

**A Traveler's
Guide**

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SWISS GUIDE

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Chapter 01

INTRODUCTION

Many people in modern, developed nations hold to a “scientific” worldview where empirical evidence, research, and reason determine what is true and false. In the sophisticated world of secular societies, it is common to dismiss the belief in gods, spirits, magic, curses, and the supernatural as mere holdovers from a superstitious age. At least, this was true for many decades when naturalism and materialism held sway as the prevailing ideologies of Western societies. In recent decades, however, many in the West have lost “faith” in the ability of science, naturalism, and materialism to explain the meaning, purpose, and hope of human existence. Consequently, millions of people are beginning to reject these non-theistic worldviews and to seek instead religious worldviews for answers to life’s ultimate questions.

Along with this shift toward religious sentiments, there has been a renewed interest in the so-called “primitive” religions of indigenous people groups. Rather than join an “organized religion” such as Christianity, many seekers have turned instead to the teachings and practices of animism, witchcraft, spiritism, folk religion, and so on. As a result, mystical practices associated with these religions have proliferated among young people in what were once secularized societies.¹

Given their newfound popularity among Western youth, the prevalence and influence of indigenous, folk, and animistic religions are not relegated to the remote jungles of Africa or South America. In fact, these religions are not only experiencing a renewed interest in once-secularized societies, but they also exert considerable influence on the other major worldviews. Elements of folk religion lie at the roots of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Shinto. They also lie at the basis of early religions in Europe, Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria, Greece, Rome, and Scandinavia – religions that are themselves experiencing somewhat of a renaissance in the West.

To effectively present the gospel in this rapidly shifting religious landscape, Christians must understand the nature and contours of folk and animistic worldviews. Moreover, they must understand the roots and fruits of indigenous religions as they are practiced in the world of shamans, witches, magic, charms, spirits, and curses. Christians must stand ready to engage followers of these religions with the light and power of Jesus Christ.

1.1 What is an Indigenous Religion?

The term “indigenous religion” refers to a religion that is the native belief system of a small tribe, ethnic group, or culture.² Indigenous religions are not belief systems that sprout quickly or suddenly through one founder or group of followers. Rather, they develop over a long period of time and have unique features that connect them to a particular group of people.³ In spite of their ethnic or cultural peculiarity, indigenous religions share common features that allow them to be classified together.



Typically, these religions are undifferentiated in structure from the people and land. Everything in the community or tribe functions as a part of the whole; there is no compartmentalization of sectors like economics, politics, and religion.⁴ All of life is unified, with the tribe's religion taking a position of primacy.⁵

Indigenous religions are typically restricted to a specific culture of origin and do not spread geographically beyond it.⁶ This means that each indigenous religion is small compared to the other major world religions, but when viewed together as one classification, they make up a notable portion of the world's religious population.

Indigenous religions tend to be animistic. That is, they believe that the natural world is imbued with spiritual power. Nature either imitates the gods or is the product of their interaction with the world. Thus, adherents tend to be “world-affirming,” seeing nature as inherently sacred and seeking to live in harmony with it.⁷ They tend to use rituals, magic, and spells to manipulate, control, or harness the spiritual power found within the natural world.



Furthermore, many adherents of indigenous religions live in fear of the spirits, gods, and demons that inhabit the world, including their own tribal deities. These spirits can be good or bad, bringing illness, disease, and famine, or a bountiful harvest, healing, and protection. Regardless, the spirits are almost always capricious and therefore pose risks to the people.⁸

Lastly, indigenous religions are traditionally exclusivist but not universal. They believe truth is represented through the stories of their people, but they do not engage in missionary activity to convince others of this truth.⁹ Their traditions are often passed down orally through successive generations, and even though they are not written texts, these traditions can be extremely precise in their transmission.¹⁰

