

(UNIT 6) Indigenous Religious Traditions and the Environment

While the world's major faiths are often the primary focus of study where religion and the environment is concerned, increasing attention has been given to the ecological outlook of the thousands of localized traditions often grouped together under the term 'Indigenous'. In point of fact, since these Indigenous religions are inexorably tied to the bioregions in which they originated – in other words, that the experiences, stories, and rituals of Indigenous peoples have, and continue to be, shaped by the natural world around them – it is commonly recognized they can make a unique and valuable contribution to contemporary discussion of green issues. The purpose of this seventh unit is to examine the nature of this contribution. In order to address the topic in sufficient detail, it will not attempt to engage with the perspectives of Indigenous societies around the globe. Rather, the unit pays specific attention to the ecological potential of the Indigenous traditions of North America.

Essential Reading

There are two articles that will help orient you to the topic of Native American environmentalism. In the first ('**Indigenous Lifeways and Ecology**' – link on Moodle), John Grim, a leading expert in Native American perspectives on the environment, identifies a handful of themes that emerge from an engagement with the traditions of Indigenous communities. These include kinship, traditional environmental knowledge, and cosmology. In the second, longer article ('**Indigenous Americans: Spirituality and Ecos**' – PDF file on Moodle), Jack D. Forbes, a Native American scholar and activist, draws on oral traditions and the words of Indigenous thinkers and leaders in order to sketch out Native American attitudes towards the natural world. Like Grim, Forbes identifies the notion of kinship as central to Native American thought, viewing it as the antidote to a reductionist understanding of nature. Ecology, he argues, must be broadened so as to include 'the realistic study of how living centers of awareness interact with all of their surroundings'. Put another way, it must acknowledge that human beings belong to 'the great totality of existence' (*Wemi Tali*) and do not exist above, or apart from, the natural world.

The reading for this unit continues with the opening two chapters of Joy Porter's ***Native American Environmentalism: Land, Spirit, and the Idea of Wilderness*** (PDF files on Moodle). The first chapter provides a critique of 'wilderness thinking' (i.e. the view of 'wilderness areas' as innocent and pristine that led to the creation of America's national parks and, ultimately, to the destruction of many of its Indigenous communities), contrasting this separatist worldview with the more holistic vision at the heart of Native American culture and belief. In chapter 2, Porter delves further into Indigenous approaches to space, place, and land, while also responding to objections raised by some over the environmental record of Indian peoples. Included in the PDF file for this second chapter is a section from chapter 3 on the role of animism within traditional Native American perspectives on life and community.

Next are two further essays by John Grim. In the entry on Indigenous traditions for *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (**'Indigenous Traditions: Religion and Ecology'** – link on Moodle), Grim analyses Indigenous 'lifeways' according to four interrelated aspects or 'embodiments': self, society, nature, and cosmos. These aspects, he says, interact with each other in such complex, dynamic ways so as to be inseparable. For this reason, Indigenous perspectives may be considered 'integral and primary voices in the emerging dialogue of religions and ecology'. Less theoretical (and, in some ways, easier to get to grips with than his essay for *The Oxford Handbook*) is Grim's account of the Winter Dance, a ritual of the Salish/Okanagan peoples of the Pacific Northwest that 'facilitates traditional environmental knowledge of land, species, and food that nurtures the village community' (***Ecology and Religion*, ch. 8** – PDF file on Moodle). That this ceremony continues to be performed speaks of Indigenous peoples' commitment to maintaining sacred relations with the natural world around them, even in the face of colonization, displacement, and cultural subversion.

The final two articles for this unit deal not so much with Indigenous attitudes themselves as non-native perceptions of these attitudes. In an entry for the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, Shephard Krech III confronts the image of the 'Ecological Indian', contending that the reality is far more complex than the stereotype would suggest (**'American Indians as "First Ecologists"'** – PDF file on Moodle). This argument is developed more fully in Krech's seminal study, *The Ecological Indian* (more on which below). A slightly different approach to outsider responses to Native American religious practices is taken by Bron Taylor who, in one of his many essays on 'Radical Environmentalism', examines the cultural appropriation of Indigenous spirituality (**'Earthen Spirituality or Cultural Genocide? Radical Environmentalism's Appropriation of Native American Spirituality'** – PDF file on Moodle). Here, Taylor examines the dynamics of, and positions on, such appropriation, assessing its impact on Native American cultural integrity and survival.

Suggested Further Reading

As noted above, Shepard Krech III has written at length about (what he considers to be) stereotyped notions of Native American environmental attitudes. ***The Ecological Indian: Myth and History*** generated significant discussion in academic circles at the turn of the millennium, garnering praise and criticism in equal measure. Interest in Krech's thesis has even led to the publication of a collection of responses (***Native Americans and the Environment: Perspectives on the Ecological Indian***). Unfortunately, neither Krech's work nor the aforementioned anthology is available from the University library. Should you be able to locate these texts elsewhere, they are certainly worth consulting. Also recommended is the volume of essays edited by John Grim (***Indigenous Traditions and Ecology: The Interbeing of Cosmology and Community***), although again, this is not available from the University library (the introduction to the book can be read on the website for The Forum on Religion and Ecology Yale, see link on Moodle).