise the price we in the West have paid for building our world around science and technology. We need to admit that we have largely lost the very 'grounded' sense of wonder of those who live close to the Earth. We have undervalued the earthy wisdom of the traditional farmer. And we have failed to appreciate the intuitive abilities which are so necessary in everyday life and so valued by the peoples whom Westerners used to call 'primitive'. Dialogue with 'primal believers' may help us to recover these gifts. Conversely, a re-valuing of these gifts may make us more open to, and capable of, realistic and effective dialogue with primal religion.

Dialogue with primal religion is quite different from dialogue with a historical religion such as Islam or Judaism. For, as I suggested in my book *Divine Energy*, primal religion is not just one among many other religions but is the source from which all the historical religions spring and the place from which they draw sustenance:

> ….. primal religion … supports and is embodied in all the traditions … It is rooted in the religious capacity and longing which is common to all humankind. This deep underlying religious dimension of the human spirit is the point where we are most fully human. But it is also a matrix where the Spirit of God moves very powerfully. Here is where the Spirit intercedes for us and speaks to our spirits 'with sighs too deep for words' (Rom 8:26; 8:16). [Here] we share in God's own life by drawing joy, hope, peace, life-energy and inspiration from the Spirit of God. [3]

YORUBA DEITIES

In primal religions it is quite common for people to believe in a variety of different gods or goddesses or deities. Western people find this really difficult to understand. We in the West tend to think that the major issue is, 'does God exist, or not?'; we find it hard to think that anybody would experience a need for a whole variety of gods! But if we are to come to a sympathetic understanding of primal religion we need to look at this issue.

I worked for some years in the Western part of Nigeria where the Yoruba religion still has a very strong influence, despite the fact that most of the local people would identify themselves as Muslims or Christians. In fact this traditional system of belief and cult was so strong that when African people from all over the continent were carried off as slaves to Brazil the Yoruba religious beliefs and practices became a unifying factor for them all.

The spiritist cults of Brazil (Umbanda, Maconda and Candomblé) have taken over the Yoruba deities and there are probably now more people who believe in them in Brazil than in Africa. When I worked for a short time in Brazil I found it interesting to discover that I could find far more people who proclaimed and practised their belief in these deities in an open and public manner than I could back in Nigeria.

Yoruba religion has a great variety of deities. Two of the best known are Ogun the god of iron and Sango the thunder-god (spelled Xango in Brazil). The water goddess Oshun is associated especially with the Oshun river. There is also a pre-eminent god called Olodumare. Christians—and many Western scholars—have tended to explain the role of the lesser deities by analogy with the role played by the Madonna and favourite patron saints in Italian or Latin American popular piety. They see them as 'intercessors' who play a kind of mediating role with

God; and Boladji Idowu, the author of the best-known book on Yoruba religion, sees the god Olodumare as equivalent to the Christian God.[4]

No doubt there is some element of truth in this approach. But my suspicion is that it is far too simple. It does not give any real insight into the inner meaning of the deities. Furthermore, it does not account for the role of certain significant aspects of Yoruba religion. For instance, Ifa, the deity or spirit associated with oracles and divining, has more in common with the Greek Delphic oracle than with any Christian saint. (Ifa has also been used as a more generic term for the overall Yoruba religion.) Furthermore, there is a mischievous divinity called Eshu—which Christians incorrectly assumed to be equivalent to the devil[5]. And Shopona was a deity associated with smallpox; he seems to have faded out of existence since this disease was more or less eradicated in recent times; but it is difficult to see how such a divinity could be equivalent to a Christian saint. As for the question of one supreme God: it may well be that Idowu and other Christian scholars were interpreting Yoruba religion too much in the light of their own Christian belief.

A more fruitful approach might be to look at the Yoruba religion and similar primal belief-systems in terms of the actual religious practice of those who belong to the cult of the different divinities. For instance, a certain number of traditional believers belong to the cult of Ogun, the god of iron. This has the effect of

making them feel that a certain quality of iron is infused into them; they experience themselves as tough, able to resist pressure from other people or from the environment in which they live. Others belong to the cult of Sango. This gives them a different kind of power—the kind of energy that is associated with thunder and lightning, rather than iron[6]. Similarly, each of the other deities is associated with a particular kind of energy which generates in its devotees a particular mood or mode of being.

