

A [sample entry](#) from the

Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature

(London & New York: Continuum, 2005)

Edited by

[Bron Taylor](#)

© 2005
All Rights Reserved

choices available to us by recognizing that we are helping to create the coming historical scenarios. It seems to me likely that Near Death Experience may be the manner in which the sacred mystery of the universe is reaching out to us. Certainly in a highly urbanized society we cannot be expected to find a place of isolation and open ourselves to this mystery. The sacred may be offering us a new chance to understand the meaning of life. Patients reporting on NDE say their lives and their view of how they were living were permanently changed by the experience.

Today in the study and practice of religion we have abandoned traditional concepts and treat religion like a strange form of sociology. We have very little empirical data to examine so we simply increase our efforts to study obscure points in various traditions. What insights we could gain if we took the phenomena rejected by science and institutional theologians and asked deep and probing questions of it. We would soon learn considerably more about our world.

Vine Deloria, Jr.

Further Reading

- Deloria, Vine, Jr. *For This Land: Writings on Religion in America*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Deloria, Vine, Jr. *Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth Of Scientific Fact*. New York: Scribner, 1995.
- Deloria, Vine, Jr. *The Metaphysics of Modern Existence*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979.
- Deloria, Vine, Jr. *Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties: An Indian Declaration of Independence*. New York: Dell Publishing 1974.
- Deloria, Vine, Jr. *God Is Red*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1973.
- Deloria, Vine, Jr. *Of Utmost Good Faith*. San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1971.
- Deloria, Vine, Jr. *We Talk, You Listen: New Tribes, New Turf*. New York: Macmillan, 1970.
- Deloria, Vine, Jr. *Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*. New York: Macmillan, 1969.
- Deloria, Vine, Jr. and David E. Wilkins. *Tribes, Treaties, and Constitutional Tribulations*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999.
- Deloria, Vine, Jr. and Clifford M. Lytle. *The Nations Within: The Past and Future of American Indian Sovereignty*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985.
- Deloria, Vine, Jr. and Clifford M. Lytle. *American Indians, American Justice*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983.
- Kirkpatrick, Sidney D. *Edgar Cayce: An American Prophet*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2000.
- Linderman, Frank B. *Plenty-Coups, Chief of the Crows*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962 (1957).

First published in 1930 under the title: *American: The Life Story of a Great Indian, Plenty-Coups, Chief of the Crows*.

See also: Devils Tower, *Mato Tipi*, or Bears Lodge (Wyoming); Holy Land in Native North America; Indigenous Environmental Network; Law, Religion, and Native American Lands; Manifest Destiny; Sacred Geography in Native North America.

Sacred Geography in Native North America

"Portals to the sacred" is an expression I use to convey belief common among Native Americans that there are specific places that possess great sacredness, and this concept illuminates the ritual functions of sacred sites in Native North America. Such "portals" should not be viewed as limited in size or scale. Some may be large in their geographical extent while others are limited in size. Likewise, use of the portals concept must include the understanding that they are not only positioned in geography but also positioned in time, such that they become sacred "time/spaces." Although the concept of the "sacred" is employed widely in recent discussions of sacred geography, no satisfactory definition of this fundamental idea has been offered.

Basic ethnographic research concerning American Indian concepts of sacred geography is sparse. The recent collection of papers edited by Christopher Vecsey (1991), the *Handbook of American Indian Religious Freedom*, stemmed from this absence of research but must be regarded as only a beginning. Research on this topic is abundant for many cultures of Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Mesoamerica (e.g., Townsend [1982] and Vogt [1965, 1969]), but with few exceptions (e.g., Harrington's 1908 "The Ethnogeography of the Tewa Indians") is a subject largely undeveloped for most regions in North America and northern Mexico. Based on what published sources are available, the following trends seem most common.

In addition to being vital to ritual practice, sacred geography in Native North America is a source of religious meaning in group identity and group cohesion. Sacred sites in Native North America are invested through ritual with complex layers of religious meaning. Tribal religions in Native America differ from most other world religions in their conceptions of the sacred and in their conceptions of sacred geography.

Definitions of the Sacred

In his *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim defines the sacred as follows:

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which

unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them (Durkheim 1947: 47).

