

RELIGION 308 Native American Cultural Traditions

Fall Semester, 2005

Dr. Fritz Detwiler

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TTh 8:30 -- 9:45

Hours: MW 11:00-11:50; T
9:45 – 11:00

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Course Purpose:

The goal of the course focuses on mastering the following outcomes:

1. **Critical Understanding:** Stepping out of one's own worldview and stepping into the worldviews and traditions of various Native American cultures. Mastery of a worldview begins by understanding of the reality assumptions made by those who hold any particular worldview. It involves coming to some insight regarding the implications for solving important life-questions.
2. **Information-Interpretation:** Reading primary source materials and secondary source materials and constructing from those materials justifiable interpretations of various Native American cultural traditions.
3. **Higher Order Thinking:** Demonstrating and assessing critical thinking strategies as tools for accomplishing the first two goals. The ability to gather, process, and assess information is central to the life of the educated person. Class structure and exercises are designed to provide the student with extensive practice in developing, using and evaluating higher order thinking skills.
4. **Moral Development:** Persevering in preparing for class work and demonstrating courage and humility in course discussions. The course structure is designed to require students to keep up with their daily assignments and to persevere in their understanding of the materials. The discussion framework requires students to risk and grow intellectually and morally as students.

Course Point of View:

The theoretical perspectives from which this approach to the study of American Indian cultural traditions moves are those of religious studies, cultural anthropology, and ethics.

Religious Studies

The main frame of reference is religious studies and, from that discipline the works of two important theorists – Gerardus van der Leeuw and Jonathan Z. Smith.

From van der Leeuw I draw upon his phenomenological approach to the study of religion. Specifically, I am guided by his notion that the investigative process asks the student of religion to suspend their own worldview assumptions in order to step into the worldview of another people. This creates an "as if" situation in which the student accepts the reality assumptions of the other culture for the purposes of investigation and tries to see the world as fully as possible through that perspective. In its application to Native American religious traditions in particular, I owe a deep sense of gratitude to the innovative work of Drs. Sam Gill who taught me that ways of living tend to be privileged over ways of thinking in Native cultures; Kenneth Morris who led me to a fuller understanding of the basic worldview assumptions of Native American peoples and to the dangers implicit in previous comparative studies of the subject; and Melissa Pflüg who combined

Gill's work with the insights of Morrison to suggest a dynamic nature of Native American worldview in which the distance between worldview and ethos is reduced.

From Jonathan Z. Smith, also introduced to me by Sam Gill, I derive much of my basic theory of the nature of religion itself. Smith employs an approach to the study of religion that focuses on the central role which religion plays in providing its followers with a coherent way of being in the universe. Religions are born and change, according to Smith, in situations in which a given expression of religion can no longer sustain itself when its followers' perceive an incongruity between its explanations and their experiences. Thus, one of the major roles which religion plays, and one of the points at which it faces its most difficult tasks, is the point when it must provide effective pragmatic solutions to the significant life-problems which are part of human existence. This course makes that task its central focus. In terms of Native American cultures, this means that the worldviews and ways of living provided coherence and practical solutions to human problems, that they were constantly in a state of change in order to adapt to new factors which entered the experiences of Native American peoples, and that they continue to change into the present time.

In addition to Smith's and Leeuw's understanding of religion, I add two other related features to complete my theory of religion as it presently stands. The first is the idea of "transcendence" and the second "wholeness." Transcendence here refers to the existence of the divine or sacred person or principle of existence but it goes beyond that to include that which draws us out of our self-centered existence towards other dimensions of existence. This involves morality, that is, our relations with other humans. It also encompasses relationships between ourselves and nature, the world of ideas, different value systems, and alternative worldviews.

"Wholeness" here is used in the sense of the way in which humans seek health, holiness, and harmony. As such it has both an inner and an outer dimension. It seeks to connect us both to the deepest levels of our inner-selves and the "heart of the universe" which exists at the farthest center of existence. This dimension of religion understands that spiritual connectedness and fulfillment are essential to a healthy life lives in harmony with ourselves, other humans, nature, the divine.

The theory of religion which guides this course, then, is one which believes that religion plays an essential role in framing our understanding of things, our relations with others, and our place and significance in the universe. In the spirit of the academic study of religion, the course does not expect students to "accept" any viewpoint as "true" but does require them to seriously engage Native American worldviews and life-ways by suspending their personal beliefs or biases in order to fairly entertain these points of view.

Cultural Anthropology

Cultural anthropology further contributes its insights regarding the pivotal role which religion plays in providing the central integrating values and symbols around which cultures develop. Specifically, two notions are drawn from the writings of Clifford Geertz. First, Geertz argues that cultures are systems in which every level of the culture is integrated with every other level through their common commitment to the culture's shared sense of value and meaning.

