

‘All believers are primalists underneath’: Towards a new appreciation of Old Testament religion as primal religion

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Public Lecture at Calvin College
Meeter Center Lecture Hall
Grand Rapids, Michigan
25 July 2007

Introduction: Understanding ‘primal’ and its place in Christian history

In view of the fact that it ought to have been Professor Andrew Walls giving a lecture here this evening, I thought it would be appropriate to introduce my topic with a quotation from one of his writings. ‘All believers ... are primalists underneath’.¹ But what is meant by ‘primal’, and why is it important for us as Christians to pay attention to it for understanding ourselves and our faith? This statement draws our attention to one important feature of primal religion, but which we are largely unaware of, and that is, the fact that it constitutes the fundamental substratum to all subsequent religious experience, providing universal, basic elements of human understanding of the Transcendent and the world, essential and valid religious insights that may be built upon or suppressed, but which cannot be superseded.² Primal means more than primeval or archetypal, in that it gives account of an enduring consciousness of the spiritual nature of the universe that translates into coherent religious beliefs and ways of living religiously.

What makes primal religion significant for Christians is the historical fact that primal religion has constituted the most fertile soil for the reception of the Christian gospel throughout Christian history. The primal religions have constituted the religious background of the majority of Christians of all ages and places, including Christians of European ancestry, as the gospel spread first to the Gentile peoples of the Mediterranean basin and then a few centuries later to the peoples of Northern and Western Europe, whom the civilised Romans called the ‘barbarians’. Of course, in the past century, the massive expansion of Christian faith on the continents of Africa, Latin America, the Pacific and parts of Asia merely serves to confirm this pattern and make it visible and concrete.

This extremely positive response to the Christian gospel among peoples of a primal background does not derive from any inherent weakness or inferiority in primal religion with respect to other religious traditions, for the new creative stages in Christian thought

¹ Andrew F. Walls, ‘Primal religious traditions in today’s world’, in his *The Missionary Movement in Christian History, Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Edinburgh/Maryknoll, NY: T & T Clark/Orbis Books, 1996), pp.120-21.

² Walls, ‘Primal religious traditions in today’s world’, p.121.

and life that have tended historically to emerge out of this encounter demonstrate that it has been the primal spirituality, now infused with Christian faith, that has taken Christian expansion to a new stage, often coming to the rescue of tired or imperilled forms of Christianity. Again, this is a feature of our time. It is the forms of Christian life, thought and worship in the primal settings of Latin America, parts of Asia and the Pacific, and especially in Africa and the African Christian communities now established in the African Diaspora, that hold the potential for revitalising the contemporary church in the West.

The legacy of the Enlightenment in Western perceptions of primal religion

We may find this historical link between primal religion and Christian expansion rather puzzling or at best unfamiliar. This is not surprising. The tendency among Protestants, in particular, to make sharp distinctions between nature and grace, natural and revealed religion, or general revelation and special revelation have not disposed us to reflect deeply on the dynamics involved in religious encounter as a feature of Christian expansion. With respect to primal religion, there is a further problematic element. There has long been a consensus in the West that the primal religions of the world, often designated by the term ‘Animism’, were as backward and primitive as the people who practised them. The term ‘Animism’ was first coined by the nineteenth century British anthropologist, E. B. Tylor, to denote the religious system of traditional societies, and was held to correspond to the presumed social, technological and moral inferiority of these ‘uncivilised’ peoples. Tylor built up a picture of a religious system that was ‘unmoral’ and ‘devoid of that ethical element which to the educated modern mind is the very mainspring of practical religion’.³ Of course, for Tylor, there was the need for the modern mind to progress beyond religion altogether. For him, Christianity, with its belief in spiritual reality, was also animistic! In all probability, Tylor never met any of the people whose religious life and practice he wrote about. He was an armchair anthropologist.

