Introduction

The time is scarcely remote when white people thought there were tribes without religion in America. In the days of Darwinism and unlimited evolutionism the assumption was prevalent that the most "barbarian" peoples were also the least developed spiritually. It was Charles Darwin himself who said that the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego lacked more lofty religious concepts. Darwin had visited the primitive Indians on the windy southern point of South America, and he was thus a direct eyewitness and did not remodel other observers’ information. During the nineteenth century reports on Indians without religion continued to pour in, and not only from little-known South America. The merchant agent John McLean, who at the beginning of the last century lived for a long time among the Carrier Indians of western Canada, assures us in his notes that the language of these Indians "has not a term to express the name of Deity, spirit or soul." As late as 1928 the German student Tessmann asserted in his work Menschen ohne Gott (Men without God) that the Indians of the Ucayali river in Brazil lacked developed concepts of god.¹

Introduction

Such information could be accepted in earnest during a time when the knowledge of American Indian life was faulty and existing ethnographical data often derived from occasional travellers, ignorant government officials, or other superficial observers who had not penetrated the spiritual world of the Indians. Darwin's observations have in fact been thoroughly repudiated by the Austrian ethnologists Gusinde and Koppers, whose meticulous field research was performed in the 1920s. Gusinde has published two gigantic volumes primarily treating the high-god beliefs of the Indians of Tierra del Fuego! Although we may rightly suspect that missionary influences have partly changed the traditional religion of these Indians the fact remains that, in pre-Christian days, there existed among the Yahgan (or Yamana) of Tierra del Fuego a most comprehensive concept of God, among other things associated with primitive rites of initiation. In the same way all other assertions on tribes without religion have, one by one, been banished to the world of fancy.

As a matter of fact, we do not know of any Indian tribe that lacked a variety of religious conceptions. In their entirety the religions of the tribal Indians offer an image that is both comprehensive and richly faceted. As was the case in the primal societies of the Old World, the lives of both the group and the individual were surrounded by religious ideas and rites. Indeed, the religion is today often all that is left of the culture of the North American Indians. Religion was furthermore the first sign of cultural life the European intruders experienced: Pizarro's conquerors were acknowledged as the Peruvian god Viracocha and his men come back from the Western islands of the sun; Cortez was greeted by Moctezuma as the returning culture hero Quetzalcoatl; and Francis Drake and his sailors, landing in the bay of San Francisco, were worshipped by the Miwok Indians as their ancestors risen from the dead. Early documents, such as the meritorious reports of the French Jesuit Fathers from Nouvelle France (eastern Canada) during the course of the seventeenth century, testify in an excellent

way to the central position held by religion in Indian life. We need here only recollect Father Fremin's vivid description of the dream as the supernatural factor that regulated both private and general enterprises among the Iroquois Indians. Similar, although not so expressive, information may be had from other parts of North and South America.

It is only from a superficial perspective that the American Indian religions constitute a unity. They do not evince specific traits that set them apart from the tribal religions of the Old World, unless that strength of mind should be mentioned which has been expressed in severe asceticism and individualism. Furthermore, Indian religions form such a changing mosaic that it is difficult to discern a common background. We must never forget that America is a spacious double continent and that it once housed hundreds of languages and thousands of ethnic groups whose religious peculiarities varied as much as European religions before the introduction of Christianity. It is easy to illustrate this by adducing some examples from North America: the simple hunting religion of the Naskapi Indians of Labrador contrasts sharply with the intricate horticultural religion of the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico and Arizona, and the simple structure of the Californian Indian religions bears little resemblance to the religion of sacred kingship represented by the Natchez on the lower Mississippi. Even among tribal religions of the same type the nature of conceptions and rites has varied. The more our research is concerned with taking stock of tribal Indian religions the richer and more complicated becomes our picture of their total outcome.

In scientific debates on religion attention has been paid to American Indians because of a series of religious phenomena and complexes that have been found in a more pronounced form among them than among other peoples. Comparative research concerning the North American Indian religions has dedicated itself particularly to the following themes: in religious beliefs, to guardian-spirit conceptions and the visionary

4. Cf., for example, Blumensohn 1933. Cf., however, also Benedict 1932.
quests closely allied to them; in ritual, to intricate ceremonialism and secret societies; and in mythology, to such myths as those concerning the trickster and the culture hero. The South American Indians, whose religious life is in many respects imperfectly known outside the domineering high cultures and their circum-Caribbean offshoots, have perhaps less pronounced religious features, and consequently they have been less appealing to scholars of religion. Nevertheless, even here research has found stimulating facts: in the field of beliefs, the profusely ramified conceptions of spirits; in ritual, the cult of vegetational goddesses and funeral customs; and in mythology, the—perhaps somewhat too strongly emphasized—astral myths. In works on the sociology of religion the tribal religions of South America tend to achieve the same importance as North American indigenous religions have had for decades.

