

Lecture 16: Participation, *Shamans*, Vision Quest

Last time we began a discussion of our concluding family of religions, those of the “primal” variety, which are the oldest by far of all the world’s traditions. I explained that the religions in this final group are prehistoric in character, dating back many thousands, perhaps even millions, of years. Most of my lecture was spent describing several common features these traditions all share. Four such characteristics were discussed: the absence of any sharp distinction between the sacred and the profane; their exclusively oral character; their cyclical view of time; and their fascination with sacred place, together with the idea that Nature is a “house of worship” and that all Her creatures are sacraments.

I would like to begin my remarks in this lecture by adding a fifth and final item to this list of common primal qualities. It’s an idea that in a sense combines or synthesizes all the other characteristics: *participation*. “Participation” is meant to describe the relationship primal peoples have with their natural environment. The term was first used in this sense by an early twentieth-century French anthropologist—Lucien Lévy-Bruhl—in an influential book, *How Natives Think* (1910), and it has since acquired something of a technical sense in reference to the modality of consciousness shared by tribal peoples around the world.

In ordinary conversation, we use the verb “participate” to describe what an individual does when he joins in the activities of a larger group. (I’ve also used it, of course, in describing increasingly intense levels of religious involvement.) I can participate in a conversation, a basketball game, or a banquet. When it comes to the primal religions, however, this idea of joining is much more intense and profound. When we think about joining in the activities of the various sorts of groups I’ve mentioned, we assume that the individual, even as a member of the group, retains his own separate identity. The members of a basketball team, for example, can all go home after practice to their personal lives. In the case of the Native Americans and other primal people, however, what the idea of participation means is that the individual’s very identity is in some way defined by his link with his community and the surrounding environment. In fact it would be more accurate to say that from the primal point of view there are *no* “individuals”, at least in our modern sense of the word. In fact there’s no such thing in their view as any completely separate entity, whether human or otherwise. Rather all things are invisibly woven together into a single web,

invisibly and organically linked with each other through their common participation in a sort of spiritual “energy field”.

If you think back to our discussions of the religions of China, especially Confucianism, you’ll recall that they too were far less interested than Westerners in individual identity and were more concerned about the community, the social group. But the Confucian and the American Indian are nonetheless still very different from each other, and the difference is basically this: with Confucianism it’s more the *value* or *worth* of the individual that depends on her social role; but with the Indians and other primal peoples it’s the very *existence* of the individual that depends on the network of relations around her. There’s simply no such thing as a separate self—ethically, spiritually, or even physically.

I don’t know whether you’ve ever asked yourself this question, but where exactly would you say that you are? I’m not asking about the present position of your body as you sit there reading this lecture, but about your *you*—your very self. *Where* is it? In my experience most modern Westerners will answer that question by saying that they feel themselves to be present somewhere in their heads: somewhere behind their eyes and between their ears. In fact this seems to most of us so self-evident that you might object to the idea that any other sensation of “you-ness” is possible. And yet there’s every reason to think that if you’d asked this question of the ancient Greeks, for example, most of them would have answered by saying that their true self was located closer to their hearts than their heads—though here too, as with us, a man’s sense of himself was still attached in some way to his physical body. In total contrast, however—in contrast, that is, to both of these Western views, whether ancient or modern—people from primal cultures seem to experience themselves as bound up with the world as a whole. From the primal point of view people aren’t separated from the world by their skin; the boundaries of the self are more permeable or flexible than they seem to most of us. Where we feel cut off from our environment as outward *observers*, they feel at one with that world as inward *participants*.

The idea of participation, however, extends even further. Not only does it refer to an “interpenetration” between the self and the world; it’s also related to the fact that in the primal worldview all the objects of nature—the animals, plants, rocks, streams, and so forth—are felt to be linked with each other as well to an invisible and immaterial world containing their “archetypes” or spiritual correlates. In this sense participation refers to two sorts of connections: one horizontal and one vertical. Horizontally, it means there is a kind of sympathy or symbiosis between all the

creatures of Nature. What affects any one of them in turn affects them all, and though they may seem to us modern Westerners to be separate entities, there are actually hidden spiritual links between the animals and the plants and the natural forces. Vertically speaking, on the other hand, participation means that there's also a link, once again hidden to the empirical senses, between the physical or bodily forms of the various creatures and certain higher forces and invisible powers. For every given eagle or mountain lion, let's say, there's a corresponding presence or pattern, which we may call the *spirit* of the eagle or the *spirit* of the lion, and which exists beyond time and space in a completely different dimension, a dimension that is superior to the physical or terrestrial world but that is also created by God or the "Great Spirit" and therefore below His own supreme level of being. This "in-between" level is the domain of what Yellowtail refers to as the "little people" and "medicine fathers" (see *A Book of Saints*, pp. 121, 126).