Yet at the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910, the ‘high-water mark of the missionary movement from the West’,⁴ Tylor’s term, ‘Animism’, became the term used by Western missionaries to describe ‘the religious beliefs of more or less backward and degraded peoples all over the world’, as such people were described.⁵ These religions were held to be the farthest removed from Christianity, at the bottom of a scale of religions that rose through polytheism to monotheism, with Christianity being seen as the highest and most civilised of the monotheistic faiths. . This sense of hierarchy among the world’s religions had been captured in the third edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, issued at the end of the eighteenth century, in the following terms:

³ E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture, Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art and Custom* (2 vols) (London: John Murray, 1891^{3rev}), Vol. 1, p.426.

⁴ Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Edinburgh/Maryknoll, NY: T & T Clark/Orbis Books, 2002), p.117.

⁵ W.H.T. Gairdner, *Edinburgh 1910 – An Account and Interpretation of the World Missionary Conference* (London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910), p. 139.

When the different systems of religion that have prevailed in the world are comparatively viewed with respect to their influence on the welfare of society, we find reason to prefer the polytheism of the Greeks and Romans to the ruder, wilder religious ideas and ceremonies that have prevailed among savages; Mahometanism, perhaps in some respects, to the polytheism of the Greeks and Romans; Judaism however to Mahometanism and Christianity to all of them.⁶

Edinburgh 1910 echoed this perception. Animism was thus described as ‘the humblest of all possible teachers ... and the least sublime of all the five great creeds’ – by which was meant, Chinese religions, religions of Japan, Islam, Hinduism, and Animism.⁷ Animism was held by many missionary participants not to provide any preparation for the Christian gospel and even to have ‘no religious content’.⁸

The legacy of the Enlightenment in Western perceptions of the Old Testament

This generally negative perception of primal religion has continued to live on, as has also a continuing perception of Christianity as civilised religion at the top of a hierarchy of religions. These perspectives manifest themselves in a lack of awareness of what is actually the driving force behind the massive shifts in Christian allegiance that are taking place at the present time. But they are manifested in other ways too. For our purposes, I wish to draw our attention to the profound unease that many Western Christians feel with respect to the religious and cultural world of the Old Testament. As Professor Walls commented in his presentation to our consultation by video-link earlier this week, the Old Testament is viewed in the way one might think of a rather eccentric or outrageous old relative – someone who belongs to the family, but whom we would prefer to keep out of sight in a back room!

By contrast, it is evident that in the newer Christian manifestations among peoples of the South who come from a primal religious background, the Old Testament is not in any way perceived as strange or alien. Southern Christians find themselves very much at home, religiously and culturally, in the Old Testament world, which was in fact the Bible of the early Christians. When Paul wrote ‘according to the Scriptures’, he meant what we now call the Old Testament. Kenyan Christian theologian, John Mbiti, articulates well this experience in his comment that when Africans enter the world of the Bible, ‘they do not have very far to go before they realise they are walking on familiar ground’.⁹ This sense of familiarity with the Old Testament finds expression in many aspects of Christian life and thought and in the forms of church structure that have developed.¹⁰ One scholarly recognition of this is found in methods of classification, which set Independent Churches

⁶ ‘Religions’, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1797³), Vol. 16, p. 77.

⁷ Gairdner, *Edinburgh 1910*, p.141.

⁸ *World Missionary Conference 1910: Report of Commission IV - The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions* (Edinburgh & London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910), p.52.

⁹ John S. Mbiti, ‘Christianity and East African culture and religion’, *Dini na Mila*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (May 1968): 4.

