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## Introduction

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In every age and place, people have sought to understand the world about them and their place in it. They have asked how and by whose agency the universe came into being, whether it is finite with a definite beginning and end, and whether it has a purpose. People in all societies have been concerned with the problem of order and chaos: that is, whether events are inevitable and predictable or are subject to interference that renders them unpredictable. And they have wanted to know whether events may be controlled by humans. They have sought to understand the meaning of life and death, and have searched for ways to deal with suffering and the forces that threaten both individual and social life. Taken together, these questions are the concerns of what, in the West, is called religion—"a set of symbolic forms and acts which relate man to the ultimate condition of his existence" (Bellah 1964, 358).

This is a book about the religion of the Navajo people of western North America, despite the fact that neither they nor many other peoples make a clear distinction between the religious and the secular, the sacred and the profane. By comparing Navajo answers to these questions with those offered by Christianity, Judaism, and modern science, I hope to show that Navajo religion is as sophisticated as the "great" religions of the Western world.

Until well into the twentieth century, anthropologists sought to discover the origins of religion by assuming that the nonliterate societies of the world represented the culture of early humanity. Influenced by the Darwinian theory of evolution, they were convinced that human culture had evolved in a similar manner proceeding from the simple to the

complex. Despite Franz Boas's rejection of the comparative method, which placed technologically simple, albeit contemporary societies at the beginning of a series of stages that culminated in the most "evolved" societies of the civilized Western world, anthropologists found it difficult to abandon the evolutionists' mindset. Certainly the so-called primitive societies of today each have a history and have changed over the millennia since *Homo sapiens* emerged (or evolved). And certainly many of these societies are complex rather than simple. But, because the history of technology has progressed from the simple to the complex, anthropologists clung to the idea that culture, along with humankind's knowledge and beliefs, must also have evolved and progressed from the naive to the sophisticated.

Although the search for the origins of religion has been abandoned by today's anthropologists, as have evolutionary schemes for the development of social organization, there has been no new anthropological approach to the study of religion. There have, of course, been theories—psychological and social—concerned with the nature of religion, but a comprehensive model that replaces that of the evolutionists escapes us. In a recent critique of anthropological approaches to religion, Morton Klass observes that "for some time many have seen the anthropological study of religion as essentially dead in the water," and that there have been no theoretical advances since midcentury (Klass 1995, 2). But why should this be so? I think that in large part the difficulty lies, first, in the fact that the cross-cultural study of religion involves understanding the mental life of people of radically different societies and, second, in the nature of the data available to us.

To illustrate the first problem, consider Paul Radin, who argued that philosophical speculation was and is performed by intellectuals in primitive societies (Radin 1927). Despite rejecting the evolutionists' assumption that as human society evolved so had the human mind, only ten years after the publication of *Primitive Man as Philosopher*, he writes:

[Early man's] mentality was still overwhelmingly dominated by definitely animal characteristics although the life-values themselves—the desire for success, for happiness, and for long life—were naturally already present. . . . No economic security could have existed, and we cannot go far wrong in assuming that, where economic security does not exist, emotional insecurity and its correlates, the sense of powerlessness and the feeling of insignificance, are bound to develop. . . .

It is but natural for the psyche, under such circumstances, to take refuge in compensation phantasies . . . the main goal and objective of all his striv-

ings was the canalization of his fears and feelings and the validation of his compensation dreams. (Radin 1937, 6–9)

With no evidence to support his assumption that early humans lived in an area of scarce resources, this student of Franz Boas was nevertheless still in thrall to an evolutionary perspective and equated their mental capacities with their technology. What are the animal characteristics of early *Homo sapiens*'s mentality and how do they differ from the animal characteristics of contemporary humans? Radin thought that the early mind was different in degree, but not in kind, from the modern mind and that the early human's responses to life's main challenges were profound, sophisticated, and comprehensible. He was, moreover, skeptical of notions of progress in moral awareness. With this point of view, I am in complete agreement. But if this is so, then in what degree was the early mind different? And what were these "definitely animal characteristics?" Do animals desire success, happiness, and long life? Or did Radin believe that even after the emergence of *Homo sapiens*, biological evolution continued to occur as culture gradually evolved?

Let us look at this problem from another perspective. Virtually all who have seen them stand in awe before the ancient cave paintings in southern and central Europe: "We look at the best and most powerful examples of this art, and we just know that we have fixed a Michelangelo in our gaze" (Gould 1996).<sup>1</sup> Radiocarbon dating places the origin of these paintings from between 32,410 years ago at Chauvet Cave to 11,600 years ago at Le Portel. They were executed by members of our own species, *Homo sapiens* commonly called Cro-Magnon, who occupied Europe and who were overlapped in time by the earlier Neanderthals, who did not produce representational art. Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon were two separate species, and not end points of a smooth evolutionary continuum. Neanderthal died out; Cro-Magnon continues as modern humanity.

