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WAY *of*

Native American Traditions



Arthur Versluis

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About the Author



Arthur Versluis is author of many books and articles on traditional religions and cultures, including *Sacred Earth: The Spiritual Landscape of Native America*, *The Egyptian Mysteries*, and *Song of the Cosmos: An Introduction to Traditional Cosmology*. In recent years he has spent much time and effort meeting with tribal people, traveling to Native American sacred sites, and researching the spiritual meaning of landscape. He teaches literature, mythology and writing at Michigan State University and when circumstances permit makes his home in Michigan and Kansas.

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Dedicated to my parents

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Contents



Acknowledgements vi

Chapter 1

Introduction 1

Chapter 2

Northern and Southern Traditions 8

Chapter 3

The Warrior 30

Chapter 4

Hierophanic Nature 37

Chapter 5

Spirits and Ancestors 46

Chapter 6

Ceremonies and Rituals 54

Chapter 7

Shamanism and Medicine 64

Chapter 8

Totems 76

Chapter 9

Sacred Sites in the Americas 85

Chapter 10

The Visionary World 102

Chapter 11

Sacred Art, Mythology and Meaning 112

Chapter 12

Circle and Cross

(Cycles in Native American Traditions) 124

Conclusion 133

Notes and References 140

Glossary 146

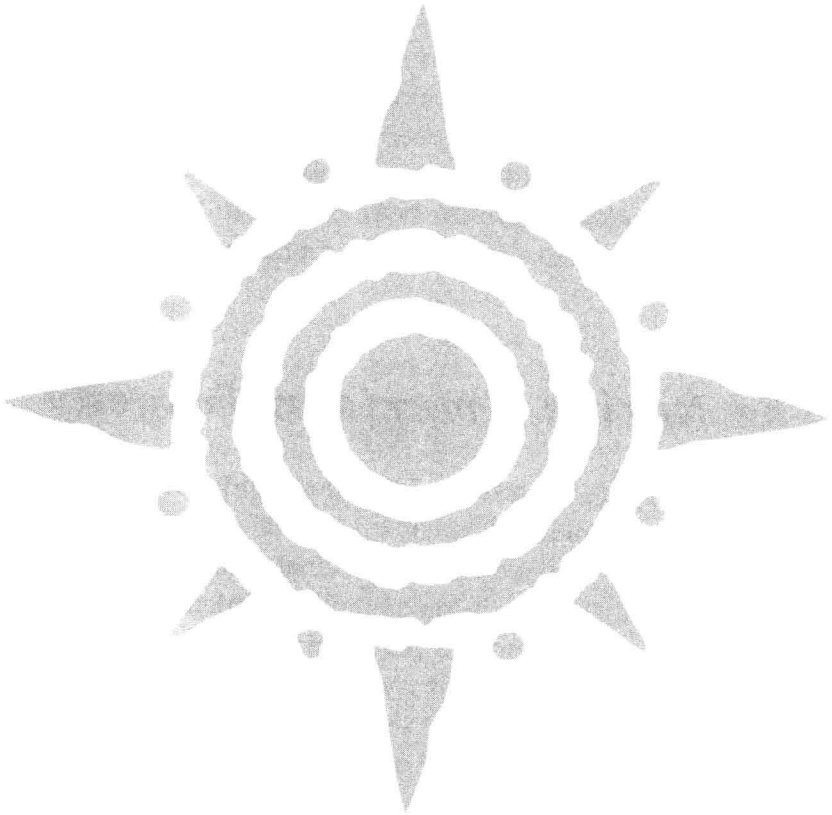
Further Reading 151

Index 156



ONE

INTRODUCTION





That the Native American religious traditions – with all their diversity – represent one of the world religions in the same way as does Hinduism, for instance, is a relatively recent concept in the Judaeo-Christian world. For centuries, Europeans, and European Americans, viewed the American Indian peoples with a combination of condescension, fascination, and, all too often, contempt and incomprehension. Only in the last few decades of the twentieth century has European American scholarship really begun to take a more open view of American Indian traditions, and only since then has a new view, which looks to the Native Americans for spiritual understanding, begun to appear more widely in ‘mainstream’ American society. Still there is much prejudice in America against American Indians; but as the destructiveness of the modern worldview has become more apparent, many people have turned to Native Americans to understand how better to live in harmony with the natural and spiritual realms. This book represents an introduction to that way.

The Native American Tragedy

Of course, to study the history of European and European American relations to the American Indians is, for the most part, to view a tragedy. One sees there a relationship that could have been fruitful become instead a lesson in mutual incomprehension, not to mention greed and deceit on the part of many European Americans. If the white Americans found it difficult to conceive of nature as theophany in the Indian way, Native Americans for their part did not think in European terms of owning square sections of land. For Indian peoples, one’s word was one’s bond; if verbal assent was given by a council of leaders, then everyone would follow that which was assented to. Hence the failure of many whites to adhere even



to written contracts was particularly incomprehensible to tribal peoples, and all of this contributed to the countless tragedies of North and South American history.

