A Comparative Study of Religions

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This chapter discusses beliefs in *mana*, supernatural beings, totemism and shamanism, in the context of modern developments in Amerindian religion.

The indigenous Americans we refer to here are the Indians of North, Central and South America to whom we shall refer as Amerindians. They are said to have settled in these areas as far back as 30,000 years ago. When Europeans made contact with them from the fifteenth century C.E., there were three great civilizations in Central and South America: the Aztec in Mexico, the Mayan in Guatemala and the Yucatan Peninsula and the Inca of Peru. In North America, there were five geographical groups: in the East, Southeast, Midwestern plains, Southwest, and Pacific Northwest coast.

The inhabitants of Central and South America had essentially ceased to be hunters and had become agriculturalists. In North America, Easterners were hunters and Northwesterners were fishermen. In each case, the economy determined the activities and life-style of the people and thus had much to do with their religious belief and practices. The life of a hunter was organized differently from that of the farmer and of the fisherman. Scholars do, however, think that there were some ideas and attitudes basic to all Americans. We turn to some of these which reflect religious manifestations.
Belief in Mana

*Mana* is a Melanesian word which Robert Henry Codrington (1830–1922), a missionary to the South Sea Islands, explained to man.

A kind of power which is capable of producing extraordinary occurrences in nature and also enables man to perform acts beyond his capacity. It is a hidden or a secret force which operates silently and invisibly in things and persons that are in some way powerful, impressive, or socially important.

This conception is conveyed by the use of the terms *wakan* or *wakenda*, *orenda* and *manitu* drawn from the Algonquin, Iroquois and Sioux Ameridians. Research indicate(s) that Amerindian life revolves around this force. It makes the surrounding nature both attractive and intimidating, because the force can be used both positively and negatively. It can be transferred from a person to an object like an arrow. An arrow thus endowed can be made effective to achieve what one wants, good or bad.

In Amerindian life, the goal was to keep a harmonious relationship with this holy force. Because harmony led to fertility both in the society and on the farm; it also led to success both in hunting and in war; which means it led to full life.

On the country, disharmony led to disaster. It ruined crops on the farm; it led to defeat in war; and brought about an unhealthy family with sickly children.

Belief in Supernatural Beings

It is unclear whether or not Amerindians worshipped a Supreme Being as such. Evidence does, however, suggest that Aztecs had a pantheon (council of gods) which consisted of Ometecuhtli, the supreme god; Tezcatlipoca, originally a tribal god who also assumed the form of the war god Huitlpopochtli; Xiuhutecuhtli, the lord of fire; and Tlazolteotl, a great goddess figure.
Evidence from Amerindians in North America suggests that agricultural groups thought of a supreme power which was associated with the sun. Other than this most, people worshipped several powers. One such power was “Earth Diver”. This is either an animal or a bird which brings the earth up out of the water. This story is retold by the Maidu of California in a different form. A turtle is reported to have collaborated with a heavenly spirit called “Earth Initiate” for the purpose of pulling the land up out of the waters.

The turtle volunteered to dive down for the earth because it wanted a place where it could rest after swimming. In the version of the Yaulmani Yokuts of California, a duck and an eagle took the places of the turtle and Earth Initiate, respectively.

The most celebrated god among the Aztecs is Quetzalcoatl who is famous for being decorated with plumes and in the form of a serpent. Quetzalcoatl is said to be a culture hero who brought the art of civilization of Mexican tribes. Later in the Aztec civilization (1325–1521 C.E.), he became the god of the wind and of heaven at night. In his old age, he left his people and wandered to the east, where he cremated himself and became the morning star. He had promised that he would come back in the form of a man. When the Spanish came to Mexico under Hernan Cortez, the Aztecs thought it was the fulfillment of the return of their god in human form. They were thoroughly disappointed when the coming of Cortez ushered in the demise if the Aztec civilization.

Culture heroes are often twins to whom the people trace their arts and crafts. Along with stories of culture heroes, exists a myth about a spirit who owns the animals. In order to have good hunting or fishing, this spirit must be revered.

