

# NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN PRIMAL SOCIETIES

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We are all familiar, even if in a somewhat vague way, with the great expansion of the Christian religion across the continents and cultures of the world, especially during the last two centuries which have seen the rise of the modern missionary movement. By any token this is a most important development in the overall history of religions and although its systematic and scholarly study has hardly begun, most of us have a general picture of the arrival of missionaries, the building of a mission community, the growth of an indigenous church and the emergence of new autonomous churches where the missionary is either a full member, a fraternal worker, or not needed at all. We have an image of the successful planting of Christianity and of its growth in somewhat new forms in many races and cultures; we also know that this growth has been very uneven, with a massive response as among the New Zealand Maoris and a meagre result as with the Australian aborigines. It would be possible to refine this picture by further study of this fascinating story, and yet to pass over the extensive and allied phenomena that form the subject of this lecture. Behind and yet along with the story of missionary expansion, there is another story of a vast range of new religious movements in the same primal societies where Christianity has seen its greatest growth; here is a whole new dimension of the interaction between the primal and the Christian religious traditions that is only now coming over the horizon of mission, of Church and of public awareness.

## Definitions

Let us approach this new subject in another and somewhat broader fashion, by looking back over the world scene during the past five centuries. In this period the tribal or primal societies of the world have had more extensive and disturbing encounters with the religions and cultures of the highly sophisticated and powerful societies than ever before. This has been largely due to the great expansion of the European peoples across the world, except for Asia and the Islamic areas of North Africa and the Middle East. On a smaller scale the tribal peoples marginal to the great Hindu and Buddhist societies of India and south-east Asia, have experienced the renewed impact of these dominant cultures and religions.

In these encounters between small, weak non-literate primal societies and large, strong, highly organized and literate societies, there has been an interaction between two kinds of religion, between the primal or tribal and the kind we have decided to call universal.

In this interaction, besides total resistance on the one hand and complete conversion on the other, there has been a vast proliferation of new religious movements that owe something both to their own indigenous traditions and to the new invasive religions. Since they are not completely identified with either the old or the newcomer religion there is usually tension between the new development and both the contributing faiths.

A more formal definition can be framed in the following terms: a new religious movement arises in the course of the interaction of a tribal or primal society and its religion with one of the more powerful and sophisticated cultures and its major religion, involving some substantial departure from the classical religious traditions of both the contributing cultures, in order to find renewal by reworking the original traditions into a different religious system. This is what I mean by the simple phrase *new religious movements in primal societies* - they are new in the particular sense that has now been specified. Since movements of this kind have arisen in similar interaction situations across the whole world, with similar features and similar variety of forms, I regard these phenomena as forming a new field in the history of religions, with a world-wide range.

### Origins

Although I began by reference to the Christian context it is important to realize that such movements may be found in India, where the scheduled tribes or hill peoples have been responding to their encounter with the Hindu tradition through new religious forms and in south-east Asia where the sophisticated Buddhist cultures of the coastal areas have had the same effect upon the tribal hill peoples of the interior. Whether similar movements can be identified where Islam has been interacting with the primal religions is at present a moot point and if it should be granted there would seem to be remarkably few examples. Since the Hindu and Buddhist interactions have been comparatively restricted in geographical extent, the overwhelming proportion of these new religious movements is to be found where Christianity has been the universal religion involved. This brings us back to the massive penetration of the tribal world by the modern missionary movement, the theme with which we began, and in the rest of this discussion I shall restrict the subject to the primal-Christian interaction.

I myself became involved in this field through encountering in West Africa one of its forms, the movements usually known as the African independent churches. When I pushed back the enquiry into the historical origins of the Nigerian aladura movement, I found the most specific sparking point lay in the 1918 world-wide influenza epidemic. This traumatic experience, when neither the white man's medicine nor his churches were of any help, led a group of Nigerian Christians to form their own prayer healing group for protection against the plague - and with some apparent success; from this independent initiative, which continued after the plague had passed,

there developed a range of independent African churches with many new and unorthodox features from the viewpoint of missions and the older churches.