This way of looking at Reality results in a very different scheme of classification from ours. Most of us would distinguish (for instance) between minerals, plants, animals, and planets, and we'd group them with respect to their structural and functional similarities. But for a primal people like the Plains Indians, what are emphasized instead are certain *symbolic* similarities or correspondences. For example, we would probably put gold and silver in one category (the mineral), a daisy and a lily in a second category (the plant), a lion and a lamb in a third category (the animal), and the sun and the moon in a fourth category (celestial bodies or planets). But a typical primal categorization might well cut across our divisions: the gold, the daisy, the lion, and the sun would be seen as having much the same symbolic significance, each of them being a sort of visible condensation or expression of the same "solar" archetype or spiritual quality. On the other hand, the silver, the lily, the lamb, and the moon would be placed in a different group, each of them being the expression of a "lunar" archetype—of a spiritual quality that is relatively passive or responsive compared to what members of the solar category embody. (To point out a parallel: Taoists would say that objects in the solar group are *yang*, while those in the lunar may be regarded as *yin*.)

This way of understanding the world is closely related to such traditional western sciences as alchemy and to the more holistic understandings of health and the human body one finds in "alternative" forms of contemporary medicine like acupuncture and homeopathy. Like the alchemist or homeopath, the primal religious person looks upon the world and the body as symbols. She senses that the objects of nature are at once symbolic of each other and symbolic of higher

planes of reality. The moon, a lamb, a lily, and a piece of silver are all tuned, as it were, to the same spiritual “frequency”, and it’s therefore assumed that in handling any one of them sympathetic vibrations or resonances can be established with other objects in the same class, and through them with the higher world of the spirits. This is the basis for what the American Indians call their “medicine”.

As you should have picked up from the selection in *A Book of Saints*, “medicine” for the Indians is not what we mean by the word. It doesn’t refer to Tylenol, or cough syrup, or other things you can buy in a pharmacy! It points instead to certain natural phenomena whose vertical links with the archetypal world are particularly strong—objects that can therefore be deliberately used for quasi-magical purposes. An eagle’s feather, a bear’s tooth, a bed of hot coals, a buffalo’s head, the smoke of burning sage, an otter’s skin, a bit of colored rock, or a clear pool of water: for the Plains Indians these are not merely material objects but channels or conduits for the entry of spiritual forces into the physical plane of Reality. Such things, they say, are all *wakan*. I used this term last time, but I didn’t really define it. Unfortunately, no English word quite does it justice. The term is sometimes translated as “holy” or “mysterious”, but perhaps the best way to explain it is to say that *wakan* means “spiritually charged”. If I attach an electric current to a metal object and then you touch the object, you’ll get a shock. Something that’s *wakan* is “attached” as it were, in a parallel way, to a spiritual current that flows from the archetypal dimension of Reality. If you make contact with this object in the proper way, you’ll feel the “charge” of that higher level of being, and you’ll in turn be brought into a relationship, through the object’s “spiritual” counterpart, with the ultimate Source of the current, which is God or the Great Spirit—a being whom the Lakota Sioux call *Wakan Tanka* (that is, the “Big Mystery”) and whom the Crow (like Yellowtail) call *Acbadadea*. In any case, all these ideas are connected with the fundamental concept of participation—with the primal perception of people, animals, plants, and natural forces as threads in a single cosmic fabric or web.

This brings me to say a few words about the role of the *shaman* or medicine man in primal societies. I mentioned this important figure in my last lecture, and I gave you just a quick description by saying that the *shaman* is a person who is able to travel outside his physical body and return with the gift of paranormal healing. Given all that I’ve been saying today, I can now go further and tell you that the *shaman* is a “practitioner of participation”. Like every other religion we’ve studied, the primal traditions combine doctrine with method or theory with practice.

