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GOD is Red: A Native View of Religion

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INTRODUCTION



WHEN I WAS VERY SMALL AND TRAVELING with my father in South Dakota, he would frequently point out buttes, canyons, river crossings, and old roads and tell me their stories. In those days before interstate highways, when roads were often two ruts along the side of a fence, it was possible to observe the places up close, and so indelible memories accrued around certain features of the landscape because of the proximity of the place and because of the stories that went with them. He seemed to remember details that other people had missed or never knew. He could point out buttes where vision quests were held, the hill near Standing Rock where the woman lived with the wolves, and obscure landings along the Missouri where the people crossed or where Jack Sully, shirt-tail relative and famous bandit, escaped from a posse.

I came to revere certain locations and passed the stories along as best I could, although visits to these places were few and far between. It seemed to me that the remembrance of human activities at certain locations vested them with a kind of sacredness that could not have been obtained otherwise. Gradually I began to understand a distinction in the sacredness of places. Some sites were sacred in themselves, others had been cherished by generations of people and were now part of their history and, as such, revered by them and part of their very being. As the Indian protest movement gained momentum and attracted many young people to its activities,

much of the concentration of energies was devoted to the restoration of sacred sites and the resumption of ceremonies there.

God Is Red did not receive much of a welcome when it hit the book stores upon its release in 1973, and, since it was something of a departure from what I had written earlier, it was not even reviewed by most Indian journals and newspapers. Nevertheless, as people tried to give voice to the concerns over getting lands back and gaining better access to sacred sites located on public lands, the book provided a framework in which the demands for lands made sense. As important as the concern for lands was the need for an affirmation that American Indians had their own tribal religious traditions and did not need to be homogenized among “other” religions.

I am most grateful to those people, Indian and non-Indian, who gave the book a chance and tried to see its message. Over the years, it has become useful to people of all tribes and it is a handy place to find a quasi-philosophical view of what the sacred might mean to Indian people. Over and over, I encounter people who found the book to be useful to them in directing their path back to a more tribal and spiritual existence. The book has led me on in my search for a way to understand the power and spiritual capabilities of our ancestors.

Reflecting back on the old men I observed as a boy and the utter sincerity of their belief, their humility and hesitancy to rush forward with answers to important questions, in writing the book I was led back to a great appreciation of our religious traditions. Since writing the book, I have been gradually led to believe that the old stories must be taken literally if at all possible, that deep secrets and a deeper awareness of the complexity of our universe was experienced by our ancestors, and that something of their beliefs and experiences can be ours once again.

Black Elk in his vision saw many hoops of many people and we always recognize that there are other traditions with their ceremonies, so that sacredness is not restricted to any particular group of people and their beliefs. Yet an examination of tribal traditions will show that Indian paths to an encounter with the Great Mystery of life were generally straight and fulfilling. Almost any tribe can be examined and the result will be a bevy of stories about how the people used spiritual powers to live, and these

powers are almost always made available to us in a sacred place where time and space do not define the terms of the experience.

Our perception of the physical world is in rapid change today, and many of the old stories about separate physical dimensions in which spirituality reigned supreme now sound possible if not probable. I can now find justification—and a possible explanation—for the old stories that say a tribe came from the stars or emerged from some mysterious underground location. As I have gained knowledge and seen others share their visions with me, I conclude that our ancestors lived in a strange condition in which they were in touch with the spirits constantly, and I see that as a goal for our present activities.

Space, as defined in this book, is determinative of the way that we experience things. Time is subservient to it because to have time, there must be a measurable distance to travel during which time can pass. Thus to say that the world has many sacred spaces—worlds under or within mountains, caves that come and go according to the kinds of ceremonies conducted at certain locations—these things now interest me, and I believe have attracted others to more closely examine our religious heritage. It is this unbroken connection that we have with the spirit world that will allow us to survive as a people.

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NOTES

1. Virginia Armstrong, *I Have Spoken* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1971), xviii. It seemed to be a startling prediction of what I had thought was developing for years; combined with the series of grave-robbing incidents it is little short of prophetic.
2. Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 299.
3. Luther Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1933), 248.