A few years later, I was able to examine more seriously some of the "offbeat" religious movements among the Maori people in New Zealand and to find that the largest and best-known of these in the present century, the Ratana Church, stemmed from a similar successful and independent initiative by its founder, Wiremu Ratana, in the same 1918 influenza epidemic. Later again, I was to discover that the largest independent church in Africa, the great Kimbanguist Church of Zaire and many other countries, also had a founder, Simon Kimbangu, for whom the 1918 epidemic had been a critical point in his experience. In every case, a traumatic situation had led to the formation of a new religious movement drawing on the two different religious traditions available and creating a new amalgam. The more one examined these developments across the world the more it became evident that here was a new and creative religious contribution common to the primal societies in all areas.

### **Distinctive Forms**

The forms taken by these movements are so varied and the points of view from which they have been described are so diverse, that it is not surprising to find them described by many different names: thus we have prophet, syncretist, messianic or millennial movements, independent or separatist churches, nativistic or revitalization movements, crisis or deprivation cults, adjustment movements and the overpublicized and little understood cargo cults of Melanesia. While some of these terms are appropriate in particular cases, none is suitable as a generic term and I therefore use the simple expression "new religious movements", adding "in primal societies" when necessary; whatever else they may be, all these movements are new in two senses — they are post-interaction phenomena, and so new in relation to the history of the encounter, and they are new in form and content when compared to the two contributing religions involved.

The question has been raised as to whether some of the above forms, especially the millennial, revitalization and cargo types, are confined to the interaction situation or may have arisen within primal societies through various stresses in a pre-contact situation. This is a difficult question, for we know so little of the internal developments within primal religions before Western contact occurred, and it is also hard to say just what constitutes contact, which may be very indirect through, for example, the distribution of Western trade goods like steel axes along indigenous trade routes to people who may not see a white man for another fifty years. Apart from the problems, and with full recognition that primal religions have had their own history of development, I suggest there are three features that distinguish these new religious movements from purely internal developments.

The first is the fact that primal religions are non-missionary, while a large proportion of the new movements are distinctly missionary in nature and spread across tribal boundaries. The second feature is the presence of a new kind of eschatology; this goes beyond anything enshrined in the traditional mythology or expectations, which usually promise a return to a paradisaical past or golden age rather than the advance to a really new order of existence that has never been conceived before. And finally, these movements serve as a form of adjustment to an exceptionally severe and prolonged traumatic experience from which there is no escape, due to the interaction of two societies that are very disparate in power and sophistication.

It is also asked whether there is any difference between these new movements and the many other new developments within the whole history of religions, for were not Christianity and Islam themselves, and most other forms, new when they first appeared? Certainly they were and it has even been suggested that Islam itself might belong to the category I am establishing insofar as it was a movement arising in the interaction of the primal tribal religions of Arabia with the more sophisticated faiths of the Jews and Christians; the answer to this may even have something to do with the lack of such movements in the subsequent primal-Islamic encounter. It can also be agreed that there may be considerable phenomenological similarity across new religious movements of all kinds and this is seen today when the new religions of Japan in the last hundred years, or the great Taiping faith and revolt in China over a century ago are compared with the movements of which I speak; the same is true of many mediaeval and peasant religious movements of earlier times. There is, however, something distinctive about these movements from modern primal societies, even though this is hard to define. I suggest it has something to do with the modern situation in which they have arisen and we may be able to make this more precise if we ask where were the comparable phenomena in the first great expansion of the Christian faith into the world of tribal societies, especially into Europe in the first millennium of this era. Where were the Teutonic prophet movements, the Slav millennialisms, the Norse adjustment cults, the Gallic independent churches and the Goths' cargo cults? Perhaps this early Christian history needs reworking with these new questions in mind, but on the face of it there seems to have been very little indeed that can compare with the efflorescence of movements within the modern Christian-primal encounter.