Fundamental to this definition is the distinction Durkheim draws between the sacred and the profane:

The opposition of [the sacred and the profane] manifests itself outwardly with a visible sign by which we can easily recognize this very special classification, wherever it exists. Since the idea of the sacred is always and everywhere separated from the idea of the profane in the thought of men, and since we picture a sort of logical chasm between the two, the mind irresistibly refuses to allow the two corresponding things to be confounded, or even to be merely put in contact with each other . . . The sacred thing is *par excellence* that which the profane should not touch, and cannot touch with impunity. To be sure, this interdiction cannot go so far as to make all communication between the two worlds impossible; for if the profane could in no way enter into relations with the sacred, this latter could be good for nothing . . . The two classes cannot even approach each other and keep their own nature at the same time (Durkheim 1947: 40).

This classic distinction does not fit American Indian conceptions of the sacred in Native North America, because the sacred is not viewed as a domain set aside, distinct, and forbidden as Durkheim suggests. Instead, the sacred is an embedded, intrinsic attribute lying behind the external, empirical aspect of all things, but not a domain set aside or forbidden. The situation is both more complex and more subtle. For example, among the Lakota this embedded, intrinsic attribute is *wakan*; among the Algonkians it is *manitou*; among Ute-Aztecs it is *pu'ha*; among the Sahaptians it is *weyekin*; and among the Salishans *su'mesh*. In this large region, accessing the sacred is a primary goal of ritual and entails actually entering into sacredness rather than merely propitiating it. Whereas certain cultures tend to create their own sacred space and sacred time somewhat arbitrarily by special rituals of sacralization, American Indians of North America more often attempt through ritual, visions, and dreams to discover embedded sacredness in nature and to locate geographical points that permit direct access to it in order to experience it on a personal level. Unlike Durkheim, Eliade's view of hierophanies is somewhat more compatible with American Indian views of sacred geography. Citing Eliade, Carrasco says,

In Eliade's view, all religions are based on hierophanies or dramatic encounters which human beings have with what they consider to be supernatural

forces manifesting themselves in natural objects. These manifestations transform those objects into power spots, power objects, wonderful trees, terrifying bends in the river, sacred animals. The stones, trees, animals, or humans through which a hierophany takes place are considered valuable, full of mana, things to be respected and revered. Human beings who feel these transformations in their landscape believe that a power from another plane of reality has interrupted their lives. Usually, they respond with a combination of great attraction and great fear. Their lives are deeply changed as a result of this encounter with *numinous places* (Carrasco 1979: 203).

Sacred Geography in Native North America: General Features

It is the rule rather than the exception that American Indian ritual life is inextricably linked with access to and ritual use of sacred geography. Traditional American Indian spiritual leaders generally assert that the geographical locations of rituals are vital to their efficacy; unless rituals are performed in their proper times at their proper geographical locations they will have little or no effect. Although there are significant differences among American Indian religions, they generally share the following characteristics central to understanding American Indian sacred geography:

- 1) A body of mythic accounts explaining cultural origins and cultural history, which depend upon the geographical area. These describe a prehuman or pre-cultural time dominated by heroes, tricksters, other mythical figures, and animals indigenous to the area.
- 2) A special sense of the sacred that is centered in natural time and natural geography.
- 3) A set of critical and calendrical rituals that give social form and expression to religious belief and permit the groups and their members to experience the events of their mythology in various actual geographical ritual settings.
- 4) A group of individuals normally described as shamans or priests who teach and lead the group in the conduct of their ritual life.
- 5) A set of ethical guidelines establishing appropriate behavior associated with ritual and extensions of ritual into ordinary life.
- 6) Reliance on dreams and visions as the primary means of communicating directly with spirits and the sacred. These and oral tradition are the primary sources of sacred knowledge.
- 7) For individuals, the major goal of ritual is gaining the spiritual power and understanding necessary for a successful life by engaging the sacred at certain special times and in certain special places.