CHAPTER 4

THINKING IN TIME AND SPACE

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THE DIVISION OF DOMESTIC IDEOLOGIES may appear to be quite artificial to many people. Traditionally we have been taught to define differences neither by ancestral backgrounds nor cultural attitudes but by political persuasions. Conservative and liberal, terms that initially described political philosophies, have taken on the aspect of being able to stand for cultural attitudes of fairly distinct content. Liberals appear to have more sympathy for humanity, while conservatives worship corporate freedom and self-help doctrines underscoring individual responsibility. The basic philosophical differences between liberals and conservatives are not fundamental, however, because both find in the idea of history a thesis by which they can validate their ideas.

When the domestic ideology is divided according to American Indian and Western European immigrant, however, the fundamental difference is one of great philosophical importance. American Indians hold their lands—places—as having the highest possible meaning, and all their statements are made with this reference point in mind. Immigrants review the movement of their ancestors across the continent as a steady progression of basically good events and experiences, thereby placing history—time—in the best possible light. When one group is concerned with the philosophical problem of space and the other with the philosophical problem of time, then the statements of either group do not make much sense when

transferred from one context to the other without the proper consideration of what is taking place.

Western European peoples have never learned to consider the nature of the world discerned from a spatial point of view. And a singular difficulty faces peoples of Western European heritage in making a transition from thinking in terms of time to thinking in terms of space. The very essence of Western European identity involves the assumption that time proceeds in a linear fashion; further it assumes that at a particular point in the unraveling of this sequence, the peoples of Western Europe became the guardians of the world. The same ideology that sparked the Crusades, the Age of Exploration, the Age of Imperialism, and the recent crusade against Communism all involve the affirmation that time is peculiarly related to the destiny of the people of Western Europe. And later, of course, the United States.

The postwar generation of which we are a part has refused to accept any alteration of this fundamental premise. It is particularly revealing that the first major doctrine enunciated as an anti-Communist foreign policy was that of containment. Through containment it was believed the spread of Communism could be restricted to certain geographical areas from which no further extensions of Communist ideologies could emanate. The anachronistic nature of this theory should have been apparent. Western political ideas came to depend on spatial restrictions of what were essentially nonspatial ideas. The inherent contradiction of opposing dissimilar definitions within a single theory proved fruitless to the colonial powers in Southeast Asia, Africa, and India, and led to unjustifiable woes in Central America and military adventurism elsewhere.

Without venturing further into the field of foreign affairs, it may be well to note in passing that the determination of two American presidents, fighting in Vietnam, not to be the "first to lose a war," when winning that war in any final sense would have meant total destruction of a land and a people, would seem to indicate the extent to which Western peoples—and particularly Americans—have taken the dimension of time or history as an absolute value. Our withdrawal from Southeast Asia would seem to demonstrate that in most military collisions, history is clearly negated by geography. We have seen this phenomenon before in the two classic,

unsuccessful attempts by Napoleon and Hitler to conquer Russia, in which that country's vast interior subdued military forces that appeared to be riding the crest of historical change. We may now be facing that phenomenon again in the Middle East.

The disclaimer of colonialism in recent years has presented Western peoples with a major dilemma. Deprived of their traditional source of wealth from the undeveloped and former colonial nations, they now have little choice but to seek ways of rechanneling their present wealth through the various forms of social organization already present domestically. A certain inertia has been achieved, perhaps unwittingly, that means a major shift in political thinking among Western peoples. The creation of wealth today is more dependent on new technology and manipulation of the tax laws than on the exploitation of untapped resources. That is not to say that exploitation of mineral and other resources will not continue. As undeveloped nations, such as those in Africa or the Middle East, continue their own growth, severe modifications of exploitation must occur, and more sophisticated forms of colonialism, such as sanctions and embargoes, must be created if Western countries are not to suffer economic collapse.

It is doubtful that many Americans understand the meaning of this shift from the colonialist attitude. At best it means the humanization of peoples who for centuries were considered merely producers of raw materials and consumers of those products they were required to purchase. At worst, the end of one form of colonialism means the beginning of a movement to feudalize political systems around the globe so as to stabilize the economic conditions of the more affluent nations. Either approach means that the ecological problem is not dealt with, the problem of technological dehumanization is not reduced, and the breakdown of individual and community identity is not reversed.

There can be little doubt that a major part of the Western world is now suffering from an increasingly complicated task of revitalizing institutions to prevent collapse. Revitalization has been primarily an effort to force outmoded institutions to respond to novel situations for which they were not created. If we take Toffler's *Future Shock* seriously (and there does not seem to be sufficient reason to consider it a trivial analysis), or if we recognize the logical conclusions of the thinking of both Buckminster Fuller and

Marshall McLuhan, we discover neither a planet Earth of the spaceship model nor an instantaneous universe of communications linking a global village, but the disappearance of time itself as a limiting factor of our experience. In a world in which communications are nearly instantaneous and simultaneous experiences are possible, it must be spaces and places that distinguish us from one another, not time nor history.

