

CHAPTER TWO: NATIVE AMERICAN RELIGIONS

Chapter Outline and Unit Summaries

I. Introduction: The Challenges in Studying Native American Religions

A. The Contemporary Revival of Interest in Native American Religions

1. Important Role in History of North America
2. Emphasis on Nature and Personal Religious Experience
3. Absence of Formal Organizational Structure

B. A Wider Variety of Religious Types Under One Heading

1. A Fifteen to Twenty Thousand Year Legacy
2. Geographic Spread Across a Continent
3. Numerous Forms of Social and Economic Organization

C. A Dearth of Reliable Sources on Native American Religions

1. Literary Sources from Only Past Four Hundred Years, with Best Sources from Past One Hundred Years
2. Difficulty of Identifying a Pure Type: Many Changes Fostered by Engagement with Europeans
3. Archaeology Provides Some Clues to Pre-European Era
4. The Necessity of Generalizing about the Entire Field

II. The Spirit World

A. A Mixture of Polytheism, Monotheism, and Monism

B. Native American Religions Tend Toward Polytheism

1. The World Populated by Numerous Spirits
2. Mother Earth at Heart of Nature
3. Deities Represented by Natural Forces

C. Native American Religions Tend Toward Monotheism and Monism

1. The Supreme Being / High God Above Lesser Deities
2. High God Generally Uninvolved in World—Lower Deities Hold Sway over Nature and Everyday Life
3. High God Conceived Personally by Some Native American Religions and Abstractly as a Sacred Power by Others

III. Animism

A. In General Native American Religions Have More Reverent Attitude Toward Nature than Europeans

1. Depending on Nature for Survival Yields Respect for Nature
 - a. Wasting Natural Resources Considered Irreligious
 - b. Hunting Practices Showed Reverence for Animals
 - c. Use of Entire Animal Killed Showed Reverence for Animals, Nature
 - d. Soil Revered as Body of Mother Earth, Farming a Religious Activity
2. The Presence of High God in Nature Leads to View that Nature is not Simply an Object for Human Use, but Rather Something with Which Humans Must Live in Harmony

B. Native Americans Preserve and Develop Religious Identity Through Contrasts with Europe's Generally Irreverent Attitude Toward Nature

IV. Contacts with the Spirit World

- A. Maintaining Good Relations with Nature Take Precedence Over Attempting to Control or Coerce Nature
- B. Sacrifice: General Goals Were Gift to Spirits in Exchange for Assistance and the Attainment of Power Necessary for Survival, Not Wasteful Human-Animal Blood Sacrifices
- C. Taboos: A Means of Protection Against Possible Danger from the Spirits of Nature and/or Ancestors

1. The Taboo of Menstruating Women: Women Set Apart by the Spirit World as One Who Can Participate in the Miracle of Child Production
 2. The Taboo of the Dead
 - a. Special Burial Customs to Avoid Contact with Dead
 - b. The Fear of Burial Grounds as Untouchable Sites
- D. Ceremonies and Rituals: Attempts to Control Forces of Spirit World and/or Renew Partnership with Them
1. Dances as Primary Form of Native American Ceremony
 2. Pre-Hunting Rituals Make Contact Between Spirits of Hunters and Spirits of the Hunted
- E. The Vision Quest: Contact with Spirit World to Gain Special Power
1. Vision Quests and the Rite of Passage from Child to Adult: Initiation into the Group through Temporary Exile and Communing with Spirit World
 2. Vision Quests and Preparation for Major Events in Life Such as Great Battles, Hunts, Marriages, Crises of Various Kind
 3. Communal Vision Quests: Sun Dances Among Native Americans of the Plains
- F. Religious Leadership
1. Overall Native Americans Have Non-Clerical Religions Centered on Personal Experience of the Spirit World
 2. Medicine Men / Women Specialize in Healings
- G. Other Means of Contact with the Spirit World
1. Tobacco and Ritual Smoking in Religious Ceremonies
 2. Peyote: Narcotic Induced Hallucination Aid Religious Vision
 - a. Native American Church Fuses Peyote and Christianity
 - b. Controversy Over the Use of Peyote in Religious Ritual

V. Death and Life After Death

- A. Wide Variety of Beliefs Among Native American Religions
- B. Exposure to Christian Ideas Influences Beliefs
- C. General Points of Agreement Between Native American Religions
 - 1. Taboos Associated with Corpses
 - 2. Overall Lack of Fear of Death Itself
 - 3. Soul of Life that Accompanies Body
 - 4. Free Soul that Goes to Land of the Dead After Body's Death
 - a. All Soul Go to Land of the Dead
 - b. No Belief in Heaven and Hell, but Land of Dead Conceived as Place of Happiness or Sadness, and Similar to Current Life
 - c. Souls in Land of Dead Do Not Necessarily Live Forever—Only as Long as Remembered by Living
 - d. The Free Soul Can be Assisted by Living in Finding Land of the Dead
 - e. Most Native American Religions Do Not Teach Reincarnation

VI. Native American Religions Today

- A. Christian Attempts to Proselytize Native Americans Have Had Mixed Results on Native American Religions
 - 1. Many Pure Forms of Native American Religions Have Been Essentially Erased—Most Native Americans Today are Christian
 - 2. Some Forms of Christianized Native American Religions Preserve Many of Their Original Elements
 - a. Medicine Men / Women Traditions Continue
 - b. Blending of Native American Ritual and Symbol with Christian Rituals and Symbols
 - c. The Rise of Mormonism Among Native Americans
- B. Resurgence of Interest Among Both Native Americans and Non-Native Americans in Native American Religions

Key Names, Concepts, and Terms

High God	peyote
vision quest	medicine man / woman
Mother Earth	Native American Church
Sun Dance	Land of the Dead