1450 Sacred Geography in Native North America

- 8) For groups, a belief that harmony must be maintained with the sacred through satisfactory performance of rituals and adherence to sacred prescriptions and proscriptions.
 - 9) A belief that while all aspects of nature and culture are potentially sacred, there are specific places that possess great sacredness, which I term "portals to the sacred."
 - 10) In their religious life, American Indian groups of Native North America are rarely hierarchically organized; nor do they favor the tightly constructed hierarchical mythologies or philosophies developed by priestly elites of either the Old or New World agricultural societies; calendrical reckoning of ritual life is somewhat less important among hunting groups of Native North America.
 - 11) The sacred sites of Native North America are more numerous, more diverse, and less geometrically patterned than is seen among religions of Mesoamerica and the Old World. This reflects the diversity of cultural groups in Native North America who are not often unified into only a few major religious systems of the types found in the Old World and Mesoamerica.
 - 12) Mountains and other points of geographical sacredness are not so often at the center of religious life in Native North America as in the Old World or in Mesoamerica. Nor are mountains identified as frequently with the state, with society, or with the group as in Mesoamerica and the Old World. This probably again reflects the diversity of cultural groups in most of Native North America as well as the general absence of large-scale political and religious systems.
 - 13) Generally, hunting groups in Native North America seek the *intrinsic* or embedded sacredness of nature and do not often force their notions of sacredness onto the land in the manner of the pyramid builders and Earth sculptors we see in both the Old World and Mesoamerica.
 - 14) Ritualists in Native North America are generally shamanic unlike the priestly figures encountered in the more complex religious systems of Mesoamerica and the Old World. Priests are more often identified with large-scale political and religious systems that encompass various cultural groups.
 - 15) Sacred sites are numerous and include the following types (see Walker 1991):
 - a) Shrines, vision-quest sites, altars, and sweat-bath sites that serve as ritual settings.
 - b) Monumental geographical features that have mythic significance in a group's origins or history. Included are mountains, waterfalls, and unusual geographical formations such as Pilot Knob, Kootenai Falls, Celilo Falls, and Mount Adams.
 - c) Rock-art sites such as pictograph and petroglyph panels.
 - d) Burial sites and cemeteries.
 - e) Areas where plants, stones, Earth, animals, and other sacred objects are gathered for ritual purposes or where sacred vegetation such as medicine trees serve as objects or centers of ritual.
 - f) Sites of major historical events such as battlefields where group members died. Sites where groups are thought to have originated, emerged, or been created. Pilgrimage or mythic pathways where groups or individuals retrace the journeys and reenact events described in myths and in the lives of mythic and other figures. Lakes, rivers, springs, and water associated with life and the vital forces that sustain it.
 - j) Areas or sites associated with prophets and teachers such as Smohalla, Handsome Lake, Sweet Medicine, and others.
- Ethnographic investigation of several hundred sacred sites suggests strongly that they are an essential feature of American Indian ritual practice. Without access to them, practice would be infringed or prevented altogether in certain cases. Likewise, all known groups possess a body of beliefs concerning appropriate times and rituals that must be performed at such sites. The more important a sacred site is in the ritual life of a group, the more numerous symbolic representations it will have in art, music, and myth. It has also become clear in this review that sacred sites also have very diverse functions in that they serve to objectify key cultural symbols, illustrate dominant religious metaphors, and sustain patterns of social, economic, and political organization. Sacred sites can also serve as indicators of cultural unity as seen among the various medicine wheels described by the Arapaho and their neighbors of the Northern and Central High Plains. In general, sacred sites lend concreteness to the less visible systems of linkages within and among different cultural groups. Sacred symbol systems, when superimposed on geography, give to geography a significance and intelligibility similar to relatives such as father, mother, or simply kinsmen. Through ritual, sacred sites function to create a conceptual and emotional parallelism between the objective order of the universe, the realm of the spirits, and the intellectual constructs of American Indian cultures. They are portals between the world of humans and the world of spirits through which sacred power can be attained and spirits contacted. Such sites give order to both geographic and social space, and by thus ordering natural space and time they give order to all that exists.
- Sacred sites involving a conjunction of geographical, social, seasonal, and other transitions enhance opportunities to access the sacred. In observing these *conjunctions of multiple transitions*, I have been struck by the parallel-

