Chapter 1
Contemporary Native Religions

The scholarly study of native religions has a long and interesting history, though it is a story which sometimes tells us more about Western scholars than about the religious people they have studied. No racial or ethnic group in the world has had their technologies, artistry, lifestyles and worldviews so thoroughly documented as have native people in North America; the "great ethnographic effort" initiated by American scholars in the nineteenth century "produced an unprecedented record of Native American cultures."[1] Yet native responses to this vast literature about their own communities are frequently marked by a lack of recognition: native people often do not see themselves in the descriptions and analyses of them by Western scholars. Claims of objectivity and universality have persisted among many scholars; nevertheless, the scholarly study of native religions exists as a cultural phenomenon that must be considered in the context of Western attitudes toward native people (and others) during the past five hundred years. Even the most cursory review of the scholarly literature makes it clear that the ways in which anthropologists and historians of religion have studied native religions have been determined by the theoretical and methodological interests of their respective historical eras.[2] Western views of native life have often

been marked by ethnocentrism, religious chauvinism, and racial prejudice, and these attitudes have found varying degrees of expression in the scholarly literature on native religions. The Western study of native religions is an intercultural, interreligious project, so it also faces problems that arise from genuine differences in worldviews and religious traditions. The questions raised by these and other issues deserve closer attention before we consider scholarly interest in contemporary native religions.

Western Scholars and Native Religions

Images of native people have played a prominent role in American society since the colonial period. Rayna Green called the Indian "a central figure in the New World iconography."

> Nowhere was he more central than in the expressive forms of American popular culture. These oral, visual, and dramatic expressions are vital forms in American culture. They describe, codify, and present the image of the Indian while defining the set of operative values by which Anglo-Americans have approached the Native American. . . .
>
> As these expressions acted together with events and ideas, they projected, extended, reinforced, and maintained the images of the Indian that suited the uses of the culture in any given region, time, or situation.[3]

Sixteenth-century European writers identified native people with their own mythic traditions of paradise and thereby gave birth to the idea of the "noble savage." As noble savages, native people could be simultaneously admired for their primitive moral purity and dismissed as something less than civilized. These interlocking images developed into two conflicting conceptions of native life--

the romanticized and the backward--neither of which affirms the full humanity of native people.[4]

The rise of evolutionary thought in the nineteenth century led Western scholars to value native people as more than a mythic ideal and for more than just their land. Already defined in terms of their cultural deficiencies--primitive, savage, preliterate, prelogical--native people came to be seen as "survivals" from the childhood of humanity. If, Western scholars queried, all human cultural expression has passed through the same stages of evolutionary change, then don't these simple people hold the keys to understanding our own humble beginnings? Modern cultural theories thus relegated native people to an inferior position in global historical process, deeming them to be primitive tribes belonging to the past rather than civilized people fit for the modern world. E. E. Evans-Pritchard observed:

> In these theories it was assumed, taken for granted, that [whites] were at one end of the scale of human progress and the so-called savages were at the other end, . . . We are rational, primitive peoples prelogical, living in a world of dreams and make-believe, of mystery and awe; . . . we are monotheists, they fetishists, animists, pre-animists or what have you, and so on.[5]

The evolutionary perspective prompted Western scholars to engage in widespread and detailed studies of native life, but their desire for cultural data from "pure" tribal societies "uncontaminated" by European contact led them to formulate their own ideas about what constitutes a "real" native. Contemporary native life was devalued and de-legitimated; living native people

were seen as inauthentic and therefore unimportant, poor reflections of their exotic ancestors. Anthropologists even developed parallel theoretical constructs for understanding native cultural history: cultural change through interaction with other tribes prior to European contact was termed diffusion, while cultural change through interaction with the European colonial presence was called acculturation.[6]

Fundamental differences in worldviews and religious traditions have also affected the scholarly study of native religions. Early Christians established a unique sense of religious identity in the pre-Constantinian Roman empire by drawing a sharp distinction between religious communities and social institutions. Their articulation of dualistic oppositions like religion/society and sacred/secular, together with similar philosophical dualisms they incorporated from the Hellenistic worldview (ideas/matter, spirit/body, good/evil), later developed into the Cartesian dualism that characterizes the post-Enlightenment Western worldview. Native people, however, commonly view their world and approach life in a more holistic fashion. Many native people consider discrete categories of phenomena like religion and politics, psychology and biology, to represent false distinctions. Sam Gill summarized the problem this way:

> We have difficulty finding words in Native American languages that approximate "religion." This means at the very least that what we understand as religion is not linguistically distinguished in the same way by Native Americans.

> . . . For Native American cultures, we will find aspects of religion in stories of creation, of heroes, of tricksters, of fools. We will find them in architecture, art, and orientations in the landscape. We will find them in ritual drama, costumes, masks, and ceremonial paraphernalia. We will find grand cosmological schemes and religious ideas in the rudest, most common materials and circumstances as well as in highly developed poetic, intellectual, and artistic forms.[7]

The Western intellectual tradition has pursued an increasingly atomistic approach to the analysis of social phenomena. Current interest in inter- and multi-disciplinary methodologies is an encouraging development, but it represents only a short-term reversal in a centuries-long trend and may not be enough to overcome what is a cross-cultural problem. The diversification and synthesis of knowledge that results from the dialectic of disciplinary and cross-disciplinary studies may lead to a more thorough interpretation of empirical data, but the overall process does not address the materialist philosophy which forms the basis for modern social scientific investigation. If Western scholars wish to grow in their understanding of native life, it may mean both new scientific methodologies and new philosophical presuppositions.

