

Reflections on Shamanism

The Tribal Healer and the Technological Trance

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IN THE COURSE of my studies into Native American religions some of the most thoughtful questions often put to me concern the temporary manifestations of these tribal religious traditions. "Do American Indians still practice their rituals? Do they still smoke the sacred pipe? Is the earth still a numinous reality for the Indians?" While these questions can be answered affirmatively they cause me to reflect upon the interest coming from contemporary American society regarding tribal traditions.

These inquiries are not prompted merely by an academic study of tribal cultures or a comparative investigation of religious experience. Rather I sense that these questions rise out of our own ongoing investigation into the meaning of our technological world which seems to be at such a distance from tribal traditions. Moreover, we wonder about the vitality of rituals which no longer seem effective in the modern world. So we ask, "Have they endured?" and the underlying question seems to linger, "Will we endure?"

In this sense endurance is akin to "power." For it is the ability to contact and channel power that enables a person to meet the rigors of life. The manner in which a people evoke this efficacious power is usually identified with religious activity. Emile Durkheim expressed it this way: Since power has been made to embrace all of reality, the physical world as well as the moral one, the forces that move bodies as well as those that move minds have been conceived in a religious form. This is how the most diverse methods and practices, both those that make possible the continuation of the moral life and those serving the material life, are directly or indirectly derived from religion.

The manner in which a society conceives and channels these "forces" provides a unique insight into their religious vitality. Power and its implementation are proposed here as corresponding to what Clifford Geertz discusses as world view and ethos. Religion and the rich symbolic world associated with it may be said to bridge a people's understanding of the world and the style of life they maintain. Ostensibly the tribal and technological worlds cannot be alternately discussed without an awareness of their marked differences in world view and ethos. Yet "power"