The world, therefore, is not a global village so much as a series of non-homogeneous pockets of identity that must eventually come into conflict because they represent different historical arrangements of emotional energy. What these concentrations of emotional energy will produce, how they will understand themselves, and what minimovements will emerge from them are among the unanswered questions of our time. If we believe that religion has a presence in human societies in any fundamental sense, then we can no longer speak of universal religions in the customary manner. Rather we must be prepared to confront religion and religious activities in new and novel ways. The recognition that there is no homogeneous sense of time shared by all societies must certainly become apparent to us if it is not already clear. We can and must, therefore, create a new understanding of universal planetary history.

Beneath the minimovements of activity on the local level, we will most certainly see the emergence of religious movements that appear out of time, movements that have been somehow triggered either by the influences of the places in which they have originated or movements of restoration that seek to invoke some type of authentic religious experience to validate the identity of the small ethnic, racial, or religious group. Thus, Southern California can be the hotbed of Christian fundamentalist beliefs and at the same time support a substantial number of devil-worshippers and Satanists. Both movements are disconnected from a universal passage of time and are a product of the concentration of beliefs as modified by their human and natural environments.

Religion has often been seen as an evolutionary process in which mankind progresses from primitive superstitions to logically perfected codes of conduct, from a multiplicity of deities to a monotheistic religion with well-developed institutions and creeds honed to philosophical purity of expression. The validity of most religious traditions is believed to be

their ability to explain the cosmos, not their potential to provide a wide range of spiritual experiences. But monotheism, as Nathan Soderblum has pointed out, is usually the product of the political unification of a diverse society more often than it is the result of a revelation of ultimate reality.

In the western tradition, revelation has generally been interpreted as the communication to human beings of a divine plan, the release of new information and insights when the deity has perceived that mankind has reached the fullness of time and can now understand additional knowledge about the ultimate nature of our world. Thus, what has been the manifestation of deity in a particular local situation is mistaken for a truth applicable to all times and places, a truth so powerful that it must be impressed upon peoples who have no connection to the event or to the cultural complex in which it originally made sense. The recounting of the event becomes its major value and both metaphysics and ethics are believed to be contained in the description of the event. Ultimately the religion becomes a matter of imposing the ethical perspective derived from reprocessing the religious experience on foreign cultures and not in following whatever moral dictates might have been gleaned from the experience.

The question that the so-called world religions have not satisfactorily resolved is whether or not religious experience can be distilled from its original cultural context and become an abstract principle that is applicable to all peoples in different places and at different times. The persistent emergence of religious movements and the zeal with which they are pursued would seem to suggest that cultural context, time, and place are the major elements of revelation and the content is illusory. If not illusory, it is subject to so many cultural qualifications that it is not suitable for transmission to other societies without doing severe damage to both the message of revelation and the society which receives it.

American Indians and other tribal peoples did not take this path in interpreting revelations and religious experiences. The structure of their religious traditions is taken directly from the world around them, from their relationships with other forms of life. Context is therefore all-important for both practice and the understanding of reality. The places where revelations were experienced were remembered and set aside as locations where, through rituals and ceremonials, the people could once again

communicate with the spirits. Thousands of years of occupancy on their lands taught tribal peoples the sacred landscapes for which they were responsible and gradually the structure of ceremonial reality became clear. It was not what people believed to be true that was important but what they experienced as true. Hence revelation was seen as a continuous process of adjustment to the natural surroundings and not as a specific message valid for all times and places.

The vast majority of Indian tribal religions, therefore, have a sacred center at a particular place, be it a river, a mountain, a plateau, valley, or other natural feature. This center enables the people to look out along the four dimensions and locate their lands, to relate all historical events within the confines of this particular land, and to accept responsibility for it. Regardless of what subsequently happens to the people, the sacred lands remain as permanent fixtures in their cultural or religious understanding. Thus, many tribes now living in Oklahoma, but formerly from the eastern United States, still hold in their hearts the sacred locations of their history, and small groups travel to obscure locations in secret to continue tribal ceremonial life.

