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Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

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THE HOME OF THE CAVE MAN

BY W. KRANZ

Frontispiece to The Open Court.

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RELIGIOUS AND MORAL TRAINING AMONG PRIMITIVE PEOPLES

BY FLETCHER HARPER SWIFT

The fact is, there has not been a single tribe, no matter how rude, known in history, or visited by travellers, which has been shown to be destitute of religion in some form.

Brinton, D. G., *Religions of Primitive Peoples*, p. 30.

I. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF PRIMITIVE LIFE

OUR study of the history of religious and moral training begins at what is undoubtedly a late stage in human culture. Thousands of years of unchronicled development preceded the savagery of today. Nevertheless, a study of the question, "What place do religion and religious training occupy in the life of primitive peoples and to what extent do they represent universal experiences," may throw some light upon earlier unrecorded stages and upon the larger questions which are our fundamental consideration. Because the religion and the religious education of primitive man are inseparably interwoven with his social, moral, industrial, and intellectual conditions, it is necessary to consider these at this point, however, briefly.

"'Primitive', to the ethnologist, means the earliest of a given race or tribe of whom he has trusty information. It has reference to a stage of culture, rather than to time. Peoples who are in a savage or barbarous condition, with slight knowledge of the arts, lax governments, and feeble institutions, are spoken of as 'primitive', although they may be our contemporaries."¹

The life of primitive man is largely one of physical conflict with men, beasts, and the forces of nature. Possessing only crude weapons, he is obliged to depend chiefly upon cunning and physical

¹Brinton, D. G., *Religions of Primitive Peoples*, p. 11.

strength for securing food and for defense. Among the beasts, he finds not only his equals, but his superiors. Only through cooperation with his own species are conquest, pleasure, and survival possible. The need of aid in caring for offspring and his social instinct demand association with his fellows. Whence it comes that the earliest social unit is some form of association.² The aim of this association is the preservation of the group and the fundamental law of this group, horde, clan, phratry, or tribe is cooperation.

The actions of primitive man appear in two groups and under two different ethical aspects: (1) actions relating to the members of his own tribe; (2) actions relating to the members of other tribes. Cruelty and craft characterize his conduct toward the members of other tribes; cooperation and kindness, his conduct toward members of his own. "The strong savage does not rush into his weaker neighbor's hut and take possession. . . . In the West Indian Islands where Columbus landed lived tribes which have been called the most gentle and benevolent of the human race."³

Filial, parental, and tribal affection, hospitality and truthfulness are virtues taught and practiced within savage tribes often with a diligence which puts to shame civilized man. " 'Why should I lie to you,' asked a Navajo Indian priest of Washington Matthews. 'I am ashamed before the earth; I am ashamed before the heavens; I am ashamed before the dawn; x---x; x---x. Some of these things are always looking at me x---x. Therefore, I must tell the truth. That is why I always tell the truth. I hold my word tight to my breast.' "⁴

There is no evidence to show that the mind of primitive man differs in respect to native traits, tendencies, or capacities from that of civilized man. Reasoning, inhibition, and choice (capacities which some writers have denied the savage) . . . are common to the whole of humanity.⁵ Nevertheless, the savage uses his capacity for logical thinking seldom and to a slight degree. This explains the fact that his world is, for the most part, a world of individual and unrelated objects. Each tree, each stone, each hut stands alone, dimly related, if at all, to others of its kind. Genera and species he knows

²Kropotkin, P. A., *Mutual Aid, A Factor of Evolution*, p. 79.

³Tylor, E. B., *Anthropology, An Introduction to the Study of Man and Civilization*, p. 406.

⁴Matthews, W., *Ethics Among the Lower Races, Journal of American Folk-lore*, XII:1-9.

⁵Thomas, W. I., *Source Book in Social Origins*, Part II, pp. 155-173.

not⁶ Moreover, he has discovered no subjective standards drawn from a knowledge of the processes of thought by which to test the validity of his own reasoning. He therefore tends to base his conclusions upon analogies. "When the natives of the Lower Murray first saw pack oxen, some took them for demons with spears on their heads, others thought they were the wives of the settlers because they carried the baggage."⁷