¹⁰ Philip Jenkins, in his book, *The New Faces of Christianity, Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: OUP, 2006), provides a recent compilation of material demonstrating this in his chapter 3 on ‘Old and New’.

and other new religious movements along a spectrum that includes the extent or otherwise of their 'Hebraic' tendencies.¹¹

At this point, I would like to illustrate this Western Christian unease with the religious and cultural world of the Old Testament by considering very briefly the thought of one Protestant scholar came to acknowledge a primal substructure to the Old Testament. William Robertson Smith was a young and brilliant Scottish Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament in the Aberdeen Free Church College in the early 1870s, who became preoccupied very early on with the relationship of the religion of the Old Testament to the religions of the surrounding Semitic peoples. He came to the conviction, which has since become widely shared by African theologians and biblical scholars, that 'no positive religion¹²...has been able to start with a *tabula rasa* and express itself as if religion were beginning for the first time'.¹³ He was articulating the important insight that the revelation of God never comes into a vacuum. It must always connect with something in the religious consciousness of those to whom it comes. It became his lifelong concern to discern the Semitic religious and cultural sub-structure upon which the revelation of Yahweh came to be built up into the revealed religion of the Old Testament, and to discern the continuities and discontinuities. He was concerned to affirm the uniqueness of the religion of the Old Testament and of the Christian faith, but in a non-doctrinaire, non-dogmatic manner that took into account the growing awareness of religious plurality and its implications for communicating religious truth, the fact that one cannot talk meaningfully about the gospel without connecting it to the religious realities of the people one is speaking to.

While Smith had support in the church, the majority of the leadership of the Free Church of Scotland (the evangelical wing that had broken away from the Church of Scotland in the Disruption of 1843) did not see any validity in these concerns, and after a protracted trial for heresy, the General Assembly condemned Smith as a heretic, barring him from teaching in the Free Church College, though not defrocking him as a minister. The church was deeply shocked that Smith found reflections of 'primitive' Semitic religion, with all its negative associations, within the Old Testament, and it was his article, 'Animal worship and animal tribes among the Arabs and in the Old Testament', which precipitated the final judgement in the heresy trial.¹⁴ They believed Smith had also sold

¹¹ Harold Turner was one such pioneer in developing a typology for new religious movements along such a scale. See his, 'Survey article: The study of the new religious movements of Africa, 1968–1975', *Journal of Religion and Religions*, 6 (Spring 1976), pp.88–98.

¹² By 'positive religion' Smith meant religions that 'trace their origins to the teaching of great religious innovators...as organs of a divine revelation and deliberately departed from the traditions of the past' in contrast to the 'old unconscious religious tradition...that inheritance from the past into which successive generations...grew up...instinctively, taking it as a matter of course that they should behave and act as their fathers had done before them'. (William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites, First Series, The Fundamental Institutions* (with introduction and additional notes by S.A. Cook; London: A & C Black, 1927³, p.1-2).

¹³ Smith, *Religion of the Semites*, p.2. Among African scholars who affirmed this point were Harry Sawyerr and Edward W. Fasholé-Luke of Sierra Leone. See Gillian M. Bediako, *Primal Religion and the Bible, William Robertson Smith and his Heritage* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), p. 374.

¹⁴ Bediako, *Primal Religion and the Bible*, p. 201.

out to the liberal German school of thought that devised what came to be known as the ‘Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis’, by which the evolutionary progress of the religion of the Old Testament could be demonstrated on the basis of a presumed documentary development dissected out from within the Old Testament text.

In fact, Smith was not a liberal after the manner of many of the German Protestant theologians of the time. He maintained to the end of his life, as his sermons show, the evangelical convictions of his youth and a concern to be, above all, an apologist for Christian faith in an environment where Christian truth claims were being increasingly challenged. As Smith expressed it:

The real difficulty lies not in any one institution of the Old Testament, but in the fact that the Christian dispensation was preceded by an Old Testament dispensation at all. Let individual limitations be spiritualised away as far as you please, it will still be true that the Old Testament dispensation as such is full of national, local, temporary interests. It will still be true that it was the history of a single nation that led up to the manifestation of Christ.¹⁵

In other words, how can one claim universality for a religion that had such clearly particular roots? This was the question Smith sought to address as an attempt to vindicate the Christian faith.

But even this manner of expressing the problem shows he was a child of his time, and he also followed the views of contemporary cultural anthropologists in his presumption that the Semitic religious substructure of the revealed religion of the Old Testament was ‘primitive’ in nature.