Other religions also have a sense of sacred places. The Holy Land has historically been a battlefield of three world religions each of which has particular sacred places it cherishes. But these places are appreciated primarily for their historical significance and do not provide the sense of permanency and rootedness that the Indian sacred places represent. European Christian shrines are often standing on the ruins of former temples and holy places of the original peoples of Europe, indicating that something of the sacred always infuses a site regardless of the religious expression that may temporarily possess it. The ancient Chinese developed an incredibly complex system of geomancy in order to make human habitations conform to the sacred landscape of China. But of all these expressions of human religious experiences, none has so faithfully remained close to the original location and original revelation as those of the tribal peoples of North America.

The nature of revelation at sacred places is often of such a personal nature as to preclude turning it into a subject of missionary activities. Thus most Indian tribes will not reveal the location of sacred places unless they

are compelled through dire circumstances to do so. But having once identified a location as having sacred properties, they will not then reveal the kinds of ceremonies that are supposed to be held there. Sacred places thus inform us of the particularity of revelation—that it is not a universal message to be placed in secular or immature hands for distribution. Rather it is as intimate as our own personal thoughts that we would never utter in profane ears. (See chapter 16 for an in-depth discussion of sacred places.)

One of the features of Western religious practice has been the dependence on teaching and preaching techniques. Indeed, take away the preaching and teaching and there is very little substance left in many world religions. Christianity has been singularly involved in proclaiming the “good news” that involves the articulation of an impossibly complex scenario involving original sin, a cosmic redeemer, the catastrophic end of the planet, and transportation of the “saved” to a new heaven where presumably people will behave much better than they did on the old earth. Preaching and teaching have, as their goal, the possibility of changing individual personality and behavior, presumably in a manner more pleasing to the deity. A glance at the historical record will show that the hope of transformation is rarely realized and never seen on a large scale.

Changing the conception of religious reality from a temporal to a spatial framework involves surrendering the place of teaching and preaching as elements of religion. Rearrangement of individual behavioral patterns is incidental to the communal involvement in ceremonies and the continual renewal of community relationships with the holy places of revelation. Ethics flow from the ongoing life of the community and are virtually indistinguishable from the tribal or communal customs. There is little dependence on the concept of progress either on an individual or community basis as a means of evaluating the impact of the religious practices. Value judgments involve present community realities and not a reliance on part of future golden ages toward which the community is moving or from which the community has veered.

In conjunction with this notion of eliminating the teaching and preaching of abstract propositions, the gulf between religious reality and other aspects of community experience is not nearly as wide. A religion defined according to temporal considerations is continually placed on the

defensive in maintaining its control over the interpretation of historical events. If, like the Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament, political, economic, and cultural events can be interpreted in a religious format, then religious and secular time can be made to coincide—at least for a time. But how does one continue the interpretation of history over a long period of time? The Exodus may well reveal divine intervention in addition to being a political event of great significance. Do all subsequent political events of comparable magnitude then become religious experiences? Obviously it becomes increasingly difficult to give a religious interpretation to secular events, and the basic framework of interpretation begins to beg credibility.

Western religion seems to have resolved this problem of interpretation by secularizing itself. Instead of working toward the Kingdom of God on Earth, history becomes the story of a particular race fulfilling its manifest destiny. Thus, Western history is written as if the torch of enlightenment was fated to march from the Mediterranean to the San Francisco Bay. But reaching the western edge of North America, history then must inexorably move to Japan, and it has appeared to do so, stripping the American experience of its cosmic validity. The Cold War retooled this concept so that the interpretation of the past half decade suggested that democracy was the favorite child of divine concern. But Russia is broke and America nearly so, and it takes incredible will power to pretend that history is the unfolding of a divine plan for humanity.

A variant of manifest destiny is the propensity to judge a society or civilization by its technology and to see in society's effort to subdue and control nature as the fulfillment of divine intent. This interpretation merely adopts the secular doctrine of cultural evolution and attaches it to theological language. If we factor in the environmental damage created by technology the argument falls flat. In less than two and a half centuries American whites have virtually destroyed a whole continent and large areas of the United States are now almost uninhabitable—even so we seek to “sacrifice” large rural areas to toxic waste dumps. The idea of defining religious reality along temporal lines, therefore, is to adopt the pretense that the earth simply does not matter, that human affairs alone are important.