CELTIC DEITIES

There are many similarities between the Yoruba divinities and those of ancient Celtic peoples. Here I shall just mention some of the divine or semi-divine figures which were worshipped in pre-Christian Ireland. First, the female deities: There was a goddess associated with the river Boyne, called Bóinn in Irish. She is a mother-goddess [7]. She can be compared to the river-goddess Oshun in Yorubaland. Flidais appears to be a different manifestation of the mother-goddess, but seems to have a special concern for deer and other wild animals, so it has been suggested that she represents ‘the wilder aspect of that divinity’ [8]; in this her role corresponds to some extent to that of Artemis among the Greek deities. There is a goddess of the soil called Danu or Ríogain or Mor Ríogain. Since her task includes protection of the land she is also a goddess of war, who empowers those whose side she is on, and who screeches terrifyingly over the battlefield [9]. Then there is Brighid who seems to be another manifestation of the land goddess Danu. As such she guarantees agricultural prosperity. She also has the special role of suckling (i.e. inspiring) poets. When Ireland became Christianised Saint Brigid (who has the same name) took her place and was given many of her functions [10]. Medb (which is the Gaelic spelling of the common Irish name Maeve) is a goddess who personifies sovereignty and who sleeps with the young hero who is destined to become king [11].

Among the male Celtic gods we may mention Lugh who is associated with the harvest festival of Lughnasa, which is the Irish word for the month of August. The play and film *Dancing at Lughnasa* by the Irish playwright Brian Friel shows how the power of this pre-Christian festival, and of the god who animates it, endures down to the present day as a source of life and wild exuberance. Then there is Goibhniu who is a god of smithcraft[12], corresponding to some extent to the Greek god Hephaestus. There is a divinity of healing and health called Dian Céicht. He was greatly honoured because the healing of sickness was a crucial aspect of Celtic religion, as of all primal religions.

GREEK GODS AND GODDESSES

It is clear that each of the various Celtic gods and goddesses, just like the Yoruba deities, is associated with a special sphere of activity and a specific kind of energy. The same applies in the case of the ancient Greek divinities. Here I shall just give some brief examples from among the Greek Olympian 'sky-gods', while noting that ancient Greek religion also included the pre-Olympian Chothonian 'earth-gods', as well as the mysterious Moira, which represents Destiny or Fate and which seems to be independent of, and in some sense superior to, all the gods.

Aphrodite is the goddess of love, of beauty and of joy. She affects men and women by filling their hearts with love and desire. She is manifested particularly in beautiful, desirable, charming, loveable women. She is associated above all with sexual love, but also with friendship, and with the beauty of nature. She has nothing to do with marital fidelity; in fact when her energy comes into play men and women are likely to desert their marriage partners and run away with the object of their infatuation. So her kind of love can bring disaster. For instance, the great war described in Homer's Iliad came about because Helen, the wife of Menelaus, king of Sparta, deserted her husband to elope with Paris, prince of Troy.

In sharp contrast to all this is the nature of the goddess Athene. Though she is a goddess of battle she does not inspire people into mindless passionate fighting. She is rather the epitome of reason, of the thoughtfulness which curbs and inhibits passion. And she is always near at hand 'to inspire presence of mind' in those she favours. Men and women who come under her influence manifest practical wisdom and prudence.

The god Hermes is very different from both Aphrodite and Athene. He is a god of the night. In the world of Hermes the night provides opportunities for making money, for being lucky, for taking advantage of others, perhaps for playing tricks on them, or even stealing. So Hermes is a kind of patron to merchants, travellers and tricksters.

Each of the Greek gods or goddesses can be seen as the unify-ing power of a whole constellation of objects, events and experiences; so each of them gives meaning to a whole 'world'. These deities are not themselves objects with the visible world, but they are 'real'—in fact far more real than the everyday objects around us. For we do not experience any object in isolation but only as part of a wider 'world' in which it has its meaning and reality. A chair only has meaning in a world where people sit down; the notion of a parent only

makes sense in a world where there are children; a book can only be understood in the context of a world where people read; and so on. Perhaps a more practical illustration of the same idea is the variety of quite different ways in which a valley in the mountains can be experienced. A lover may experience the valley as a place of beauty to be shared with the beloved; a military strategist sees it in terms of defence; an engineer may see it as a possible site for a reservoir; and a mystic may experience it as an invitation to find closer union with God.