With only internal evidence, early scholars sought to date the cave paintings by classifying them in stages proceeding from the simple to the more complex, despite the fact that Darwinian evolution is not a theory of progress. According to Stephen Jay Gould, "The equation of evolution with progress represents our strongest cultural prejudice against a proper understanding of this biological revolution in the history of human thought" (71). Perhaps there was a general mental advance for a

1. The discussion of this topic is taken from Stephen Jay Gould's article in *Natural History* (1996).

time immediately after the appearance of *Homo sapiens*, but the twenty-thousand-year period during which the cave paintings were made does not reach very far into humanity's past. By best estimates, modern humans evolved in Africa some two hundred thousand years ago: The creators of the first known cave paintings were much closer in time to us in the twentieth century than to the original *Homo sapiens*.

Most species do not alter much during their geological lifetimes, and widespread species such as human beings are particularly stable. Consequently, there is no reason to assume that Cro-Magnon was less developed than ourselves or evolved biologically over a period of twenty thousand years, and even less reason to believe that the so-called primitive societies of today, which have as long a history as urban societies, are any less sophisticated despite their less complex technologies.

We must, therefore, study all the religions of the world in the same manner as we do the "great" religions: without assuming that, because they are not "great," they are "lesser." Unfortunately, this is easier said than done, which brings us to the second reason there have been no advances in the field in half a century: we are hampered by the data available for the task. What we know of religion and philosophy among preliterate people is essentially timeless; it has no historical depth, having been learned almost without exception during the past two hundred years. Whereas the written texts of Christianity are plentiful and may be dated, which allows us to reconstruct the development of Christian ideas, the synchronic materials we have for preliterate people do not readily allow for similar approaches to their religions.

An interview with a single religious expert, no matter how knowledgeable, would not be acceptable as an accurate, general description of Christianity, nor indeed of any other aspect of modern urban society. We know that the views of a Protestant clergyman will not adequately describe Catholic or Greek Orthodox Christianity, much less Judaism or Islam. Yet anthropologists and others have not hesitated to generalize from transcripts of conversations with a preliterate individual in order to represent the religion of an entire society. Similarly, even when several versions of a myth have been gathered by a number of scholars, variations are attributed to the vagaries of individual tellers. A general version is derived by including only the elements found in all or most of the variants, and the resulting text is examined as a phenomenon independent of the society that created it.

Anthropologists have made some very important simplifying assumptions about the nature of preurban societies and, on the basis of

these assumptions, generalized from the individual to the society as well as from one society to preliterate societies as a class. Robert Redfield summarizes the characteristics of these societies: they are distinctive, as evidenced by the group-consciousness of the people in the community; they are small, so that either the community itself or a part of it may be studied by making direct personal acquaintance with one section of it; they are homogeneous; and “activities and states of mind are much alike for all persons in corresponding sex and age positions; and the career of one generation repeats that of the preceding. So understood, homogeneous is equivalent to ‘slow-changing’” (Redfield 1955, 4). In sum, the views of a single individual may be taken to represent the culture as a whole. Moreover, because the culture is slow-changing, it represents the distant past as well as the present and thus is presented to the reader as tightly integrated, lacking in internal contradictions or conflicts, and representative of early society in general.

To learn what pre-civilized men were like, . . . we may look to what has been written in great detail about many hundreds of present day tribes and bands and villages, little communities of the never civilized. I do not assume that these latter people have experienced no changes in the several thousands of years since the first cities were built. The particular thoughts and beliefs of the present-day preliterates have probably changed a good deal during many hundreds of generations. The customs of these people are not “earlier” than is our own civilization, for they have had as long a history as have we. But what I do assert is that the surviving primitive peoples have remained substantially unaffected by civilization. Insofar as the conditions of primitive life remain . . . so, too, the kinds of thoughts and beliefs, however changed in specific content, remain of a kind characteristic of primitive society. That there is such a kind is evidenced to us from the fact that we can generalize as to this manner of thought and belief from the surviving primitive peoples in the face of the very great variety of content and belief which these exhibit. (Redfield 1953, 2–3)

In sum, by *assuming* that these preliterate societies are homogeneous and slow-changing, that the conditions of life have not changed, we may generalize from the present to the past, *and* the evidence that this is possible is the “fact” that we can and do find certain features of pre-civilized life held in common by the hundreds of societies studied. But if thoughts, beliefs, and customs have changed over time, what has remained unchanged? Certainly, technology has changed from spears to atlatls to bows and arrows, and hunting and foraging have been superseded in many parts of the world by the invention and spread of

agriculture and pastoralism. Redfield does not answer this question, but he details what, in his opinion, makes preurban society qualitatively different from civilized society.

In *The Primitive World and Its Transformations*, Redfield describes the differences between the two types of society (1953, 7–25). Preurban societies had a strong sense of group solidarity, and the groupings of their members were based on status and role rather than on practical usefulness. The incentives to work and exchange labor were not economic but based on tradition and derived from a sense of obligation “coming out of one’s position in a system of status relationships” (1953, 11). In contrast, the urban society rests on mutual usefulness with an economy determined by the market.