Restructuring religious understanding to anchor experience in sacred places enables us to avoid the complications that temporal definitions

create. We are left with the question of the function of religion in human society. Was it meant for us to remain tied to a particular place without an adequate technology and refusing to use the intelligence that our species obviously possesses? How do we understand religious experiences if we are confined to one or simply a few locations where religious events can take place? These questions are important but they represent a tendency to make principles absolute and describe a polarity that does not and should not exist in theological discussions. Just as the temporal world religions find a place for sacred sites, so spatial religions deal with the passage of time and the increasing complexity that it brings to human societies by attaching stories to the sacred places.

Tribal religions are actually complexes of attitudes, beliefs, and practices fine-tuned to harmonize with the lands on which the people live. It is not difficult to understand that the Hopi people, living in the arid plateau and canyonlands of northern Arizona, had need of a rain dance to ensure the success of their farming. Here place and religion have such an obvious parallel that anyone can understand the connection. It becomes exceedingly more complicated, however, when we learn that the Lummi and other tribes of the Pacific Northwest also had a rain dance. Perhaps once or twice in a person's lifetime the West Coast would have an exceedingly heavy snow storm. The snow would bury the longhouses in which the people lived, and if it remained deep for any significant period of time, the Lummi would be unable to get out and hunt and fish and would starve to death. A man with powers to make rain would then perform the rain dance, and the snow would cease falling, turning to rain that melted the snow and prevented the people from being snowbound.

Space has limitations that are primarily geographical, and any sense of time arising within the religious experience becomes secondary to present geographical existence. The hazard that appears within the spatial conceptions of religion is the effect that missionary activity has on its integrity when it tries to leave its homeland. Can it leave the land of its nativity and embark on a program of world or continental conquest without losing its religious essence in favor of purely political or economic considerations? Are ceremonies restricted to particular places, and do they become useless in a foreign land? These questions have never been critically examined

within Western religious circles, because of the preemption of temporal considerations by Christian theology.

Time has an unusual limitation. It must begin and end at some real points, or it must be conceived as cyclical in nature, endlessly allowing the repetition of patterns of possibilities. Judgment inevitably intrudes into the conception of religious reality whenever a temporal definition is used. Almost always the temporal consideration revolves around the problem of good and evil, and the inconsistencies that arise as this basic relationship is defined turn religious beliefs into ineffectual systems of ethics. But it would seem likely that whereas religions that are spatially determined can create a sense of sacred time that originates in the specific location, it is exceedingly difficult for a religion, once bound to history, to incorporate sacred places into its doctrines. Space generates time, but time has little relationship to space.

The problem of religious imagery is also confounded when we shift from temporal patterns of explanation. The procedure by which religious imagery arises is still the subject of great debate among theologians. It is such a serious problem it has burst the boundaries of religious thought and become the subject of psychoanalytical investigation. How do people conceive of the symbols, doctrines, insights, and sequences in which we find religious ideas expressed? How do we come to conceive deity in certain forms and not others?

Theological explanations that depend on temporal world views would appear to be relatively helpless in examining this question. Perhaps the best that can be said is that temporal theologians place great reliance upon the poetic imagination as the source of religious symbolism. The best and most lofty considerations of a society or culture over a period of time eventually distill themselves into a poetic mythology that comes to express the community's experienced realities. That is about as close as we can come when using temporal conceptions of religious reality—eventual distillation of concepts and symbols.

If the spatial dimension of religion is considered, the answer would appear to be fairly clear. Something is observed or experienced by a community, and the symbols and sequences of the mythology are given together in an event that appears so much out of the ordinary experiential

sequence as to impress itself upon the collective memories of the community for a sufficiently long duration of time. The basic myth may be refined to some extent, but it is not subject to very much editing because it is the common property of the community, not the exclusive property of the community's poets or religious leaders. The symbols are always representations of the concrete and the place always has precise location.

When considering the multitude of flood stories, for example, we can suggest the possibility of a planet-wide flood at some specific time, because of the appearance of the story in many diverse religious traditions. If we accept the spatial dimensions of religion can we reach reasonably profound conclusions? The flood, experienced in a number of places, gave rise to the legends that recorded memories of the flood. These accounts can be related to the geography of the region, recording the date of occupation of the location. The twist that each locale represents give us more specific information on how the religious experience was received and what it came to mean to the people indigenous to the site. Thus, instead of general principles that support one or another world religion, the flood becomes primarily a historical event with moral and ethical codes particular to the religion reporting the flood experience and explained by the complex of religious events within each tradition.