[T]he superstitions [in Israel] with which the spiritual religion had to contend were not one whit less degrading than those of the most savage nations...It does not appear that Israel was, by its own wisdom, more fitting than any other nation to rise above the lowest level of heathenism.¹⁶

As a result, his concern was to trace the evolutionary development that led to the revealed religion of the Old Testament being built upon this primitive basis, beginning with the 8th and 7th century prophets such as Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah and Jeremiah. Religious and cultural evolution thus came to define the relationship between the Semitic substructure and the revealed religion of the time of the prophets. By a strange irony, the dichotomies of nature and grace, natural and revealed religion, accepted within the Reformed tradition, fitted in very well with this evolutionary conception of religious development in the Old Testament.

From our vantage point of sharing in a world Christianity that lives and grows by engaging with primal religion, one may say that Smith was asking important questions but did not have the tools with which to answer them. We may also say that he typifies a Western handicap in dealing with primal religion and its relation to the religion of the Old Testament. First of all, there is the basic presumption of an evolutionary

¹⁵ William Robertson Smith, ‘On prophecy’ (1876), in J.S. Black & G. Chrystal (eds.), *Lectures and Essays of William Robertson Smith* (Edinburgh: A & C Black, 1912), pp. 341–9 (346).

¹⁶ William Robertson Smith, ‘Animal worship and animal tribes among the Arabs and in the Old Testament’ (1880), in *Lectures and Essays*, pp. 455–83 (482–3).

development of religion from primitive beginnings that are viewed as virtually entirely negative. In tracing the development of the institution of sacrifice, for example, Smith judged the age of particular rites by how crude they appeared to be, and discerned the origin of sacrifice in the rite that seemed to him the most crude.¹⁷ Levitical traditions represented a higher form, but in fact, even the highest forms of sacrificial worship in the Old Testament ‘present much that is repulsive to modern ideas and in particular it requires an effort to reconcile our imagination to the bloody ritual which is prominent in almost every religion which has a strong sense of sin’.¹⁸ For him, the superiority of Christianity lay in its fulfilment of the work of the 8th and 7th century prophets, which he perceived as the ‘sublimation of the contents of religion’, where people enjoy the ‘assurance of forgiveness, freedom of access to His holiness and joyful obedience to his moral kingship’ in a pure and spiritual way, without need of external aids or ritual acts to make that access possible.¹⁹

This leads us to a second Western handicap that Smith typifies, and that is in his view of Christianity as the most civilised of all religions. Smith thus identified a series of perceived antitheses between primal (primitive Semitic) religion and Christian faith, which tend to override the continuities that he also discerned. He considered primal Semitic religion as barbaric and crude, and lacking a sense of sin, as simple, not complex, consisting of unconscious unhistorical traditions, as against the revealed historical traditions of Christianity. He held it to be childish, immature and intellectually inadequate, in contrast to the mature, historical and intellectual acuteness of Christian thought. He considered it materialistic, irrational and incapable of conceptual thinking, in contrast to the European Christian ideal of a rational spirituality capable of abstract thought. He saw it as naturalistic religion, as against ethical religion, Christianity being the most ethical of all religions.²⁰

With respect to the biblical material, however, this understanding left Smith as a churchman in a dilemma in two areas. First, if in its presumed evolutionary journey, the revealed religion of the Old Testament emerged fully only in the age of the writing prophets, what are Christians to make of the Ten Commandments, considered under this scheme as too ethically advanced for the time of Moses and yet attributed to Moses in the Scriptures as the foundation of the Torah? Second, if the institution of sacrifice as a phenomenon remains ‘repulsive’ to Western Christian sensibilities, and Christianity achieves the ‘sublimation of religious content’, what does that mean for our understanding of the death of Christ as sacrifice? While Smith did not deal explicitly with these two issues, there is evidence from his writings that neither of them was satisfactorily resolved in his mind. What is most striking is his silence on the death of Christ as sacrifice in his exegesis of biblical texts where this interpretation can scarcely be avoided, such as the Epistle to the Hebrews. Smith was prepared to see Jesus in a

¹⁷ Bediako, *Primal Religion and the Bible*, p. 334–36.