Redfield discusses what Robert Nisbet has called the five unit ideas of sociology: community, authority, status, the sacred, and alienation. Linked to their conceptual opposites—society, power, class, the secular, and progress—these ideas were the major concerns of European sociology in its great formative period, 1830–1900, when the foundations of contemporary sociological thought were being laid by such men as Tocqueville, Marx, Weber, and Durkheim (Nisbet 1966, 4–6). “Considered as linked antitheses, they form the very warp of the sociological tradition. Quite apart from their conceptual significance in sociology, they may be regarded as epitomizations of the conflict between tradition and modernism, between the old order, made moribund by the industrial and democratic revolutions, and the new order, its outlines still unclear and as often the cause of anxiety and hope” (Nisbet 1966, 7).

Moreover, these ideas were deeply rooted in the persisting moral conflicts of the nineteenth century; none came into being as a consequence of problem-solving research strategies. Today, we are “in a late phase of the classical age of sociology. Strip from present-day sociology the perspectives and frameworks provided by men like Weber and Durkheim, and little would be left but lifeless heaps of data and stray hypotheses” (Nisbet 1966, 5). This, in my opinion, goes a long way to explain why anthropological approaches to religion have not progressed since the ideas of cultural evolution were discredited during the latter half of this century.

In the opinion of these early sociologists, the transition from the *Gemeinschaft* to the *Gesellschaft*, from the traditional community to modern society with its large-scale, impersonal, contractual ties, involved the loss of a prior state during which mankind was intimately connected to the natural environment. The world that had been lost was repre-

sented by European culture prior to the industrial revolution and the rise of the great cities. Later anthropologists, following social philosophers like Rousseau, have believed that this was the state of precivilized people in general. The idea is deeply embedded in the social sciences and has reached into popular culture: primitive people lived in harmony with the natural world in a “Golden Age,” whereas civilized urbanites have become rootless and alienated in the artificial world of the city.

But whereas all of the early sociologists with the exception of Karl Marx were mistrustful of the idea of progress, at least as envisioned by the thinkers of the Enlightenment who saw it as a freeing of the individual from the bonds of tradition and the development of individual analytic reason and rationality, later liberal anthropologists and philosophers such as Adam Smith or Alexander Robertson embraced not only the notion of progress but also that of evolution. Redfield, for example, was explicit in his support for the idea of progress:

The standards as to the good have changed with history. The moral canon tends to mature. . . . On the whole the human race has come to develop a more decent and humane measure of goodness—there has been a transformation of ethical judgement which makes us look at noncivilized peoples, not as equals, but as people on a different level of human experience. . . . I find it impossible to regret that the human race has tended to grow up. (1953, 163)

This “evolution” involved both cultural and physiological development: “We may suppose that fifty thousand years ago mankind had developed a variety of moral orders, each expressed in some local tradition comparable to what we find among aborigines today. Their development required both an organic evolution of human bodily and cerebral nature and also the accumulation of experience by tradition” (Redfield 1953, 17). Nevertheless, according to Redfield, the people who made the cave paintings, although fully human and possessing the same degree of moral sensibility, were not capable of the same degree of theoretical sophistication as we (1953, 18).

The idea of progress supports the notion that human society has changed qualitatively since the development of civilization. It is also an idea that antedates Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution and is deeply embedded in the culture of the Christian West. It was St. Augustine who fused the early church’s idea of a unified humanity with the conception of a single, unified, linear flow of time (Nisbet 1980, 59–68). As Christianity was universal and available to all humans regardless of race or

culture, so the notion of progress applied to the development of humanity as a species rather than the development of a single society that might eventually decline. And humankind, possessing the capacity to progress over a long period of time, was gradually educated and improved. Time itself—real, linear, and finite—was a creation of God along which humanity progressed through successive emergent stages toward fulfillment of all that was good in its being.

Unilinear cultural evolution is nothing but a recasting of these ideas in a secular mode: it rephrases an old Christian idea in the language of biological evolution. Even the stages of culture through which humanity was thought to have progressed—savagery, barbarism, and civilization—are reminiscent of Augustine's epochs of advancement during which humanity progressed from *infantia*, a preoccupation with the satisfaction of basic material needs, through *pueritia*, the birth and proliferation of languages and cultures, and on through the various periods of increasing maturity.<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, unilinear evolutionists were not millennialists, as were early and even later Christians. Nevertheless, they perceived the stage of "civilization" as one which embodied a more mature humanity, if not the final stage of perfection and enlightenment.