Participation, the idea that all things are invisibly linked with each other, is in a sense their “doctrine”—that is, the essence of primal “theory”—whereas shamanism refers to the corresponding practice or method. The word “shamanism” can actually be used in a couple of ways, one broader and one more narrow. From one point of view every primal person is a sort of *shaman*, because for all such people (as I’ve explained) the sense of selfhood is not confined to the body, or not at least as strongly as it is in our case: they feel themselves to be at one with the world around them and in tune through that world with its archetypes. In its more precise sense, however, a *shaman*—the “medicine man” or “medicine woman” of a given tribe—is a “specialist”, if you will, in participatory practice, for this is a person who is able to make conscious, deliberate, and repeated use of his or her people’s attunement and oneness and who for this reason is able at will to become a sort of supercharged channel of energy.

To use a technical term, *shamans* are masters of *ecstasy*. We sometimes employ the word “ecstasy” simply to describe a feeling of great happiness—“I’m ecstatic!” you say, if you’re thrilled with something—but here I’m using it in its etymological sense to refer to the experience of “standing” (*stasis*) “outside” (hence the prefix *ec-* [= *ex-*]) one’s body. You may have heard people talk about “out of the body experiences”, and perhaps you’ve come across the related idea of “astral projection”. But however you label it, the point is that the *shaman* is someone who is able to transcend the physical limits of her body. Once out of the body, she then sort of “swims” (if you will) along the channels of energy that link things together and that connect them with their archetypal dimensions. And then, having made contact with these higher levels of being, she returns into her body with the power to help other people—powers of healing, telepathy, and clairvoyance. As you should have gleaned from your reading, the *shaman* is also someone who serves as a spiritual guide for other people and who assists them in acquiring shamanistic powers themselves.

I’m not sure what most of you will make of this idea of ecstasy or astral travel. It’s certainly not uncommon to hear about “ecstatic” experiences even in our modern Western culture, especially from those who’ve been through some sort of painful or frightening ordeal. People who’ve undergone life-saving surgical procedures or who’ve come close to dying in an automobile accident, for example, sometimes describe having seen themselves “from outside”, lying on the operating table or crawling out of their damaged car. In the “for what it’s worth” department, I’ll tell you in my YouTube lecture about an experience of my own, one that certainly left me

personally believing that our consciousness is not confined to the body. It goes without saying, of course, that an isolated experience of the kind you may read about in a checkout stand magazine or hear about on a television show is not *at all* on the same level as shamanism! The vast majority of the people who report such phenomena in these contexts didn't plan on having the experience—I certainly didn't plan on mine—nor were they in control when it happened. In the primal traditions, however, the *shaman* is very much in control of his “travel” and is able to exit his body at will, moving where and when he wishes. There's also this further important difference: the *shaman*'s experience is not an end in itself—he doesn't do what he does just for the “fun” of doing something weird nor in order to achieve some selfish benefit—but a means to the end of helping other people around him.

I want to turn now from these rather general points to a discussion of some specific American Indian practices. As you've learned from the selection in *A Book of Saints*, Plains Indian tribes such as the Crow traditionally practice four basic rites: the Vision Quest, the Sweat Bath, the Sacred Pipe, and the Sun Dance (p. 122). The assigned reading includes a chapter from Yellowtail's autobiography in which he describes the Vision Quest in some detail (pp. 117ff), and in the remainder of this lecture I'd like to focus on this particular sacred rite. As you've discovered, there's also a chapter in *Saints* in which he describes preparations for the Sun Dance (pp. 123ff). I'll talk about this and the other two practices next time.