Another important difference in worldview is the Western Christian belief that historical process is the primary locus of religious reality. Native societies typically emphasize the religious significance of particular places and the cyclical nature of time, whereas Western Christianity understands time as primarily linear and envisions salvation history unfolding in a uniformly material universe. Focussing on the interpretation and meaning of time

rather than space has led to an unnecessarily narrow understanding of religion. Vine Deloria, Jr., summarized the effect of this difference:

> Many of [humanity's] religions have been held in deepest contempt because they do not in some manner measure up to the definitions of religion as promulgated by Western/Christian ideas of the nature of religion. They were held invalid, not because they did not provide an understanding of the universe with which that particular society was confronted, but because they did not coincide with ideas held by Western society . . . .[8]

Western religious chauvinism, a product of these ideas about the nature of religion but also deriving from the presumption that Christianity is inherently superior to other religions, manifests itself in several ways. Western scholars commonly identify native religions as being "tribal" (read particular) and contrast them with "world" (read universal) religions such as Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. Such a distinction obfuscates the obvious commonalities between religions of the world, all of which grow out of particular natural environments and sociocultural contexts while making universal claims about cosmological reality and human experience. When Western scholars distinguish between "world" and "tribal" religions they are actually ranking religious traditions on the basis of demographic criteria, a practice that must be questioned in light of the demonstrable relationship between religious expansion and political colonialism. Rather than using the categories "world religions" and "tribal religions," it makes more sense for us to address ourselves to the world _of_ religions as a way of recognizing

the combination of universality and particularity within every religious tradition in our religiously diverse world. We might even argue that the very word "tribal" is inherently problematic for describing religious traditions, because of the negative connotations associated with its common usage; people living in modern industrialized societies tend to view tribalism as xenophobic ethnocentrism, and often use the term to refer to ethnic or religious conflict in "developing" nations.

Native religions are also depreciated by Western scholars when they are described in terms of their component parts but not as religious totalities comparable to the dominant ("world") religions of the East and the West. Native religious life is thus characterized as a type of spirituality, a cycle of rituals and ceremonies, or a collection of myths and stories, but not as a complete and self-sufficient religious tradition. Distinctions that grow out of the institutional nature of religions should not determine how we classify and value them, though some of these distinctions are based on very real differences in religious organization. Native religions developed in the context of non-literate societies and therefore do not have traditions of written scriptures; though Western scholars have recorded volumes of stories, songs and teachings, most surviving native religions continue as primarily oral traditions. Western theories of religious authority and orthodoxy often assume the existence of a documented literary tradition and thus have little usefulness for studying oral religions. Searching for the definitive version of a story or for a

universally accepted belief makes little sense if a religious tradition does not support this level of institutional uniformity and rigidity. Western scholars impose another form of artificial orthodoxy when they base their studies on the testimony of religious leaders and specialists while overlooking or excluding popular views of religious life.

Today the very existence of some native religions is threatened by demographic fragility; a variety of social and political factors form the context for both the practice and the scholarly study of these religious traditions. Many native religions maintain a strictly regulated secrecy in relation to certain beliefs, stories, songs, ceremonies and objects; scholarly (or any public) discussion of these things is proscribed. This need for secrecy is usually determined by internal constraints on religious knowledge and power. In some instances, however, it is a result of external religious persecution through governmental suppression and Christian missionization. The long process of territorial invasion and land dispossession, accompanied by widespread population destruction through both epidemic disease and military engagement, understandably affected the ability of historic native societies to maintain their religious traditions. Colonial governments and Christian churches joined forces in the midst of this situation of religious and cultural crisis; their concerted efforts to "Christianize and civilize" native people continued the assault on native religious traditions and forced some of them into an underground existence. The climate for religious freedom on reservations has improved

since the implementation of the Indian Reorganization Act in 1934,[9] but demographic shifts since World War II have introduced a new challenge--urbanization--to the maintenance of native religions. The lack of effective, long-lasting economic development in reservation communities has forced many native people to seek employment opportunities by relocating to cities which are often far from home; more than half of all native people now live in urban areas. This situation prevents many of them from participating in the religious life of their home communities and especially impacts young people born outside those communities.

The single most important factor affecting the scholarly study of native religions may be the fundamental difference between this project and the scholarly study of Western Christianity. Western intellectual history is deeply rooted in Christian religious traditions, so that the difference between studying Christianity and native religions is the difference between insider (participant) and outsider (observer), between first-hand experience and second-hand empathy. The rise of Christian secularism in the West led scholars to a peculiar attempt at defining an objective point of view--a kind of epistemological observation deck--that would not originate from "inside" the perspective of any religious tradition, but would remain both "outside" and superior to all of them. Despite its nonpartisan pretensions, this ideological stance is strangely reminiscent of traditional Christian theologies of revelation and biblical authority. More importantly, it serves to mask the power relationships that are mediated by scholarly discourse.[10] Western theories and

methodologies have served the ideological and material interests of Europeans; correcting this problem requires a fundamental critique of the language being used and of the relationship between that language and the power it legitimates. Charles Long suggested that recognizing the power of "signification" is critical to understanding how cultures are invented:

> The first official language about [colonized] peoples in the modern world is not a language which they have created, but a language of signification created by others about them. It is for reasons of this kind that a most extensive literature exists *about* them, most of it written and presided over by others.
>
> More often than not, the differences that bring a culture or a people to the attention of the investigator are not simply formed from the point of view of the intellectual problematic; they are more often than not the nuances and latencies of that power which is part of the structure of the cultural contact itself manifesting itself as intellectual curiosity. In this manner the cultures of non-Western peoples were created as products of a complex signification.[11]