Those raised in the Christian West need not have been Christian to imbibe this vision of time and development. Those who were to become anthropologists breathed it in with the very air during their years in universities. It was, therefore, within this tradition that even contemporary scholars who have eschewed the theory of unilinear evolution if not the idea of progress faced the materials that pertained to non-Western religions. Much of North American ethnographic material was gathered in an attempt to record as much as possible before what still remained of the precontact cultures of the continent was lost forever. One consequence of this "salvage ethnology" was the recording of hundreds of myths but remarkably few philosophical discussions between anthropologists (or other observers) and their informants that might help interpret myths that are remarkably difficult for westerners to understand. Though the myths are narratives, they do not often follow Western narrative traditions. What they purport to explain most often seems trivial, and the images they project seem, to a westerner, hardly rational. Take the opening statement of a Paviotso version of a myth about the theft of pine nuts by Coyote and Wolf: "Coyote smelled pine nuts in the east,

2. By midcentury, the terms described stages in the development of subsistence technologies: foraging, horticulture, agriculture, and on through the industrial revolution.



and blood gushed from his nose" (Bierhorst 1985, 124). What methods of analysis should be used to interpret such a statement? And, as myths were gathered from any individual willing to tell them, there was often no attempt made to ascertain the position of the narrator in his or her society, with the result that, for any given myth, we do not know whether it was told by a knowledgeable person or even if it was in a form designed to be told only to children.

In some societies the grand myths of creation appear to have a structure; in others they appear fragmentary and disconnected. Events do not follow one after the other with any logic recognized by current observers and rarely is there a conclusion that makes sense. Yet anthropologists, linguists, theologians, and many others have recognized that without an understanding of myth, there can be no understanding of the religions of nonliterate societies.

Informed by the theoretical models of their times, anthropologists have attempted unitary explanations designed to embrace all types of myth. These have invariably failed, from the early evolutionist to contemporary structuralist, symbolic, and psychological explanations, if only because there are so many different types of myth. Myths do not have a single form or function, nor do they act according to one simple set of rules. Adding to the confusion, there is no one definition of myth. Myths differ enormously in their morphology and their social function. Some are closely related to rituals, but many are not. There may, however, be a

primary mode of mythical imagination or expression which is then applied in different ways and to different ends. . . . There is no invariable connection between myths and gods or rituals. Myths may possess significance through their structure, which may unconsciously represent structural elements in the society from which they originate or typical behavioristic attitudes of the myth makers themselves. They may also reflect specific human preoccupations, including those caused by contradictions between instincts, wishes, and the intransigent realities of nature and society. (Kirk 1970, 252)

It is not my intention here to critique the various approaches to the study of myth. Each has had a degree of success analyzing those myths that serve a particular function. For example, Bronislaw Malinowski's analysis of Trobriand myths accounting for the origin of an entire clan system demonstrates that these accounts are charters that reaffirm institutions (Malinowski 1954, 111–126). They support the status quo and can be accepted because the genealogy of the institution may be

stated and their origins placed in the mythical time when “everything was placed in order and achieved once and for all its proper nature” (Kirk 1970, 257).

But what about myths that do not serve this function? Malinowski’s theory does not apply to myths that appear to have little or nothing to do with social institutions. Take the myth of the *vagina dentata*. It is widespread but has nothing to do with either biological or social reality. Psychiatrists have noted that many patients fantasize that the female vagina has teeth, and these patients are said to suffer from castration anxiety and fear of women (Abraham 1949, 463). That the phenomenon is common among neurotic and psychotic males leads to the inference that myths of *vagina dentata* indicate the presence of widely held anxieties in societies that tell these myths. Some have posited a connection between *vagina dentata* myths and vaginismus, an involuntary spasm of the vaginal muscles that protects a woman from the pain she fears. “Since the vagina is a receptive organ, vaginismus can be considered as an expression of powerful incorporative tendencies; it seems to be the realization of the idea of ‘vagina dentata,’ the hurtful female genital” (Benedek 1959, 735). Myths “about cases of *penis captivus* (a prolonged form of vaginismus which immobilizes the inserted penis in the female) . . . have an almost global circulation. . . . In reality no case has ever been observed or treated or reported. . . . The story shows only the ubiquitous character of the latent castration fear in men” (Gutheil 1959, 720).

Here, interpreters of myth face their greatest challenge; how to verify the interpretation. Malinowski, working in a relatively undisturbed society, could observe the uses to which the myth was put and, in the event of conflict, might even have been able to observe it functioning as a charter that supported the status quo. But how shall we do this for the innumerable societies that have been transformed forever by exposure to the modern world? We cannot administer psychological tests to people long dead to see whether they were plagued by castration anxieties. And where something like this has been done—administering such tests to Eskimo shamans, for example—we have found them to be eminently normal and not the neurotics proposed by theories purporting to explain the nature of the shamanic trance (Murphy 1964). Moreover, regardless of how these myths originated, their meaning for a given society is problematic depending upon whether the myth has been retained over time or has been borrowed. Undaunted by such difficulties, scholars have created theoretical concepts, such as the basic or modal per-

sonality, which are then used to analyze myths as if they were the collective dreams of an entire people.