This lack of standards leaves the savage without means for distinguishing between real experiences and experiences which are purely fictitious, imaginary, or subjective, such as dreams. In his dream, weapon in hand, accompanied by his faithful dog, he travels through the forest, swims the turbulent stream, and fights with his enemy. Awakening suddenly, he finds himself with weapon and dog lying in his hut. The intense reality of his dream cannot be shaken off. How can he reconcile his dream and waking experience? A ready explanation suggests itself, namely, that while he slept, his physical body remained in his hut, but another invisible self left his body and actually performed the dream feats. Dreams, trances, swoons, temporary or prolonged cases of insanity, all tend to support this explanation and to establish it as a general interpretation of the world in which he lives. Thus, there grows up in the savage mind a primitive philosophy or interpretation of the world and of life, known as animism which attributes to every object, whether animate or inanimate, an invisible or spiritual double. Some doubles are friendly, others hostile. How to summon and gain the support of his invisible friends? How to avoid, exclude, or nullify the desires and acts of his spirit enemies? These are questions which confront him continuously. It is upon luck, magic, and religion that the savage depends for the solution of these questions.

II. LUCK, MAGIC AND RELIGION

It is not within the province of the present article to enter upon a discussion of the nature of luck, magic, and religion, nor to attempt to establish their genetic relation, nor the extent to which they overlap one another. Whether or not the three, in essence and in origin, are different aspects of the same thing, the fact remains that in time they tend to become differentiated and their extremes, at

⁶Welton, J., *Logical Bases of Education*, pp. 8-9.

⁷Taplin, *The Narinyeri*, p. 53 (cited here from Sir John Lubbock, *The Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man*, p. 7).

least, are easily distinguished. In this state, "religion is prescribed, recognized, and thoroughly respectable. Magic is prohibited, secret; at most, it is permitted without being prescribed." The savage is ever subject to the influence of his belief in luck. As to magic, he turns to it as certain Christians of today turn from seeking Divine guidance through prayer to mediums and fortune tellers. His magic and religion are greatly influenced by his animistic beliefs and by the character of his reasoning processes. Failing to distinguish the abstract from the concrete, the object from its symbol, he considers shadow, portrait, image, or name as an integral part of the thing for which it stands. Anyone of these representatives or symbols may be used to control the thing itself. To possess the portrait, to know the true name of a person or thing is to possess an integral part of it through which consequently, it may be controlled. The belief upon which Rosetti bases his poem, "Sister Helen", namely, that an enemy may be injured by making an image of him and destroying it, is almost universal among the savage tribes.

The existence of savage tribes totally destitute of religion has often been asserted. Brinton, discussing such assertions, writes, "The fact is, there has not been a single tribe, no matter how rude, known in history, or visited by travelers, which has been shown to be destitute of religion in some form."⁸ It is impossible here to attempt to show the extent to which primitive society is dominated by religion. From one point of view, every savage tribe may be regarded as a secret religious society bound together by mystic rites. In many tribes, as among the American Zuni, the supreme political power is in the hands of the priests. The influence of religion perhaps can be most easily realized by a brief consideration of the prevalence of rites and ceremonies.

Every important act must be preceded or accompanied by some religious rite. Before the hunt, a prayer must be offered, an incantation chanted, a sacrifice made, or a dance performed, to give the hunter power over the game and to propitiate the spirits of beast, wood, and jungle. Before the battle, before the meal, before the tree is cut, or the stream entered, a sacred rite must be performed. From sunrise to sunset, from day to day, from season to season, in connection with every activity, there is an almost unbroken succession of such rites.

⁸Brinton, D. G., *op. cit.*, p. 30.

III. AIM AND ORGANIZATION OF EDUCATION

The aim of primitive education is two-fold: (1) to preserve and transmit the occupations, rites, traditions, and customs to which the tribe credits its preservation: (2) to develop in the individual those qualities and capacities, physical, social, industrial, moral and spiritual necessary for those who would preserve and transmit the tribal institutions. The reverence for custom, the fear of trespassing upon the unknown and of offending unseen powers all tend to prevent variations from what the past has established. The preservation of what has been and is, rather than progress, is the social, and consequently, the educational aim. Independent thinking and intellectual initiative are at a discount. It is incorrect, however, to say that there is no desire to develop the individual, but this development is absolutely limited by social aims and standards.

Prior to that division of labor which develops with the rise of distinct industrial and social classes, every member of the group must be able to fulfill all tasks which fall to the members of his sex. Consequently, to each child is insured the opportunity of whatever training, instruction and development the tribe affords. This training, crude as it is, includes every aspect of child life, physical, social, industrial, intellectual, moral, and religious.