### **World Range**

However this question may finally be answered, there is no doubt about the extensive appearance of these new movements over the past four centuries when the primal world had to deal with a society with a great disparity of power as compared with their own — think of what gunpowder alone meant as compared with the spears and bows and arrows of the Roman Empire as it advanced over Europe. The earliest recorded movements in modern times appeared in Latin America as the Christian Spaniards and Portuguese advanced among

the Indian peoples; a messianism in Guatemala in 1530, a movement in Colombia in 1546, a Paraguayan prophet in 1558, an Indian "church" in Brazil in 1583; and many others, totalling over a hundred right up to the Mama Chi movement among the Guaymi of the mountains of Panama from 1961 and the Rastafarians of Jamaica who have been mounting in influence over the past forty years.

In North America, again over a hundred movements may be identified, including what may be the first, the Narragansett Indian Church which has continued from the 1740s right till the present day, the Yaqui syncretist churches ever since the 1760s, the Handsome Lake religion among the Iroquois since 1800 and still active, the short-lived but dramatic neo-primal movements known as Ghost Dances in the 1860s and late 1880s, the small but persistent Indian Shaker Church, a syncretist movement from the 1880s, many small independent churches among the Seminoles, the Hopis, the Creeks, the Navahos and others and, above all, the massive peyote cult, or Native American Church over the past hundred years across more than fifty tribes. What do North American Christians know of these things? And yet none of it would have happened if the whites and their Christian religion had not come.

Similar movements are much rarer in Europe and Asia, although early this century there was a "Big Candle" movement among the Cheremish, a tribal people in European Russia. There have been some examples among the tribal peoples of India and of south-east Asia in relation not only to the Hindu and Buddhist influences, as we have already noted, but also in relation to the more recent Christian contacts. Indonesia also has examples, but the great development has been in the Philippines with perhaps three hundred or so independent churches or other kinds of new movement. There were notable movements in Polynesia last century and this is still going on more than might appear, for recently in Fiji I came across four most interesting and important current examples that had hardly achieved any mention so far in the literature. Among New Zealand Maoris there have been not only the Ratana Church with over twenty thousand adherents, but perhaps a dozen other movements of some significance and many more minor ones. Melanesia is known widely for its cargo cults, which may be numbered by the hundred and have caught the eye of the TV camera and the popular journalist on account of their (to us) exotic features; but there are other non-cargo movements such as the one still flying the Australian flag from its sacred meeting ground when I visited it recently in the hills of New Britain, or the Christian Fellowship Church of Eto, a former Methodist, in the Solomons since 1959. Of the Australian aborigines there is little to report: the Kurrangara movement late last century, the Worgaia cult from about 1954 and especially the Elcho Island movement since 1957 that has been written about by R.M.Berndt; there have been other incipient developments, a few cargo ideas and some independent pentecostal churches on the eastern seaboard, but perhaps the era of new religious movements in Australia has yet to come.

It is in Black Africa, however, that the most massive growth of these movements is to be found. There were early forms back in the seventeenth century or even before this in what was then the Congo, with Portuguese missions. In the last hundred years, as Black Africa has been moving into the position of the great Christian cultural-geographical area that promises to surpass all others, there has been a vast proliferation of new religious movements of all kinds. Some estimates suggest as many as seven thousand distinct movements embracing perhaps as many as six or seven million adherents; in South Africa alone, where the data may be more exact, there have been somewhere about three thousand bodies with some three million members. I myself can vouch for the existence of about 140 separate movements of this kind over the forty year period before 1960 in a limited area of eastern Nigeria, where they are recorded in the files of the colonial administration. Taken together these movements clearly form a most extensive and important sector of the growing Christian community in Africa, insofar as they are to be called Christian and churches, or if not then of the influence of this faith upon the primal religions and societies of Africa. Some of the independent church forms have been admitted into national Christian Councils and others are now members of the World Council of Churches.