ism of these ideas with those of Arnold Van Gennep concerning rites of passage (1960) and others who have demonstrated that the rites of passage in the human life cycle are ritually celebrated as times of great sacredness in the life of the individual. From this perspective, the sacred may be more easily experienced as individuals go through life-cycle transitions, especially when such transitions are conjoined with other transitions such as “first game” or “first fruits” rituals that may coincide with additional transitions such as equinoxes and solstices. Similar transitions in the lunar cycle in which the first quarter, second quarter, third quarter, and full moon are seen as paralleling the human life cycle in birth, adolescence, marriage, and death are further transitions in nature that may coincide with transitions in the lives of individuals and communities. In Native North America the conjunction of multiple transitions provides heightened opportunities for accessing the sacred, especially at points of geographical and environmental transition such as mountaintops, waterfalls, cliffs, and other breaks in the landscape.

Conclusion

From this view, therefore, sacred sites and sacred geography among cultures of Native North America function as fundamental ingredients of ritual. Points of geographical transition are joined with multiple transitions in the seasons, the sun, the moon, the life cycle of the individual, and the rhythm of community life to form conjunctions of multiple transitions that become especially powerful access points to the sacred or hierophanies. This view of sacredness and sacred geography stresses the embeddedness of the sacred in all phenomena, distinguishes between the general sacredness of all things and the specific sacredness of access points or portals to the sacred. It also notes the importance of conjunctions of multiple transitions in the individual life cycle, in nature, in community, and in tribal life, and how such multiple transitions help establish the times of greatest sacredness and ritual efficacy of sacred sites. It rejects the Durkheimian view that the sacred is a domain set aside or forbidden, and agrees more with the view of Eliade (1964, 1969, 1972) that the sacred can be accessed and experienced directly through ritual practice at appropriate times and in geographical locations.

Deward Walker

Further Reading

- Carrasco, David. “Foreword.” In Philip P. Arnold. *Eating Landscape*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 1999.
- Carrasco, David. “A Perspective for a Study of Religious Dimensions in Chicano Experience: *Bless Me Ultima* as a Religious Text.” Paper presented to the Chicano Studies Colloquium at the University of California, Santa Barbara, 12 April 1979.

- Durkheim, Emile. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1947.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. New York: Meridian Books, 1972.
- Eliade, Mircea. *The Quest*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1964.
- Harrington, John Peabody. “The Ethnogeography of the Tewa Indians,” in *Twenty-ninth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1907–1908*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1908.
- Townsend, Richard F. “Pyramid and Sacred Mountain.” In Anthony F. Aveni and Gary Urton, eds. *Ethnoastronomy and Archaeoastronomy in the American Tropics*. New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1982.
- Van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960.
- Vecsey, Christopher. *Handbook of American Indian Religious Freedom*. New York: The Crossroads Publishing Co., 1991.
- Vogt, Evon Z. *Zinacantan: A Maya Community in the Highlands of Chiapas*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969.
- Vogt, Evon Z. “Structural and Conceptual Replication in Zinacantan Culture.” *American Anthropologist* LXVII (1965), 342–53.
- Walker, Deward E., Jr. “Protection of American Indian Sacred Geography.” In Christopher Vecsey, ed. *Handbook of American Indian Religious Freedom*. New York: The Crossroads Publishing Co., 1991.
- See also: Eliade, Mircea; Holy Land in Native North America; Indigenous Environmental Network; Landscapes; The Sacred and the Modern World; Sacred Mountains; Sacred Space/Place.

Sacred Groves of Africa

Sacred groves, which may be forest patches, clusters of trees and even individual trees, are recognized by many African ethnic groups; this recognition often implies that “the community has established a covenant with deities or other sacred entities to refrain from certain uses of the environment” (Lebbie and Freudemberger 1996: 303). Any attempt to do more than list well-known examples of sacred groves, for example, by providing a classification of these sites according to various criteria, runs into many problems. By their very nature, sacred groves are objects of fear and respect, about which people are reluctant to share information with outsiders. In the early years of colonial rule knowledgeable local community members hid much arcane information from colonial officers and missionaries; more recently, many elements of traditional