The problem facing the mythologist is the same as that confronting interpreters of the early cave paintings: the myths come to us without context, and we are forced to rely on internal evidence alone. The approach of most anthropologists has been to treat myths of preliterate peoples as representing an ahistorical and unchanging culture, one that has existed—at least until the recent past—as homogeneous and without internal conflict. Different versions of a myth are ascribed to differences among individual tellers, some more creative than others, and some perhaps more knowledgeable. The result is a Platonic version of the myth created by the anthropologist that erases all internal inconsistencies and includes only those elements that appear in all or most of the variants. This version may reveal something about the myth, but it reveals nothing about the mythmakers.

Rarely have anthropologists used biblical scholars' methods of analyzing the Bible, or, lacking written historical contexts, fitted a myth or legend into a known period of history. Without a written text, it is impossible to see stylistic changes in the use of language over time. And without an historical framework to provide context, it is virtually impossible to identify persisting traditions that represent differing points of view within the nonhomogeneous and changing preliterate society. Yet this is precisely what I attempt in this book, because at no time during its known history was Navajo society either homogeneous or unchanging.

A large corpus of Navajo myths has been recorded in great detail during the past century. Usually, the status of the narrator is known—whether a layman or a religious practitioner—as well as the particular ceremonies the narrator knew and performed. This knowledge allows us to determine whether the variations in the telling of the myth of creation are patterned and correspond to specific ceremonies, or whether they are random results of the individual's narrative skill or level of knowledge. These myths were most often recorded by scholars such as Washington Matthews, Father Berard Haile, Leland Wyman, Clyde Kluckhohn, and Gladys Reichard, or knowledgeable amateurs such as Mary Wheelwright, all of whom spent many years working with the Navajos. In addition, Haile, Reichard, Kluckhohn, and Wyman had some command of spoken Navajo.

We know the general outlines of Navajo history: that they originated in what is now western Canada and, over several centuries, moved southward until, circa A.D. 1500, they settled in the Southwest

and made contact with the Pueblos. We have many of the myths told by their linguistic congeners in the north and by the peoples of the Plateau, Basin, and Plains with whom they came into contact on their journey south. We also have many Pueblo myths and can, in consequence, see which myths were borrowed from neighbors, which were retained over the centuries, and which were created *de novo*. Most important, we know something of the great transformations that occurred in their society. From a hunting and gathering society with a religion much like those of other hunter societies of western North America, they became agriculturalists after their contacts with the Pueblos. But no sooner had this transformation taken place, than they began another shift to pastoralism that lasted from the late eighteenth century until well into the reservation period in the late nineteenth century. Then, with the dislocations taking place in the twentieth century, they began another transformation as they became integrated into a wage-work economy. All of these major changes in subsistence led to changes in social organization and religion. And change generates conflicts within the body politic itself, which in turn lead to changes in myth. Let us turn briefly to consider how this may be seen in societies with written texts.

Scholars have identified four major “documents” that make up the first five books of the Bible. The earliest are called J and E, the one reflecting the traditions of the southern kingdom of Judah, the other those of the northern kingdom of Israel. There is also a later “priestly” document, P, that builds upon J and E, as well as an almost complete retelling of the story of Moses contained in the book of Deuteronomy, called D.<sup>3</sup> These sources are identified by differing styles of writing as well as terminology. More important for our purposes, they represent different political and religious points of view that fit known historical events.

There are two very different myths of creation. The first is the P version (Gen. 1:1–2:3), in which humankind is created after all other living things, and male and female are created together. The earlier J version follows (Gen. 2:4b–25) but insists that the human male was created first, followed by the creation of the flora and fauna of the world, which were placed in the Garden of Eden. Only after this was the human female created from the male’s rib. The former myth is concerned with establishing the law of the Sabbath, the seventh day, as well as with the orderly

3. The reader is referred to Richard Friedman’s *Who Wrote the Bible?* (1987) for an accessible discussion of the subject.

sequence of creation of order out of chaos. The latter accounts for original sin, which is blamed on the female, and for the subordinate status of women in general. The internal contradiction of the total account is not objected to by religious Christians and Jews.

There are also two accounts of the flood myth that differ in terminology, actual details, and conceptions of God.<sup>4</sup> J pictures an anthropomorphic deity who regrets things that he has done, is “grieved to his heart,” and can “smell” Noah’s sacrifice. P regards God more abstractly as a transcendent controller of the universe.

