

Lecture 17:
Sweat Bath, Sacred Pipe, Sun Dance

I come now to my third and last lecture on the primal religions, where our focus has been the traditions of the Native Americans, specifically those of the Plains Indians. Our last session began with a discussion of the primal idea of “participation”, a word that refers to the invisible bonds or connections between things. I explained that there are at least three different sorts of connections: first, participation has to do with the relationship between man and his natural environment and with the fact that the primal sense of personal identity is not confined to the body; second, it concerns what I called the “horizontal” links between the various creatures in Nature, the way in which they exist in a symbiosis or sympathy with each other; and third, it refers “vertically” to the invisible connection between the physical forms of those creatures and their spiritual counterparts on the “archetypal” plane of Reality. I then spoke for a few minutes about the *shaman* and shamanism. Shamanism was defined as the “practice of participation” and the *shaman* as a master of ecstasy, one who can deliberately leave his body in order to acquire spiritual powers like the gift of healing. Finally, I talked for a few minutes about the Native American sacred rite called the Vision Quest, which I compared to a Christian’s *sortilege* or “chance reading” of scripture, and I took you through the four stages of the Quest: permission and blessing, purification, ascetic ordeal, and return and interpretation.

As promised last time I want to continue now with a discussion of the other three rites mentioned by Yellowtail in *A Book of Saints*: namely, the Sweat Bath, praying with the Sacred Pipe, and the Sun Dance.

First, the *Sweat Bath*. We’ve heard about this already in conjunction with the Vision Quest. As Yellowtail explained, it’s customary for Indians to perform the Sweat Bath both in preparation for, and upon returning from, their solitary retreats, but it’s used on other occasions as well. The Bath is primarily a rite of purification or purgation, and it’s remarkably similar in its basic symbolism to the Christian sacrament of Baptism. As many of you undoubtedly know, it’s a fundamental requirement of the Christian tradition that those who wish to become members of the Church must first be baptized. This is done in obedience to what Christians call “the great commission”, in which Christ Himself commands: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). In its most

ancient and traditional form, this involves a full immersion in “living” water, that is, in a stream of running water or perhaps in a lake. (Baptismal “fonts” and “sprinkling” came later historically.) The symbolism of the rite is two-fold: Christians believe on the one hand that the consecrated water of Baptism—for Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and others, this means water that has been specially blessed by a priest—has the power to protect a person from the effects of “original sin”; even as his body is washed on the outside, so is his soul being spiritually purified inwardly. We encountered a similar practice with the Muslims’ “ablutions” before their five daily prayers. On the other hand the water is also symbolic for Christians of a grave or a tomb: according to Saint Paul, baptism is to be seen as a participation in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (see Romans 6:3-5). In the early Church baptisms were normally conducted early on Easter morning, the day the Church celebrates Christ’s resurrection from the dead. Those to be baptized would remove all their clothes, their nakedness representing a return to the simplicity and innocence of their infancy. Facing the West, which is the direction of sunset and hence of darkness, they would spit and renounce Satan and their former sins. (As you may recall, I’ve compared this to the Muslim rite of “stoning Satan” during the *Hajj*.) Then turning to the East, which is the direction of sunrise and hence of light, they would accept the Lordship of Christ and promise to fulfill the sacred duties of the faith. After that would come the baptism itself, which involved three complete immersions in water, with a priest pronouncing the formula, “I baptize you in the Name of the Father [first immersion] and of the Son [second immersion], and of the Holy Spirit [third immersion].” There’s reason to think, by the way, that the ancient practice involved holding the person under the water long enough that when he came up the final time he would have to gasp for breath (remember here the identity of “breath” and “spirit” [Lecture 15]). All this was timed, I should add, so that the rite was concluding just as the sun began to rise above the horizon.