### A Religious Typology

At several points I have spoken of different forms of these religious movements and it is now time to look more closely at their range and variety. The following classification was worked out in relation to the African phenomena but for the most part has been found to work reasonably well in all areas. The spectrum of movements runs from those which are nearest to the original primal religion and which seek to revitalize it by reworking it in the light of the Christian influence and perhaps with specific Christian borrowings; these movements I call neo-primal, and here I would include the first three Australian movements already mentioned, many of the Melanesian cargo cults and the Maori Hau Hau cult.

The next form, moving along the spectrum, I designate as syncretist; this is in spite of the fact that all these movements are syncretistic in different ways and is in default of a better term. They are explicitly and consciously syncretist in the sense of rejecting the old primal tradition, not wanting to become Christians in the churches and yet taking their religious content from both these sources. They represent a quite new mix of their own. It is possible that some of the Australian aboriginal pentecostal churches belong in this group; certainly this is the place for many of the Melanesian cargo cults, for the Eto Church of the Solomons, for some of the Fiji movements mentioned and probably for the King movement's Tاراio faith and the Pai Marire cult in New Zealand.

Further still along this same spectrum, I find we need a group called "Hebraist". By these I mean movements that have made a radical transference from the primal faith into the world of the Bible,

especially into that of the Old Testament, but which reject the Christian Church and usually the New Testament, or else have no christology. They cannot be called Christians or churches and yet they have a prophetic form of religion under one moral god who acts as saviour of his people; their form of religion seems to correspond closely to that of Israel in her classic period, and some of these groups actually call themselves "the Israelites" and believe they are descendants of the ancient Jews and especially of the lost tribes. This is not so surprising when we note what a ready-made model Israel in Egypt, Israel struggling to the promised land, Israel under successive foreign imperial powers, presents to primal societies under the colonial yoke. It is difficult to find an example of this category in Melanesia, unless it be a group known as the "Remnant" which existed in the Solomons from the 1950s to the 1970s, but in Polynesia there were "Israelites" in Tuamotu in the 1870s, and perhaps Ofa Mele Longosai, the Tongan prophetess of the present day, should be so classified. What is striking here is that most of the largest and longest-lasting Maori movements clearly fall into this class, from Papahurihia of the 1830s, through Te Whiti's Parihaka village, Te Kooti's Ringatu cult and Rua's Seven Wells of Jehova cult to the Ratana Church. Why this should be so, and more than anywhere else in the world, is another question, but the facts speak plainly enough.

Finally, there are what may properly be called independent churches, bodies which intend to be Christian, which use the Scriptures, and which often regard themselves as having effected a local reformation of European Christianity and so have become more Christian than the missions and their connected older churches. There are many cases, and certain respects, in which I am prepared to accept this claim as well founded. In Africa, where this form predominates, they may be described as having been founded in Africa, by Africans, for Africans to worship in African ways and to meet African needs as Africans themselves feel them; the same process of complete indigenization may be identified in the independent churches of other cultural areas. Some of the Australian aborigines' pentecostal churches may properly belong here, as also the Congregation of the Poor and the Daku community in Fiji, the early Paliau movement in the Admiralty Islands, the Anglican Church of Nauru from the 1920s, the early Kakuak from 1940 in New Guinea and the Pentecost (sic) movement from 1954 in Irian Jaya. Among the Maoris there have been the Maori Evangelical Fellowship since 1959 (although of rather different white-connected origins) and the Absolute Established Maori Church which was formed by secession over matters of religious principle from the Ratana Church in 1941. In Africa this category may be further subdivided into Ethiopian churches, which resemble their parent orthodox churches in most matters, except perhaps in polygamy, and the prophet-healing churches which are variously known as Zionist, aladura, spirit, or spiritual in different countries; these latter are much more African in form and content and their two main emphases are indicated in the phrase that describes them; they have also been the main form of the last fifty years and are still

appearing as new prophets arise and, not all of them I fear, entirely genuine.