Scholars studying native religions, then, face a number of special challenges and problems that grow out of Western ethnocentrism, religious chauvinism, and racial prejudice: defamatory and romanticized misrepresentations of native life; evolutionary theories that consign native people to positions of inferiority; disciplinary social scientific methodologies which are inappropriate for understanding native worldviews; unjustified religious chauvinism and exclusive definitions of religion; and research agendas that overlook important sociopolitical

considerations. Scholarship on native religions has served the interests and needs of the West rather than those of native communities, and so it has often focussed on the historical reconstruction and comparative analysis of pre-European-contact religious data. These efforts certainly address interesting questions and may even increase our understanding of native life in some ways. However, interest in historical reconstruction has been accompanied by disregard for contemporary native realities, and efforts at comparative analysis of religious data have overlooked the complexities of religious identity in contemporary native communities. Living native people are often seen as being less than authentic representations of native cultural distinctiveness, and so scholars frequently have de-emphasized the process of religious change and have paid little attention to the issues raised by the religious diversity now present in many native communities.

* * *

There are several ways we might measure the degree to which scholars have focussed on the historical reconstruction and comparative analysis of religious data rather than on questions of contemporary religious identities. Much of the literature on native religions is devoted to particular tribes or culture areas; we might look at recent scholarship on a single well-documented group, such as the Lakotas.[12] We might also consider multi-author anthologies, of which there are several recent examples.[13] The most straightforward and concise way to evaluate this situation, however, is to review recent introductory surveys of native

religions. Scholars trained in a variety of disciplines have produced general overviews and comparative studies of native religions since the nineteenth century, and we can hardly cover all of them here. Three influential scholars representing three different methodological approaches to the subject have written such surveys during the last thirty years: Ruth Underhill (cultural anthropology), Ake Hultkrantz (history of religions), and Sam Gill (religious studies). Peggy Beck and Anna Lee Walters, under the auspices of the Navajo Community College, wrote an important interdisciplinary survey which also deserves our attention.[14]

In evaluating these introductory surveys, we need to consider several specific questions:

> Does the author describe religious phenomena only for comparative purposes, or does she consider beliefs, myths, rituals and objects in their sociocultural contexts?
>
> Does the author rely solely on social scientific explanations of religious phenomena, or does he also incorporate narrative (confessional) interpretations of religious life?
>
> Does the author present native religions as ahistorical traditions, or does she place them in their historical contexts and acknowledge the process of religious change?
>
> Does the author devalue contemporary religious life, or does he consider it to be a legitimate subject of study?
>
> Does the author disregard the problems raised by religious diversity, or does she examine the complex religious identities that emerge as people participate in and interact with different religious traditions?
>
> We might very well ask: How does the author understand the category "native religions"; is it defined on the basis of

> a human community (the religions practiced by present and past native people), or on the basis of an intellectual construct (the religious distinctiveness of pre-European-contact native people)? A related question is this: What criteria should we use to describe a religion as "traditional"?

<u>Ruth Underhill</u>

Ruth Underhill[15] devoted her career to the study of native cultures and produced books and articles on a number of tribes in the Southwest, particularly the Papagos, which she considered to have "retained" their religious rites better than most tribes.[16] She wrote <u>Red Man's Religion</u> (1965) as a companion volume to her earlier survey of history and culture, <u>Red Man's America</u> (1953), which contains the details of social organization and material culture that provide the context for religious beliefs and practices. Underhill approached the study of native religions from a functionalist perspective, suggesting that ceremonial observances are often more mechanical ritual than theological statement and that beliefs develop as rationalizations of the results of actions.[17] While she admitted that "circumstances" don't "produce religion," she relied on standard deterministic explanatory models by consistently attempting to correlate religious phenomena with natural environments and patterns of subsistence, using the traditional anthropological distinction between hunter-gatherers and planters.[18]

Underhill believed that "under all Indian religions in North America there is a substratum, a layer of basic beliefs and practices, that unites them all," and that was "inherited from the

Old World." Religious variation between different native groups developed according to the particular needs of each group. The simple and time-consuming lifestyle of food-gathering tribes, for example, produced childlike religious traditions:

> Among such food gatherers no one had time to dream. They received little stimulating contact from elsewhere, and their myths remained at the simple stage reached thousands of years before. In my early myth-collecting days, I asked a man from such a culture: "Who do you think made the world?"
>
> The question was out of his line but finally he ventured: "I guess it was Wolf. He's our most powerful animal."
>
> I was reminded of the Swiss children whom Piaget tested by the same question. The children were not poor, but they had had no more opportunity for thought than had the food gatherer. They named the most powerful agent they could think of: "I guess some gentlemen at Geneva."
>
> The children learned better in later life. The Indian and his group continued with a bounded idea of the universe. . . .[19]

Underhill opened the first chapter of her book with three anecdotes taken from personal experiences in native ceremonies, but she showed little interest in contemporary native religious life, except insofar as it could inform her about ancient traditions.

> The beliefs and ceremonies described here are, as far as possible, those held before white settlement had changed Indian life. Some of the performances we see today have been a good deal altered since that time.

Only her final chapter on "Modern Religions" focussed on post-contact religious change, in the form of revitalization movements. Having opted for a reconstructionist orientation, Underhill faced some formidable historiographical and ethnographical obstacles; as

a result, she expressed some ambivalence about how to evaluate the inevitable presence of historical change. She acknowledged that "no Indian group considered its own religion complete and final," yet she also seemed to view any kind of religious change as a form of contamination. Describing theological discussions between the Iroquois and Jesuit missionaries in the seventeenth century, she suggested that the Iroquois "often professed to find their own theology sufficient, but one wonders how many changes of attitude crept into it undetected." A chapter on Navaho religion referred to obvious "changes in religious patterns," and closed with these questions:

> Granted that all people have a religious urge, though it may differ in individuals, then what situation makes a new framework acceptable? What works against it? And if the change comes, what is its mechanism? Perhaps Indians themselves will soon help in this little-explored field.

