

CHAPTER TWO: NATIVE AMERICAN RELIGIONS

Learning Objectives

- Learn about the great variety of Native American religions.
- Learn about the ways in which Native American religions and cultures have been influenced by contact with Europeans.

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 Takes Precedence over Attempting to Control or Coerce Nature
- B. Sacrifice: General Goals Were Gifts 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 kinds
 - 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 aids 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 souls 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—many 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 rituals and symbols 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

Mother Earth	vision quest	Sun Dance
Great Spirit	Native American Church	

Questions for Class Discussion

1. Discuss the revival of interest in Native American religions in our culture. Can you give examples of this revival? What do you think motivates it?
2. How has the encounter between Native American religion and Christianity affected Native Americans? Has the encounter been good or bad for the native peoples?
3. Native American religions share a strong belief that animals, rivers, stones, trees, etc. are spiritually alive. Is this belief compatible with science and/or Christianity?

Evaluation Questions

Multiple Choice

1. To the traditional Native American, sickness is caused by _____ in the body.
 - A. an evil spirit
 - B. a psychological imbalance
 - C. a foreign object
 - D. poison
2. Which of the following best describes Native American religions?
 - A. Animistic
 - B. Monotheistic
 - C. Panistic
 - D. Polytheistic
3. What is a medicine bundle?
 - A. Herbs and teas wrapped in canvas that are used during healing rituals.
 - B. A talisman given to young men heading into battle.
 - C. A collection of animal hides and bones, plants, and minerals that are believed to be a source of spiritual power.
 - D. A fetish carried by medicine men.

4. The vision quest is a _____ by which a young person seeks _____.
 - A. reward; advancement
 - B. ritual; power and acceptance by the tribe
 - C. dance; unity with nature
 - D. drug; hallucinations

5. According to Native American belief, the land of the dead is often portrayed as _____.
 - A. a diminished plane of earthly existence
 - B. an exalted heavenly place
 - C. an eternal punishment in hell
 - D. reincarnation in another creaturely form

True/False

6. Most Native Americans have rejected Christianity.

7. Most Native Americans do not believe in a Supreme Being.

8. Native Americans see rituals as a means of renewing the partnership between humans and the spirit world.

9. Most Native American religions are purely polytheistic.

10. Traditional Native American religions taught that menstruating women should be kept away from ordinary society.

11. Most Native Americans deeply fear death itself, which explains the prevalence of taboos surrounding the dead.

12. The primary purpose of Native American ceremonies, rituals, and songs is worship of the High God.

Fill in the Blank

13. _____ have appealed to Native Americans by telling them that they are children of the lost tribes of Israel and that Jesus preached in the Americas after his resurrection.

14. The _____ blends Christianity and the peyote cult and boasts 225,000 members.

15. The Dakota (Sioux) believe in a High God called _____.

16. The _____ is a summer event by which an entire community of Native Americans of the Plains achieves a vision of the spirit world.
17. The ritual in which a young person is sent into the wilderness alone to seek a vision from the spirit world is known as a _____.
18. _____ is a religion popular amongst the tribes in the Great Plains that combined elements of traditional Native American religion with Christianity.
19. During certain rituals, Native Americans smoke tobacco by placing it in a _____.

Matching

Match each term to its definition; some definitions will match more than one term.

A. High God B. burial grounds C. spirits D. Mother Earth

20. Considered taboo.
21. Present in belief system of most Native Americans but generally not worshipped.
22. Often appears to Native Americans during a vision quest.
23. At the center of Native American religion's animistic worldview.
24. Hunters make spiritual contact with before the hunt.
25. Believed to be present in all animals, plants, objects.

Essay Questions

26. Explain why it is difficult to neatly categorize Native American religions as polytheistic, monotheistic, or monistic.
27. Discuss several challenges involved in studying Native American religions.
28. List some major taboos in Native American religion and explain their rationales.
29. Describe the meaning of music and dance in Native American religion.
30. Discuss how contact with non-native cultures has influenced the development of Native American religions.

Answer Key for Evaluation Questions

Multiple Choice:

1. C 2. A 3. C 4. B 5. A

True/False:

6. False 7. False 8. True 9. False 10. True 11. False 12. False

Fill in the Blank:

13. Mormons 14. Native American Church of North America 15. Wakan Tanka

16. Sun Dance 17. vision quest 18. Ghost Dance 19. sacred pipe

Matching:

20. B 21. A 22. C 23. D 24. C 25. C