In terms of primal religion, each of these different experiences is attributable to a particular god or deity. It is the gods which give meaning to our world—and not just one meaning but a variety of different meanings which come to the fore at different times. The night has a radically different meaning in the 'world' of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, than it has in the 'world' of Hermes, the god of chance and wealth and opportunity. [13]

In so far as they affect us humans, it is helpful to think of Aphrodite, Athene, Hermes and the other Greek gods and goddesses as sources and manifestations of a variety of different moods or modes of being. 'The gods … are the personification of those mysterious forces which through their often violent interaction produce the harsh patterns of human life—the rise and fall of nations, the destructiveness of the earthquake … but also the sweetness of passionate love, … the extra strength that surges through a warrior's limbs at the moment of danger.' [14] They are *personifications* but they are not *persons* in the strict sense. This means that they are not individuals who are subject to moral constraints, who take account of the welfare of others, who are capable of self-criticism or able to question their own nature. 'Each one is a separate force which, never questioning, moves blindly, ferociously, to the affirmation of its own will in action.' [15]. So it is more accurate to see them as different types of energy rather than as different personalities.

SPIRITUAL ENERGIES OR POWERS

This notion of a deity as a type of spiritual power or energy applies also to the Yoruba deities which I referred to above. For instance, Ogun is the source and personification of 'iron energy', of toughness. His spirit, his energy, inspires and imbues blacksmiths, those who go to war, and those who do difficult physical work, such as road construction. In the primal world 'spirit' and 'energy' and 'power' are all more or less the same reality. Furthermore, those who experience the world in this primal way do not make the kind of sharp distinction made in the West between *personal* and *impersonal* powers; so it is not possible to get a clear answer to the question, 'is Ogun a person?'

When I was engaged in pastoral work in Africa I was struck by how frequently people said to me 'I was taken by a spirit of anger' (or by a spirit of lust, or envy). A European is inclined to see such remarks as figures of speech. But I suspect that such remarks are remnants of an older religious mentality, one where people experienced themselves as influenced—perhaps even 'possessed'—by spirits or powers[16]. I say they are 'remnants' because it seems that Christianity subsumed all the more positive aspects of such experiences, leaving only the negative ones to linger on without being integrated with the Christian worldview.

What all this suggests is that, for adherents of primal religions in ancient Greece or in tribal societies in the non-Western world, there is no gap between the material world and the spiritual world; spiritual energy permeates every aspect of life. The 'natural order' is not opposed to 'the supernatural'. Instead, nature is experienced as an integral reality which includes, on the one hand, what we can see or hear or touch and, on the other hand, various kinds of spiritual power or energy which we can 'feel' or experience and which have a profound influence on our lives.

It is to be expected, then, that people would set out to understand and control spiritual energies, just as they learn to manage the growing of plants and the herding of animals. Some people are believed to be more effective than others in 'managing' these spiritual powers; such people are recognised as shamans or diviners or healers—or sometimes as magicians or wizards or witches. The spiritual powers remain mysterious, however; even though they do not constitute a separate sphere which is seen as distinct from everyday life. They are rather the controlling

forces of everyday life, what we might call the depth dimension. As I have said, diviners or shamans or healers learn ways of 'using' these powers. But the reality is that it is more true to say that people are controlled by the powers than that the powers are controlled by people—even by the most effective shamans or diviners.

It now becomes quite understandable why different people become involved in the cult of different gods or deities. Take the case of Greek or Nigerian warriors who sometimes experience themselves as 'taken over' by a kind of 'battle fury', to such an extent that they find themselves filled with courage and quite ready to risk their lives in the heat of battle. If the warriors interpret this experience to mean that they are inspired or empowered by the Greek war-god Ares or the Yoruba god Ogun, then it is not surprising that they would seek ways of invoking this power again when they come to face another battle. So soldiers are likely to be devotees of their warrior god and to become involved in whatever ritual or cult is associated with this god. The cult can be looked at in two ways. From one point of view it is a celebration and honouring of this mysterious spiritual energy or force which surpasses ordinary human power; but from another point of view it can be seen as an attempt to use or harness this power. Much the same can be said of those who engage in the cult of Aphrodite or any of the other gods.

I should mention in passing that this attitude does not seem very different from that of Catholics who have a great devotion to, say, Padre Pio. Their devotion includes both an honouring of this saintly person and an attempt to gain some benefit from him. But devotion can go much further than this. It can move in two very different directions. At times devotion can take a direction that borders on the magical; in such cases the devotee is trying to 'harness' the power of the saint. On the other hand, there is a deeply authentic kind of devotion which is not at all magical or superstitious but is almost mystical. It seeks—and sometimes finds—some sharing in the life, the energy, the spirit of the holy person to whom one is devoted. I know a deeply religious woman who has a great devotion to Padre Pio. In times of great difficulty she occasionally has a sense of being in living contact with his presence. She experiences this presence in the form of a beautiful aroma which envelops her and brings her unutterable consolation and peace. In some respects this is a typically 'primal' experience; yet it is fully integrated into her Christian faith.