In the earliest stages of primitive life, there is no teaching class. Every adult is a teacher. The women train the girls in weaving, preparing food, etc., and the men train the boys in hunting, fishing, war, and other occupations. Soon, however, certain members of the tribe, owing to a superiority of gifts, come to be recognized as directors, leaders, and so, in a very real sense, teachers, in the dance, in religious ceremonies, in games, hunting, and war. At length, as the number and complexity of occupations, religious rites, and the mass of tribal lore become too great to be mastered by every member of the tribe, it becomes necessary to select certain individuals to be trained for this purpose. It is not to be inferred, however, that parents, relatives, and elders surrender their educational and religious responsibility; on the contrary, they continue to be the child's first teachers and models. Nevertheless the beginnings of three factors of great educational significance now appear: (1) a teaching class; (2) the distinction between lay and priestly education; (3) the religious character and control of education.

There are neither schools nor text books among the primitive peoples. War, the hunt, the council, feasts, religious festivals, and

the meetings of the tribe are among the most important educative institutions. The men's house, found in many tribes, arose out of the tendency of the sexes to separate. It became at once an important institution in the training of boys and young men. It serves as the council chamber of the adult males, a town hall, a social club, and a sleeping resort. Among the African Unyamwesi, there are usually two in each village. At seven or eight, the boy throws off the authority of his mother and spends most of his time at the men's house, usually eating, often sleeping there.⁹

All primitive peoples recognize with differing degrees of clearness that the life of the child is divided into distinct periods. Consciously or unconsciously, primitive man, in striking contrast to the practice of civilized nations, adapts, as far as conditions permit, the activities, occupations and responsibilities of the child to the needs, interests, and capacities of these periods. Evidence of such recognition may be found in the Mexican rock-writings, depicting child training,¹⁰ and in the American, Australian, and African graded series of tribal initiations.

The African Kafirs recognize at least four distinct periods in the life of the child:

- (1) Infancy, from birth until the child is weaned.
- (2) Interdentition, from the time the first teeth are cut, until the second teeth are cut.
- (3) Childhood, from the cutting of the second teeth to puberty (from five to seven to approximately twelve years).
- (4) Puberty and adolescence (from twelve years —).

A brief summary of Kidd's account of Kafir childhood will show many of the important features of primitive education prior to adolescence.

The Kafir mother begins to guard her child against evil influences even before birth. She binds up her ankles with small yellow flowers to break evil spells. In her hut, she keeps pots of medicine from which she drinks occasionally. She refrains from eating the flesh of certain animals lest the child should have their characteristics. The birth of the child is attended and followed by a series of rites. That on the first day is for the purpose of imparting to the child the ancestral spirit, *itongo*. Other ceremonies are held on the second, fifth, and seventh days following birth. Some have

⁹Webster, H., *Primitive Secret Societies*, 1, 13.

¹⁰Bureau of American Ethnology, *Tenth Annual Report*, 1888-'89, pp. 542-550.

for their object the purification of the mother; others, the binding of the child with the spirits of his dead and living relatives; still others, to protect him against evil spirits.¹¹

The second period of training, interdention, is "par excellence the age of innocence and charm." Boys and girls of the same age play together. The little Kafir continues under the care of his mother. He learns almost exclusively through play. He does not work, or at least, is not compelled to work until the second teeth are cut.¹²

The physical changes which mark the entrance upon adolescence are accompanied by a quickening of the emotional, intellectual, and social life of the child. Hall writes, "True and deep religious experience is almost impossible before adolescence. . . . The birthday of the strongest passion (the sex passion) is also the day of the greatest need of religion."¹³ "Childhood must be selfish in the sense that it must be fed, sheltered, clothed, taught, and the currents of its environment set toward and not from it. . . . Youth seeks to be, know, get, feel all that is highest, greatest and best in man's estate."¹⁴ In emotions, desires, and intuitions, the individual is no longer a child. He is an adult in nearly all things except knowledge and experience. Now is the time when members of the rising generation desire to be tested to determine whether they possess the qualities necessary to survive life's combat. Now is the time for choosing a life occupation. The change in the youth's nature demands a change in occupation and in social relations. He craves an interpretation and an explanation of all that surrounds him. Now is the time set by the laws, physical and psychological, of his own nature, for instruction in social relationships and all that pertains to an intimate view of life. At no other period in life is the individual so sensitive and so responsive to religious stimuli. This is *par excellence* the time for religious instruction and expression.