Added to this is all that religio-scientific theories have been able to scoop from the rich treasures of Indian religions during different times. The well-known British ethnologist Edward B. Tylor (who was a specialist on the Indians of Mexico) based his animistic theory on materials he could adduce from American Indian beliefs in souls and spirits. In a more restricted form, one documented with American materials, the same theory was later upheld by the Finlander Rafael Karsten, known for his South American investigations. Sir James G. Frazer and his followers brought numerous examples of magic and totemism from America, in particular North America. Paul Ehrenrejch and other German ethnologists worked on South American myths and reduced them to nature mythology of a solar or lunar kind. Marcel Mauss of France examined the religious organizations of the North Pacific Coast, and his fellow countryman Lucien Lévy-Bruhl collected instances of "primitive mentality" from American ethnological literature. A belief in power of the Melanesian type (the conception of mana) was recognized by J. N. B.

5. Cf. also the classic scholar in the subject of civilization and culture, J. F. Lafitau (d. 1746), who was the author of the first scientific work on North American Indians (Lafitau 1724).
Hewitt among the Iroquois and by William Jones among the Fox Indians. It was repeatedly discussed by Konrad Th. Preuss, Alice Fletcher, and Paul Radin. The idea of primeval monotheism (Urmonotheismus), was finally vindicated by Father Wilhelm Schmidt and his disciples. Among the latter were Father Martin Gusinde, who conducted field work among the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego and the Cheyenne Indians of North America, and Josef Haekel, who arranged American religious data in cultural-historical surveys.

It would transcend the frame of our main subject to discuss in detail here the long line of European and American scholars who have been engaged with problems of American Indian religion. To the extent that their dealings with these problems have had importance for our account they will be mentioned in the course of our discussion.

Tribal Religions
The Supernatural

Like other so-called "primitive" peoples, the American Indians lack a word to denote what we call religion. Of course, nothing else is to be expected in environments where religious attitudes and values permeate cultural life in its entirety and are not isolated from other cultural manifestations. In some places, however, there is a term for the traditional, inherited cult practices, as among the Zuni Indians in New Mexico, whose tewusu includes all ritual, "each sacred custom, each urgent request." But the rites are generally mingled with other, profane manners and customs, something like the Latin ritus. To the extent that Indian languages use an expression for exclusively religious customs there is often reason to suspect influences from Christian preaching and Christian practice. This is presumably the case with the expression of the Wind River Shoshoni (in Wyoming), tivizi-togweishúenchaint, "much in that fashion they believe."

There is, however, another expression found among many Indian peoples which clearly and concisely delimits the separation of religious reality from the profane: the supernatural.

The basic dichotomy between sacred and profane, supernatural and natural, is not merely an abstraction coined for scientific purposes by Durkheim, Marett, Otto, Söderblom, and other sociologists and scholars of religion, but a living reality experienced by the Indians themselves. The continuous, expected process of everyday reality is disrupted by the supernatural reality with its discontinuous, unexpected, and, above all, incomprehensible course of events. At times the two realities are distant from each other, as when the spiritual beings of one's dreams vanish at the moment of awakening and are replaced by the living beings of one's home and vicinity, but just as often supernatural reality interrupts the natural. There are glimpses of the spirits in the surrounding landscape, in weather transitions, and in the movements of the stars, and they perform more concretely in the masked dances of the cult societies. What was long considered by some to be established fact, namely that "primitive" people merely experience the dynamic, unforeseen aspect of the mysterious, is hardly true. American Indians have not necessarily associated striking, exceptional phenomena and violent or overwhelming experiences with the supernatural. Events and processes of a superficially trivial, everyday nature have often been regarded as manifestations of a supernatural reality. In essence it is the cultural tradition which determines the borderline between the natural and the supernatural.\(^2\)

Historians of religion and ethnologists have spent much effort on investigating and delineating the concepts of the supernatural among tribal peoples, especially in North America. During the first decades of this century, when terms

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2. Several authors have, for various reasons, doubted the reality of a demarcation line between natural and supernatural in American Indian thought (cf., for example, Albers and Parker 1971, p. 207n). Others consider the dichotomy basic (cf. Lamphere 1969, pp. 279, 282). If we keep in mind that we are facing not an absolutely drawn distinction but a general perspective the dichotomy seems understandable (cf. Momaday 1976, p. 81). It is therefore never sharply expressed, as Boas has stated for the Kwakiutl (Boas 1966, p. 162). Indeed, on the Northwest Coast most phenomena of life could be drawn into the supernatural sphere (Boas 1966, pp. 156–60). Perhaps a similar case could be made for the Navajo (Toelken 1976, p. 11). Other Indian tribes have particular names for the supernatural (cf. below).