I go into all this in such detail because I’ve found that many Christians are themselves unaware of these ancient practices, most of which are retained to this day in the Eastern Orthodox Church. It’s only when you *are* aware of them, however, that you can begin to appreciate some of the resemblances between baptism and its Native American parallel. The Sweat Bath is performed in a small hemispherical structure, which (like the water of baptism) is symbolically associated with a grave or tomb. You’ve read about how the Sun Dance Lodge is constructed (*A Book of Saints*, pp. 127-28), and the Sweat Lodge is similar. Here too the foundation is circular—though considerably smaller. The lodge is constructed by positioning several young saplings along the

circumference of a circle, and then bending them toward each other, tying them together, and covering them with animal skins. (I'll show you a picture of this in my YouTube lecture.) In entering the lodge, the Indian is understood to be leaving behind his former life in the world and descending into the darkness of death in anticipation of rebirth. The door of the lodge always faces the East, so that as he goes in the Indian moves toward the West and in exiting returns again to the East, passing like the Christian from darkness to light. Another similarity to the baptismal practice of the early Church is that the Indians are naked as they take part in this rite (as they often are also during the Vision Quest), and the symbolic meaning is again much the same as in Christianity: innocence, simplicity, infancy. Nudity reminds the Indian, according to Yellowtail, of "the holiness of our creation and our humility before our Maker".

As for the actual performance of the rite, what happens is this. In the middle of the lodge a small hole has been dug in the ground, in which a fire is kindled, and a number of rocks are placed in the fire. When the participants first enter the lodge, these rocks have already been heated, and ladles of water are then poured on the stones, creating steam like a sauna. Hence the term "sweat bath". Yellowtail explains elsewhere in the book (in a section you've not read) that the number of times the rocks are doused has a symbolic significance, as does everything in the Indians' postures and movements and the particular prayers they recite. The essential idea is that like the waters of baptism the steam of the bath has the power to purify, not only physically and externally through the pores of one's skin, but also internally and spiritually. Just as with baptism, the rite of the Sweat Bath presupposes a psychosomatic unity within the human being such that bodily experiences have repercussions on the state of one's soul. There is this difference, however: whereas Christians are baptized only once in their lives, the Indian can make use of the Sweat Bath repeatedly throughout her life, and in this sense the Bath might also be compared to the sacrament of Confession and Absolution, in which the Catholic or Orthodox Christian repeatedly takes stock of his moral faults and re-enters into a right relation with God.

Another sacred rite discussed by Yellowtail involves *praying with a Sacred Pipe*. Unlike the Vision Quest, the Sweat Bath, and (as I'll mention shortly) the Sun Dance, it's difficult to find even a partial analogy between this rite and the practices of other religions, for the idea of linking one's prayers to the smoking of a Pipe is virtually unique (as far as I know) to the American Indians. According to Yellowtail the Crow nation—his own people—lost track of the exact origin of the Pipe in their own tribal history. But the Lakota Sioux remember, and they tell a story about

a beautiful celestial maiden named Pte San Win, the “White Buffalo Woman”, who brought their people the first Pipe as a gift many distant ages ago, well before the dawn of what we think of as recorded history. According to the tale, there was a terrible famine, and two Sioux scouts had been sent out in one last desperate search for buffalo, when there appeared out of nowhere a dazzlingly beautiful girl, clothed only (as the story says) in her hair. One of the scouts had lustful thoughts about her, but when he reached out to grab her, he was immediately engulfed in a thick cloud, and when the cloud blew away, all that was left of him was a worm-covered skeleton. The other man, a very noble warrior, respected the girl’s dignity and obeyed her command, which was to return to his campground and prepare his people for her arrival. When she arrived in the village she brought the people their first Pipe, explaining its symbolic significance, telling them how and when to use it, and promising that it would bring the tribe great blessings. As she bade them farewell, walking away from their village, the story says that she suddenly turned into an albino buffalo calf, which galloped a few more paces and then vanished into thin air, whereupon a tremendous herd of buffalo appeared around the camp to feed the hungry people.

