



Short Introductions to the World Religions - Native Spirituality

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1. In the religion of North American Native peoples there is a great variety of beliefs, ceremonies and customs which may differ significantly from tribe to tribe. Common to all, however, is the belief that everything comes from the Great Spirit and that there is a

deep unity between humans, animals, plant life, and all the elements of the earth and the universe. 2. The forms of Native Spirituality tend to vary according to whether the people were farmers or hunters and gatherers.

(1) For farmers rain is most important. In rain dances masks and special ceremonies and elaborate songs make connection with the spiritual powers that cause rain to water the land. Clouds, wind, sun and moon, day and night are seen as expressions of the Great Spirit and are addressed in prayers and hymns. Today's prayers mainly ask for peace and love among people, express deep thankfulness for all creation and ask for guidance in daily activities.

(2) In the spirituality of hunting, gathering and fishing tribes there is a sense of the very close relationship between humans and other creatures. Spiritual insights are gained through dreams and visions, and ecstasy is often

experienced.

3. Some tribes have changed in the course of their long history from an agrarian to a hunting life style and back again. The traditions are, therefore, often blended together.

4. Many tribes have secret associations who are the bearers of cultural and spiritual life. Ritual dances in masks, which represent ancestry or mythical beings, are among the ceremonies of these associations.

5. Medicine Bundles are part of Native religion (especially among the Prairie tribes). They may contain parts of animals, flute, rattle, club, flint, lighters, among other items. They have special meaning only for the owner of the Bundle because of dreams or visions he or she received in preparation for the rite of initiation.

6. The Sacred Bundles belong to the tribe as a whole. Sacred Bundles have been bestowed to an ancestor of a particular tribe in some mythical past. These Bundles are usually made from

buffalo leather and contain objects of special meaning to the whole tribe.

7. Most of the teachings of Native spirituality exist in oral form only and have to be taught and learned in the context of the life of the community. The custodians of the traditions are the elders, men and women who have shown their worthiness by their wisdom and by living their lives according to the traditions. These people decide who can be taught, because they do not want the traditions to be misunderstood, perverted, or abused.

8. The contact between Native and Western cultures has had a devastating effect on Native traditions. Whole tribes became confined to reservations. Some important ceremonies (e.g. the Sun Dance) became illegal, others were discouraged. Sacred and Medicine Bundles were taken from them and stored in museums.

9. Christian

missionary effort did its part in changing the traditions and the life style of Native people by translating the Bible into Native languages, teaching Christian religion and non-Native languages, and encouraging the adoption of Western customs, clothing and other expressions of Western culture.

10. Children were often taken away from their parents and raised in boarding schools where they lost their Native traditions and their Native language and could no longer communicate with those who knew Native spirituality.

11. Some Christian churches have worked towards reconciliation with the Native peoples by confessing their historical sins - their alliance with worldly powers in oppression and assimilation - and asking for forgiveness and a new relationship between them and the Native peoples based on respect and justice.

12. In spite of the powerful interruptions in the

traditions and the life style of the Native communities their spirituality has not died. It has suffered immeasurable losses. The teaching elders are getting fewer. But it has adapted itself to changed circumstances and has adopted insights of Christian spirituality, and it has retained its resilience. The traditions preserved by the elders are eagerly sought after by a new generation which asserts their pride in them.

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