To go in “quest” of a “vision”, as Native Americans understand that phrase, is to seek what a Christian might call a “personal word” from God. The Vision Quest is not an obligatory practice for the Indians, but as Yellowtail explains it's something that in former times the vast majority of men and many women would have engaged in at least once in their lives, usually in their early adulthood. Yellowtail mentions that there are many different reasons for undertaking the Quest, varying from person to person, but more often than not the main aim is the wish to gain “medicine”. In other words the Indian seeks to be granted possession of a sacred object that might serve him thenceforth as an amulet, a talisman against evil, and as a source of continuing spiritual energy. The Vision Quest is based on the idea, which I've now explained at some length, that all of Nature's creatures are symbols and revelations of a higher Reality. An otter or an eagle or a buffalo are not just biological organisms, but the material forms of certain spiritual meanings—facets, you might say, of the Gem of Divinity, or Rays of that Sun which is the “Great Spirit”.

When the Indian goes off into Nature on his Quest, he could therefore be described as embarking on the study of his “scriptures” or as reading his “Bible”. I’ve said that all the creatures of Nature are *sacraments*, but I could change the metaphor and say that they’re also *verses* in the great Spiritual Text of the Indian’s natural environment. And so just as a Hindu, Buddhist, Jew, Christian, or Muslim might open up his sacred scriptures, searching for a passage that will speak to him personally in an especially profound manner, so the Native American goes out into Nature. To be even more precise with the analogy, the Indian’s practice is exactly like the Christian practice of Biblical *sortilege* (French) or *sortilegium* (Latin). These words literally mean “chance reading”, and they refer to the practice of opening the Bible at random, pointing to a verse with your eyes closed—and hence without attempting to influence the results by your own conscious choice—and then applying the meaning of the verse to some problem or question you’re faced with. The difference is that in the case of the Vision Quest the “Holy Book” is Nature, the “chapters” are (as the Indians say) the “four-leggeds”, the “wingeds”, and other “peoples” of the world, and the “verses” are specific creatures. But the fundamental purpose is much the same: to receive an inspirational message from God, the Great Spirit.

As you’ll have gathered from your reading, there are four basic stages to the Vision Quest. First, an Indian must consult with his tribe’s *shaman* or medicine man. The quest itself is a solitary affair, but at the same time there is nothing individualistic about it. No traditional Native American would dream of undertaking so sacred a practice without first receiving the permission and blessing of a spiritual master. Just as a Hindu looks to his *guru*, a Sufi to his *shaykh*, a Zen Buddhist to his *roshi*, and a Christian to his *geronda* or *starets*, so the Plains Indian submits to the authority of his *shaman*. Second, the person undergoes a period of purification in strict accordance with the *shaman*’s directions and as a preparation for the journey itself, a preparation that normally includes a sweat bath. (I’ll say more about what this rite entails in my next lecture.) If you’re looking for analogies here, you could compare this second stage of the Quest to a Muslim’s ablutions, or ritual cleansings, before saying the *salat* or to a Christian’s confession to a priest before receiving Holy Communion. Third, the Indian sets off on the Quest itself. He will normally go to a remote spot in the wilderness, again in obedience to the *shaman*’s instructions—perhaps to a mountain peak or other solitary place. Once there he begins a very severe and stringent ascetic ordeal. The Quest traditionally lasted three or four days. During this period, the person would observe a complete fast, neither eating nor drinking, and the time would often be spent without clothes, stripped naked

and exposed to the elements: fierce sunshine, cold nights, storms, and so forth. Sometimes, as Yellowtail mentions (*A Book of Saints*, p. 119), the ordeal would also include a flesh sacrifice: slicing off the tip of a finger or cutting a patch of skin from an arm or leg.

As the Indians understand the process, the severity and rigor of the ordeal, coupled with their fervent prayers to *Wakan Tanka* or *Acbadadea*, help to foster a visionary state of consciousness—a state of “wakeful-dreaming”, as it were—in which the mind is refocused and redirected onto the archetypal plane, allowing the seeker to become aware of the inner meanings of things. In this state, it is said, men and women become able to understand the language of Nature; they can communicate not just with animals but even with plants and minerals and cloud formations, and it’s the hope of the seeker that one of these creatures will bring him the Divine message or revelation he’s looking for. If and when this happens—if a bird comes flying by and drops a feather (let’s say) or if a squirrel brings him a nut—that creature becomes forever afterward the Indian’s special helper, and he thinks of its spirit as a kind of “guardian angel” (to use a Christian equivalent).