The Pipe itself is highly symbolic. Besides the symbolism of the materials used in its construction—the wood of the stem represents the plant kingdom; the stone of the bowl, the minerals; and the feathers with which it is often adorned, the animals—there’s also the celestial resonance of the smoke itself, what the Plains Indians call the “visible breath” of the Pipe. Here there might be at least a partial parallel in the Christian tradition: like the incense in a Roman Catholic or Anglican High Mass or an Eastern Orthodox Liturgy, the smoke from the Pipe is said to represent the rising of man’s prayers to Heaven. (In an Orthodox Vespers service, the use of incense is accompanied by the words of Psalm 141:2—“Let my prayer be set forth before Thee as incense, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice; hear me, O Lord.”) Once again we’re brought back to the idea, which I mentioned last time in conjunction with the oral emphasis of primal religions, that the breath is a sacred force. Drawing on the Pipe, the Indian then exhales, and the smoke becomes for him a visible sign of the invisible return of his life force or spirit to the Great Spirit. A second feature of this practice involves the spiritual importance of the directions of space, which I talked about briefly a couple of lectures ago when discussing the primal importance of “sacred place”. As he smokes the Pipe and says his prayers, the Indian shows his respect for the Divine presence in the world around him by honoring the Six Directions. First he raises the Pipe upward toward the Great Spirit at the zenith; then he points it downward in the direction of Mother

Earth at the nadir; and then he turns in a clockwise direction, pausing briefly as he faces each of the four points of the compass: first East, then South, then West, and finally North, passing symbolically through each of the four seasons in sequence, since—from the point of view of Indian peoples in North America—East “is” spring, South “is” summer, West “is” autumn, and North “is” winter.

A final point to be made here has to do with the words of the prayers. As she engages in these various movements and smokes the Pipe, the Indian is at the same time addressing herself to God, and her prayer consists not only of personal petitions, which naturally vary from one individual to another, but also of certain sacred words and formulas determined by her tradition—even as the words used in the *salat* are determined for the Muslim by the Qur’an and the Prophet’s *sunnah*, and as the words of the Lord’s Prayer are determined for the Christian by Christ. One such formula that is common among the Sioux is *Wakan Tanka, unshimalaye oyate wani wachin cha*: “O Great Spirit, be merciful to me that my people may live.” Note the importance of the idea of participation in this prayer, that is, the way in which the supplicant’s personal well being is understood to be linked to that of his society. There’s a striking parallel here to an ancient invocation known in the Christian East as the “Jesus Prayer”, an invocation based on the Gospel prayer of the publican (Luke 18:13) and consisting of the words: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me.” In this case too Divine mercy is understood as an “uncreated energy” (as Orthodox Christians call it), an energy which descends from God upon the person who’s praying and which then flows through that person outward toward all others within his spiritual community, and finally throughout the world.

Finally, the last of the Plains Indian rites, and perhaps the most famous, is the *Sun Dance*. This is an annual summer event, and it’s at once the most demanding and the most important of all these Native American practices. If you’re looking for a comparison here, you’d probably have to say that the Sun Dance corresponds, at least in some ways, to the Christian sacrament of Holy Communion, for it represents for the Indian the most sacred and intimate thing he can do to become related to God. The Christian and the Plains Indian both believe that God is present everywhere, but the Christian believes He is present with a special force and reality in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, while the Indian believes that this “real presence” can be found above all in the midst of the Sun Dance. The Sun Dance might also be compared to the East Asian use of the martial arts and archery or to the Sufi *hadrah* (see Lecture 14), for in all three of these cases—in

Zen Buddhism, mystical Islam, and Plains Indian practice—the aim is to provoke a spiritual insight or a deepening of one’s awareness of the Supreme Reality through a disciplined, carefully orchestrated, rhythmic movement of the body. Yellowtail’s description of the preparations for the Sun Dance and its actual practice among the Crow is quite thorough. I’ll leave it to him to fill you in on most of the details, but perhaps a few highlights would be useful here too.