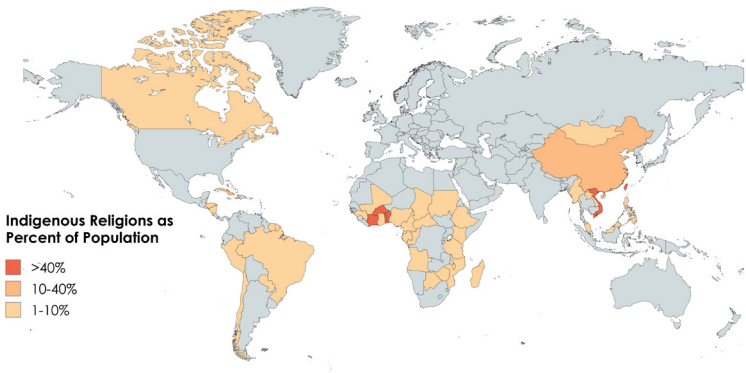


1.2. Statistics: Regions and Population

Estimates range widely regarding the number of adherents in these religions. Taking all ethnic religions together, the global estimate is roughly 740 million practitioners. With 2,641 unique groups, indigenous religions comprise approximately 9.2% of the world's population.¹¹ These groups are located all over the globe, but heavy concentrations exist in sub-Saharan Africa and South America's central regions.

Quick Facts

- Religion:** Indigenous
- Adherents:** Tribal
- Population:** 740 million
- Founder:** No founder
- Began:** Various times
- Type:** Animistic
- God:** gods, nature spirits, demons
- Texts:** Oral tradition



Chapter 02

THE HISTORY OF INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS

The origin of indigenous religions is a controversial debate among anthropologists and philosophers of religion. One prevailing theory is an evolutionary model that views tribal religions as the foundation of all religious development. Under this theory, early, more primitive indigenous religions transformed into polytheism and henotheism, eventually giving rise to major monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and eventually culminating in secular, non-religious worldviews such as atheism, agnosticism, and transhumanism.

An opposing theory, one consistent with a biblical worldview, considers indigenous religions to be considerable deviations from an original monotheism shared by early human civilizations. This thesis argues that there has been religious development in all directions, but the general direction, at least originally, was a movement away from the worship of one supreme Creator God. As human beings abandoned original monotheism, they turned to rituals and magic to invoke the powers of spiritual forces for protection, healing, power, and meaning. Philosopher of religion Winfried Corduan explains:

“As monotheism is left behind...the role that people play in attempting to find their own way in a world dominated by spiritual forces becomes far more central, leading to an increase in spiritual manipulation techniques, such as magic and ritual...This tendency is almost prevalent enough to be elevated to the level of a law analogous to the second law of thermodynamics (randomness increases within any closed physical system): A religious culture left without strong guidance will tend toward increased ritual and magic.”

In support of the monotheistic theory, it is a startling fact that many indigenous religions contain vestiges of belief in a Creator God, either an ancient one who ceased to exist or a god no longer active in the tribe's spiritual realm. Vestiges of early belief in a Creator God, while not conclusive proof of an original monotheism, give credence to the theory that indigenous religions are a deviation from, not the origin of, monotheism.

Primordial Monotheism

In the 1930s, a famous anthropologist and historian, Rev. Wilhelm Schmidt, published an extensive study demonstrating that the vast majority of indigenous religions contained a belief in a Supreme Being, commonly referred to as the “Sky God” or “High God.” Moreover, these Indigenous religions frequently ascribed the same attributes to this Supreme Being: eternity, omniscience, omnipotence, beneficence, morality, and creator. Schmidt's work provides strong evidence that monotheism was an essential property of ancient human civilizations before various groups split off and separated from one another.

Wilhelm Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion* (New York: Cooper Square, 1931).

Chapter 03

DIFFERENT TYPES OF INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS

Since indigenous groups are so varied and are generally uninterested in spreading their beliefs beyond their community or tribe, anthropologists typically sort them according to geographic clusters and cultural groups.¹³ However, even this method has proven difficult due to several factors, such as the syncretic influence of other world religions influencing indigenous groups, the process of secularization of cultures, and migration. One attempt has been presented by evangelical missions scholar Terry Muck. In “The Christianity Study of Religion,” he divides the world into ten areas: North America, Meso and South America, Europe, Middle East, Africa, North Asia, South Asia, China, India, and Oceania (but other divisions are possible).¹⁴



Chapter 04

MAJOR BELIEFS AND TEACHINGS

Although indigenous religions are numerous and diverse in their beliefs, they share several characteristics regarding their beliefs and teachings. It is important not to make assumptions about any particular indigenous religion, but these common characteristics provide a picture of what many look like.

