

(UNIT 7) 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 two items that draw attention to the values and practices of particular Native American and First Nations communities. In her entry on '**North America**' for the *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (PDF file on Moodle), Melissa K. Nelson considers the cosmovision of the Anishinaabeg, highlighting four major elements that can be understood as promoting ethical relations with the non-human world. The essay also identifies some of the Indigenous ecological movements that have been inspired by such cosmovisions, specifically the Idle No More, Climate Justice, and Indigenous Rights movements. It is the Winter Dance, meanwhile, that is the focus of chap. 8 of Grim and Tucker's *Ecology and Religion* (PDF file on Moodle). That this ritual of the Salish/Okanagan peoples of the Pacific Northwest 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', reflects on 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 are two volumes, one edited by John Grim (*Indigenous Traditions and Ecology: The Interbeing of Cosmology and Community*) and the other by Melissa Nelson and Dan Shilling (*Traditional Ecological Knowledge: Learning from Indigenous Practices for Environmental Sustainability*). The volume edited by Nelson and Shilling is given on the Moodle page as a PDF file.

Questions to Consider

- 1) What, according to the readings for this unit, are some of the ecological themes that emerge from an engagement with the traditions of the Indigenous communities of North America? Are there any you find particularly striking or appealing?
- 2) How important is a sense of place for the Indigenous communities of North America? How does this compare to other religious traditions studied in this module?
- 3) The image of the 'Ecological Indian' gained particular traction in the 1960s and 70s. To what extent is this image true to reality, in your opinion?
- 4) How far would you agree with the conclusions drawn by Bron Taylor re. the moral ambivalence of the appropriation of Native American spirituality by non-Natives?

- 5) How would you summarize the ecological potential of Native American lifeways?
What is the contribution of Indigenous concepts, values and practices to the formulation of a 21st century environmental ethic?