

## 2. INDIGENOUS SACRED WAYS

Whereas a great many people have at least heard of some of the major global religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism, few are probably familiar with the religions and sacred ways of Eskimos, Australian Aborigines, or Native Americans.

Consequently, the goals of this chapter are:

1. To introduce and explain what an indigenous religion is
2. To help students appreciate why it is difficult to understand these religions and the current perils of their existence
3. To present key common features of indigenous religions with particular emphasis on their views of humanity's relationships with spirits, creation, and power

### Chapter Overview

It is sometimes difficult for westerners to realize that the people of foreign lands had a belief system in the reality of the spirit world centuries before missionaries arrived on their shores. The religions of various lands are referred to as Indigenous Religions. This chapter gives an overview of the sacred beliefs of people often misunderstood by contemporary western observers.

The term indigenous means, of or relating to an area or land. Generally, the term has been used by anthropologists to refer to the native inhabitants of a certain region or country. For example, various Native American tribes, Australian Aborigines, and Eskimos are all considered indigenous peoples. It would be good to point out to students that this term expresses hidden implications. That is, all indigenous peoples are described as native to a region that was later inhabited by an invading and/or dominating culture. Two examples illustrate this point. First, Native Americans were indigenous people until colonialists, and the later European settlers on this continent subdued them. Second, Aborigine means the first settlers of a land. We only know of these fascinating first settlers through the eyes of the subsequent colonists from the British Isles. Unfortunately, then, we are unable to know these native people and their religions as they were before they came into contact with a dominating outside culture.

The first two sections, Barriers to understanding and Cultural diversity, lay out important introductory and background information that prepares the reader for the two major sections that follow; namely, the circle of right relationships and Spiritual specialists. The concluding part, Contemporary Issues, reinforces two important concerns presented in the opening section. Firstly, the dangers facing indigenous religions today, and secondly, some ways in which these sacred practices are addressing current ecological crises.

### Barriers to understanding

Indigenous sacred ways have traditionally been little understood. Until recently, those who have attempted to comprehend them had little preparation or background for doing so. For instance, anthropologists who tried to ferret out the native sacred ways did so from a Western non-spiritual perspective. Recognizing that such inquirers did not accept the truth of their beliefs and practices, native peoples protected the sanctity of their ways from nonbelievers hiding them, or going underground. For example, in Mesoamerica, ancient teachings remained hidden for half a millennium since the coming of the conquistadors. Another good example of this for students is the quotation by the Aborigine Lorraine Mafi Williams. When the missionaries came, we were told by our old people to be respectful, listen and be obedient, go to church, go to Sunday school, but do not adopt the Christian doctrine because it takes away our cultural, spiritual beliefs. So we've always stayed within God's laws in what we know. Another tactic has been the giving of false information to outside inquirers.

To a degree, then, most native religions have evolved a measure of private teaching shared only with initiates and not presented to outsiders, no matter how well meaning they may seem. This feature has made the scholarly work on native religions sometimes challenging to complete, because of adherents' fear of repression or misinterpretation by those studying the culture from the outside.

Another barrier to understanding has to do with the way in which these religions preserve and pass on their sacred traditions; namely, by way of oral narratives. Stories have been handed down by word of mouth rather than through written sources, such as scriptures. For obvious reasons, accessing and studying oral transmissions are more difficult than examining religious writings. Because of the lack of written sources, students of native religions needed to interview storytellers and elders of the group to ascertain the myths and traditions that ground these ways of sacred knowing.

Barriers to comprehending indigenous religious beliefs and practices definitely exist; however, today there are encouraging indications that some common ground between these religions and those on the outside is emerging. First, some traditional elders are beginning to share their core values regarding reverence for the earth with others because of their concerns about current ecological developments. Second, from the other side so to speak, members of global religions (and others) are coming to a new appreciation for the profundity and value embedded in indigenous sacred ways. Third, some members of global faiths are being attracted to the spirituality and practices of indigenous religions.