¹⁸ William Robertson Smith, ‘Sacrifice’, in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1886⁹) XXI, pp. 132–8 (138).

¹⁹ Smith, William Robertson, *Prophets of Israel* (London: A and C Black, 1882); also his article, ‘Prophet’, for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (9th edition), Vol. 19, 1885, pp. 814–23 (819–20). For a fuller discussion, see Ch. 8 of my *Primal Religion and the Bible*.

²⁰ I identify these antitheses in my *Primal Religion and the Bible*, pp. 326–36.

mediatorial role as High Priest, but said nothing about his role as the perfect sacrifice for the sin of the world.²¹

It is possible to suggest, then, that when one begins to view the Old Testament (and the Scriptures generally) less from the standpoint of Christian doctrine or typology and more from the perspective of the phenomenology of religion, Old Testament religion and even the fundamentals of Christian faith itself become less than congenial to modern Western sensibilities. Perhaps we have returned to the days of Marcion, a man who achieved some notoriety in the early church for considering the Old Testament, and much of the New Testament also, as ‘barbarian’, when set against ‘civilised’ Greek culture and for wishing to excise from the Bible these parts he considered uncongenial.

But we find ourselves also in a new situation since belief in the evolution of cultures and religions became a new orthodoxy, with Western culture and Christianity seen as the most civilised, and it is this Western Christian self-understanding that has shaped Old Testament scholarship for almost two centuries. For it can be shown that the documentary hypothesis derived to a considerable extent from these presumed antitheses of primitive and civilised religion, as a means of gauging the age of texts and sections of text by their perceived level of advancement away from primitive forms.²² Even if Old Testament scholars are no longer so confident of the documentary hypothesis or that it gives us ‘assured results’ in elucidating the Old Testament, modern scholarship continues to build upon it or pay lip service to it in one way or another. Most introductions to the Old Testament still speak of ‘the Yahwist’, ‘the Elohist’ and ‘the Priestly writer’, and still assign the corresponding documents, or traditions, or schools of thought, to specific eras, following the old assumptions.

Where evangelical scholars have sought to distance themselves from this evolutionary perspective, it has sometimes been on predetermined dogmatic and doctrinal grounds that have not challenged its roots in its assumptions about the nature of primal religion. Where evangelical scholars have sought to suggest greater antiquity for traditions considered late or a more positive role for oral tradition in the preservation of history, or to discern an underlying religious unity in the Old Testament over against the tendency to polarisation,²³ these have been minority voices that have not overturned the general consensus. The contemporary postmodernist counter-tradition, while making much of ‘the Other’ and foregrounding hitherto marginalised ‘readings’, betrays a lack of real engagement with primal religious realities and the convictions of Christians from a primal background.²⁴ Western biblical scholarship of the past two centuries, therefore, has been geared to making sense of the Old Testament in categories it has found congenial, largely oblivious to what could be learnt from primal contexts.

²¹ For an extensive discussion of this issue, see Bediako, *Primal Religion and the Bible*, pp. 369–72.

²² Bediako, *Primal Religion and the Bible*, Ch. 3.

²³ For specific examples, see Bediako, *Primal Religion and the Bible*, pp. 251–53.

²⁴ John J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel, Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

Turning things upside down: What African primal religion in its encounter with Christian faith brings to our attention

Yet the massive movement of peoples from a primal religious background into the church and the consequent expansion of Christian life across the South, affords us an unprecedented opportunity to discover what these present realities can reveal about the Old Testament.

For if it is the case that persons from a primal background are the ones who embrace the Christian gospel the most readily, who find that ‘on entering the Bible, they do not have far to go before they find themselves on familiar ground’, and whose God, hallowed from ancient times, is now revealed in the translated Scriptures to be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, then this has far-reaching ramifications for how we understand the nature of primal religion, the nature of Old Testament religion and the nature of Christian faith itself.