Underhill showed little interest, however, in the answers native people might offer to these questions; she relied almost exclusively on scholarly analyses of native religions (and on her own field work for the chapters on the Southwest). She made no use of narrative accounts of religious life, though many of the ethnographic texts available to her contain this type of material.[20]

Native people appear only incidentally in Red Man's Religion, as the preservers of distinctive cultural data in the form of religious beliefs and practices. Underhill de-emphasized the process of historical change and overlooked the vitality of contemporary native religious life, and in the process she also

avoided discussing contemporary religious diversity and the complex nature of native religious identity. Underhill's survey of native religions tells us little about religious life in contemporary native communities.

Ake Hultkrantz

Ake Hultkrantz[21] is commonly recognized as a leading authority on native religions, having authored more than a dozen books and three hundred articles in the field,[22] though his personal and professional experiences make this claim problematic. In the introduction to one of Hultkrantz's collections of essays, Christopher Vecsey was unintentionally candid when he wrote that "Like many Swedes, . . . Hultkrantz grew up fascinated with Indian lore. . . . [T]he romantic image of Indians . . . has persisted through his works." Vecsey went on to describe Hultkrantz as an "antiquarian," more concerned with ancient traditions than with contemporary expressions of religious life. Perhaps less as cause than as effect, Hultkrantz's first-hand contact with native communities has been remarkably limited, considering the scholar's prolific output. His last fieldwork was conducted among the Wind River Shoshoni in 1958, only five years after the publication of his dissertation.[23] Except for his 1987 summary of Shoshoni religion, in which he used narrative accounts from his own thirty-year-old research, Hultkrantz relied on scholarly interpretations and considered scholars to be the authorities on native religions. He admitted that

> It seems reasonable to presume that only the Indians themselves--Indians who have been reared in the old tribal traditions and speak the language of their ancestors--are able to supply the profound and hidden treasures of Indian religions.

But only if they become "highly educated Indians [who] specialize in the field of American Indian religions and assume academic offices at the universities." It might be more appropriate to say that Hultkrantz is a leading authority on scholarly simulations of native religions.[24]

Hultkrantz's 1967 survey of both North and South American traditions "claims only to supply the most basic of the knowledge we now have of the Indian religions." Hultkrantz rightly questioned the reductionistic and deterministic tendencies of social scientific interpretations of religion, but he shared their evolutionary presuppositions; his own "typological and phenomenological" perspective neglects the sociocultural contexts of native religions and instead attempts to "bring together those features characteristic of these religions." "Historical reconstructions are attempted, and the main lines of the development of tribal Indian religions are sketched." His focus, then, was on the comparative, cross-cultural analysis of discrete religious phenomena, a project which he found to be informative both phenomenologically and theoretically, as scholars "scoop from the rich treasures of Indian religions."[25] Underhill's functionalist perspective led her to emphasize ceremonial practices, but Hultkrantz was more interested

in beliefs and myths, especially the ongoing scholarly debates over tribal understandings of gods, spirits and the soul.

Hultkrantz used present-tense verb constructions in his discussion of native religious beliefs and practices, but he did so in an ahistorical fashion. For example, he described "The Creek and Chickasaw of the southeastern United States [who] celebrate the 'busk' or *bosquito* ceremony"; present-day Creeks do celebrate the busk, though they have done so west of the Mississippi since their forced removal in the 1830s. Hultkrantz shared Underhill's view of religious change as contamination:

> Through missions, commercial connections, and colonial endeavors indigenous religions were gradually tainted by Christian propagation and, to some extent, by European values.[26]

He distinguished, though, between diffusion and acculturation as representing two different kinds of change, the first acceptable for his purposes, the second not. Introducing his primary Shoshoni informant, Hultkrantz wrote:

> Tudy Roberts, one of the most respected medicine men, was the head of a family known for its strict adherence to traditional religion and was a Ghost Dance leader in the conservative Sage Creek district. Still, like most Shoshoni, he had listened to what missionaries had to tell, so that some aspects of Christian ideas slipped into his conceptual world.[27]

Hultkrantz thus apparently considered the innovative, intertribal Ghost Dance to be "traditional religion" among the Shoshonis, though one of its respected leaders was evidently unable to protect this tribal worldview from Christian proselytizing discourse.

Hultkrantz's more recent survey of native religions is a better introduction to "the American Indian religious world" and "living tribal religions" of today. He focussed on two tribes--the Wind River Shoshonis and the Zunis--in order to illustrate "The balance between faithfulness to tradition and openness to new experience [which] constitutes the religious life."

> Both religions manifest the historical depth of their traditions, and the faithfulness of the people, particularly the Zuni, to these traditions is evident in these pages. At the same time, there is a continuous innovative process going on, particularly among the Shoshoni, that recreates religion in new patterns. During the last decades pan-Indianism and secularization have changed many old religious forms.

His "Chronology of Native American Culture and Religion (with particular references to Shoshoni and Zuni history)" ends in the year 1919.[28] Nevertheless, it would appear that Hultkrantz is gradually recognizing that the quest for pure, uncontaminated native religions is a misguided project, and that religious adaptation and change may actually be an authentic, internally consistent, and intellectually interesting expression of native religious life. There is much more, however, that can be said about contemporary religious diversity and the complex nature of native religious identity than Hultkrantz ventured.

