

It would take a course of lectures to put before you even a sketch of the history of religion. In my humble opinion the complete history of religion would be almost the same thing as a complete history of the human mind. Perhaps the first thought that man had after self-preservation, was that of religion. I have never met with any savage or barbarous race that had no religion. I have found the Esquimaux, the Negro, the Papuan, the South Sea Islanders, all deeply religious in their own way. True, we often call their religion superstition. But one has heard one sect of Christians say that of the religious service of another. I profess to be broad-minded in regard to religious belief, but like others I have had to draw the line somewhere. Indeed, during the best ten years of my life most of my time was given to obstruct men in the execution of the sacred duties imposed on them by their religion. I mean when they were, by the strict practice of their religious belief, bound to murder a neighbour to procure rest to the soul of a dead relative, or to preserve the honour of the tribe and family by squaring a blood account. Then in my last government I had, for example, to inflict punishment in at least two cases of human sacrifice. These sacrifices were carried out in conformity with a ghastly, a sickening and mysterious ritual. I can assure you that those poor people feel keenly the imperative nature of the duties imposed on them by their religion. With them the principle of an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth is not only a law, but a binding sacrament, a sacred duty.

In these things you can see the difference between a human religion and a divine, a revealed religion.

It follows from what I have said that the oldest races of whom we know anything had a religion of some kind. My remarks must be confined to the old races with whom the early Hebrews came into contact, or by whom they were influenced.

Let us begin with the most ancient race of men of whom we have any knowledge. Who were they, what were they, where did they live, what was their religious belief?

A glance at any map of the world will show you that by far the greatest land mass now above water on our globe is Asia. Indeed, Africa and Australasia are only detached parts of it. As we might therefore expect, all history, sacred and profane, declares that the human race first appeared in Asia, and to be precise, more or less in Central Asia. At what date the different ancient races of men appeared there, we have at present no means of knowing. Certain it is that the oldest race of whom we do know anything had left Central Asia and wandered westward, as far as Mesopotamia, before we first heard of them. This is the teaching of Genesis xi. 1 : 2, Coming from the rising of the sun