I 4.1 Power (Animism)

The term animism refers to the belief that the natural world is animated with the power of spiritual beings. Most of these religions are oriented around the use of that spiritual power animating the world. Animistic religions believe in many kinds of spirits, including the sky god, lesser gods and goddesses, ancestors, nature spirits, demons, and various other spiritual powers. Religion focuses on placating these spirits and gaining access to their power.¹⁵



I 4.2 Taboos

Many of these religions practice the use of taboo, which essentially means untouchable. In modern vernacular, the phrase “cultural taboo” simply refers to an action or word that tourists should avoid when visiting another culture, but in indigenous religions, the taboo has deeply religious connotations. A taboo may be a place, a person, or a physical object, such as something used in ritual magic. A taboo must be avoided, and violations may bring extremely bad consequences upon a person.¹⁶ Examples include the tools used by shamans and witch doctors for divination and magic. These objects possess great spiritual power, too much for the commoner to casually handle. To touch one of these objects could engender severe consequences on a person.



4.3 Totems

A totem is a spiritual entity that may be represented by an animal, or in some cases, a physical object. Many westerners will be familiar with the term “totem” because of totem poles commonly found in Native American religions, but totem poles are only carved and painted representations of totems themselves. Each tribe has its own totem, such as an animal (or spirit animal). Totems are used to identify each clan or tribe, and they are revered within that tribe or clan as sacred. Typically, tribal members are forbidden from eating the animal that is their totem.¹⁷



4.4 Fetishes and Charms

A charm is a physical object with spiritual power believed to ward off evil. These are also called amulets or talismans. They could be parts of an animal such as a claw, foot, or tooth, or a man-made object such as a knife, necklace, or ornament.

Fetishes are considered more powerful than charms and are occasionally used to ward off evil and seek out evildoers. They are often statues or objects believed to house powerful spirits and are therefore treated with great respect.

Fetishes and charms that Westerners would likely recognize are the dreamcatcher and the evil eye. A dreamcatcher is a hand-woven charm in Native American culture that is hung over a bed and believed to protect sleepers from bad dreams and evil spirits. The evil eye charm is common in folk religion of the Middle East and is a popular souvenir among Western tourists. It is believed to ward off the evil intentions of envy and jealousy from other people by reflecting back ill will on the other person. The eye is probably a depiction of the ancient Egyptian god, Horus.

Harmless souvenirs?

In many parts of the world, souvenirs depicting idols, charms, and fetishes of local religions are sold to tourists. Tourists commonly bring back these souvenirs believing these things to be harmless without suspecting that they might be imbued with spiritual power. Unfortunately, these objects may, in fact, have curses and spiritual entities attached to them, sometimes intentionally so by merchants. Sadly, this is a common practice in many parts of the world. The Bible warns Christians not to associate with idols (e.g., Ex. 23:13, 34; 1 Cor. 10), and while Christians should not be overly superstitious, they should be careful about purchasing “harmless” objects like these



■ 4.5 Trickster Spirits

Many indigenous religions believe in trickster spirits who play pranks and tricks on humans and other spirits. These spirits are considered morally “grey,” meaning they are not intrinsically evil or good. Rather, the trickster wants attention and perhaps worship. He can bring about undesirable consequences or beneficial circumstances on people depending on his mood or things done to placate him.¹⁸



Chapter 05

COMMON PRACTICES AND CUSTOMS

Harmony among the tribal members, the gods, and nature spirits is an essential feature of these religions, and ritual magic and sacrifices are used to this end. Conflict is a sign that someone or something has introduced disharmony within the tribe through their words, actions, or thoughts, disrupting the peaceful unity between the tribe's members and/or the gods and spirits. Hence, religious duty and social conformity go hand-in-hand, enforcing the standards of harmony on all members and all spheres – economic, political, and familial.¹⁹



■ 5.1 Rituals and Magic

In indigenous religions, rituals and magic are often employed to manipulate aspects of the spiritual and physical world, and there is a heavy proliferation of both ritual and magic in indigenous religions.



