

C. World Religions | Sample Answer

i. Describe two ideas that are particularly associated with primal religion (2019 Section C [a])

The term 'religion' has undeniably evolved hugely over time. For our ancestors, religion was the way that they attached meaning to the key moments in their lives. All religions are rooted in the primal traditions which date back to 50000 BC.

All primal religions have similar characteristics which have enabled them to be grouped together. (1) They all appreciate and stress the importance of the supernatural and the divine, (2) all accounts were passed orally and there are no written records and (3) they did not make boundaries between the sacred and the profane. Primal religions firmly believe that religion encompasses every aspect of life.

Primal religion involves concepts and phenomena such as Mana, Shaman, Tabu and Totem. Mana refers to the action of the spiritual world in the human world. Mana is the power that is the reason why other things happen. Some people, places or things are embedded with the power of mana that comes from kinship with gods and ancestors. Some people and things have more mana than others, they are more 'gifted'. They were considered stronger and more skilful. Tribal chiefs were considered to be highly gifted with mana, they possessed the gift to control their land and their people.

If mana was uncontrolled it was deemed to be fraught with danger. Specific rules were called 'Tabu', designed to protect anything that possesses mana. Tabu means 'marked off'. Once it was believed that a person or object was gifted with mana, it was removed from everyday use and specific rules were designed. The aim of this was to preserve the holiness of mana.

The rules of Tabu declare that sacred places and objects can be only used by those who have the gift of mana. They are considered consecrated and pure. A breach of Tabu results in the uncontrolled release of mana which is fraught with danger. Some Tabu customs are prohibited under law and punishments have been established. Tabu should be left alone and not interfered with and in some cases, not spoken of.

Totem is a feature of some tribal societies that believes something, or a creature possesses the power of the supernatural. The word 'totem' comes from the word 'dodem' meaning "this person is a relative of mine". Totem was considered to be a natural being which symbolised the spiritual essence of an individual or a group. Clans were often named after an animal. Totem expressed membership of the same clan and a source of shared identification. The totem functions as a guardian spirit and there were often restrictions on whether it could be killed or eaten.

Some people nowadays adopt a spirit animal and incorrectly call it a 'totem'. The Bald Eagle could also be considered a 'totem' of the USA, though it carries no spiritual significance to these people. The Native Americans view this incorrect use of 'totem' quite negatively. For them, it undermines the sacredness of totem and is disrespectful. Totem expresses their connection to spiritual ancestry.

In conclusion, the ideas of totem, shaman, mana and Tabu are all associated with primal religions. Totem still exists in today's world, but the materialistic element has distorted its true meaning.

ii. Explain how the influence of two ideas associated with primal religion can be seen in a major world religion that you have studied

All of today's major world religions find their origins in our ancestors' primal religions. Primal religions date back to 50000BC when people placed huge emphasis on human relation with the natural world. We can see the influence of primal religions on the Hinduism tradition.

Primal religions related religion so closely to the natural world that they believed many Gods and Goddesses controlled different aspects of nature, such as the Sun God and the Goddess of Wind. They made sacrifices and offerings to these Gods, indicating a strong belief in spirits and a desire to appease and honour deities related to different aspects of life and the cycle of the seasons. Their close relationship with nature meant that they believed they were at mercy to natural disasters such as storms, floods and famine which the Gods ultimately controlled. They put great emphasis on religion and humanity's relationship with the world and the divine. Today in Hinduism, particular Gods (as manifestations of Brahman) are associated with different aspects of

life. Hindu's worship nearly 33 million Gods and Goddesses, these different gods are thought of as different 'masks' of God which provide humans with a point of contact with the divine.

One example of a primal religion is the Maori people of New Zealand. They erected many religious structures and beliefs that are still referenced today. They believed that there were no boundaries between people and religion. They emphasised the presence of the divine in natural forces such as in lakes and in waterfalls. The Shinto religion shares a similar belief. The spirit of Shinto is called 'kami' and is present as an invisible force in waterfalls and mountains. The purpose of Shinto is to carry out the wishes of kami in hope that kami will intervene and benefit aspects of the believer's life such as their health. Humans and nature are believed to be the children of kami and are fundamentally good.

In conclusion, it is clear that Hinduism was influenced by the teachings of early primal religions. They both stress that the transcendent creations should be honoured and respected and that we, as humans, are a part of the world, rather than the centre of the world.