

Part Five

**The Enigma
of
Primal Metaphors**

Chapter 22

Six Primal Metaphors for Religious Formation

My interest in world cultures began under the tutelage of Joseph W. Mathews as he, other colleagues, and I were teaching International Training Institutes all across the world. It was plain to us that being a Christian in India or Japan or Africa was different from being a Christian in Europe or America. Christians have tended to bring to nonwestern cultures a Westernized form of Christian witness that implied contempt for nonwestern cultures. This has tended to make Christians in these nonwestern cultures needlessly alienated from the religious wonders of their native places. As part of our attempt to promote a form of Christianity that was respectful of all cultures and religions, we attempted to understand these world cultures in relation to their quite different ways of giving form to the basic religious impulse.

Mathews came up with a model of six basic cultural areas, each of which is rooted in a uniquely different way of giving religious form to profound humanness. He characterized these six cultural symbols as “Ur-images.” In this book I have defined “image” in a particular way, namely as the mental recording of multi-sensory reruns that is common to all animal life. That understanding of “image” was not what Mathews was pointing to with his term “Ur-image.” Rather, his Ur-image was a very basic kind of religious symbol. So, I will use the term “primal metaphor” rather than “Ur-image.” There is something poetic about the term “Ur,” (reflecting as it does an ancient city by that name), but perhaps “primal” is more clarifying. And “metaphor” is also quite descriptive of the cultural form that Mathews had in mind.

Mathews saw six distinct cultural areas of the planet, about which our reading and our visiting indicated were geographical expanses with a similar primal metaphor: (1) Sub-Asia – especially India and its close surrounding places, (2) Arabia – from the old Babylonian Empire that is now Iraq through Egypt to the rest of North Africa. (3) Europe – the upper Mediterranean all the way to Scandinavia and Ireland. (4) The Orient – China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and adjacent places, (5) Sub-Saharan Africa – the wide variety of ancient cultures dating back to the primal origins of humanity, and (6) The Americas – before European settlement. There have been some questions about this model, such as: Is there a seventh primal metaphor characterizing some of the Pacific Islands? But I will go with Mathews’ six-primal-metaphor model, recognizing that it is a model – a very useful one for making the basic point that religious formations have developed in different ways in different places with different primal understandings of what it means to be profoundly human.

The insights that I will share in the next six chapters are only sketches for a research project that could take generations to complete, and that is clearly beyond my competence. I have not studied and do not have time to study in the remaining years of my life what would be needed in order to do an adequate job of fully exploring these topics. I do, however, experience enough intuitive wisdom about these cultures from my readings and my visits and conversations to propose this basic hypothesis that can at least encourage further research. I am willing to go out on a limb about this, because I am convinced that this topic is important for every person living on this planet of thoroughly interacting cultures and religions.

My basic hypothesis is that a unique and primal cultural metaphor has conditioned the development of the resident religions of each of these six geographical areas. This metaphor has been largely unconscious or simply taken for granted by most members of these cultures. We now live for the first time in an era of human history in which many of us have had encounters with these various peoples and can therefore understand and need to understand the basic differences in these six zones of human

religious formation. We now have a need to become more and more aware of how significantly different the formations of religion have been in different parts of the planet. And we need to know that the taken-for-granted primal metaphor of our own culture turns out to be a human creation, not a “truth” appearing from some universal realm. We can hold that the primary essence of being human is everywhere the same, and yet see that our ways of understanding, nurturing, and enacting that primal humanness have been and still are fundamentally different from at least six other regions of the planet. When we are confused about those differences, we can become arrogantly oppressive, supposing that our taken-for-granted cultural uniqueness is the universal by which other cultures are to be judged. Such unconscious oppressiveness is one of the roots of our racism and other cultural oppressions that we surely need to overcome. So I have dedicated Part Five of this book to calling attention to these very deep cultural differences.

Here is a poetic summation of the Chapters to follow:

Chapter 23 The Primal Metaphor of Sub-Asia–**Uniting with the Infinite Silence**
Chapter 24. The Primal Metaphor of Arabia–**Intimacy with the Eternal Communicator**
Chapter 25. The Primal Metaphor of Europe–**Ordering the Absolute Wonder**
Chapter 26. The Primal Metaphor of the Orient–**Balance within Inclusive Community**
Chapter 27. The Primal Metaphor of Deep African–**Attunement with the Final Rhythm**
Chapter 28. The Primal Metaphor of Native America–**Designing the Unstoppable Flow**