Political motivations also provide different accounts of events and major actors. The E document, reflecting the views of the northern kingdom of Israel, is pro-Moses but anti-Aaron, the high priest, and thus expresses the resentment of Levitical priests who were expelled from Jerusalem during the reign of Solomon when the high priesthood was put in the charge of the descendants of Aaron. E attacks Aaron and praises Moses. In the E story of the golden calf, it is Aaron who commits the heresy (Exod. 32:1–33:11). After Aaron and his sister Miriam excoriate Moses for having a foreign wife, E describes how they are personally reprimanded by God (Num. 12). Years later, after the fall of the northern kingdom and the arrival in the south of northern refugees, the author of P is faced with a problem. By this time both J and E are sacred texts, so that neither can be totally censored. Moreover, northerners raised in the E tradition are now a part of the southern kingdom. How may the account be fashioned so that both traditions are accommodated without having Aaron and the priests of Jerusalem appear as villains? In effect, P writes a second Torah that parallels the accounts of E and J. Now Moses and Aaron together are attacked by their cousin, Korah, and a group of Levites. Korah does not challenge Moses’s leadership but Aaron’s exclusive hold on the priesthood (Num. 16). Here, Moses defends Aaron, and God destroys Korah.

We are led to ask whether similar political and religious conflicts may be detected in orally transmitted traditions. Once sacred texts have been committed to writing, later writers find themselves constrained, forced to work around the preexisting traditions or create new ones. Either way, internal contradictions become obvious. One may denigrate Moses, but he cannot be removed from the text entirely. The emphasis may be tilted

4. “P has one pair of each kind of animal. J has seven pairs of clean animals and one pair of unclean animals. . . . P pictures the flood as lasting a year. J says it was forty days and forty nights. P has Noah send out a raven. J says a dove” (Friedman 1987,59).

somewhat so that Aaron's rather than Moses's staff turns into a snake.<sup>5</sup> But oral traditions are free to reshape their myths as they choose. At any given time, they may be thought of as an integrated whole.

However, when political divisions have been documented in an oral society and myths have been gathered during the period of conflict, similar manipulation of the creation myths have been documented. In 1904, after many years of intravillage conflict, the Hopi village of Orayvi split in two as one faction left the village and started a new one a few miles away. Both before and after the split, several observers recorded creation myths as told by the leaders of the two factions. Some of these narratives were recorded within five or six years of each other. Two were narrated by the same individual before and soon after a change in the leadership of the faction to which he belonged. The two accounts differ greatly, featuring different creators, and reflect the political changes. Members of a rebellious political faction told the Hopi myth of creation in which Spider Woman, a beneficent deity and guardian of the hero Twins, led the people out of the underworlds. This faction was led by the Spider clan, and the prominence of Spider Woman in the narrative was taken as proof that their cause was blessed. In contrast, the faction loyal to the village chief told of a creation led by the female deity, Huru'ingwuuti, who created humanity. The emergence from the underworld was not mentioned because Spider Woman and the Twins could not be omitted from that narrative. Spider Woman could, however, be identified as the creator of imperfect and evil humans who brought dissension into the world (Levy 1992, 123–154). The question is whether similar phenomena can be identified in Navajo myths for which we have no well-documented internal historical conflicts.

This problem is addressed in part 2 of this book: I analyze the myths and identify two opposing traditions. Despite the large number of myths that have been gathered and translated—some fifty myths by 1957—most account for the origin of specific healing ceremonies rather than the creation of the cosmos and the present world. Part 2 compares only translations of complete creation myths as narrated by practitioners of various ceremonies as well as by a knowledgeable layman. Ceremonial myths are only referred to when they amplify or elucidate the manner in which practitioners of a particular ceremony narrate the myth of creation. Each of the chapters in part 3 deals with a single question posed and answered by most religions and compares how the answers provided

5. In Exodus, J is 4:1–5 and 7:14–18. P is 7:10–13.

by Navajos compare with those offered by Judaism, Christianity, modern science, and sociology.

The primary purpose of part 2 is to demonstrate that two philosophically opposed points of view are expressed in the creation myth and in the later origin myths of the various Navajo healing ceremonies. As noted by other scholars—notably Karl Luckert (1975) and Bert Kaplan and Dale Johnson (1964)—motifs that the Navajos carried with them from the north can still be found in the myths. Luckert believes that these early myths are survivals of the Navajos' distant hunting past and can be viewed much as archaeologists reconstruct the past by examining strata deposited over time. He does not claim that they express points of view that have persisted beyond the period during which the Navajos subsisted primarily on hunting. Kaplan and Johnson take the position that the tradition of the hunters was gradually replaced by that borrowed from the agricultural Pueblos and that the earlier tradition focuses on personal and magical "power," whereas the latter tradition functions primarily to maintain social control and harmony. Unlike Luckert, they go on to claim that, as the agricultural tradition came to dominate, not only was conflict generated but the hunter tradition found expression in contemporary cases of social pathology and psychiatric disorder such as interpersonal violence, alcoholism, and hysteria.

Kaplan and Johnson believe that the personality produced by hunting and gathering societies is still to be found in contemporary Navajo society—that this personality has somehow survived, despite two centuries of major changes in the subsistence economy. They believe that, because prevailing social values emphasize the community as opposed to the individual, contemporary hunter personalities can only be deviants. To me, their position is untenable: It is inconceivable that "hunter" personalities could be created by a society that today is thoroughly integrated into the wage-work economy and dependent on federal and state welfare.