For this lecture, I am focusing on African evidence, partly because I am most familiar with it, but also because there is a depth of African scholarship that has sought to argue for a preparation for the gospel in African primal religions.²⁵ I should also indicate that what I share here reflects my own learning in and from Africa. The observations I make merely open a window on what could constitute a new field in biblical studies from the South.

If African primal religions, so long presumed primitive and therefore without an elevated concept of deity, in fact bear witness to a High God who is sufficiently ethically elevated to be identified as the Creator of the universe and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom the Scriptures in African mother tongues testify, then we need not be suspicious of ancient testimony in the Scriptures to a Supreme Deity of similar nature. It becomes possible to understand the giving of Torah to Moses as an authentic historical memory, as well as the subsequent struggle between ethical and unethical forms of primal religion. Because of the African experience of recognising in their Creator God the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ on the basis of shared attributes, when the gospel came, we have opportunity to understand in a new way the Old Testament recognition of El 'Elyon, Elohim and Yahweh, as one and the same, with these and all the other names ascribed to him in the Old Testament existing side by side, and giving account of aspects of religious experience.

We need not dismiss the patriarchal narratives as the retrojections of a later age, on the grounds, for example, that the religious experience and practice of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob could not have any religious or ethical distinctiveness from those of their neighbours. The new religious movements that have developed in Africa and elsewhere in the encounter of primal religion with Christian faith, bear witness to the religious dynamics that create distinctives in religious experience and expression within such

²⁵ John Mbiti is perhaps the most notable of the pioneer generation. Kwame Bediako represents a subsequent generation of African Christian theologians who argues for and seeks to demonstrate the primal substructure to modern African Christian thought. See his *Christianity in Africa, The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh/Maryknoll, NY: Edinburgh University Press/Orbis Books, 1995), ‘The primal imagination and the opportunity for a new theological idiom’, pp. 91–108.

societies.²⁶ The career of Moses in the Old Testament narrative has much in common with the careers of the founders of new religious movements around the world.

The evidence of high moral values and codes of ethics in indigenous traditions, in their prayers, proverbs and myths, for example, can help us to see that the evolutionary constructs upon which so much of Western biblical scholarship has been built, were little more than a figment of the imagination, a demonstration of an unfortunate Western tendency to be ignorant about other peoples. While the intellectual and cultural processes of the Enlightenment led to advances in science in many fields, it did not lead to greater knowledge and understanding of other peoples. The eminent Swedish biologist, Carl Linnaeus, in his *System of Nature* (1735), advanced scientific understanding through his general classification of flora and fauna. However, his division of mankind into two species, *homo sapiens* and *homo monstrosus*, and his acceptance of the reality of ‘monstrous men’ show that he was, in this respect ‘subservient to unexamined medieval ideas’.²⁷

A deep appreciation of indigenous cultures reveals that other presumed antitheses between primal and civilised – simple as against complex, lacking in abstract thinking, materialistic as against spiritual²⁸ - are without foundation. Traditional societies have been shown to have highly complex structures and it can take an outsider many years to begin to understand the intricacies of social relationships. Drum language in West Africa is just one example of indigenous capacity for abstraction, as are also artistic symbols that have proverbial and often spiritual meanings, such as the logo of the Nagel Institute, *Akoma Ntoaso*, in the Akan language of Ghana, which means ‘linked hearts’. It was chosen to express the Institute’s commitment to be a part of a world Christianity. Far from being materialistic, indigenous societies are built upon the foundational belief that reality is primarily spiritual in nature.²⁹ Ritual, far from being evidence of narrowly materialistic perceptions devoid of theological reflection, as William Robertson Smith thought, is deeply symbolic and sacramental in nature, as is also cosmic dance, where every gesture has meaning and communicates an awareness of the spiritual realm, as well as being embodied prayer. Furthermore, the concrete nature of primal thought as

²⁶ Turner, ‘Survey article’. See also his, ‘Primal religions of the world and their study’, in Victor C. Hayes (ed.), *Australian Essays in World Religions* (Bedford Park, South Australia, 1977), pp. 27–37.