Sam Gill

Sam Gill[29] has emerged in recent years as an influential figure in the study of native religious life, particularly the traditions of the Navaho.[30] Gill wrote the most recent scholarly

survey of native religions, a useful two-volume set: Native American Religions (1982) and Native American Traditions (1983), an anthology of primary texts.[31] He shared Underhill's desire to survey the diversity present among these traditions and Hultkrantz's concern to establish a place for native religions in the scholarly study of religion, yet Gill did not share their romanticized ahistorical perspective and their preoccupation with historical reconstruction and phenomenological analysis. He began his survey by placing the study of native religions in its historical context, not "the earliest archeological evidence of Native American religions," but rather "the ideas and images that have shaped our perceptions and conceptions of Native American and their religions . . . fostered by the earliest stages of European contact."[32] Gill also devoted the first chapter of the companion volume to considering the ways in which Western observers have been "Imagining Native American Religions."[33] Gill's careful, self-conscious attention to these and other meta-theoretical issues enabled him to arrive at interpretations of native religious life that are more sensitive and useful than those provided by Underhill and Hultkrantz.

If Underhill emphasized ceremonial activities and Hultkrantz theological beliefs, then Gill chose the middle ground; he discussed rituals, beliefs and myths and also considered the religious dimensions of other cultural expressions (architecture, art and language). Gill summarized his primary goal in writing the book:

> The aim is not so much to introduce data and facts as to introduce an academically and humanistically useful way of

> trying to appreciate and understand the complexity and diversity of Native American religions.

Gill steered clear of broad generalizations by relying on narrative accounts and scholarly descriptions of specific beliefs and practices. He still argued, though, that some degree of interpretation is necessary, and both the survey and the anthology are organized around an interpretative framework. "I feel that the significance and value of religious acts and events are not self-evident to people outside the performing tradition." Gill acknowledged that native people may view his interpretations as "either unnecessary or inadequate," and he further relativized his own views by pointing out that they are based on certain presuppositions, that they are non-exclusive, and that they are often the product of his own personal experiences.[34]

Gill considered native people to be reliable sources in explicating their own beliefs and practices, a view which he demonstrated by using both historical and contemporary narrative accounts of religious life.

> Wherever possible I have selected materials that I judge to be as close as possible to primary sources. These are statements written or spoken by Native Americans--descriptions, comments, statements, stories, songs, and prayers.[35]

Gill explored Hopi ceremonial symbolism, for example, by quoting from Don Talayesva's 1942 autobiography Sun Chief and from a recent article by Hopi scholar Emory Sekaquaptewa, while also drawing from a nineteenth-century ethnographic source and from

Gill's own personal experiences. This inclusive, innovative use of textual evidence bears out Gill's concluding comment:

> For only the Hopi can the dance create the Hopi reality and way of life. Hence we can never know, in the same way a Hopi knows, the significance made possible by these dances. But we can appreciate and understand that the dances create life, and we can even glimpse something of the significance that the Hopi symbols evoke when they are danced.[36]

Gill affirmed contemporary native life in other ways, especially when he cited texts by contemporary native writers such as N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Silko, Arthur Amiotte and John (Fire) Lame Deer, whose works some scholars are not even willing to acknowledge as authentically native literature, much less as religious texts.

Gill, like Underhill and Hultkrantz, devoted a chapter to "Tradition and Change in Native American Religions." While he recognized the difficulties involved in explaining and evaluating the process of religious change, he saw it in a much more favorable light than either Underhill or Hultkrantz did.

> The persistence and survival of so many . . . tribes testify to the great capacity of Native American world views to accept and digest change while remaining in continuity with the defining elements of their traditions. This persistence has not been a product of isolation and extreme conservatism but of incorporating into their world views a flexibility that enables them to see patterns of the cosmic dramas even within the challenges of modernity.
>
> A review of the features we consider most traditional, typical, and distinctive of Native American religions reminds us that commonly entwined within their histories are many elements of outside influence, originating both in Europe and in other native cultures. Once we become aware

> of the importance of historical processes in Native American traditions, we must recognize that we introduce inaccuracies when we investigate Native American religions without taking their histories into account. Every aspect of Native American religions that we have considered has had a place in a long, complex history; and every form of expression and religious act is part of a history.
>
> . . . [H]istorical processes are among the most distinctively important aspects of Native American religious traditions.[37]

Gill examined the religious histories of three specific cultural groups to show that native people have adapted to new contexts in a variety of ways; in every situation of intercultural contact "religion plays a central role, for it is through religion that the world view and broad, meaning-giving perspectives are taught, effected, and developed." Gill discussed religious diversity in the Southwest and in the Plains and recognized the connection with issues of identity. While he did not explore the implications of this relationship as fully as he might have, he at least pointed the way toward a more inclusive understanding of the category "Native American religions" by referring to these examples of contemporary native religious life as "several important new and emergent forms of Native American religions."[38]

Peggy Beck and Anna Lee Walters

Navajo Community College published The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life in 1977; authors Peggy Beck and Anna Lee Walters worked with more than fifty native elders, scholars, artists and community leaders (representing dozens of tribes) in

compiling this introduction to native religious life.[39] Gill's grammatical style makes it clear that he wrote for a non-Indian audience;[40] Beck and Walters intended their textbook for use in tribal college classrooms, though they recognized that it would also be read by non-Indians. Religious prohibitions and social conditions often make public discussion of native religions difficult, but Beck and Walters believed that

> without the proper discussions and conversations--without clearing the air of prejudice and misconceptions--people grow up with fixed ideas in their heads of what other people are like. As we have said before, the Elders teach *respect* for other people's ways of worshipping; this is a basic tool for living a long and good life. Since one of the purposes of this textbook is to enable students to compare their cultural experiences with those of other cultures, we have provided the following sections as tools for thinking about concepts at the root of the sacred, at the root of Native American sacred ways and practices.