The position taken here is that changing economic and social conditions engendered diverging interpretations of events that sought their justification in and expressed themselves by utilizing preexisting myths as well as by creating new ones. In order to clarify the transitions undergone by Navajo society, chapter 2 reviews what we know of Navajo history from the time they left the western subarctic, through their migration to the Southwest, their contact with the agricultural Pueblos, the adoption of pastoralism, and the reservation experience of pastoralism and its displacement by wage-work.

The intent of chapters 3 and 4 is to demonstrate that the differences that distinguish several versions of the creation myth are patterned rather than random. The account of the creation provided by a man who was knowledgeable but not a ceremonialist is followed by a comparison of other narrations given by several ceremonialists.

Two traditions may be discerned depending on the ceremony or ceremonies performed by the narrator. The general structure of the myth follows that of the agricultural Pueblos. It is a myth of emergence from the underworlds and an account of the creation of the present world, of humankind, and the origin of the Navajo clans. The myths told by men who performed the most Pueblo-like ceremonies emphasize agricultural symbolism, a major female creator deity, and an orderly world as opposed to an unpredictable one. In this tradition, which I have called the Blessingway tradition, disorder and unpredictability, represented by the trickster deity Coyote, are demonized. Dualism has developed and is also kept separate in the ceremonial sphere: There are ceremonies according to the Blessing and Holy ways as well as ceremonies according to the Evilway side. Evilway practitioners include more references to Coyote, the prime trickster figure of the Great Basin and Plains, and to shamanic possession than do Blessingway and Nightway singers. There are, however, men who perform such ceremonies as Waterway, Hailway, Frenzy Witchcraftway, and Mothway. These narrators preserve Coyote's importance as a creator but give even more prominence to a deity named Begochidi. I have called this more monistic emphasis on unpredictability as inseparable from creativity the Coyote-Begochidi tradition.

The number of ceremonies referred to in the preceding paragraph may confuse the reader who is not already familiar with the literature. A detailed discussion of these ceremonies is provided in chapter 6. Here it is sufficient to point out that, after the adoption of agriculture and exposure to Pueblo influences, the ceremonial system was transformed radically and the number as well as the form of healing ceremonies proliferated.

The Blessingway is considered by nearly all ceremonialists to be the "skeleton" that gives form to the whole system. Many think it the most important of the ceremonies. It is performed for blessing as a prophylactic and prevention of untoward events. Opposed to the Blessingway but its indispensable antithesis are the Evilways, which function to exorcise evil expressed as sickness and witchcraft.

The ceremonies of the Coyote-Begochidi tradition do not easily fit into this scheme. They exorcise as do the various Evilways, but rather



than demonizing Coyote, they utilize his creative power to heal. Two of these ceremonies—Frenzy Witchcraftway and Mothway—have been especially difficult for both Navajos and anthropologists to classify. Of special concern is Coyoteway, which does not fit comfortably in any classification. It appears to be a ceremony in transition that began to die out before it had reached a final position in the system. These problematic ceremonies of the Coyote-Begochidi tradition express a continuing concern with unpredictability and chance.

Chapters 5 and 6 attempt to show how the Coyote-Begochidi tradition developed and to relate it to changes in Navajo life that are discussed in chapter 2. In chapter 5, I examine an ancient and widespread myth, the Hiding and Release of Game, as it is told among the tribes along the route of the Athabascan migrations from Alaska and Canada to the Southwest. As the route is followed, the principle hero of the myth changes from a northern Athabascan, vaguely human trickster-creator to Coyote in the Basin, Plateau, and Plains. Some Apaches retain Coyote as the hero, but the Western Apaches, Jicarilla, and Navajos—those Apacheans with the most agriculture—replace Coyote with one of the Hero Twins of the Pueblo Southwest. I discuss how the two traditions have utilized and changed myths from the Athabascan north and note that some of these myths coexist in different forms depending upon which ceremony utilizes them. I then examine motifs that feature Coyote and Begochidi, to show how shamanistic notions of soul possession are retained as well as to demonstrate that Begochidi was borrowed from Zuni and Keresan Pueblos in order to clothe a trickster-creator in more acceptable Pueblo clothing as the Puebloized Blessingway tradition gained acceptance.

In chapter 6, I use the myth motifs of the Navajo healing ceremonies to classify the various ceremonies according to whether they include shamanic themes of soul loss, possession, and trickster figures. The two traditions are located in the various sings. The Coyote-Begochidi tradition does not represent a survival from the distant hunting and gathering past so much as an adaptation that took place to cope with important new problems that became acute during the transition to pastoralism as well as the later period of conquest and life on the reservation.

In part 3, the focus changes from myth analysis to the comparison of Navajo answers to the perennial questions of the creation of the cosmos and why the world is the way it is. The purpose of these chapters is to demonstrate that Navajo religion is as sophisticated as Judaism and Christianity.