Remaining committed to temporal concepts, we can only conclude that at a certain stage in evolution it became necessary for societies—extremely diverse and with little in common—to have evolved a myth about a flood. Or, as it is the case with Christianity and Judaism, the possibility of a world flood is taken as proof that the religion is the only correct religion. It does not seem possible for adherents of these religions to conceive of the flood as a universal geological event to which each cultural tradition has attached religious significance. Theological explanations frequently become abstract, and the universal need for baptism was even once advanced as a sufficient reason for the origin of the story. Yet all religious traditions have not depended on baptism, and there seems to be no particular doctrinal need to have created a flood story in the first place.

We are virtually helpless to understand the symbols, stories, doctrines, and ideals that religions have traditionally espoused if we are content to define religion according to temporal terms of explanation. Once we leave

time behind and consider the nature of geographical events of extraordinary nature, we can begin to project the possibilities for understanding the nature of religious language and the efficacy of religious doctrines as an explanation of man's religious experiences because symbols are rooted in real events in specific locations. It is, if we will consider it, a very different thing to create a religion out of the best of ideas, symbols, and explanations, and to pass down memories of religious experience absent speculation and reinterpretation.

There appears to be a peculiar relationship between thinking in temporal and spatial terms. We are inevitably involved, whether we like it or not, with time; but when attempting to explain the nature of our experiences, we are often not necessarily involved with spatial considerations once we have taken time seriously. The whole nature of the subject of ethics appears to validate this peculiarity. Ethical systems are notorious for having the ability to relate concepts and doctrines to every abstract consideration except the practical situations with which we become involved. Ethics seems to involve an abstract individual making clear, objective decisions that involve principles but not people. Ideology unleashed without being subjected to the critique to the real world proves demoniac at best. Spatial thinking requires that ethical systems be related directly to the physical world and real human situations, not abstract principles, are believed to be valid at all times and under all circumstances. One could project, therefore, that space must in a certain sense precede time as a consideration for thought. If time becomes our primary consideration, we never seem to arrive at the reality of our existence in places but instead are always directed to experiential and abstract interpretations rather than to the experiences themselves.

A great segment of the American public has been rudely pushed beyond the traditional temporal Western doctrines by the influence of the modern communications media. This is the true nature of the problem of postwar American society. The meaninglessness and alienation discernible in our generation results partially from our allowing time to consume space. The shift in thinking from temporal considerations to spatial considerations may be seen in a number of minimovements by which we are struggling to define American society. Ecology, the new left politics, self-

determination of goals by local communities, and citizenship participation all seem to be efforts to recapture a sense of place and a rejection of the traditional American dependence on progress—a temporal concept—as the measure of American identity.

A great many other considerations could be made in attempting to define how our consciousness is gradually shifting away from Western cultural and religious patterns. Development schemes of the federal government began as early as the Great Depression, when the Tennessee Valley Authority marked the first departure in programming from traditional patterns—railroads, settlement, and industrial development by private parties—to federally sponsored projects to enhance regional development. Since that time, the Missouri Valley Authority, the Appalachian Development Authority, the Four Corners Development Authority, and the river compacts of states have evolved, so that geographic considerations are playing a much more important role in how we conceive social, economic, and political problems.

The field of religion has been peculiarly isolated from this development in American thought. Rather, theological considerations have fluctuated from Fundamentalism to social gospel and back. If we consider the social gospel and activist church involvement in social problems such as Civil Rights as an indication of concern with the problems of this world and land, we can find even in the theological movements of the past generation a movement away from temporal considerations.

It is doubtful if American society can move very far or very significantly without a major revolution in theological concepts. In a very real sense religious doctrines define the brooding sense of identity without which societies appear helpless to function. The present theological vacuum is being filled to a great degree by efforts to establish exotic religions in America. The great appeal of oriental religions that appear to provide a meaningful answer to contemporary questions, demonism and fascination with satanic cults, and the rejection of traditional mainline denominations for the simplicity of Fundamentalism all seem to indicate that a comprehensive effort to derive a new religious conception of the world is badly needed.

Before we can have a new theological understanding of our situation, however, the tools of analysis of religious ideas must be changed. This will

require a tremendous reversal of ideas that have been held by Western peoples, particularly Christians, for many centuries. Perhaps religions can answer only a few questions concerning our existence; Christian doctrines have attempted in the past to answer everything. Perhaps we will find that the present situation makes it impossible for religion to function at all; perhaps we are stuck with psychodrama and other scientific techniques.