The best approach, then, to the study of native religions is one that grows out of this characteristically native attitude of cross-cultural (and cross-generational) respect. Beck and Walters preferred the phrase "the sacred" because "Many Native People find it difficult to explain their ways of life, beliefs, traditions, and observances with the word 'religion'"; they referred to native people collectively as "The People" because many native groups refer to themselves, in their own languages, by this term.[41]

Beck and Walters prefigured Gill's methodological approach by placing primary emphasis on native oral traditions: "interviews, speeches, prayers, songs, and conversations."

> The material in this textbook will attempt to describe, not intrude by analysis, the meaning, role and function of sacred traditional practices and observances in the lives of The People. . . . By simply letting The People speak we may come to better understand the profoundness of strength, beauty, and vitality of this dimension of American Indian People.

Beck and Walters drew from an extensive bibliography of scholarly literature, but they did so primarily for the narrative accounts that are included in many of these ethnographical sources. Each chapter in the textbook includes a number of narratives taken from these sources as well as from contemporary native writers and spiritual leaders.

> Of course, the most valuable source of knowledge and ideas are The People themselves. The sacred life in every tribal community goes on throughout the day, every day. Learning through experience and work in the community is a basic source of knowledge.

The authors used historical and contemporary accounts together in order to demonstrate both the "viability" (adaptability) of native traditions and the continuity between their past and present expressions.[42]

Beck and Walters identified six religious understandings that most native people share: the supernatural, cosmological interdependence, personal worship, morality and ethics, spiritual leaders, and the importance of humor. They located the essence of native religious life in the distinctive worldviews that guide native communities; "the knowledge *at the core* of most traditional or

aboriginal beliefs and practices remains virtually unchanged." Beck and Walters emphasized

> the *traditional* characteristics of sacred ways in North America. We feel that the *concepts* and practices at the root of *classic* tribal systems of knowledge continue to describe a basic way of thinking about the sacred in today's Indian communities.

By asserting the persistence of this "aboriginal core" that forms the "basic roots" of native life, Beck and Walters were able to view religious change as a creative expression of survival, not a tragic process of degradation. "Aboriginal sacred ways . . . have passed through changes over the centuries as tribal people have met one another and exchanged ideas, songs, dances, stories, and medicines." Native religions are not anachronistic relics; they have the capacity to address modern problems facing us today. Beck and Walters thus described innovative religious movements as normal, positive responses to the "unbalancing" that has affected tribal communities. The Bole Maru movement in northern California, for example, demonstrated that

> it is possible to combine the new and the old in the rapidly changing world of today, so that young and old people can find ways of balancing their lives with respect to physical, social and economic conditions and their spiritual needs.

Sacred clowns and trickster figures are "direct evidence that the sacred ways of tribal people are not inflexible, self-important and without humor."[43]

Beck and Walters addressed some of the most interesting questions in the study of native religious life when they considered

peyotism (chapter 10) and Seminole religious history (chapter 11). By describing peyotism as an historically continuous tradition and by allowing those who practice it to speak through narrative accounts, they shifted the focus of interest from religious phenomena to issues of identity. As one peyotist said, "When I join a church, it will be a Peyote Church because it is Indian." Beck and Walters highlighted the ways in which some native people understand the religious diversity present in their communities when they quoted a Navaho peyote leader who argues that "Peyotism is adaptable, supplemental and not detrimental to any other religion, including Christianity." Multiple religious participation is present in other native communities including the Florida Seminoles, where "in general, there has not been a negative attitude . . . on the part of the Christians toward the Green Corn Dance or other traditional customs and practices."[44]

* * *

This brief review of recent introductory surveys of native religious life highlights the variety of ways in which the subject can be approached. Scholars who view religions from an evolutionary perspective are primarily interested in religious phenomena because of its value for comparative and developmental studies. They often focus on the historical reconstruction of native religions, attempting to discover definitive versions of these religious traditions by placing them in an ahistorical past, just prior to the contaminating arrival of European religions. These romanticized, decontextualized simulations of pre-contact religious

traditions are understood to represent authentic native religions. On the other hand, scholars who view religions from a humanistic perspective are primarily interested in the study of religious identities because of its value for cross-cultural understanding and respect. They place native religions in appropriate social and historical contexts and frequently rely on narrative descriptions of religious experience in order to appreciate the range and variability of religious life, even within a particular tradition or community. Contemporary native religious life can therefore be understood as no less authentic than it was before European contact, though it may very well have changed (as all religious traditions have) over time and space.

What is at stake in making this distinction between religious phenomena and religious identity is the very definition of the category "native religions." Is it to be understood on the basis of an intellectual construct (the religious distinctiveness of pre-European-contact native people), or on the basis of a human community (the religions practiced by present and past native people)? Scholars who focus on religious phenomena and consider only "traditional" native religions to be authentic face formidable historiographical and epistemological problems in making this claim; ultimately, any specific definition of "traditional" is value-laden and perhaps even arbitrary. Scholars who claim the ability to reconstruct, to any meaningful extent, pre-European-contact native religions demonstrate their commitment to a methodology of rationalistic conjecture and psychological projection. Without

documentary and oral sources describing pre-contact religious life, without solutions to the inescapable problems involved in linguistic translation and cross-cultural interpretation, and without a plausible theory with which to demonstrate the genesis of particular religious ideas and behaviors, the entire project of historical reconstruction and phenomenological analysis would seem to have an unstable theoretical basis.