No recognition that primitive peoples give to the periods in child life is more significant from the religious and social standpoint than that which is accorded to adolescence. There is, on the whole, little organized or conscious effort to teach children before adolescence, but primitive peoples universally recognize that adolescence marks the time for assuming social responsibilities and consequently, for

¹¹Kidd, D., *Savage Childhood A Study of Kafir Children*, pp. 7-8; 12-13; and 20-29.

¹²*Ibid.*, pp. 81, 87.

¹³Hall, G. S., *Adolescence*, II :300.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 301-302.

special instruction in religion, morals, and the mysteries of life. The adolescent rites are, first and last, tests to determine whether or not the youth is able to measure up to the physical, moral, and intellectual standards set by the tribe. But they are more than this, they are periods of religious and moral instruction. In passing through ordeals, the youth is not only tested, but he is given most severe training in the qualities demanded by these ordeals, courage, obedience, perseverance, loyalty, concentration, indifference to pain.

IV. THE CONTENT AND METHODS OF EDUCATION.

The tasks and occupations of primitive life may appear exceedingly simple at first glance, nevertheless, the process of learning them is by no means an easy one, and in many cases requires prolonged effort, persistence, skill, concentration and courage. Even among the most primitive people, the amount of lore of forest, field, stream, and lake to be mastered, in connection with procuring food, is by no means small,—the names of birds, beasts, and fish, the habitat of each and how to locate and capture the same; the preparation of skins for clothing. In higher stages, the knowledge of fire and metals brings in a host of new occupations.

With respect to the political and social life of the tribe sooner or later, the prospective tribesman must know something of its social organization, government, and history. The unwritten laws of the council, customs regarding marriage and property, customs and forms concerning the sending and receiving of messengers. Formal instruction in these matters is postponed until adolescence; nevertheless, the small boy undoubtedly begins to pick up a large amount of information from his earliest years.

The morals and moral standards of primitive peoples are those which experience has shown necessary for the preservation of the tribe. Unquestioning obedience, self-control, cooperation, trustworthiness, including the ability to keep the tribal secrets, courage and indifference to physical pain are not qualities to be gained in a week or a fortnight, but through long years of continuous training. Among the American Indians, learning self-control began with learning not to cry at night, one of the first things which the infant savage must be taught, for to do so might reveal the whereabouts of the tribe to an enemy. The education of the American Indian boy was a continuous process of physical and moral discipline. *Needless* fear and physical pain were voluntarily sought and inflicted.

When a savage punishes his child, he does so with cruel severity; holding him in the smoke, tying his hands behind his back, leaving him in a swamp, sticking thorns into his flesh.¹⁵ Darwin relates that a Fuegian struck and "killed his little son when the latter dropped a basket of fish into the water."¹⁶ Such acts as the above are not, however, representative. Primitive man's customary attitude toward his child is one of tenderness, love and deep concern. No more striking evidence of this can be given than the fact that when a European wished to secure a Bushman woman as a slave, he would lurk in wait and steal her child, knowing that the mother would come after the child, preferring capture to the loss of her infant.¹⁷

Primitive man employs fear to a much greater extent in the training of his children than his civilized brother. Witches, bogies, ghosts, and an entire host of unseen spirits furnish an abundant source of moral suasion. The Zuni Indians of North America initiate the children into a tribal secret society, the Kok-ko, at approximately four years of age. Adult members of the tribe, wearing hideous masks, pass from hut to hut, interview the children and later, in the actual initiation service, continue farther the frightening process.¹⁸ Needless to say, implicit obedience is a virtue not difficult to instil where such means are employed.

Scarcely second in importance to training and instruction in morals is the training and instructions in manners. The earliest instruction given to Kafir children includes manners. Proper forms of address must be learned. Children are taught to address older people as "uncle" or "aunt". Detailed instructions are also given as to how the little Kafir should conduct himself when visiting another kraal.¹⁹

Any distinction between religious training and other forms of education must be primarily a subjective and arbitrary one, for in the mind, life, and education of primitive people, no such distinction exists. On the one hand, many industrial tasks carry with them religious rites; on the other, many religious rites include instruction in such arts as making fire, cooking, capturing wild animals.

¹⁵Bureau of American Ethnology, *Tenth Annual Report*, 1888-'89, pp. 542-550.

¹⁶Thomas, W. I., *op. cit.*, p. 151.

¹⁷Kropotkin, P. A. *op. cit.*, pp. 89-90.

¹⁸Stevenson, T. E., *The Religious Life of the Zuni Child*, Bureau of American Ethnology, *Fifth Annual Report*, pp. 533-555.