I suspect that such experiences are far more common than we realise. Perhaps the reason we Church ministers do not hear more about them is that they do not fit well with our rather cerebral theology. One of the benefits of dialogue with primal religion may be that we come to a better understanding and appreciation of such experiences. On the other hand, I believe that it is only by being open to listen to such religious experiences among our own Christian people that we can begin to have some sense of what is involved when the adherents of primal religion engage in the cult of various deities.

POSSESSION

As Christians we tend to take it for granted that being 'possessed' by a spirit is unusual, bizarre and evil. But people who practice primal religion quite frequently *want* to be possessed. One obvious example is the war-dance ritual where warriors set out to be empowered and 'taken over' by a deity or spirit of battle which will give them courage and also, perhaps, give them immunity to the weapons of their enemies. Much more common are rituals in which a shaman or 'medicine man/woman' deliberately sets out to be filled with and inspired by a god or spirit in order to be able to act as a diviner—for instance, to discover the cause of some sickness or evil which is troubling an individual or a whole village.[17]

Spirit possession can also have a healing effect. For example, in parts of Zambia young women who are under a lot of stress occasionally become 'possessed'. This is accepted as a fairly normal part of life. It offers the young woman an opportunity to opt out of everyday life for a while and to go through a kind of catharsis which may have the effect of relieving the strain. I have often thought that it serves much the same function as the 'primal therapy' or 'holotropic breath-work' which has become fairly common in the West in recent years. In each case the normal barriers are broken down or suspended for a time in order to allow the person get access to, and work through, material that would normally be considered unacceptable, for instance, very painful memories from the past. I should add, however, that when this kind of work is done as therapy in the Western world the person is usually encouraged not to go so deeply into the altered state that he or she loses all sense of the everyday world; the aim is rather to achieve a kind of dual consciousness, so that the cathartic

work may have an immediate effect in the person's 'normal' world. In primal religion, on the other hand, it appears that 'possessed' people usually lose all personal contact with their 'normal' world; it would seem that the link to that everyday world is held for them by the community and by those who specialise in working with them.

In many traditional primal religious celebrations there are extended bouts of intense dancing which do not have any purely 'practical' function such as healing or triumph over enemies. The aim of the rite is strictly religious—it is to shift the participants into a state of altered consciousness where they achieve a condition of spiritual exaltation. For the participants this indicates that they are touched or even possessed by a deity or spirit. Some of the Pentecostal Churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America (as well as various 'prophetic' or 'healing' sects such as the 'Aladura') have adapted this practice and given it a Christian interpretation: the adherents of these sects set out to become possessed by the Holy Spirit.

WITCHCRAFT

Fifty years ago there was a ready market for films and periodicals such as *The Wide World Magazine* which depicted the barbarous religious practices of tribal peoples in a lurid and bizarre manner. In sharp contrast to this, people nowadays tend to romanticise primal religion, seeing it in terms of an idyllic harmony with Nature and the Earth. Each of these presentations, of course, owes more to the imagination of Western people than to the reality. The truth is that we have much to learn—or re-learn—from primal religion, but people who live according to this pattern also suffer a lot of spiritual oppression and their lives are often marked by fear of spiritual evil.

There are various sources of fear and evil. One notable cause of distress for many people is the havoc which they believe is caused by the spirits of recently deceased relatives who are dissatisfied with the way their family treated them before or after their death. Another major source of trouble is disharmony in the community which brings all kinds of illness and evil into people's lives. But in my experience by far the greatest source of fear and evil is witchcraft. It would be difficult to over-estimate the impact which witchcraft, or even suspicion of witchcraft, has on the everyday life not only of primal believers but also of
Christians who come from a primal background, or a culture where witchcraft is taken seriously.

This is the sphere where I find the widest gap between my own religious consciousness and that of my African friends. Some years ago in West Africa a close friend of mine told me he had discovered that his daughter was a witch; he was afraid to let her out of his sight for fear she would do irreparable damage.