There is another character in North Amerindian mythology called Trickster. He is said to be against culture heroes. He is both a cunning person and a dupe. In other words, he is capable of deceiving and being deceived. He is the embodiment of order and disorder. He is said to be the founder of convention and, at the same time, the first to defy it. He has huge intestines, an appetite
that is never satisfied, and a long uncontrolled penis which takes off on adventures of its own.

In practice, however, North Amerindians had personal gods like Wakan Tanka, Mani and Tirawa. Wakan Tanka is the embodiment of all beings. Mani is the chief among many gods who serve as his agents. Most prayers are addressed to Mani’s agents, but the greatest ceremonies address Mani himself. Tirawa can be likened to Wakan Tanka. Although one of his titles is “Father Above”, he is thought to be more impersonal than personal. He can best be conceived as the power in all creation which sustains all things.

Belief in Totemism

In this introduction, we have already discussed “totemism”. We noted that the term derives from an Amerindian word *ototoman* meaning, “He is my relative”. The word “totem” has been taken by anthropologists and given a wider meaning. Here we want to elaborate on the idea that totemism was found particularly among hunting societies. In religious terms, the totem object is generally regarded as the great ancestor of the clan and is accorded the greatest courtesy, reverence and ceremony.

In other words, the killing of the animals is necessary for the society’s survival. However, the act of killing is not to show hostility, because man and animal belong to a common world of dynamic existence and each of them shares in the being of the other. The killing is, therefore, to be done with reverence and ritual. The primary concern is to establish and reinforce a basic connection between man and the animal world through ritual and myth.

Among Amerindians, one finds tall totemic poles, some standing as high as thirty feet tall. The poles are decorated with figures of animals from bottom to top. Here the religious symbols are essentially theriomorphic, meaning the gods are represented or symbolized in animal form. This signifies that the images and insights belong to hunters.
Belief in Shamanism

The term “shamanism” derives from a Siberian word *shama*. Scholars, particularly Mircea Eliade, define a shaman as a specialist in ancient or archaic techniques of ecstasy.

Shamanism, then, is the practice of going into ecstatic experiences and the ability of the shaman to go into a trance and travel to the realm of sacred powers. The other side of it is the ability to take the spirit. Instead of people going to the gods, therefore, the gods come into the people.

Generally speaking, the person who becomes a shaman may need to have had a visionary experience in his early life, and be capable thereafter of inducing ecstasy. One characteristic feature among the Amerindians is that of the vision quest. South Amerindians accepted visions which came, but they tended not to pursue them. North Amerindians did, however, seek earnestly for a vision of a guiding spirit. The vision quest came to a rite of passage which ushered in maturity. In the absence of a vision as a guiding experience, one lacked a sense of direction and purpose in life. If a young man failed to experience a vision, he was faced with the threat of being marginal in his society, of being forced to wear women’s clothing, and of being barred from male roles.

There is a variation of the Amerindian theme of the vision quest. The Hopi Amerindians represent spirits through ceremonial masks. Children up to nine years old believed that the *Kachinas*, masked dancers, were real spirits in their midst. The crisis of the *Hopi* passage to adulthood was when the dancers dropped their masks. The young people had to be made to accept that the reality of the *Kachina* was not physical but completely spiritual. The adult *Hopi* assumed the characters of the masks they wore by projecting themselves into the spirit world and becoming what they were representing.

The foregoing examples illustrate the type of persons from among whom shamans came. Usually, the initiation of a shaman is depicted as a long journey during which the shaman fights
monsters, descends into the underworld, gets “killed” and torn apart, limb from limb. Then the gods restore him to life. Finally, he goes up to the sky and learns secrets from gods and heroes. After acquiring techniques of ecstasy, he returns to the world of his people with powers of healing and ability to assist them in performing successful hunts.

Through their visions, Amerindian shamans functioned as healers, prophets and diviners. As healers, they extracted by sucking from the bodies of their patients objects thought to be the tools of witches or ghosts. Others stressed healing by ritual singing. Those from the agricultural groups specialized in spells for crop fertility.