Second, Geertz argues that in order to "see from the native's point of view" the visitor must come to understand the "culture system" as an integrated whole. Geertz refers to this as a "thick" description of culture. It requires that the student of a particular culture delve far below the surface to see the interconnection of the entire system and understand the system's dependence on the shared cultural values from which it derives its meaning, structure, and values. This can best be accomplished by accepting the value and reality assumptions upon which the culture is

based and entering into the culture through the worldview.

One area of cultural anthropology, which has been particularly helpful to me in my understanding of Native American traditions, is the world done by linguists A. Irvin Hallowell and Benjamin Whorf. We will read one seminal article from each and I would suggest that you pay particular attention to the way in which language reflects quite different cognitive structures in human cultures. From symbolic and ritual studies we will begin to see how Native American peoples frame their understandings and actions in terms of symbolic maps. These maps provide the thick description to which Geertz points.

My theory of Native American cultures derives from theoretical developments within the field of ethics and, more specifically, within the sub-field of relational ethics. Relational ethics hold that the moral act occurs in the "between," in human interaction, rather than in absolute duties, social contracts, or pragmatic calculations. H. Richard Niebuhr's "The Center of Value" and *The Responsible Self* have been particularly important in framing my thinking on the structure of Native American ethics and its centrality to the social and religious dimensions of Native American cultures.

Finally, I am deeply indebted to my colleagues in the Society for the Study of Native American Religious Traditions. In particular, I have come to understand the importance of the political implications of teaching about these traditions and to begin to frame my understanding of the traditions from the experiences and cognitive frameworks of native peoples.

Course Questions:

The central course question is this: Given Native American worldview assumptions, what inferences can we draw about the meaning and significance of Native American cultural patterns? In other language, "What does the world look like from 'Native American' points of view?" This is the question of critical understanding. Are we able to suspend our present orientation to the world sufficiently to see reality from another perspective

Course Assumptions:

Certain assumptions which follow from the above theoretical discussion provide the basis for the course structure and assessment design. These assumptions are:

1. Native American cultural traditions can be entered through understanding the particular worldviews they embrace. These worldviews provide entry into the ways in which people have effectively come to a coherent understanding of their world which guides their actions with each other and helps them solve the significant life-problems which they face.
2. It is possible to "see from the native's point of view." That is, it is possible to suspend our own belief commitments to enter, however tentatively, into the world of other persons.
3. It is far more difficult to enter the world of another culture than we commonly suppose. This difficulty arises from our natural tendency not to suspend our own biases but to bring them into our interpretation of the "other's" world. In turn, partial understanding of the "other's" world may have disastrous consequences for the life, safety, and security of the other's culture. This is particularly true in regard to Native American cultures since they are "living" cultures that often come into confrontation with the dominant Anglo-culture. Two particularly harmful attitudes which contemporary Native American activists have identified among non-Natives in the latter's eagerness to study Native cultures are a "wannabee" attitude and an appropriation of Native American cultural phenomenon by New Agers. Both share the same difficulty – the failure to abandon biases resulting in a misunderstanding of Native cultures.
4. There are also substantial political issues in teaching courses in Native American religious traditions. These issues are of two sorts: First, we must be sure that the use to which we might put the knowledge gained contributes to rather than harms the people we are studying. Second, we must be aware of "power" issues in our investigations into the symbolic world of Native American cultures. We must also accept moral responsibility for using that power in ways that enhance rather than tear down Native peoples.
5. Quite different from the other assumptions is a pedagogical one – Student learning is best accomplished through structures that place the greatest responsibility for learning on the students themselves. Thus, the

assumption of the course is that students will take responsibility for their own learning, for developing the necessary skills to become effective learners, to employ strategies for processing information, and to construct processes by which students can assess their own learning.

Information

The length of the reading assignments is uneven so care should be taken to allow for sufficient preparation prior to class. Class discussions will be based on the readings. The following texts are required for the course with their appropriate designation on the reading assignment list: Martin, *The Land Looks After Us* (Ma); Gill, *Native American Religions* (G); Tedlock, *Teachings from the American Earth* (T); Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (Mo); Black Elk, *The Sacred Pipe* (B). Gill and Sullivan, *Native American Mythology* is a recommended text. In addition to these books, selected readings will be placed on reserve in Shipman Library.

The following books are suggested for further reading and provide a solid foundation for anyone wishing to build a personal library in the subject: Deloria, *God is Red* and *The Metaphysics of Modern Existence*; Gill, *Native American Traditions*; Brown, *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian*; Hultkrantz, *Religions of the American Indians*; Capps, ed., *Seeing with a Native Eye*; Underhill, *Red Man's Religion*; Hultkrantz, *Native Religions of North America*; Sullivan, *Native American Religions: NORTH AMERICA*; Lee Irwin, *The Dream Seekers*; Jace Weaver (ed.) *Native American Religious Identity*, Howard Harrod, *Becoming and Remaining a People* and *Renewing the World*, and others which are particularly relevant to the Sioux, Lame Deer, *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions*; Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*; Walker, *Lakota Myth*; Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*; DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*; Rice, *Black Elk's Story: Distinguishing its Lakota Purpose*; Tinker, *Missionary Conquest*; and DeMallie and Parks (eds), *Sioux Indian Religion*.