²⁷ See Margaret Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), p.425-6, commenting on, Sir Charles Linné, *A general system of nature, through the three grand kingdoms of animals, vegetables, minerals, systematically divided into their several classes, orders, genera, species and variations...* (London: Lackington, Allen and Co., 1806), I, p.9. A more recent observation about the way the West remains ignorant of other cultures is that by Lamin Sanneh: ‘When we ...strip and materialise cultural forms to construct our categories of the real and the ideal, we exploit a procedure incapable of enlightening us about either, for the argument forces us to take as real ideal notions and their cultural configuration, with the result that cultural perceptions become philosophical conceptions, qualitative analogies [become] literal facts and representation [becomes] identity.’ Lamin Sanneh, *Encountering the West, Christianity and the Global Cultural Process: The African Dimension*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993, p. 130.

²⁸ William Robertson Smith shared all these perspectives. See Ch. 9 of my *Primal Religion and the Bible* for an extensive discussion.

²⁹ Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought – The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995^{rev. ed.}), p.69.

evidenced in language has resulted in Bible translations that make the Word of God more immediate and relevant to everyday life than the Bible in languages that have a predilection for abstraction, such as English.

The tenacity of African cultural values despite the massive onslaught they have endured in the past four centuries, taken together with the accelerating attrition of historical memory and traditional values in the modern literate West, may perhaps also give the lie to the widespread view, which Robertson Smith also exemplified, that oral traditions are less reliable than literary traditions in the preservation of a people's memory. African Christians may perhaps be in a better position to understand the dynamics behind the oral transmission and the writing down of the biblical records than modern Western Christians. In other words, plumbing the depths of African religion and culture can help us appreciate without apology the religious and cultural world of the Old Testament.

The Old Testament from Africa for the world

If, then, the development of African Christianity and other forms of Southern Christianity overturns many of the presumptions underlying Western biblical studies, biblical scholars from societies that have not lost their primal memory have the opportunity to do fresh exegesis and interpretation of the Old Testament, building on the more solid foundations of religious and cultural affinities and shared experience of religious itinerary. The various forms of primal religion in the world can become a vital resource for a fresh appreciation of the Old Testament in the testimony they bear to shared primal perceptions of the spiritual nature of reality, perceptions that include a deep awareness of transcendence in immanence, with the physical world as sacrament of the spiritual, a deep sense of the numinous in religious experience,³⁰ of the creaturehood of humanity and of human participation in a personal universe, common processes of relating to the Transcendent through sacrifice and mediation, and shared anticipation not just of afterlife but of a better existence to come.

The Old Testament, in turn, then becomes a paradigm, a key, for interpreting the religious itineraries of peoples from a primal background, illuminating the diverse trajectories that have prepared them to welcome Jesus Christ as the one who saves them within their world, or recalling them from trajectories that may be taking them away from Jesus.³¹

In his chapter on 'The primal imagination and the opportunity for a new theological idiom', in his book, *Christianity in Africa, The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, Kwame Bediako indicates how 'the primal imagination may help us restore the ancient unity of theology and spirituality' because it 'restores to theology the crucial dimension

³⁰ Rudolf Otto gives a very profound elucidation of the Numen and the numinous, words he coined from ancient Roman primal religion to convey the 'wholly other' nature of 'the Holy', which he felt was missing in European Christianity as he knew it. See his book, *The Idea of the Holy, An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2nd edition), 1950, reprinted 1977). He argues, in other words, that truly religious experience is irreducible to other categories.

³¹ Don Richardson, in his popular book, *Eternity in their Hearts* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984^{rev ed}), pp. 41–48, cites the fascinating story of the Santal people of India, who realised, when the gospel was first preached to them, that they were being called back to the worship of Thakur Jiu, the Creator God, after having abandoned him for lesser spirits.

of living religiously for which the theologian needs make no apology'.³² It is possible to argue that the primal world-view can restore to biblical studies the unity of the Christian Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments in a common religious outlook, so that the Bible becomes once again a contemporary living witness to the presence and activity of the living God in the world, in which persons and communities of faith everywhere may participate.