This spectrum should be regarded as a rough working system and there are always individual movements that are difficult to so classify or that seem to span more than one of these classes. It should also be remembered that these movements are full of the flexibility of youth and may prove very mobile as to form and content, so that what seems to be a syncretist movement in one decade may well have to be reclassified in the next. This has happened to the Kimbanguist Church in Zaire which looked like a syncretist or even an anti-Christian movement in the fifties and yet was admitted to the World Council of Churches before the sixties were out. On the whole it would seem that the general movement tends to be across the spectrum from the neo-primal form towards the more Christian categories, especially as the Christian Scriptures come to be used more or better understood. Not many of the neo-primal forms show extensive growth or last through long periods of time, although striking exceptions can sometimes be found.

### Sociological Forms

This classification has been according to religious form and content. If we desire a sociological classification, by social form and structure, then we need a different typology. The natural tendency is to apply the well-known Western scale of sect – denomination – church, representing three different structures and different relations to surrounding society. This, however, was devised for forms of Christianity in Western societies and only obscures the phenomena outside this context. For the African movements it appears that we need at least five basic forms: the initial inchoate prophet movement or secession and then four forms which may develop from this. There is first the independent church form, a new African denomination that I call 'religious society' form; or there may be a new comprehensive community with its holy village or New Jerusalem and economic and other activities to make up what I call the 'total community' form; alternatively, at the other extreme from this, there is the prophet healer with no more than a loosely attached range of people who come for healing and who are not organized into a community among themselves – the 'clientele' form; and finally the form of the 'ancillary cult' which provides certain benefits not found in the missions or older churches so that people belong to both for different purposes. These five forms cannot be arranged as a linear sequence, as in the Western system above, but should be placed in a circle with the prophet movement at the top, to form a pentagram. Then the dynamics of the situation, all the possible developments, may be represented by lines drawn from the founding form at the top to each of the other four possibilities, and also by the six lines that can be drawn to show all the possible links between the other four. (Try it on paper for yourself). How far this pentagram, based on the exceedingly extensive and varied African phenomena, can be of use in other cultural areas has yet to be explored.



## Causes

Many different disciplines have attempted to identify the causes of these new religious movements and, naturally, to do so in terms of their own special categories, whether sociological, economic, political, psychological, theological, etc. We can be certain, however, that as in all things human there will be a complex of all such factors at work and with varying degrees of importance in different cases. Since on the face of it at least, these are religious movements, there is a presumption that distinctively religious causes are to be found; but those who hold reductionist positions will of course always convert these into non-religious factors. It is perhaps better to approach the question of causation from another angle and to identify four classes of causes.

There are the situational causes, the kind of encounter and interaction situation wherein two very disparate societies and their religious traditions meet, often in a conquest or colonial relationship. This is a necessary but not a sufficient cause, for there are quite a few "negative instances" where none of these religious movements has arisen. Then there are what I call contributing factors, which may be of all kinds and in varying combinations — psychological stress, social and cultural disintegration under rapid social change, political domination or oppression especially in the harsher colonial forms, economic deprivation — especially the loss of the land sacred to a people as well as necessary for support, and religious and moral conflicts due to the clash of two different world views and sets of values, especially over matters of magic and marriage. There is, however, no necessary correlation between these and the emergence of movements. For instance, Ghana has had one of the highest per capita incomes among the countries of Africa and an early and comparatively peaceful transition from a benevolent colonial regime to independence and yet there has been a tremendous development of these new movements since that event.

Thirdly there are what may be called precipitative factors which, in a situation that is ripe for such development, push things over the edge. These are more accidental and incidental in nature — a personal crisis such as the sudden deaths of the two children of the young woman Gaudencia Aoko who became leader of the Legio Mario independent church in Kenya, the effects of a plague like the 1918 example already mentioned, a sudden economic depression where the price of local commodities like palm oil or copra mysteriously plummets, the disciplining of a mission agent, or, and most importantly, the emergence of a charismatic individual to provide a crystallizing point for an incipient movement that will otherwise never surface into history.