As you know from your reading, the Dance takes place in an open-air structure made out of trees and other natural objects, like the Sweat Lodge. Yellowtail comments, “The Sun Dance Lodge is like the white man’s church; it is our place to pray to Acbadadea. The Indians do not need a church to capture the presence of God, because He is all around us in Nature. We carry out all of our sacred ceremonies in Nature, without the aid of any permanent building” (*A Book of Saints*, pp. 130-31). The first thing the Indians do in preparing for the annual Dance is to select a large, forked cottonwood tree, which is cut, brought to the site where the Dance will take place, and placed in a deep central hole. With this marking the center, twelve additional smaller trees are then placed along the circumference at a distance of about thirty feet from the cottonwood. In the Crow tradition, these are connected to the central tree by “rafters” made out of small branches, forming a partially roofed enclosure around sixty feet in diameter; in the Sioux and Sheshone traditions, the area between the central tree and the circle’s circumference is open to the sky. Yellowtail emphasizes the importance of the number twelve, which (he says) represents the months of the year, and he also stresses the significance of the circular shape of the Lodge, with its close connection to the primal idea of cyclical time (see *A Book of Saints*, p. 128). You’ll have noticed, I hope, how much importance is attached to the central tree, which might be compared to the altar in a Christian church. The vertical positioning of the tree allows it to serve as a kind of spiritual axis or conduit, along which the *wakan* or sacred energy of the Great Spirit can flow. Special “medicines” are hung on the tree—in the case of the Crow, a stuffed buffalo head and a stuffed eagle are used, representing respectively the earth and the sky. Yellowtail is careful to describe how respectfully and reverently the tree must be treated. It’s even addressed by name with special prayers before it’s cut down. Yellowtail says very simply, “It is through the Center Pole that we meet God” (*Saints*, p. 131).

As with the Sufi *hadrah*, which varies among the different *tariqahs* or spiritual orders, the precise length and pattern of the Dance differ somewhat among the various groups of Plains Indians. Yellowtail explains that the Crow Sun Dance lasts either three or four days. During this

period, just as during the Vision Quest, the participants observe a total fast from both food and liquid (even water) at least during the daytime, and the most serious among them neither eat nor drink at all for the entire period. During the day the dancers keep moving virtually all of the time, stopping only for very brief periods of rest or when (in Yellowtail's words) they "take a fall" from exhaustion, a phenomenon that might be compared with the Christian Pentecostal idea of being "slain in the Spirit"; Yellowtail himself compares it to being charged, hooked, and thrown by a buffalo.

What the word "dancing" refers to in this ritual context is a pattern of moving either clockwise around the central Tree, as is the case with the Sioux and Shoshone, or along one of the radii, as is the practice among the Crow. In the latter case each participant engages in a series of small "jumps" or "hops" toward the Center Pole and then back again toward a little stall along the circumference of the Lodge. Moving thus back and forth in rhythm with the beat of drums, the Crow attempt to keep their eyes constantly focused on the central "axis"—especially the buffalo head or the eagle—while simultaneously blowing on a small whistle carved from eagle bone, which is intended to imitate the sound of an eagle. The usual practice today is for the dancers to have freedom of movement. But among the Sioux and a few other tribes it was customary in times past—and occasionally still—for the dancers to attach themselves to the Center Pole with long cords made out of animal skins; the cords are tied at one end to the Pole while the other end is connected to a piece of bone that is inserted through two vertical cuts in the skin of a dancer's chest. As you may have guessed, the aim is to add yet another dimension to the sacrificial character of the entire ordeal as the dancers endeavor to break loose from this fetter by tearing the skewer through the skin. This is a goal that may require many painful hours, even for the most courageous and resolute; in some cases it's only after two or three days of continuous movement, having reached a point of total exhaustion, that an Indian will end up falling backward, ripping open the skin above his heart in a moment of extreme suffering and self-sacrifice.

I've provided you with a link to a short YouTube clip that will give you a taste of some of these things I'm trying to describe. You'll also get just a glimpse of a brief healing service, taking place during the Dance near the central tree. As I've explained before, among the powers of an Indian *shaman* is his ability to perform paranormal healings. Because he's traveled in the spirit world and is in contact with the "medicine fathers" who dwell there, he's able to draw on a sort of spiritual reservoir—the "*wakan* field" as I called it in my last YouTube lecture—and it's by using

the power he's able to draw from this reservoir or field that he's able to bring about certain miraculous cures. *Shamans* can conduct healing ceremonies any time, but among the Plains Indians it's believed that the most potent and efficacious are those held during the time of the annual Sun Dance—when an even greater “quantity” of *wakan* than usual becomes available.

As I've mentioned before, I had a chance to meet Yellowtail just a few weeks before he died. Besides listening to his lengthy mealtime prayer, which I've already described, I was able to attend one of his healing ceremonies. I'll share some of that extraordinary experience with you in my YouTube lecture.