Finally, the fourth stage of the Quest is a return to the tribal community. Another sweat bath is taken, and the seeker has a second audience with his *shaman* in which the details of the experience are recounted for the *shaman*’s interpretation. If there’s been some kind of revelatory contact with one of the creatures of Nature and a token has been brought home—for example, the feather or nut I just mentioned—the Indian will be instructed on how to prepare a special “medicine bundle” for its safekeeping (*A Book of Saints*, pp. 121-22); this is a small pouch made from the skin of an animal, and often beautifully decorated, in which a Native American places all the objects that are of special significance to him and which can be opened only at certain times and seen only by certain people. In any case, the point here—to repeat—is that the rite is not simply an individual affair; it depends instead for its effectiveness on the insight of a spiritual master (see p. 122).

Now all of this, I realize, is going to seem to many of you very strange indeed. And not the least strange will be the aspect of suffering and ordeal. I know that people often come away from descriptions like this thinking that traditional Native Americans must be masochists. You have to understand, however, that from the Indians’ own point of view it is *we* who are strange—we who are so insistent on comfort that we can’t get along without air conditioning and take a few pills in anticipation of headaches! In the primal perspective, by contrast, heroism in the midst of great

suffering is one of the greatest of virtues. For them such things as warfare and even physical torture are crucial tests of one's spiritual strength, and they would tell us that our world, a world of cell phones and iPads and GPS navigation and creature comforts of every kind, has turned us all into wimps, sub-human beings altogether lacking in dignity and nobility.

And then of course, too, there's the whole question of visions. One of the most common skeptical responses to the Vision Quest is that it's all just a matter of self-hypnosis and that by putting their bodies through so much stress the Native Americans are simply engendering certain "psychosomatic" effects. The problem with this sort of criticism, however, is that *all* of our mental experiences must inevitably reflect in some way or on some level the corresponding state of our bodies. You might as well complain that a good night's sleep and a nutritious diet make a person a clearer thinker. They do, of course, but this in no way compromises the possible truth of what such a thinker may tell us. Quite the contrary, we expect people to require sleep and nutrition in order to reach correct conclusions with their minds. Who can say how much more we might know if our bodies were more physically disciplined and accustomed to withstanding extreme conditions?

Then of course—the skeptic or cynic has yet another objection—there's this rather odd-sounding idea that a visionary or "dream" experience can serve as the basis for "Divine revelation". Aren't dreams just "imaginings" and "fictions"? Doubtless most of them are, and yet Christians and Jews, if no one else, should have no objection—or not at least as a matter of principle—to this aspect of primal tradition, for there are numerous examples of such visionary experiences in the Bible. There's the Old Testament story of Joseph, the son of Jacob, sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt, who wins respect by correctly interpreting the dreams of the Pharaoh (Genesis, chapters 40 and 41). Meanwhile in the New Testament a different Joseph, the husband of the Virgin Mary, is told by God in a dream that her child will be God's Son and should be named Jesus (Matthew 1:20-21); and in the book of Acts, Saint Peter falls into what we're told is a "trance", during which he's shown through certain symbols that the Gospel is for gentiles and not only Jews (Acts 10:10-16). Another even more precise parallel can be found in the words of Saint Paul, who refers to certain "visions and revelations of the Lord"; he tells of a man—scholars say it was almost certainly Paul himself—who was "caught up into paradise" and who "heard unspeakable words", whether (says Paul) "in the body" or "out of the body, I cannot tell" (2 Corinthians 12:1-4). And finally there's the whole last book of the New Testament, the book of Revelation, which is Saint

John's account of his own visionary experience of Heaven. Clearly there's nothing about the basic idea or the essential aim of the Vision Quest that those who follow Christ need object to.

Let's just say then—for the sake of the argument—that you're willing to grant the claim that physical suffering and ordeals may actually have a positive purpose. And let's also suppose you're prepared to admit the possibility of there being authentic revelations in dream and visions. Where you'll probably still draw the line and refuse to go further, however, is with the Indians' claims about "spirit helpers" or "guardians". Many of you reading these words are undoubtedly thinking that this business about keeping a feather or nut or some other natural object as a link to God through an animal is more than just a little crazy!

If so, you may be interested to hear what I'll tell you in my YouTube lecture about Thomas Yellowtail and his goose.