Religious Identity

Social scientific analyses of native religions are useful for considering questions of a comparative nature, but these interpretations often tell us little about how native people imagine and express their own religious identities. Anthropologists and historians have often used their value-laden interpretations of native religious phenomena to draw conclusions about authenticity and identity. They have also employed various theories of acculturation in order to account for and to explain religious change and diversity among native people. The idea of "culture," however, is an invention and an intellectual abstraction;[45] the use of phenomenological cultural theories to measure subjective realities like religious identity represents an inappropriate and unjustified application of the interpretative conclusions.

The concept of religious identity is an appropriate tool for studying native religions because religious issues are at the heart of contemporary native life. Native people today identify themselves and are identified by others using a variety of criteria: community

and peer acceptance, personal lifestyle, socioeconomic status, language fluency, documented tribal membership, skin color and physical appearance, and "blood quantum" (racial pedigree). Native communities, social scientists, governmental and private institutions, and the general public all have different (and often contradictory and conflicting) definitions of "Indianness." For many native people, religious attitudes, practices and associations have become increasingly important factors in their identification of themselves and others as being native in the context of contemporary Canadian and American societies. The phrase "religious identity" has not been clearly defined in the scholarly literature, but its use is becoming more common as scholars look more closely at the relationship between religion and identity in contemporary, often pluralistic, societies.

Erik Erikson applied psychoanalytic theory to the study of childhood and human development, and in the process focussed much of his attention on identity formation and maintenance. He schematized the developmental process as a sequence of eight stages;[46] he insisted that this life cycle must be understood in its sociocultural contexts, that psychosocial identity is "at once subjective and objective, individual and social."[47] Erikson believed that "religion is essential in the development of the life cycle and the race," that "one finds one's identity in relation to others and ultimately to the Other." He highlighted the relationship of ethical and religious concerns to identity formation in the fifth stage of his schema, the identity crisis of youth.[48] Yet for Erikson, as for other

psychological approaches to the study of identity, primary emphasis lay on the ways in which religious factors influence psychosocial identity and not on religious identity as a distinct subject of study.

Hans Mol approached religious identity from the opposite direction, arguing for an "identity perspective" on the study of religion. In his "general, social-scientific, theory of religion," he defined religion as "the sacralization of identity." Mol found "the latent and primary sources of identity" in the multitude of symbolic forms and systems that humans create in response to changing circumstances and in which they locate their identities: not just territory or hierarchy, but also things such as reason, celibacy, Maoism, snakes, peyote and money. Identity is thus inextricably intertwined with worldview. In emphasizing the process of sacralization rather than the distinction between the sacred and the profane, Mol wanted to shift the emphasis from states to processes.

> Sacralization is the inevitable process that safeguards identity when it is endangered by the disadvantages of the infinite adaptability of symbol-systems. Sacralization protects identity, a system of meaning, or a definition of reality, and modifies, obstructs, or (if necessary) legitimates changes.[49]

Mol identified four mechanisms of the sacralization process which function on both personal and social levels: commitment, ritual, myth, and "transcendentalization" ("the tendency to sum up the variegated elements of mundane existence in a transcendental point of reference where they can appear more orderly, more consistent, and more timeless"). Religion understood as the sacralization of

identity refers to the dialectical tension between creativity and order, between differentiation and integration, between adaptation and identity. Religious phenomena are neither wholly dependent nor independent, but interdependent; focusing on the dialectics of religious identities goes beyond standard phenomenological analysis in attempting to elucidate these interdependencies.[50]

It is worth noting that neither Erikson nor Mol found a receptive audience among the religious studies "establishment," which still prefers the phenomenological approach. The definitive Encyclopedia of Religion (1987), edited by the leading phenomenologist Mircea Eliade, does not include articles on identity or religious identity or on the work of Erikson. Mol was not a contributor to the encyclopedia and his work is not cited in any article, despite his important contribution to the global study of religion and identity.[51]

Erikson looked at the ways in which religious factors influence psychosocial identity and Mol focussed on an identity-oriented definition of religion; we might gain insights from a third approach by evaluating anthropological literature concerned with the relationship between religion and ethnic identity.[52] Yet relatively few works use the phrase "religious identity" as an analytical category. Gibson Winter's Religious Identity: A Study of Religious Organization, which described denominational power structures in the United States, is not useful here, other than to serve as an excellent example of the Western (Christian) tendency to think of religious identity in terms of institutional affiliation.[53] Eldon

Ernst took an historical perspective on "religious identity in American culture" in Without Help or Hindrance. He found two underlying themes in American Christian history, the tension between private and public expressions of religion and the challenge of conflicting truth claims amidst religious pluralism, and suggested that in twentieth-century America the search for Christian identity has become more complicated, even "critical." Ernst emphasized religious groups and movements and their relationships to social and political processes in a pluralistic society, though he did not offer any explicit definition for religious identity.[54]

J. P. Kiernan studied Zulu Zionism in South Africa from a sociological perspective; he argued that this independent black Christian movement is an example of a "complex religious identity." Zulu Zionist identity "is a composite of political, ethnic-linguistic, residential, class and religious markers," but "while being a Zionist means being black, being Zulu, being a settled migrant, being poor and being christian, it is the distinctive identity of being Zionist that is decisive." Kiernan's interpretation of Zulu Zionism follows his clearly articulated theoretical approach: identity is related to classification and boundary formation between insiders and outsiders; identity is both imposed and chosen; identity consists of a cluster of definitional statements, which may be arranged hierarchically; and identity is a dynamic process, not an event or state. Religious identity refers to the process of identity formation based on religious attitudes and behaviors.[55]