### **Cultural diversity**

Even though the two central sections of this chapter (The circle of right relationships and spiritual specialists) focus on common characteristics of indigenous religions, it is equally important for students to see that these religions are quite distinct. It may be useful to emphasize to them that this is a central issue and problem in the study of native religions.

As a whole, indigenous forms of spirituality exhibit traditions that developed within a spectrum of cultural, religious, and material diversity. Some indigenous cultures have been highly developed whereas others still embody a basic strategy of survival (e.g., Australian Aborigines). Diversity manifests itself in other areas as well. Such groups may live in somewhat sheltered ancestral enclosures or large contemporary urban areas. They also vary in the degree of adaptation to and absorption of the dominant religions in their regions.

Despite the real differences in cultural origins, indigenous traditional ways do manifest some common characteristics. It would be overgeneralizing to ascribe specific beliefs to all native peoples, but there are some concepts and ways of approaching the universe that are common to many of them. Four major groups of recurring themes are the subjects of the ensuing section.

### **The circle of right relationships**

First, many indigenous religions hold that everything in the universe, all forms of life, are interrelated and interdependent. This belief pervades all of the common themes explained in the chapter. Often, but not always, the symbol for this interrelationship or unity is the circle. Since this form has no beginning and no endpoint, it can symbolize the ongoing cycle of birth, youth, maturity, death. It can also symbolize the return of the seasons, or the cyclical movements of the sun, moon, planets and stars. Perhaps the most appropriate image for these concepts would be circles within circles. Lama Deer's quotation on page 51 expresses the point eloquently. Within these circles of interrelated interdependence, right relationships must be maintained with everything that is, in order to maintain the balance of existence. One set of relationships is with the realms of spirit. This constitutes a second common feature of indigenous religions.

One aspect of the spirit realm has to do with belief in a Supreme Deity, the One. Most native religions believe in a Great Creator who can be found in all of existence: trees, grass, rivers, mountains, animals, birds, and people. Names for the Creator are very diverse and include Wakan tanka (the Sioux), the one who is met everywhere (an African name), *moyo* (Chewa of Malawi), and Ala (the Ibo). Indigenous peoples would not use this term, but outsiders to these religions could describe this vision of the Supreme Being as *pantheistic*, which means God (or the Divine) in and amid all. Even though the Great Power is present in all places and things, the Power remains transcendent, that is, unseen and mysterious. Though frequently imaged in the masculine, for some groups the Supreme Being is female, such as the Ibo's Ala, the earth mother goddess. Still other groups envision the Supreme Being androgynously because their language makes no distinction between female and male pronouns. Another aspect of the spirit realm involves the many unseen powers which are a part of daily life and work.

Spiritual powers may be thought of as formless, mysterious, sacred presences. Others are conceived as having more definite personalities or forms; albeit, they are still intangible. These may be associated with venerable mountains or trees, or they may be seen as animal spirit helpers, or personified elemental forces, or deceased ancestors who are still concerned about the lives of their relatives. Reverent believers can call upon these spirits as helpers, intermediaries between the people and power, and as teachers. Acquiring and maintaining right relationships with this aspect of the spirit world can constitute a sacred partnership.

A third important circle of right relations has to do with the tangible world, all aspects of which are believed to be imbued with spirit, and thus are spiritually interconnected. What others might consider as inanimate objects such as mountains, bodies of water, and rocks, indigenous peoples personify as living beings with whom the believer is related. Thus, the image of family helps capture this sense of kinship with all creation. The metaphor of earth as mother also expresses the felt sense of intimate connections with the world. This way of conceiving one's connection to the created order engenders the convictions among indigenous believers that they are caretakers of the earth, rather than its controllers. Consequently, in the indigenous worldview, respect is always due to all creatures from insects to whales to persons. The experience of the world as family or mother and the convictions about the reciprocal relationship humans have with the world are very ably expressed in the quotation by the Aborigine elder Bill Neidjie and the Hawaiian shaman-priest Kahu Kawai found on page 56.