Finally, there are the more intangible enabling factors, features of the two cultures concerned in the interaction that either predispose towards these new developments or discourage their appearance. For instance, if a Melanesian society has a mythology containing the promise of a golden age that will return in the future, this can readily

be reworked in the light of Christian teaching about the Second Advent and the hope of the world to come and serve as the basis for a new cargo cult. If, on the other hand, the mythology tells of a golden age that is for ever gone and perhaps also includes stories of the different fortunes of two brothers, one brown and one white, then this society can come to terms with the advent of the Europeans in a realistic way without the emergence of new cults with which to face the future. On the other side of the interaction it appears that the Christian religion has considerable "enabling capacity" as compared with, say, Buddhism. It brings a clear-cut gospel with a rich eschatology and a strong identification in its scriptures with the oppressed and the sick and the poor; it also comes associated with European wealth and power and not with a monk and a begging bowl. The extensive association of these new religious movements with the spread of Christianity may therefore be much more than a merely quantitative matter due to the extent of the geographical expansion of this particular faith. It is significant to note that even when local peoples have become disappointed with Christianity for not bringing them social equality with the whites or equal economic and political power, or for not healing all diseases as seemed possible in the Bible and solving all personal problems, even then there has been no rejection of this new faith, but so often a persistent attempt to discover its secrets and secure its powers through their own new religious movements, their own truer forms of the religion of the whites.

### Evaluation

Behind all the different factors at work in the emergence of these phenomena there stands a deep desire for spiritual autonomy and human maturity on the part of the primal societies, a longing to enter into the larger world that has opened up to them and to stand therein on their own feet as men who are recognized and accepted by all other men and who have their own spiritual contribution to make to the human experience. This is the motive that must be seen and valued behind all the crudities and excesses, the misunderstandings and futilities, the heresies and immoralities that may be found in some of these movements. This is the motive that is also at work in the achievements that deserve much more appreciation than has as yet been given them — the contribution to medical care through spiritual healing, the discipline for disorientated peoples when they have a new "place to belong", the new trans-tribal unities and missionary outlook, the authentic indigenization of Christianity in many of the independent church forms and, in general, the great spiritual and mental shake-up that breaks through the confines of the old world view and opens the way for new incentives, new visions of the future, new basic assumptions and values.

These considerations reveal how the primals' new religious movements which seem ignorant or reactionary, may in fact be making a most important contribution to the development and modernizing of their societies. Much more could be said on this,

especially with reference to some of their own economic activities, their new model communities and their ethic with its common banning of alcohol and tobacco. On this last point it is clear that what may be tolerable luxuries in affluent societies are economically disastrous in the newly developing areas; one has only to explore the effects of that most tragic Western contribution to Papua New Guinea, South Pacific beer. A cargo cult may be very much astray as to where the future wealth of the nation is to come from, but it is right on the ball if it forbids the use of alcohol.

To the Christian community in all continents these movements present new issues. It is not sufficient to oppose, criticize, deplore or ignore them; they are too extensive and they will not just go away. Nor can the Christian community escape responsibility for their very existence — if the whites and the Christian faith had not come to these peoples there would be none of these movements. They are the offspring of the Christian encounter, illegitimate offspring if you must see it that way, and if the primal society be the mother then the white society as father is now summoned to his responsibilities. These may be described in two dimensions. There is first the dimension of mission, for these movements insofar as they represent a “distorted” or “inadequate” form of Christianity present a quite new type of mission responsibility when dealing with those who have already made their own response to the Christian encounter and regard it as the full and proper version for local peoples; this is a new complexity in the mission task. Then there is what we may call the ecumenical dimension, where these bodies may rightly be called independent churches and expect to be accepted into the fellowship of the wider Christian community. Considerable developments are occurring in this dimension in Africa and gestures have been made towards the Ratana Church by the National Council of Churches in New Zealand and probably could be made in Fiji and elsewhere. While from the academic point of view the new religious movements of the primal societies form what I have called a new field in the study of the history and phenomenology of religions, from the contemporary human viewpoint they raise questions of a much more urgent and active kind.