**Modern Developments**

With the coming of whites and their expansion in other parts of America, social changes among Amerindian came radically and violently. As Amerindians territories were taken by the white man’s westward advance, depression set in among the Amerindians. The solution to this depression lay in new religious movements which emerged under the influence of local prophets. One such new religious movement was the Ghost Dance which arose in the nineteenth century.

This was a cult based on trance and a spiritual message which promised that if the Amerindians renewed the old ways and danced the new dance, they would defeat the whites and be able to witness the return of the buffalo.

In 1886, one Wowoka, a Paiute rallied hundred of Paiutes, Kiowas and Cheyenne in Nevada. In a period of four years, except for the Navaho who resisted it, the movement had become Pan Amerindian. By 1890, the Sioux, who had lost nine million acres of their best land, resorted to the Ghost Dance. Across the country, Amerindians sang the message which had been brought by a spotted eagle to the effect:
The dead are returning;
The nation is coming;
The father will return the elk;
The deer and the buffalo.

Disappointingly the movement came to an end when the Amerindian leader, Sitting Bull, was killed at Wounded Knee.

The value of the Ghost Dance is seen in the fact that it placed emphasis on morality, It promised the ultimate hope, the destruction of the white man, with the assistance of the supernatural. The dance was a way of restoring social cohesion and dignity. And this did something to check the rapid spread of alcoholism, a social disease precipitated by the decay of traditional social values.

Later developments among the Amerindians saw the rise of the Peyote religion. Peyote is a hallucinogenic drug which was introduced from Mexico in the late nineteenth century by Apaches. Peyotism is, therefore, the practice of the use of the drug to induce vision and a sense of peace.

The experience is a means of contact with the supernatural. Gradually there came to be a body of rituals developed until there was a complete ceremony of confession, singing, drumming and praying. The movement came to borrow some Christian elements, with most of its followers coming from among the plains and Southeast Amerindians, thus filling some of the void left by the disappearance of the Ghost Dance.

Today, the movement is incorporated as the Native American Church. Peyote religion does, therefore, offer Amerindians the legal right to take peyote as their ritual sacrament.
Further Reading


Activity

1. Discuss the impact of modernization on the religious life of the Amerindians.
2. Explain the belief in supernatural beings among the Amerindians.
3. Who were the shamans and what function did they carry out in the life of the Amerindian?
Native American religions are the spiritual practices of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. This article focuses on Native North Americans. Traditional Native American ceremonial ways can vary widely and are based on the differing histories and beliefs of individual tribes, clans, and bands. As part of the US government's suppression of traditional Indigenous religions, most ceremonial ways were banned for over 80 years by a series of US Federal laws that banned traditional sweat lodge and sun dance ceremonies, among others.[4] This government persecution and prosecution continued until 1978 with the passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA).[5] Native American Religion Native American Religion is a vast subject that covers the religious beliefs, rituals, ceremonies and practices of the indigenous people of North America. Native American religion is characterized by the religious belief that spirits are present in all things, both animate and inanimate. The Native American religion and religious beliefs are centered around the environment and the natural world of animals, birds, insects, plants, herbs and trees, natural phenomena such as rocks, mountains, rivers, lakes, and clouds and celestial bodies such as the sun, moon, planets an... The following table describes many of the beliefs and religious practises that feature in American Indian religion. Native American Religion - Beliefs and Religious Practises. Native American religions are the spiritual practices of the indigenous peoples of North America. Ceremonial ways can vary widely and are based on the differing histories and beliefs of individual tribes, clans, and bands. Early European explorers describe individual Native American tribes and even small bands as each having their own religious practices. Theology may be monotheistic, polytheistic, henotheistic, animistic, shamanistic, pantheistic or any combination thereof, among others. With the passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (hereinafter AIRFA) a decade ago, there was some reason to believe that that practice might at last fall under the aegis of the trust responsibility, but the Act has been interpreted by the Courts to add nothing substantial to Indian rights and protections under the religion clauses of the First Amendment, rights and protections enjoyed by all Americans. And the Congress has done nothing since the passage of AIRFA to counter that view. Book Review: Religion, Law, and the Land: Native Americans and the Judicial Interpretation of Sacred Land. Contributions in Legal Studies. By Brian Edward Brown.