Some time previously, a fellow missionary who was an ethnologist was staying with me. An African teacher came to visit me and the three of us got talking. The conversation turned to witchcraft. The teacher assured us that he did not believe in witches. My ethnologist friend drew him out skilfully and before long this teacher was sharing what he really believed, rather than what he thought we Westerners would want him to think. He told us that he had discovered that his own wife was a witch and that she had left him to practise her craft elsewhere; and he ended by saying: 'I heard that the woman died.'

In such circumstances I find in myself a very strong inclination to make a judgement, to say this is right, that is wrong. It is as though I try to control the situation by trying to fit it into a moral grid of readymade judgements. But witchcraft is so foreign to my present Western culture that it will not fit easily into my pre-existing frameworks of understanding or evaluation. Of course I have no doubt that it is evil and does enormous harm in the cultures where people believe in it. I find it important to be reminded that not all spiritual energy is good—that there are people who cultivate a kind of spiritual power which is destructive and is used for evil purposes[18].

I do not know how best to deal with witchcraft. I find it salutary to recognise that this is one of many areas where I am ignorant, inexperienced, and have no readymade answers to give people. My limited experience indicates that if I take too much account of it I only increase its power—just as the efforts of the Inquisition in Europe to extirpate witchcraft gave it more credibility and caused it to increase. My African friends have a sense

that it is their very belief in the power of witchcraft which gives it a power over them—a power which does not seem to touch me.

But it would be very naïve to draw the conclusion that the power of witchcraft is purely psychological. There is here an evil spiritual power which, in my Christian view, can ultimately be overcome only through the power of Christ whose dominion is universal. But I am shocked by the insensitivity of some Western evangelists who come to preach to tribal peoples and draw in large crowds by presenting their message in terms of a confrontation between 'their' Christ and 'the forces of evil' (as defined by them). In dealing with witchcraft it seems better to rely not on mass crusades but first of all on careful listening and humble dialogue, and then, where appropriate, on personal witness to one's belief in the all-embracing care of God and the power of Jesus Christ.

TRANSCENDENT?

The conclusion which emerges from all that I have said is that primal religion is not 'other-worldly' in the same way as religions such as Christianity, Islam, or Judaism set out to be. And it is not as inward-looking as the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Primal peoples are not at all dualistic; and this applies also to people who still retain a primal form of religious consciousness even though they are officially Christian or Muslim.

We are accustomed to think that religion is concerned with the *transcendent*. But it would appear, at first sight, that I am now saying that primal religion has no conception of the transcendent. In one sense this is true. But in a more important sense it is not true at all. We need to distinguish between two levels of transcendence[19]. There is first of all the sacred dimension of the world around us. For primal people this is at least as real and as obvious as the everyday objects around them; and they do not make any clear distinction between 'the sacred' and 'the secular'. But from the point of view of the rather secularised Western world this 'sacred' aspect of the world *transcends* or goes deeper than the visible tangible objects around us.

The second level of transcendence applies above all to the God of the Christian, the Muslim or the Jewish believer. It does not imply that God is absent from our world. But it indicates that God is not limited to this world or identical with it but always remains 'beyond' it. It is not clear to what extent primal religions have such a conception of God. Almost all African religions have some notion of a Supreme Being who is 'beyond' our world and is normally accessible only through intermediaries. But these religions do not have a formal theology so it is difficult if not impossible even to discuss the question whether this Supreme Being is transcendent in the same sense as the Judeo-Christian God or the Muslim Allah.

Perhaps the major source of difficulty in understanding primal religion and engaging in dialogue with it is the fact that we in the West have partly lost our sense of the sacredness of the world. It seems that one reason for this is precisely because we have put so much emphasis on the transcendence of God. It seems as though this divine 'other-worldly' transcendence somehow monopolised the sphere of the sacred, leaving our everyday world largely bereft of its sacred or spiritual quality. However, I would prefer to qualify this statement: I think that this

secularisation of our world occurred more in the realm of scientific and theological theory than in the actual everyday experience of people who were less scholarly.

Over the past three centuries, the emptying of the sense of the sacred and of the mysterious dimension of life gradually percolated 'downwards' from the scholars to the middle classes and to the world of industrial workers . It was a long time before it had a big effect on the peasants—and it is only as the peasants of Europe have gradually disappeared that secularisation has had its full impact on the West. And even still there are remnants of a deeply religious consciousness in many 'ordinary' Western people; these are half-submerged and are largely ignored by most scholars (including theologians). In recent years many Western theologians made the very mistake which is often attributed to primal peoples: they saw God as so transcendent and distant that they found little room for God in their everyday *experience* of life. Putting it in very crude terms one might say that the transcendent God first 'hoovered up' all the sacredness of life; and then this God became more and more remote and eventually more or less disappeared from everyday life!