In part, too, the tragedy of the Native American peoples reflects how they were simply overwhelmed by sheer population. While many of the Indian tribes were decimated or even obliterated by unfamiliar European diseases (sometimes deliberately introduced among them), by slaughter, by dispossession, and by exhaustion of traditional game, whites flourished and moved inexorably westwards, taking over even lands contractually deeded to various tribes or confederacies. In the face of such obstacles, including the relentless erosion of traditional ways, and even by the outlawing of native religions, one is surprised that the Indian peoples have survived and preserved as much as they have.

Yet much has disappeared. When Europeans first landed on North and South American shores, the native traditions were extraordinarily diverse, ranging from the urban centres of the South American peoples to the nomadic traditions of the far north, from the Pueblo and Hopi traditions of the south-west, for instance, to the totemic traditions of the Pacific north-west. Both linguistically and culturally, the Native Americans were so diverse that one can hardly speak of a single American Indian religion. But much of this diversity has been lost, not least through the erosiveness of European-derived American civilization, and today one finds that many tribes follow similar patterns in meeting, in what Joseph Epes Brown has called the 'pow-wow syndrome'.

The Recent Resurgence in Native Traditions

Be this as it may, in the last half of the twentieth century many tribes have seen a renaissance of traditional ways. If on the one hand there has been a tendency toward pan-Indian movements like that focusing on the peyote rituals, on the other hand many tribes have taken a renewed pride in the old ways, and have sought to restore their traditional religious and cultural practices, sometimes even by consulting the works of nineteenth-century white ethnographers and other like sources, if, for example, the elders are unable to remember rituals completely. There have even been renewed efforts to recover sacred lands taken from the native peoples, and to retain those lands threatened anew by white government or business.

Given such developments, one cannot but see as signs of hope the new interest shown by European-derived Americans in the traditional ways of native peoples. While one could hardly expect widespread 'conversions' to native ways, still it seems evident that the Native American views of nature and of spirituality are affecting white society in ways that previously would have been for the most part unthinkable. Some of this influence is rather superficial, of course, particularly that associated with so-called 'new age' true believers. But there is evidence for the belief that many Europeans and European-Americans are willing, indeed eager, to learn about traditional tribal spirituality.

In a book like this, it is impossible to do justice to the whole range of Native American traditions; one cannot begin to address all the different tribal practices and ways. But on the other hand, there are certain aspects of American Indian cultures that do transcend



individual tribal differences, and that do allow one to speak in more or less general terms. We will also draw on the testimony of the most widely respected tribal spokesmen or visionaries: men like Black Elk and Thomas Yellowtail, whose significance transcends their particular tribal affiliations. While we cannot discuss the totality of American Indian traditions, we can discuss that which is perennial and universal within them.

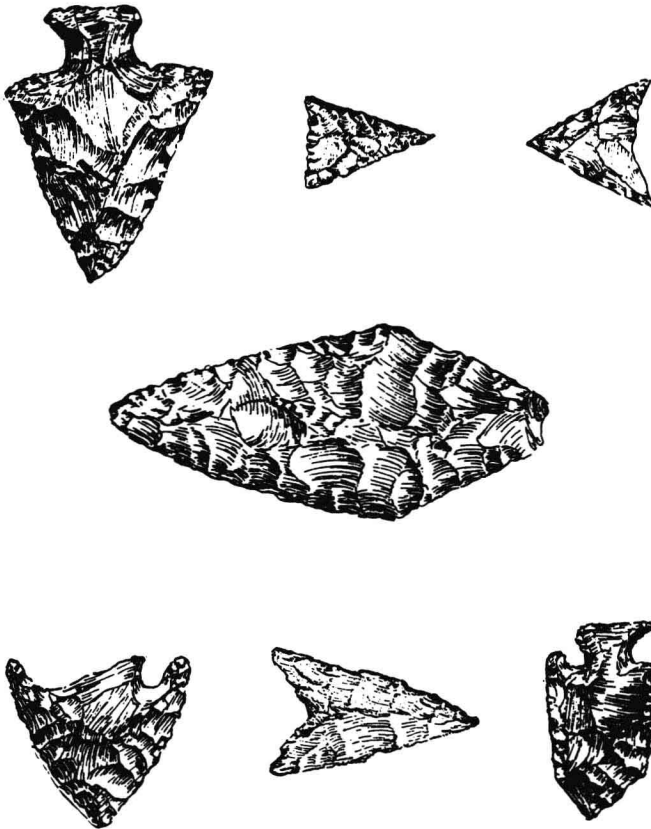


Figure 1: Seven chipped jasper arrowheads; the centre object may be a knife or scraper.



Indeed, it is precisely what is universally applicable within the Native American traditions that we need to hear, in this time of social, economic, ecological, and above all religious, crises. For what the Native Americans have to tell us speaks directly to our modern crises, and especially to our modern near-total divorce from the natural world. The American Indian religions are religions inextricably linked to nature, in mysterious ways that are only now beginning to be taken seriously by the dominant white society.

Hence this is a book of listening – listening to what virgin nature and the Native Americans have to tell us. Let us listen.



Figure 2: Map showing the Native American tribe locations.



TWO

NORTHERN AND Southern Traditions