Regarding the difference between magic and ritual, Winfried Corduan explains,

“Magic is essentially a subset of ritual, the key difference being that magic is directed more immediately toward spiritual powers. Many descriptions of magic in traditional religion distinguish between good magic and evil magic by means of different terms translated into English with words such as magic (a neutral term and includes good uses), sorcery (an intrinsic negative meaning), and witchcraft (used for irremediably destructive evil).”²⁰

Black magic may use objects that resemble a person or that have been taken from the person (such as a lock of hair) to place a curse on them. This kind of magic is intended to bring harm to them.

■ 5.2 Shamans and Witch Doctors

Shamans are religious experts who act as spiritual leaders and priests. The shamans typically lead in the performance of ritual and magic, often using trance-like states to communicate with spirits and even allowing themselves to be “spirit-possessed” in order to gain spiritual power. Shamans conduct healing and cleansing ceremonies and provide spiritual insight for the tribe.

A closely related term to the shaman is a witch doctor. While these two terms are often used interchangeably, there are some unique differences. Witch doctors typically do not function as a priestly class or spiritual leaders and are often subordinate to the shaman. They tend to practice folk medicine to treat diseases and other ailments, but they may also practice sorcery, witchcraft, and black magic.



■ 5.3 Divination

Divination is the process of “divining” or accessing special knowledge by contacting and interacting with spiritual entities. Typically, a shaman performs divination to tell the future or gain special insight into a matter. Divination may also include ordeals, which are rituals to determine the guilt or innocence of a person, but sometimes they may be used in rites of passage (see below).



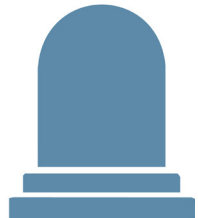
■ 5.4 Rites of Passage

In indigenous communities, life is highly regulated according to age, which typically determines one’s social standing. Rites of passage are used not merely to celebrate the transition from one stage to the next but also to confer social standing and significance. These rites officially usher a person into the next stage of life and include a state of “liminality” in which the person is in an “in-between” state of non-identity until the rite is completed.²¹



There are at least four virtually universal rites of passage in tribal religions: birth, puberty, marriage, and death.²²

- 1. Birth:** Birth is not always equated with biological birth (exiting the birth canal), but usually with a rite of passage after the infant has been born. Before this rite, the infant is not part of the community. If an infant dies before this rite is performed, the community may conclude that the infant was a trickster spirit in disguise playing a malicious prank on tribal members.
- 2. Puberty:** This rite marks the critical transition from childhood to adulthood. It may involve ordeals and torture through which young men and women must pass before the tribe receives them as adults in the community.
- 3. Marriage:** The rite requires appropriate social sanctions, such as being officiated by a tribal leader or shaman. Marriages in indigenous communities may include any of the following elements:
 - Freely chosen or arranged (or a combination of the two).
 - Matriarchal or patriarchal (the man or woman is considered the head).
 - Matrilocal or patrilocal (the couple lives within or near the father or mother's family).
 - Matrilineal or patrilineal (lineage traced through the mother or father's line).
 - Exogamous or endogamous (marriage within or outside one's tribe).²³
- 4. Death:** A person's death may not be officially recognized by the tribe until this rite is performed. The purpose of this rite is threefold:
 - To ensure the deceased is truly dead and remains so. There is a fear that a person's spirit could harm the community.
 - To transition the deceased into the status of an ancestor.
 - To reinforce the unity of the tribe amidst grief and loss.²⁴