Many religions have been held in deepest contempt because they do not in some manner measure up to the definitions of religion as promulgated by Western/Christian ideas of the nature of religion. They were held invalid, not because they did not provide an understanding of the universe with which that particular society was confronted, but because they did not coincide with ideas held by Western society that is heavily dependent on its technology and nearly independent of its religious ideology.

In almost every instance in which other religions were considered as invalid, it was because the categories of explanation on which they were judged to be false, were those derived primarily from temporal considerations of how the world ought to be. If the categories are turned around and the Christian religion is judged by nontemporal categories, the story becomes somewhat different. In most instances Christianity has either no answer or an extremely inadequate answer to the problems that arise. The difference is notable. While Christianity can project the reality of the after-life—time and eternity—it appears to be incapable of providing any reality to the life in which we are here and now presently engaged—space and the planet Earth.

American Indian tribal religions are among those so downgraded, because they did not fall into the easily constructed categories of religion as defined with temporal concepts and doctrines. Yet in a variety of ways the American public, searching for a sense of authenticity that it cannot find in its own tradition, is turning to American Indians as it wishes to visualize them. It is not simply the nobility of the novelists or the tragic vision of the historians that America is seeking. In a very real sense, the quest is for the religious insight of American Indians and the feeling of authenticity that Indians project.

In seeking the religious reality behind the American Indian tribal existence, Americans are in fact attempting to come to grips with the land that

produced the Indian tribal cultures and their vision of community. Even if they avoid American Indians completely, those Americans seeking a more comprehensive and meaningful life are retracing the steps taken centuries before by Indian tribes as they attempted to come to grips with this land. Recently Congress discussed compensation as a principle of criminal law. The days of the oriental potentate and justice as vengeance may be closing. If so, would not the religion that sees deity as the stern judge of mankind also be fading?

In the pages to come we will deliberately place several concepts of general religious interest under examination. We shall attempt to define in Western terms that nature of Indian tribal religions as they differ in their method of framing questions from a predominantly spatial conception of reality. And we shall discuss traditional Christian solutions to these questions, comparing the two types of answers to learn if any distinct differences do in fact exist.

We cannot, of course, pretend to give an exhaustive answer to any particular question or to present a final definition of either Indian tribal religions or traditional Christian ideas. What is important is that alternative methods of asking questions or of viewing the world may arise. By learning where differences can or do occur at least one thing may become clear. Before any final solution to American history can occur, a reconciliation must be effected between the spiritual owner of the land—American Indians—and the political owner of the land—American whites. Guilt and accusations cannot continue to revolve in a vacuum without some effort at reaching a solution.

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I do not pretend to make a complete analysis of the problems involved here since my original goal was to sketch out on rather broad terms the change in perspective that is required to get people to take the idea of place seriously. Most Americans, raised in a society in which history is all-encompassing, have very little idea of how radically their values would shift if they took

the idea of places, both secular and sacred, seriously. In the two decades since I wrote this chapter, an amazing number of books have been published that deal, in one way or another, with sacred places. It would be interesting to see how many books preceded this one in articulating some kind of theory about the importance of specific place in our outlook and emotional lives.

CHAPTER 5

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THE PROBLEM OF CREATION

INDIAN TRIBAL RELIGIONS AND CHRISTIANITY differ considerably on numerous theological points, but a very major distinction that can be made between the two types of thinking concerns the idea of creation. Christianity has traditionally appeared to place its major emphasis on creation as a specific event while the Indian tribal religions could be said to consider creation as an ecosystem present in a definable place. In this distinction we have again the fundamental problem of whether we consider the reality of our experience as capable of being described in terms of space or time—as “what happened here” or “what happened then.”

Both religions can be said to agree on the role and activity of a creator. Outside of that specific thing, there would appear to be little that the two views share. Tribal religions appear to be there—after confronted with the question of the interrelationship of all things. Christians see creation as the beginning event of a linear time sequence in which a divine plan is worked out, the conclusion of the sequence being an act of destruction bringing the world to an end. The beginning and end of time are of no apparent concern for many tribal religions.

The act of creation is a singularly important event for the Christian. It describes the sequence in which the tangible features of human existence are brought into being, and although some sermons have made much of the element of light that appears in the creation account of Genesis and the