I wish to conclude by giving just one example of what may come to light when we take primal religion and world-view seriously as the substructure of Christianity. The words are from Hebrews 12:18-24.

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded, "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned."...

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven ...to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

At first sight, it might appear that the author of Hebrews is describing a disjunction, a stark contrast between old and new, between law and grace. Yet that would be to overlook what is common to both images. For Christians from a primal background can identify with both of these images in terms of the religious experience they articulate. Mount Zion presents us with the primal world of numinous presence just as Mount Sinai did, and the source of both is the same Living God.

What we see here is in fact an articulation of the biblical paradigm of the transformation of religious experience from the old covenant community to the new, from Sinai to Zion, where the difference comes with the change of perception of that world and the change of relationship with that world that Jesus brings. In his capacity as 'the mediator of a new covenant', whose 'sprinkled blood speaks a better word than the blood of Abel', Jesus has, through his sacrifice of himself, achieved the ending of estrangement, alienation and the consequent sense of terror, to which the primal religious sense bears witness. With his establishing of the reign of God, symbolised by 'Mount Zion' and 'the heavenly Jerusalem', there is also the ending of spiritual chaos as the whole range of spiritual presences are brought into line, so that it is angels 'in joyful assembly' who predominate and, together with the ancestors, 'the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven', constitute an eternal covenant community. This biblical paradigm can therefore describe what can happen wherever persons and communities from a primal background discover who Jesus is in their world of religious experience and what he has done for them in it.³³ It is meant to describe the religious experience of us all.

³² Bediako, 'The primal imagination and the opportunity for a new theological idiom', p. 105.

³³ A clear example of this is the transformation that took place in early Irish Celtic religious experience following the encounter with the gospel. See Gillian M. Bediako, "'Be thou my vision": The Lorica and early Irish Christian worship in African perspective', *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (December 2005): 46-52.

Conclusion: Rescuing the memory of Western Christians

There is often a sense among Western Christians that the primal world is remote from their experience. Some feel this way about the Old Testament and the biblical world in general also. Yet we shall do well to remember that primal religion is the Western pre-Christian heritage too and that it inspired creativity in mission and scholarship that made an enduring impact on the development of Western Christianity. I think particularly of the example of the Celtic Christianity of early Ireland.³⁴ It is my observation and also my personal experience that recovery of the primal vision in Christian faith can be mediated to present generations of Western Christians through fellowship with Christians and Christian communities that have not lost their primal vision. It is possible to learn from them, from the fervour of their worship and prayer, from the way they read and participate in the Christian Scriptures of Old and New Testaments, and from the practical outworking of their Christian faith in life and witness. It is possible to discover, as the twentieth century British anthropologist, Godfrey Lienhardt discovered from his own direct personal experience in Africa, that

It is not finally some mysterious ‘primitive philosophy’ that we are exploring but the farther potentialities of our own thought and language.³⁵

In recovering the primal vision and the immediacy of the Scriptures, we shall be rediscovering the ‘farther potentialities’ of our own faith, as well as discovering a common humanity with others and new ways of being Christian in our contemporary environment of religious and cultural plurality. For as Andrew Walls observed, ‘All believers ... are primalists underneath’. Learning to appreciate Old Testament religion as primal religion will be for our own good!

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³⁴ Among the many books on the subject, see, for example, Timothy Joyce, *Celtic Christianity, A Sacred Tradition, A Vision of Hope* (New York: Orbis Books, 1998); Ian Bradley, *The Celtic Way* (London: DLT, 1993).

³⁵ Godfrey Lienhardt, writing about the study of ‘primitive society’, in ‘Modes of Thought’, in *The Institutions of Primitive Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1961), pp.96-97, quoted in Lamin Sanneh, *Encountering the West*, p. 240.