Chapter 06

BARRIERS TO THE GOSPEL

The Bible is full of warnings about idolatry and animistic practices. The ancient Israelites were in frequent contact with the worshippers of Dagon, Chemosh, Molech, Tammuz, and Baal worshippers. Throughout the Old Testament, there were many instances where the people of God had to confront cult practices like idolatry, child sacrifice, divination, necromancy, and sorcery. Instructional Sections of the New Testament deal with these religions and their practices in the same way (Ex. 20:2-6; Rom. 1:19-25), and there is much information in the Scriptures to help the Christian know how to bridge the divide and bring indigenous worshippers into a relationship with the one true God, Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, there may be barriers to belief that Christians can graciously and diligently overcome when engaging with people of indigenous religions.

I 6.1 The Fear of Spirits

Indigenous religions are predicated on fear of the spirit world and the power it contains. The ability of shamans and witches to wield this power is why they hold such prominence among tribal groups. Fear is a great barrier to conversion because of the capriciousness of ancestor spirits and the power of shamans and witches to compel religious conformity.²⁵ Members of the community may be hesitant to convert to Christ out of fear of spiritual retaliation in the form of curses. Moreover, Christians must be careful when sharing about the Holy Spirit, as indigenous people might perceive Him as one of many other spirits. Emphasize His divine nature, power, and authority.



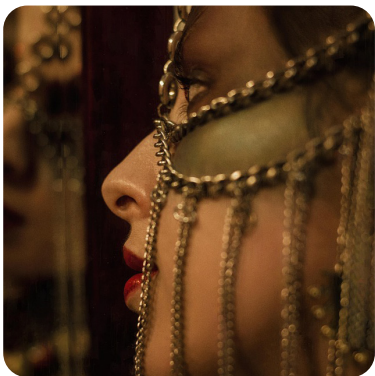
Christians can wisely navigate this subject by presenting the gospel as the way to be freed from the fear of these spirits. God can protect them. The Bible

teaches that Christians have been rescued from the domain of darkness (Col. 1:13) and that we now wrestle against spiritual forces with the armor of God (Eph. 6). Christians should also keep in mind that preaching of the gospel, especially in contexts where spirit-worship is prevalent, may involve tangible encounters with demonic powers. Though rare, spiritual warfare in the form of casting out demons is sometimes necessary for missionaries and church planters, but it must always complement evangelism and discipleship. Christians can share the gospel of Jesus Christ while confidently relying on the Holy Spirit's authority and power to subdue the forces of darkness and illuminate people's hearts and minds.

■ 6.2 Proper Motivations for Conversion

The prominence of religion among indigenous people can be a barrier in two directions. For the indigenous, converting to Christianity can feel like rejecting their entire identity; for the Christian, the desire to win converts can invite a temptation toward syncretism in their strategy of evangelism. Tribal people may not fully understand all the implications of conversion and may seek to blend their new Christian faith with animistic practices.²⁶

Moreover, the convert's motivation for trusting Christ affects their view of Christian faith, ethics, and responsibilities. Remember that indigenous religions are predicated on manipulating spiritual powers, so there is a danger in a convert viewing Christianity as another means of harnessing the power of the spirit world (Acts 9:9-13, 18).



Chapter 07

BRIDGES TO THE GOSPEL

I 7.1 The Place of Community in Conversion

Indigenous people tend to be polychronic in their orientation of day-to-day activities and responsibilities. This means that they are comfortable mixing work and play, family and friends. Relationships with people are much higher on their value scale than work projects or time constraints. Hospitality toward friends and strangers is important for these communities, and it is not unusual for them to welcome uninvited guests into their homes for a meal and fellowship.



In addition, the New Testament contains examples of entire households, towns, and villages converting to Christ (Acts 9:35, 16:30-34, 18:8). For indigenous groups, decisions are often made as a community or household, with a tribal leader or family head functioning as the executive determining the group's direction. Engaging with indigenous people often requires conversing with leaders who, upon converting to Christ, influence the conversions of others in their group. True faith in Christ is ultimately each person's decision, but the community leader or the head of household can play a major role in whether one or many turn to Christ.