¹⁹Kidd, D., *op. cit.*, pp. 108-112.

The child's religious education begins in infancy and continues until he has mastered the rites, forms, and prayers which every tribesman is expected to know. The character and detail of his training will, of course, depend upon the character of the religion of the tribe. If consecration and a lofty conception of sacrifice occupy an important place, the growing boy will be called upon very early to sacrifice his dearest possession. Eastman, as a boy, was required to offer up his pet dog as his first sacrifice to the Great Mystery.²⁰

The channels and activities through which the child receives his religious training are many and varied. Almost every aspect and activity of child and adult life contributes its modicum. The religious songs of the tribe he hears from his earliest years. Its myths and legends teach him the names, attributes, loves and hatreds of the unseen beings which people his religious world.

In his play, he imitates practically every activity of adult life and consequently many religious rites and festivals. Some rites and symbolical acts he picks up; others are taught him directly. Sometimes on the boundary, sometimes in the midst of a festive group, he observes tribal rites, sacrifices, and dances. Often, he assists in the preparations for these occasions. Many times, he makes his way through the throng and for a few moments, takes part in the religious dances. As soon as the play period is past, the learning of the occupations and industrial activities of the tribe, closer contact with its institutional life, war, the hunt, council meetings, all bring him into more intimate association with its religious life and continue and deepen his religious training.

As stated above, every primitive tribe is, in a certain sense, a secret society bound together by ties of blood and religion. Admission to this society can be had only through sacred initiatory rites. Such rites constitute one of the most important factors in the religious education of the primitive child. Some tribes limit these rites to adolescence; other have a series of rites; marking off the life of the child into distinct periods.

"There are three distinct steps or periods in the initiation of the Central Australians. At the age of ten or eleven, the boy is seized by a number of adults who are marked out for this special work by the position which they hold in their tribe. He is painted

²⁰Eastman, C. A., *Indian Boyhood*, pp. 101-112.

with the totemic symbols, tossed up into the air and severely beaten."²¹

"A few years later, he is seized again and subjected to mutilation. The form of mutilation varies: it may be the knocking out of the front teeth, a piercing of nasal septum, or the lips, or a loosening of the scalp by biting. The ceremony usually culminates in smoking or burning over a fire. During the period of these ceremonies,—lasting some days,—the youth is given little to eat. By hunting he must secure certain animals used in the ceremonies. The entire period is taken up with a variety of complex totemic dances and ceremonies. During the ceremony, he, (the Australian youth), has a guardian to direct him, but for the most part he must observe absolute silence."²²

"The third phase of the initiation follows after an interval of some months. It consists of elaborate dances and performances participated in by large numbers, often representing several tribes, and sometimes lasting for several months with ceremonies every day. After this, the youth is admitted into full membership of the tribe and, henceforth, associates no longer with the women and children."²³

In various preceding paragraphs, different aspects of the educational significance of tribal initiation rites have been indicated. It has been shown that they represent the first organized educational effort on the part of primitive peoples; further, that they are essentially tests, public examinations to determine whether the youth measures up to the physical, social, religious, moral, and intellectual standards set up by his social group; that they indicate also a recognition of the periods in child life and especially, of the deep social and religious significance of adolescence.

"Here education began", writes Hall, "and extended upward toward more mature years and downward toward infancy, almost in exact proportion as civilization and its luggage of cultures and skills increased. Of the importance of this state of transition, religion which is so pre-eminently conservative has preserved the best and most adequate sense. It still maintains the idea that the great change is fixed, brief in time, radical in nature, and mediated to a greater or less extent by external pious offices. Secular and intellectual education has broken so radically with the concensus of the

²¹Condensed from Monroe, P., *A Brief Course in the History of Education*, pp. 3-4.

²²*Ibid.*

²³*Ibid.*,

past as to retain no vestige of recognition of this great revolution."²¹

Primitive man and the training he gives his children are continuously religious. From the hour of his birth, the care and instruction of the little savage rest with those who are ever conscious of their own and of the child's responsibility to unseen powers. The voice of these powers can be heard in storm, stream, and brook, and can be felt in the awe that creeps out of the recesses of the forest or steals down from the mountain at the close of day. All nature is the child's teacher and guide. Every occupation and activity of life contributes its share toward developing in him an attitude of reverence and a religious consciousness destined to permeate all acts, feelings, and thoughts and unite him by well nigh indissoluble mystic religious ties with the community in which he lives.

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²¹Hall, G. S., *op. cit.*, II:232-233.

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