Cultivating proper relations with spiritual power is a fourth common aspect among these religions. Sometimes a specific site is believed to concentrate spiritual power. Thus, when indigenous peoples are forced from the ancestral lands they lose connections with their sacred places, which makes their displacement all the more tragic for them. Another source of spiritual power can be special sacred practices. Using special stones and animal artifacts can be important. Wearing clothing made of the fur of particular animals may increase one's spiritual power. Visions or sharing a sacred pipe are still other practices involved with one's relation to spiritual power. Developing this relationship is not without danger. If spiritual power is used for egoistic motives, the power can turn on the one possessing it. One's relationship with spiritual power is a sacred trust. Acquiring power is not an end in itself. It is to be used for the good of others and the environment.

### **Spiritual specialists**

The indigenous worldview is that the Supreme One is present in all places. The Supreme One fills all things. There are also other sacred presences that pervade the world, the entire world is considered family, and spiritual power can be cultivated and used. It is therefore not surprising that we should find specialists within these religions dedicated to activities involved with the world of the spirits.

These sacred roles can take several forms: storytellers, poets, tricksters or sacred fools, sacred clowns and dancers, priests and priestesses. Most distinctive among the spiritual specialists are the shamans, the medicine people. **Shaman** is a Siberian word that scholars use to refer to this group generically. They are mystical intermediaries between the non-physical and physical world who have attained this status either through heredity, a special gift, or initiated through certain religious ordeals. Archaeological research indicates that the practices of the shaman probably date back twenty to thirty thousand years. The shaman is often involved in physical, psychological and social healing. It should be interesting for students to learn that modern medicine is beginning to adopt some of the approaches taken by these visionaries, who saw the physiological health of the individual as an expression of his or her psychological and sometime spiritual health.

Most native religions see the shaman as a sacred and important person. They view the rites of passage that she or he must endure as very dangerous rituals that are not to be taken lightly. Usually a shaman would have a guide or mentor to help him or her along the spiritual journey. A shamanic vision is not to be used merely for personal edification but rather is given to be used with the group to see how the social order and the planet can be improved.

## Group Observances

Humans can help maintain the natural harmony of the world by practicing ritual observances. These rituals are community-centered as are indigenous ways in general. Specific rituals aid the community in perceiving the extraordinary dimensions of the world within the realm of the ordinary. Some of these rituals follow the major points of passage in the human life cycle: birth, naming, puberty, marriage, and death. Some rituals support the group's strategies for survival. Other rituals are about the beginnings and sacred history of the people. Communities can also assemble for spiritual renewal and ritual purification. Even pilgrimages to sacred sites are frequently communal. An awareness of the community-centeredness of indigenous faiths and their rituals increases one's sensitivity to the plight of those who are driven out of, or forcibly taken from, their native communities. Such people lose not only their individual identity, but also their relationship to a tightly knit group and meaningful religious rituals.

Balancing the communal dimension of ritual observance is individual observance. For native sacred ways it is considered important for individuals to experience a personal connection with the realm of the spirits. Such connections are open to all the people. Shamans have a privileged relationship with the spirit realm, however, native religions have also been nicknamed democratized shamanism stressing the idea that everyone has the opportunity to connect with the spirits. Undergoing a vision quest is a common means of access to the other world.

## Contemporary issues

Contemporary issues involving indigenous religions revolve primarily around one central concern: the near obliteration of these responses to the sacred throughout the world. Barriers to understanding these faiths discussed in the earlier part of this chapter demonstrate indigenous reactions to outside pressures and oppression. The lands of these people have been seized. Attempts have been made to transform, or rather conform, their cultural identities and to replace their pathways to the sacred with other schemes of salvation.

An irony amid this tragedy is that the indigenous world view which reverences all creation, recognizes the interdependence of all circles of life, and understands humanity's relationship to mother earth as reciprocal-nurturing rather than domineering-subduing, may be precisely the necessary outlook to adopt in order to slow down and eventually stop the present ecological ravaging of the planet. Some indigenous people feel that their traditional sacred ways are not only valid, but actually essential for the future of the world.

## Key Terms

indigenous people  
shamans  
orisa  
Voodoo

Santeria  
cosmogony  
vision quest  
Dream Time