Chapter 7 examines the Navajo creation of the cosmos and life and finds the account closer to contemporary scientific cosmology than to Christian belief. The position of humankind in the creation, the nature of life and death, and the relationship of the body to the soul are also discussed.

The reader may question why I have included a discussion of contemporary scientific cosmology that is, after all, of a different order than religious speculation. My intent is threefold. First, I want to show that scientific knowledge cannot be taken as a standard of truth against which religious truths may be measured and found either wanting or satisfactory: Scientific theory changes even more rapidly than religious philosophy. Second, I wish to show that modern science, as exemplified by the recent development of chaos theory, is as sensitive to the sociocultural environment as is religion. And third, I hope to demonstrate that scientific theories cannot answer the eternal questions dealt with by religion. Whether one accepts that there is a single universe or many universes, and whether the universe is constantly expanding finally to experience entropy death or will ultimately collapse into a black hole, one is still faced with the question of whether there was a beginning and will be an end to the process. Perhaps more important, one cannot decide whether the order of the universe—that is, the laws of physics and life—are the result of a divine plan, or a happy accident, the consequence of the nature of matter itself.

By these statements I do not intend to imply that a religious truth is as valid as an empirically derived scientific one and that both may be accepted simultaneously. Rather, my intent is to show that when we consider issues of concern to religion, we often find ourselves at the limit of current scientific knowledge and cannot rely on current scientific speculation and theorizing to answer our questions.

Chapter 8 takes up the relationship between notions of order and chaos and good and evil. It is here that the two Navajo traditions diverge the most. The Pueblo-like Blessingway tradition tends to be dualistic, opposing good and order to evil and chaos. In this, it is more similar to Christianity than to modern secular thought. The Coyote-Begochidi tradition is more monistic and similar to contemporary science and psychology. Unpredictability is not totally random, and humankind is neither completely good nor entirely evil. Moreover, evil is not as inclusive as it is for Christians and Jews because untoward events of the natural world—famines, plagues, and other disasters—are part of the unpredictable natural world and not of themselves evil. Evil is confined to malevolent human acts.

Chapter 9 examines how Navajo myths define the nature of the masculine and feminine as well as the hermaphrodite, a symbol that unites the two. Unlike Judaism and Christianity, which clearly place the female in an inferior position, Navajo myth is ambivalent: Some events place women on a par with men, whereas others see the male superior to the female. Similarly, the role of the hermaphrodite as mediator of the polarities is not clearly stated; the hermaphrodite's position is as ambiguous as that of the sexes.

Because some degree of sexual conflict is found in societies worldwide, the chapter presents evidence that this conflict is more acute and persistent in Navajo society than is generally the case elsewhere. The myths reflect this antagonism between the sexes as well as the ambivalence felt toward the institutionalized transvestism of true hermaphrodites and physiologically normal males.<sup>6</sup> On the subject of sexual conflict, Navajo religious concepts do not provide clear answers, and the conflicts themselves are most likely the result of the major and fairly rapid transitions undergone by Navajo society over the past five hundred or so years.

The final chapter considers the nature of religion and myth and the reasons why most westerners view the so-called primitive religions as less coherent and perfect than the world's "great" religions. The major cause of this view, beyond the tendency to see one's own religion as more advanced and therefore superior, is the nature of myth itself. Small, preliterate societies must preserve their traditions in a form that can be memorized and understood by a wide range of listeners, not just the most philosophical ceremonialists. This constraint, in conjunction with the relative paucity of myth material gathered from each society, has made it difficult to read the language of myth as an intellectual treatise exposing the philosophy of a given society. Used to reading books specifically designed to explicate religious and philosophical issues, westerners are baffled by narratives with plots seemingly devoid of logic that rely on cryptic symbols for much of their meaning. The result of this bafflement has been the tendency of most westerners to believe that the religions of preliterate societies are incomplete and disorganized and to discount the intellectual content of myths and provide

6. Most anthropological literature refers to the person who assumes the role of transvestite as a *berdache* because this was the term used by early French explorers who observed the practice among tribes of the Southeast. The French assumed these individuals were homosexuals; *berdache* means a male prostitute. Because the role does not necessarily involve homosexuality, it is preferable to use *institutionalized transvestism* in its stead.

instead psychological interpretations or speculations concerning the evolution of religion.

To the extent that Navajo myth and religion represent North American religions in general, I conclude that the religions of precontact North America are no less comprehensive or sophisticated than those of the civilized Western world, and that our lack of understanding results from the paucity of data rather than any deficiency of the primitive intellect. The story, of course, is not yet finished. I do not detail developments during the last half century. Yet suggestive questions come immediately to mind. First and foremost, what changes in Navajo religious life may be observed today and can they be related to the changing social and economic conditions of the reservation? Will Navajo religion disappear entirely, supplanted by Christianity and other religious phenomena currently observed in the United States? Will myths recede in importance as they have in modern societies in general? None of these questions can be answered here, but trends may be suggested and the need for continued interest and research emphasized.