

# **THE RELIGION OF THE AFRICANS**

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The religion of the Africans by Henry Rowley

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**HENRY ROWLEY**

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RELIGION OF THE AFRICANS.

BY THE

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## PREFACE.

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“WHEN records are wanting, and tradition is grown a blind matter concerning the origin of a people, all that can be done in it is to compare that tradition, together with their customs and institutions, with the histories, institutions, and customs of other nations, and fix it, if nothing shall hinder, where the parity most appears.”

Thus writes Peter Kolben, a German traveller, at the commencement of the 18th century, in his book on “The Present State of the Cape of Good Hope,” wherein he gives a particular account of the Hottentots.

I am not concerned with the origin of the Africans, but in setting forth their religion in order to indicate the source from whence it has been derived, and to show that it is in harmony with the beliefs of the rest of mankind, I thought to pursue the course indicated by Kolben; but I soon discovered that, though interesting in itself, such a method of proceeding was far from satisfactory.

There are, it is well known, traditional beliefs amongst nations widely sundered, and between whom there is no historical connection, concerning God,

the Creation of the World, the Creation of Man, the Immortality of the Soul, the Temptation and Fall, the Deluge, &c., which, though so divergent in detail, so distorted by wild imagination, are yet so alike in their general features as to afford good reason for concluding that they have a community of origin. That the Africans have a fundamental affinity with all other races of men upon an authority far higher than that which the undoubted possession of common traditions would give them, I do not doubt; and that they have beliefs which are the relics of the primitive faith professed by the undivided human race, I fully believe, yet it appeared to me so difficult to prove this conclusively, in the way Kolben suggests, that I resolved to content myself with simply recording such information on the religious beliefs of the Africans as I had at my disposal.

Take as an illustration of this difficulty the belief in God. Maitland says,<sup>1</sup> "I believe that the theology of the world clearly and unequivocally embraced the doctrine of a Supreme Deity, that the 'Catholic tradition' of mankind cried always, 'I believe in God the Father Almighty;' and that 'the great, pregnant, imperative idea of a Supreme power, man's Creator, ruler, and judge, call it Saturn, or Jupiter, or Fate, or what you will, reigned paramount in the minds of men, and in the Catholic tradition which they passed on from generation to generation, even after they had been given up to idolatry and the worship of false gods.'"

I believe that, also, and hold that the nations of

<sup>1</sup> "Essay on False Worship," p. 50.



the world knew God, not because certain natural phenomena may have suggested the idea of God to their minds, but because God in the beginning made a direct revelation of Himself to man. And yet when you examine the idea which the Africans have of God, you cannot help seeing that the argument which Mr. Taylor<sup>1</sup> uses against the general prevalence of the belief in a future state of life for man being conclusive in favour of its being inherited from a common source, might be applied with equal force against this idea of God being a survival, and in favour of the opinion that it may have sprung up independently amongst them in virtue of the natural laws of mental growth.

The difficulty in arriving at the religious beliefs of the Africans is great. (1) They have no "Record, nor writing, nor notion of either." Their traditions live from mouth to mouth. Such have evidently undergone much change as they have descended from generation to generation, and they vary considerably in important particulars amongst the different tribes. (2) The Africans are very reticent upon their religious beliefs and customs. Until their confidence is gained,—and it is rarely that travellers stay sufficiently long with any tribe to gain its confidence,—they will keep what they know and do as secret as they can. When questioned on their religion they will give evasive answers, and rather than divulge their beliefs to strangers they will prefer to be considered fools, or as utterly ignorant of any sort of

<sup>1</sup> "Researches into the Early History of Mankind," p. 5.

religious belief and practice. Consequently our information on such subjects is derived almost entirely from such tribes as have been brought under the influence of missionaries, or who have lived for some length of time in the neighbourhood of European colonists. It would be more satisfactory if our information was derived from wider sources, yet I think that in all essential features it will be found that the information which we possess affords a fair example of what the Africans generally believe.

It may not be out of place to allude here to two facts which serve to show that the Africans must have separated from the main body of the human race at a very early period in the history of mankind, inasmuch as this fact may account for the crude character of their religious ideas, viz., their ignorance of writing, already mentioned, and their ignorance of any sort of architecture in brick and stone.

It is, I know, assumed by some that the antediluvians possessed a considerable knowledge of both these arts, and that Noah was perfectly acquainted with them, and that, consequently, there has never been a period since the Deluge when mankind was ignorant of them. I doubt, however, the correctness of this assumption. It is true that Josephus makes mention of "the letters of Seth;" that Pliny says, "As for letters, they have been from the beginning;" and that other learned men in ancient and modern times have thought that letters, and even sciences, were taught before the Deluge. Yet in face of the fact that the earliest specimens of writing have been shown to belong to a period long after that which can be assigned

to the Deluge, and that it has never been proved that any people once possessed of the art of writing has ever absolutely lost it, I think we may fairly conclude that when the Africans broke away from the parent stem of mankind, writing was an unknown art. To my mind, it is far more reasonable to come to such a conclusion, than to imagine that they knew of its existence, were, in common with the rest of their fellow creatures, proficient in it, and yet there should be not a vestige of such knowledge to be found amongst them.

That the knowledge of the art of architecture before the period assigned to the fact which is known as the Dispersion rests on evidence upon which there can be no doubt; but that this knowledge existed before the Deluge, seems to me to be by no means certain. The passage in Holy Scripture which is principally relied upon to prove that it did exist, is,—“And Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bare Enoch; and he builded a city, and called the name of the city after the name of his son Enoch.” But to apply to that word *city* the modern idea associated with it, and then to infer that Cain was conversant with the art and science of architecture, as we understand the term, is a method of argument opposed to all the knowledge which we possess upon the primitive habitations of mankind. At what period after the Deluge architecture, properly so called, was employed, I do not know, but between that great event and the creation of the earliest specimens of architecture with which we are acquainted, there was, I believe, a much longer