

BOOK SUMMARY: *WORLD OF THE SPIRITS: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON TRADITIONAL AND FOLK RELIGIONS*

[Burnett, David, *World of the Spirits: A Christian Perspective on Traditional and Folk Religions*, reprint, Oxford UK: Monarch Books, 2005.]

In his book, *World of the Spirits*, David Burnett seeks to describe the beliefs and practices of “traditional religion” (animism), including the nature of the spiritual realm. He also explores the consequences of folk-religion – the merging of traditional religion with major world religions (namely Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism).

Traditional Religion. In searching for a definition, Burnett surveys several attempts at identifying traditional religion, or at least identifying its roots: fetishism (De Brossess), magic (Frazer), belief in spiritual beings (Tylor), belief that is basic to all religions (Taylor), belief that existed before world religions (Shaw), a local expression of belief without missionary intent (Turner, Baylis), and beliefs of oral societies. Ultimately, Burnett does not offer a specific definition of traditional religion; rather, he relies on describing its various beliefs and practices: gods/spirits, humans/souls, ghosts/ancestors, taboo/sin, rituals, divination, witchcraft, sorcery/magic, spirit possession, and shamanism. His findings in each of these areas provide the reader with realistic insights into traditional religion.

1. *Gods/Spirits.* Concerning gods/spirits, he notes that although belief in a supreme creator may exist in traditional religions, the lower gods and spirits are viewed as the ones that influence human experience. The supreme being is often viewed as the creator, but now distant from daily life – some even seeing the lesser gods as various manifestations of the supreme god. Consequently, a tension exists between monotheism and polytheism in traditional religions.

2. *Humans/Souls.* Followers of traditional religion perceive an individual's soul as interrelated with the community and with nature. The individual's soul can move in and out of his, or her, body – possibly through dreams. Other people can also manipulate an individual's soul, through acquiring something related to the individual (hair, fingernail, name spoken, or footprint).

3. *Ghosts/Spirits.* There is a distinction in traditional religion between ghosts and spirits. Ghosts are ancestors, whereas spirits have always been supernatural beings. Ancestors continue to play a role in the welfare of the living, at least as long as the people living remember the ancestors. The emphasis on ancestors is not how they exist, but how they affect the living.

4. *Taboos/Sins.* A “taboo” is prohibition that, if violated, results in a penalty. The penalty does not require human- or spiritual-being involvement; rather, it occurs naturally (almost as a force within itself). Taboos play a role in many facets of life: societal taboos, individual taboos, and religious taboos. The breaking of taboo results in pollution/sin. Although Burnett argues that Western missionaries may have imported the concept of sin, he goes on to discuss classes of sin: sins against society, sins against known gods or ancestors, and sins against unknown gods. Protection countermeasures include charms and rituals.

5. *Rituals.* A “ritual” is a prescribed formula, used at specific times, to influence spiritual forces. These times include status transition (birth, puberty, marriage, death), time transition (calendar festivals), and rites of crises (sickness, disease, war, accident, drought, unexpected death). In rites of crises, traditional religion societies ask “Why?” rather than “How?” the crises occurred. In an accidental death, effort is made to determine what (sorcery, witchcraft, spirit) may have caused the death. Once the “why” is determined, a ritual may be part the response. Rituals function to integrate a society, and give cadence and stability to life.

6. *Divination.* The term “divination” covers the ways people search for the cause of a problem, and then ways to counter to the problem.

There are many divination methods, each including ritual: manipulation of material objects (cowry shells, twigs, strips of leather), observation of animals (movement of a beetle, animal entrails), and accessing spiritual powers (meditation, dance).

7. *Witchcraft*. “Sorcery” is a conscious attempt to harm another by spiritual powers. Conversely, “witchcraft” is an unconscious attempt to do the same. An example of witchcraft is when one person (witch) dreams of another person being sick. If that person then becomes sick, the witch is the cause. A witchdoctor is one who seeks to uncover the witch that caused the harm. Interestingly enough, most people, accused of being a witch, are surprised at the accusation. Bad social relations (jealousy, spite) are the motivation for witchcraft, while fear of being accused as a witch often discourages expression of greed and envy in a society.

8. *Sorcery/Magic*. “Magic” is the manipulation of objects, or the reciting of spells, to cause harm, intentionally. The fear of sorcery/magic is very real in a traditional-religion society. One example of sorcery is the “evil eye”, by which one person causes harm to another person, by looking at or praising them. Jealousy is the reason for the harm, while charms ward off the evil eye – the physical effect of the jealous thoughts. Popular charms in Islamic-influenced societies are the hand of Fatima, and the wearing words from the Qur’an in a locket. Another example of sorcery is the curse – words that are spoken deliberately to harm. Charms may ward off curses, but the effectiveness of curses is related to the innocence or guilt of the cursed person. The best way to combat a curse, then, is to live an irreproachable life. Yet another example of sorcery is magic rituals, normally involving three steps: finding something associated with the victim (hair, clothing, excreta), carrying out a ritual to apply the intended results, and the summoning of appropriate powerful spirits to produce the intended results.