However, things are not as bad as might appear at first sight. First of all, the process of secularisation has taken place more at the level of articulation and theory than in the actual experience of 'ordinary' people. So one aspect of the way forward is to look more closely at the 'spiritual' experiences of people and to value them more highly. Secondly, many Western people are becoming aware of how empty and meaningless life becomes when it lacks a sacred dimension, or when the depth aspects of life are not properly acknowledged. This has led to a great (and sometimes naïve) interest in primal religions of all kinds—perhaps especially Celtic religion and Native American religion[20]. So, as the process of secularisation advances, it is being challenged by

a more recent growth in interest in 'spiritual' realities. It is at this point that I see a convergence between primal religion and the deeper dimensions of modern Western life. That is the topic I wish to consider in the next chapter.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1 Have you had the experience of being *inspired*? Who or what do you think is the source of inspiration?

2 Can you identify aspects of your own religious experience which you would consider to be 'primal'?

3 What is your attitude to witchcraft? Do you think somebody could bewitch you—and if so what do you think is the source of this power? Could you guard yourself against witchcraft?

NOTES

1 Cf. John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision*, 92-3.

2 Wole Soyinka, 'The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedа', in *Art, Dialogue and Outrage,* 27-39.

3 Donal Dorr, *Divine Energy*, 32.

4 Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, 32-62; John V. Taylor makes the point that the influence of Christian missions 'helped to crystalize the concept of a supreme Creator even among those who did not become Christians.'—see, *The Primal Vision*, 81. Taylor also makes a strong case for holding that, in the

African view, God is present not in the *making* of the world but as *immanent* and *involved*—see, *The Primal Vision*, 65.

5 Cf. Emefie Ikenga Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion*, 75-6, who deals with the same issue in Igbo religion and notes that it is not marked by such dualism.

6 Soyinka says: 'Ogun stands for a transcendent, humane, but rigidly restorative justice. (Unlike Sango, who is primarily retributive.)'— *Art, Dialogue and Outrage,* 28.

7 Dáithi Ó hÓgain, *The Sacred Isle,* 64.

8 *Ibid.,* 148.

9 *Ibid.,* 66-7.

10 *Ibid*., 112 and 203.

11 *Ibid*., 133-4 and 145-6.

12 *Ibid*., 140.

13 For this account of the nature of Greek goddesses and gods I have relied on Vincent Vycinas: *Earth and Gods,* 174-223. (Vycinas himself has drawn heavily on the works of the German scholar Walter F. Otto.) Vycinas's insightful study of the nature of these Greek divinities enables him to throw much light on the purpose and value of Heidegger's attempt to unveil the sacred dimension of the world in which we live, rather than relying on an other-worldly religion. For a more factual popular account of the Greek divinities see, Sofia Souli, *Greek Mythology*.

14 Bernard Knox, Introductory Booklet to *Homer, The Iliad* (Penguin Audiobooks), 62.

15 *Ibid*., 63.

16 Taylor notes that a person's 'brooding anger or envy very quickly can take on an existence and vitality of its own'—*The Primal Vision,* 40.

17 On shamanism see Wendell C. Beane and William G. Doty (eds.), *Myths, Rites, Symbols: A Mircea Eliade Reader*, Vol. 2, pp. 262-282.

18 For a sensitive treatment of the topic of witchcraft see Michael C. Kirwen, *The Missionary and the Diviner,* 30-2, 50-4, 127. Kirwen suggests that in many respects the witch in African religion plays the role which Christians have traditionally assigned to the devil (p. 54). See also Taylor, *The Primal Vision,* 66, where Taylor makes the interesting suggestion that witchcraft springs from 'a rapacious individual grasping of the power-force latent in other beings'.

19 In making this distinction between two levels of transcendence I am attempting to go beyond the somewhat over-simplified view of Taylor who, in *The Primal Vision*, 80, says: 'The Christian, with his theology grounded in the doctrine of the transcendence must pass through an agonizing abnegation if he is to understand imaginatively how essentially this-worldly is the closed circle of being which is the African world, and how little it needs a transcendent God.'

20 A brilliant and highly successfully attempt to respond to the hunger for Celtic spirituality is John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*