Paul Steinmetz, a phenomenologist, studied religious identity in Pipe, Bible, and Peyote among the Oglala Lakota. He argued that contemporary Lakota religious life encompasses the three traditions he symbolized in his title, and that these religious influences result in six distinct religious groups. Steinmetz was interested in studying "religious acculturation," by which he meant religious change and identity formation involving both Indian-white and Indian-Indian interactions. He concluded that his "model of Oglala religious identity" has six important features; briefly, these are: mutual influences, mediating symbols, diverse interpretations, boundary formation, continuity/discontinuity, and dynamic processes. Steinmetz believed that "the ultimate source of personal identity is religious," and he relied on Erikson's definition of the term identity:

> At one time, then, it will appear to refer to a conscious sense of individual identity; at another to an unconscious striving for a continuity of personal character; at a third, as a criterion for the silent doings of ego synthesis; and finally as a maintenance of an inner solidarity with a group's ideals and identity.[56]

Contemporary Native Religious Identity

Religious life in contemporary native communities can be described as a situation of religious diversity, a situation which has resulted from conditions of religious crisis. Indigenous religious traditions have faced severe challenges in the form of population destruction, land dispossession, governmental suppression, and Christian missionization. The resulting experience of sociocultural

crisis has led to a variety of religious responses: opposition (both overt and covert), innovation (such as revitalization movements), incorporation and accommodation (what some term "syncretism"), capitulation (voluntary conversion), and deicide. The process of urbanization since World War II has also contributed to the decentering of native religious life (as it has for many religious communities), which has led to efforts at the revival of threatened indigenous religious traditions. Today most native communities are religiously pluralistic, with various tribal traditions, intertribal movements, and Christian denominations affirmed and practiced by different (and sometimes the same) groups and individuals. We could consider these distinct religious traditions from a phenomenological perspective, but it may be more interesting and informative to study the complex identities that emerge from interreligious interactions. If we want to appreciate contemporary native religious life, we must attempt to understand how native people imagine and form, express and maintain their own religious identities in the midst of this religious diversity.

I propose to develop a theory of contemporary native religious identity based on certain theoretical and methodological assumptions. Identity consists of a combination of individual, social and cosmological factors, and religious identity lies at the heart of human existence. Religious identity is located in symbolic forms and systems (worldviews); it is not a state but a dynamic process, a dialectic of continuity and change in a similarly continuing/changing world. Religious identity is expressed through

a complex combination of boundary-defining attitudes and behaviors, some of which are imposed from without, others chosen from within. In situations of interreligious interaction, religious traditions exert mutual influences and are subject to diverse interpretations.

Placing contemporary native religious identity in its sociocultural and historical contexts requires that we recognize religious change and diversity, which means studying more than just traditional tribal religions. The interreligious and the intertribal dimensions of contemporary native life also deserve our attention. Social scientific explanations of religious life can tend toward reductionism, and so narrative interpretations of religious identity should be utilized whenever possible. Contemporary native religious identity is less a function of cultural data described through social scientific methodologies, and more a product of shared interests and perceptions, networks of relationship, the ability to empathize, and an unusual combination of mutual respect and self-deprecating humor.

In order to develop a theory of contemporary native religious identity, I will suggest an interpretation of an appropriate case study, the Indian Ecumenical Conference. This contemporary religious movement began in 1970 on the Crow Reservation in Montana and was an important new experience in the religious history of North America, as native people and their religious leaders came together each summer to address the religious diversity in their communities. From its very inception, the Ecumenical Conference sought to be as inclusive as possible,

welcoming all native communities and all religious traditions in these communities. The Ecumenical Conference was the first large-scale, intertribal, interreligious gathering of native people since the beginning of missionization, and it took a distinctively native approach to understanding and negotiating the problems raised by inter- and intra-community religious diversity. The Ecumenical Conference was also unusual in that it grew out of the concerns of religious leaders and elders in reservation and rural communities, unlike other native social movements of the 1970s, many of which represented an urban Indian perspective.

Conference participants addressed the problem of interreligious interaction on several different levels and in a variety of ways. Religious leaders attempted to reconcile the theological differences between religious traditions by discussing their shared convictions, while also recognizing that interreligious harmony is as much a practical as a theoretical problem. Elders and community representatives encouraged interreligious cooperation in order to address the social problems in their communities, and argued that social activism must be rooted in religious commitment. Individuals demonstrated their inclusive understanding of religious life by participating in several different religious traditions. The Ecumenical Conference also challenged popular notions of religious orthodoxy, authority and authenticity by permitting and affirming heterodoxy, autonomy and innovation in the formation of religious identity.

While the Indian Ecumenical Conference was widely known in Indian country and involved thousands of native people throughout Canada and the United States, the movement has not yet been studied in any extensive or comprehensive way. The Ecumenical Conference is mentioned in a variety of secondary sources including scholarly and popular books and articles, though only one of these citations is longer than six pages. Primary sources on the Ecumenical Conference include: articles in Indian periodicals and Christian periodicals, especially The Native People/Windspeaker (Alberta) and Canadian Churchman (Anglican Church of Canada); a few articles in daily newspapers and popular magazines; native biographies and tribal histories; films and videotapes; and unpublished materials such as Conference announcements, statements and reports. The case study presented in chapter two is based on original research drawing on these primary and secondary sources along with interviews conducted specifically for this project.