I 7.2 The Power of Story

Do not underestimate the power of stories, especially religious stories, for indigenous groups. Many of these cultures are oriented around narratives; thus, religious teaching is much more effective when told in story form rather than straight propositional doctrine. This means that they are more likely to understand the gospel message when told chronologically and in a story form.²⁷

Christ's victory over sin and death takes on a much more powerful meaning when one understands the grand story of salvation: creation, fall, redemption, and glorification.



7.3 The Centrality of Religion to All of Life

Westerners are accustomed to compartmentalization, particularly when it comes to religion. In Western secular societies, religion is just one sphere among many, and it is typically considered a private matter with no place in work or politics. For indigenous groups, religion is central to their way of life. Religion permeates everything they do. The spirits are present in all areas of life, and religion, therefore, cannot be relegated to just one part of life. It affects everything.



Christians who engage indigenous groups can affirm the centrality of religious faith to all of life. The act of conversion to faith in Jesus Christ has ramifications for every aspect of one's life, requiring drastic changes in habits, thoughts, words, and deeds. The Bible ties these changes to the fruits of repentance and sanctification (two terms that will require contextualization for someone unac-

customized to Christian concepts). The gospel doesn't just change what we believe; it changes everything about us. It gives us a new identity and a new way of life.

■ 7.4 Public Confession and Demonstration

Because religion plays such a central role in the life of the group or tribe, a public confession of faith in Christ and an explicit rejection of their old way can strengthen the resolve and commitment of converts (e.g., Acts 19:19-20). Public rites of separation or public demonstrations of leaving the old ways will vary from culture to culture. Rejecting old beliefs and replacing them with the rites of one's new faith in Christ (e.g., baptism) can be very powerful demonstrations for others to see.

Patience is needed from the Christian who engages with people of indigenous faiths as they wrestle between their current beliefs and a decision to follow Christ.



Appendix

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

I Books and Articles

1. Burton, Tara Isabelle. *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*. New York: Public Affairs, 2022.
2. Corduan, Winfried. *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions*. 2nd ed. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012.
3. Hindson, Ed and Ergun Caner. *The Popular Encyclopedia of Apologetics*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2008.
4. Muck, Terry. "The Christian Study of World Religions." Pages 3-10 in *Handbook of Religion: A Christian Engagement with Traditions, Teachings, and Practices*. Eds. Terry C. Muck, Harold A Netland, and Gerald R. McDermott. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014.
5. "Religion: Ethnic religions." The Joshua Project. <https://www.joshuaproject.net/religions/4>.
6. Schmidt, Wilhelm. *The Origin and Growth of Religion*. New York: Cooper Square, 1931.
7. Studebaker, John A. David Cashin, and Chris Gnanakan. *The Quest of World Religions: An Introduction and Anthology*. San Diego: Cognella Academic Publishing, 2022.

References

- ¹ Tara Isabelle Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2022).
- ² Terry Muck, "The Christian Study of Religion," in *Handbook of Religion: A Christian Engagement with Traditions, Teachings, and Practices* (Eds. Terry C. Muck, Harold A Netland, and Gerald R. McDermott. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 183.
- ³ Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions*, Second Edition (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 207.
- ⁴ Muck, "The Christian Study of Religion," 184.
- ⁵ Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths*, 207.
- ⁶ Muck, "The Christian Study of Religion," 184.
- ⁷ Muck, "The Christian Study of Religion," 183-184.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 184.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.
- ¹⁰ Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths*, 207-208.
- ¹¹ "Religion: Ethnic Religions," The Joshua Project, accessed February 25, 2025, <https://www.joshuaproject.net/religions/4>.
- ¹² Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths*, 45-46.
- ¹³ Muck, "The Christian Study of Religion," 184.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 184-186.
- ¹⁵ Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths*, 209.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 213.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 213-215.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 215-216.
- ¹⁹ Muck, "The Christian Study of Religion," 184.
- ²⁰ Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths*, 47, 209-210.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 211-213.
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 233.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 231-233.

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