Interpretation and Inferences

The structure of the course places a great deal of emphasis on the student's ability to interpret Native American worldviews and draw inferences from that interpretation to bring out the meaning and significance of the various cultural phenomena we will study. Students will be expected to demonstrate growth in their ability to apply basic concepts about reality in moving toward a deeper sense of the native's point of view

Basic Concepts

The key ideas of the course are "personing," "powering," and "gifting." Full understanding of these terms is essential before the student can move beyond them to apply them to various Native American cultural expressions. In addition to these three basic concepts, each specific cultural tradition will have its own technical vocabulary relating to sacred names, sacred things, sacred acts and beliefs.

Implications and Consequences

Ultimately, the worth of any knowledge is the light it reflects on one's own understanding of the world in which we live. The course examination of "logic" of Native American cultures is intended to have two consequences -- a much deeper and fairer understanding of the native points of view and a deeper sense of one's own place in the universe and the modes of relationship which define the quality of our lives together.

Course Requirements

One of the most important expectations is that students come to class prepared to discuss the reading assignments. We will spend the first few minutes of the class talking about any questions students bring regarding the material. From that point on, students will be responsible for taking the lead in discussion -- focusing on what I refer to as "reasoning" and "substantive" questions. Descriptions of these questions can be found at the following URL: <http://www.adrian.edu>

[/~fdetwiler/local/ctwg/questioning.htm](http://~fdetwiler/local/ctwg/questioning.htm)

Since a theoretical objective of this class is to move students toward the “native’s point of view,” we will be focusing on the following Dimensions of Thinking: assumptions, interpretations, and implications.

Students will submit a 12-15 page formal academic term paper near the end of the semester. The purpose of this paper is to allow students to research Native American cultural systems of their own choosing, to apply a reasoned argument to interpreting that material, and to assess ability of the student to interpret that information from a cross cultural perspective. Topic selection and a rough draft of the paper must be submitted to the instructor at the time announced – October 25; rough draft, November 29; Final Paper submission exam period. Papers must be taken to the writing center prior to submission to the instructor for the rough draft. Documentation from the writing center is required.

Finally, students will sit for several essay exams as designated in the course schedule. These will cover the readings for that segment of the course.

Grade Compilation:

The final grade will be based on the following scheme:

Class Participation – *fifty percent*. The class will assume a seminar format. This means that students will be asked to present the reading material in class, offering their understanding of it and commenting on the presentation by identifying alternative interpretations or identifying additional points of significance

Term Paper – *twenty percent*. The instructor will provide the students with a "specs" sheet that will describe both the structure of the paper and the standards by which it will be assessed. These materials can be found on the Critical Thinking web pages linked from the instructor's home page. The paper topic is due Oct. 30. The papers will be due at the beginning of class, Wednesday, November 18.

Essay Exams – *thirty percent*. Students will sit for three in class essay exams. These exams will ask you to apply the terms and information learned in class and through class preparation.

Office Hours:

The instructor maintains regular office hours. If you are having trouble in the class or would like to explore questions relevant to the course, you are strongly encouraged to drop by the instructor’s office. Since other responsibilities occasionally may require the instructor’s attention during those hours, students are encouraged to check with the instructor if a consultation is desired. If the announced hours conflict with your class schedule, please make an appointment with the instructor at a time which is mutually convenient.

Introductory Matters

Aug. 30 Introduction to the Course

Sept. 1 The Politics of Studying Native traditions

Handout

The Beginnings

6	No class	
8	Circling Earth	Ma 1-31
13	Encounters	Ma 32-83
15	Responses	Ma 84-139
20	The Way to Rainy Mountain	Kiowa story
22	The Way to Rainy Mountain	History
27	The Way to Rainy Mountain	Personal
29	First Essay Exam	

Gaining Perspective

Oct. 4	To Dance	G 39-58
6	To Envision	G 29-38, 59-73
13	Tricksters and Clowns	G 26-29, 73-82, T 105-18
18	Ceremonialism	G 114-39
20	Spiritual Healers	T 3-20, 190-204
25	Second Essay Exam	

The Natives' Point of View

27	Shape of the World, Wintu	G 15-26, T 130-10
Nov. 1	Ojibwa	T 141-78
3	Tewa	T 179-89
8	Hopi	T 121-29

The Oglala -- A Case Study

10	Worldview	T 205-218
15	Concept of Person	WebCT
17	Inipi	B 31-43
22	Hanblecheyapi	B 44-66
29	Ishna Ta Awi Cha Lowan	B 116-26
Dec. 1	Winwanyag Wachipi	B 67-100

Contemporary Issues

6	Contemporary Issues	
8	Tradition and Change	G 140-76, T 75-104
Exams		