

Indigenous Religions

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WHAT'S COVERED

The general objective of this lesson is for you to understand exactly what are indigenous religions. You will look at certain core beliefs that are found in these religions and are, at times, universal and transcend culture and geography. You will also want to pay close attention to how they might be related to other religions and religious belief structures. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. What Are Indigenous Religions?
2. Connections with Modern Religions

1. What Are Indigenous Religions?

When scholars describe the religions of indigenous people, they have historically used the term primal (or first) religions because they are considered to be the oldest religious traditions and may have been the practices of prehistoric societies. Definitionally, indigenous religions refer to the spiritual beliefs, customs, and practices of the world's indigenous tribes and native cultures. Many of these religions are still practiced today. Indigenous religions have decentralized structures of belief and practices that are associated with the time prior to, or in some cases concurrent with, the emergence of the major religions of the world as they are understood today.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Common examples would be the Maori tribes of New Zealand, the Aborigines of Australia, and Native American tribes such as the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Navajo, et cetera (there are hundreds). These various traditions, although the cultures are spread out across the world and may have had little direct contact with one another, have many things in common. The most prominent feature of all indigenous religions is their relationship with nature and a deep reverence for animals and the world of animal spirits.

For many of these religions, animals and birds were/are believed to possess magical powers. The prehistoric cave paintings found in what is now France and Spain tend to be focused on one animal integral to each culture, such as the bison and aurochs (the ancestors of cattle) in the Lascaux cave or the lions in the Chauvet cave. Scholars believe these indicate a deep spiritual connection to those animals.

As a contemporary example, the kereru bird, a native of New Zealand, has, for the Maori people, the gift of offering itself as a last meal to the dying. The belief is that it will guide the person's soul safely to its home in Hawaiki, the origin of the Maori people.

The raven is revered in many Native American traditions. The Athabascan tribes of Alaska regard Raven as the creator god, benevolent and always there to support and guide. However, he also has a trickster side and tends to exhibit careless behavior. He is known to get himself into trouble. These qualities are manifested in the bird and some of the environments and activities that surround him. They offer lessons for spiritual understanding, guidance, and insight.

In this sense, there's a very thin veil between animal spirit and human understanding. This form of belief, common among many of the primal religions, is generally referred to as animism and is centered around the spirit and spiritual essence abounding in the natural world.

Another common feature of the primal religions is a strong belief that pertains to the idea of **taboos**.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Using the Maori people again, there are restrictions against using more of a natural resource than is absolutely necessary. Overfishing in the Maori culture is “tapu.” It's a spiritual restriction.

Indigenous legends have many ways of maintaining a fluid contact with the spiritual world. Many tribes and indigenous cultures have **totems** that function as their representative. Often a particular animal, plant, or tree will be a totem used as a link with the spirit realm. It typically communicates both ways. The totem works to remind the tribe or the community of their ancestry and their spiritual origin.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Take a look at the totem poles of many native tribes from the Northwest region of North America for an example. These are carved structures that carry the myths and the stories of the tribe, as well as cosmologies, creation stories, and spiritual roadmaps.



TERMS TO KNOW

Taboo

Any practice or behavior forbidden for religious, cultural, or social reasons.

Totem

An image, a living thing, or a physical object that is recognized by a group as representing that group, either in whole or in part.

2. Connections with Modern Religions

As you might be noticing, some of these practices and beliefs are not as antiquated as the name primal might seem to suggest. Indeed, there are belief structures of many modern religions that can be traced back to these primal religions.

Many traditions, both primal and modern, give a lot of importance to the individual's rites of passage through the cycles of life, beginning with celebrations and ceremonies that surround a birth and honoring the passage into adulthood. They also have special rituals for marriage and death.

Indigenous religions typically honor and revere their deceased ancestors. As a form of worship, it provides another link to the past as a way of staying tied to its origin. In many religions, such as Judaism and Christianity,

this takes the form of prayer and specific religious services that are designed to establish the conditions for these offers of worship.



SUMMARY

What are indigenous religions? This is a very broad category and generally refers to a range of history from prehistoric societies to contemporary societies, and to indigenous tribes and cultures throughout the world. Primal religions have **connections with modern religions**. Some of the major religions of the world have inherited beliefs and practices from primal religion, such as rites of passage and how certain ceremonies mark the passage from one cycle of life to another.

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