9. *Spirit Possession*. There are two types of spirit possession: unwanted and wanted. An unwanted spirit possession results in maladies, such as sickness or convulsions. Appeasement or exorcism

(transferring the spirit to an animal) is often the remedy for unwanted possessions. The title “shaman” is used of a person, who pursues spirit possession, and then seeks to control the spirit for the purposes of healing. Additionally, a person may join a possession cult, often through a dance-induced trance state, and enter into a working relationship with a spirit. As long as the person adequately appeases the spirit, the spirit will serve the person.

10. *Shamanism.* A person may become a shaman, a controller of spirits, due to the spirit’s bidding, the passing of shamanistic powers from parent to child, or by a person seeking out the spirit. Since a shaman can “see” spiritual beings, the shaman has insight into the causes of sickness. In shamanistic societies, sickness is caused by soul travel, spirit intrusion into a person, object intrusion into a person, breaking of a taboo, or sorcery. The shaman’s job is to protect society from unwanted spiritual influence. The shaman invokes friendly spirits, often through entering a state of ecstasy, to gain knowledge of how to respond to unwanted spirits.

Folk-Religion. After describing traditional religion, Burnett turns to evaluating what happens when a major world religion invades a traditional-religion society. He makes a couple of insightful points regarding religious conversion.

Firstly, a traditional-religion society more readily accepts a major world religion than a society already influenced by another world religion. This may be due to the firm moral code and creeds of world religions. The growth of Christianity, for example, has occurred mainly through the conversion of traditional-religion societies. If a traditional-religion society converts to a major world religion, it is unlikely in the future to commit to a new major world religion.

Secondly, religious conversion is a long process that normally includes a period of syncretistic beliefs. “Syncretism” is the mixing of belief systems (such as traditional religion with Christianity). Burnett discusses a two-tier belief system in traditional religion: great traditions/high religion and little traditions/low religion. The latter often refers to beliefs

of uneducated, non-literate, villagers. Low religion, also called “folk religion”, addresses questions of daily life (sickness, drought), has no written texts, has informal leadership, few formal institutions, and is pragmatic overall. Syncretism then is nominal acceptance of the high religion, but continuing to practise the low religion in subtle, yet frequent, ways. Followers of folk-religion are more concerned with “does it work?” (low religion), rather than “is it correct?” (high religion).

Summary. In summary, Burnett paints an accurate picture of traditional religion, gives the reader an appreciation of the spirit world, and explores the impact of world religions on traditional-religion societies. While doing so, he presents several ideas that warrant mention.

Firstly, scripture leaves room for the possibility of ghosts, as exemplified by the witch of Endor (1 Sam 28), plus Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration. God, however, did prohibit the Israelites from trying to contact the dead (Deut 18:11; Is 8:19).

Secondly, the subject of ancestors in a traditional-religion society is of great importance. There is a shift from lineage solidarity to a nuclear family, as Christianity grows in influence in a society, often undermining traditional family ties of the living, in communion with their ancestors.

Thirdly, Burnett does not answer the question whether converts to Christianity should participate in traditional rituals. He notes that some Christian missionaries have advised against participation in the rituals, while others have promoted the Christianisation of the rituals, namely the illustration of Christian teachings. He concludes his discussion of rituals with a tantalising statement – he suggests that ritual serves as more than just a societal function, carrying symbolic meaning; it is also the harnessing of spiritual power.

Fourthly, in traditional religion, divination plays an important role in helping people make decisions. He observes that Christians, in contrast, use the Bible, prayer, and the Holy Spirit’s guidance, in making decisions, which, to the traditional-religion adherent, often seem to be abstract methods. Consequently, God is viewed as unable to

communicate with man, other than through a book, only usable by the literate. Divination, in their eyes, provides a specific method (ritual) for providing a definitive answer for all people. He surmises that this may be why the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, with their emphasis on spiritual gifts, have become such a part of the global expansion of Christianity.

Fifthly, Christians must be aware of the social context of witchcraft and sorcery. Those accused of being witches are often the ones living on the edge of society (widows and minorities), who are then used as a release valve for relief of social pressure. When something in society is not going well, blame is cast to these outcasts. The Christian message should stress reconciliation and acceptance of all, by all, in a society.

Sixthly, followers of traditional religion live in fear, including the fear of spirits, ancestors, sickness, and death. Hence, following taboos, performing rituals, and reliance on shamans, all play important roles in countering this fear for traditional-religion followers.

Melanesia. Burnett refers to Melanesia a number of times in *World of the Spirits*, including the Gahuku-Gama of the Eastern Highlands Province in Papua New Guinea, Kwaio people of the Solomon Islands, the Bahinemo people of Papua New Guinea, the Maisin of northeastern Papua New Guinea, and people of Fiji. This fact is of special interest to me (as the writer of this book summary), since I am sitting in the Eastern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea as I type this review. The reality of the truths and insights, Burnett relays in his book, are valid and worthy of study by anyone seeking to reach people, living in a traditional-religion society, with the good news of Jesus Christ. Understanding the beliefs and practices of traditional-religion adherents is an important step towards reaching such societies for Christ. After all, the model missionary, the Apostle Paul, walked around Athens studying the objects of the Athenians' worship before declaring to them the truth about their unknown God (Acts 17:22-23).

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