

NATURE: WORSHIP OF NATURE

What is ordinarily spoken of as "nature"—the physical world, including all living beings beyond the control of human culture—often appears to the religious consciousness as a manifestation of the sacred. Through nature, modes of being quite different from the specifically human reveal themselves to the religious imagination. The sun, the moon, and the earth, for example, can symbolize realities that transcend human experience. Throughout the history of religions, "nature" frequently is perceived as initiating a relationship with humankind, a relationship that is the foundation of human existence and well-being. In large part, this relationship is expressed in forms of adoration, a response of the total personality, or of an entire religious community, to the phenomena of nature.

The worship of nature underscores the fact that the sacred can appear in any guise. The religious person is confronted by the paradox that the sacred can manifest itself in material form without losing its essential character. In the worship of nature, radically different levels of existence are felt to interpenetrate and coexist. The possibilities of the human spirit become coextensive with the sacred capacities of the rest of the physical universe. The worship of nature thus highlights both the freedom of the sacred to appear in any form, and the capacity of the human being to recognize it for what it is in any expression. It also underlines the capacity of profane reality itself to become a transparent symbol of something other than itself, even while remaining what it is. In such a religious perception of the universe, nature transcends its brute physicality. It becomes a cipher, a symbol of something beyond itself. From this point of view, nature's existence is like the human situation in the world. Its modes of being as a manifestation of the sacred become resources for understanding the human religious condition. In many traditions, in fact, the belief in the shared destiny of nature and humanity is highly elaborated, so that the objects of nature are held to possess the same essential qualities as human beings: emotions, life cycles, personalities, volition, and so on.

The value and function of nature thus goes beyond the concrete sphere to the mystery of the sacred as it appears in the fuller reaches of religious experience. Only by keeping this in mind will people understand the forms in which communities respond to powers revealed in the physical universe. The following provide a series of suggestive illustrations of worship of nature.

The sky is often revered as a manifestation of divinity or venerated as the locus of the gods. The *Konde* of east-central Africa adored Mbamba (also named Kiara or Kyala), a divinity who dwelt with his family in the heights above the sky. The *Konde* offer prayer and sacrifice to the god who dwells in the sky, especially at times when rain is called for. Many divinities of the sky originally lived on earth or with the first human beings. Eventually, they withdrew on high. Not much is recounted about them in myth. The Samoyed

peoples adored Num, a god who lived in the seventh heaven and whose name means "sky." Num overspreads the entire universe and is identified not only with the sky but with the sea and the earth. Tengri (Sky) is the supreme being among Mongols (Tengeri among the Buriats).

Baiame is the supreme god among tribes of southeastern Australia (Kamilaroi, Euahlayi, and Wiradjuri). He welcomes the souls of the dead into his dwelling place beside the flowing waters of the Milky Way. His voice is thunder; he is omniscient. Although supreme beings of the sky like Baiame reveal important mysteries to the first ancestors before they withdraw on high, and although they play a major part in initiation ceremonies, they do not usually dominate liturgical life.

Objects fallen from the sky come from the sacred locus of the heavens and often become the objects of religious cults. For example, the Numana of the Niger River valley in West Africa, who accord an important place to the divinity of the sky, venerate small pebbles, which they believe have fallen from the sky. They install these sacred pebbles on top of cones of beaten earth some three feet high and offer sacrifices to them. Since the pebbles have fallen from the sky, they are believed to be fragments of the sky god. Actual meteorites are frequently the center of a cult associated with sky gods. In the same way, flints and other species of "thunder stones" or "rain stones" fallen from the sky are treated as sacred, for they are believed to be the arrowpoints shot by the god of lightning or by other celestial divinities.

Worship of the sun is widespread, especially at the times of the solstices. The Chukchi of northern Asia, for example, offer sacrifices to the light of the sun. Among the Chagga of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, Ruwa (Sun) is the supreme being, who receives sacrificial offerings in times of crisis. In societies engaged in intensive agriculture, the sun is worshiped in connection with the fertility of the crops and regenerative life of the cosmos. Such is the case with Inti in the Inca pantheon. The sun's power in such cases is not limited to the fertility of foodstuffs but extends also to human progeny. Privileged groups of human beings reckon their descent from the sun as did the Inca nobles, the Egyptian pharaoh, and important chiefly families on the island of Timor that reckon they are the "children of the sun." In many cultures the sun is believed to traverse the underworld at night. Therefore the sun becomes a sacred guide for the soul's journey through the land of the dead. In the Harvey Islands, the dead cluster in groups to await the biannual postmortem trek. During the solstices the sun leads these groups through the netherworld. Veneration of the sun takes the form of following his tracks when he sets. The sun carries into heaven the warriors who have fallen in battle.

Frequently the sun is worshiped because of its heroic achievements, including the creation of human beings. The sun and the moon created human beings from gourds, according to the tradition of the Apinagé people of South America. In the tradition of the Desána, a Tucano-speaking

group of southern Colombia, the sun inseminated his daughter with light (through her eye) and caused the creation of the universe.

The moon is one of the most fascinating and rich religious characters. It has long been an object of worship in many cultures. The moon's shifting shape and changing disposition in the sky at various times of the night, day, and month makes it the focus of a wide range of associations that have led to its veneration. Sin, the Babylonian god of the moon, had important connections with the waters of the earth. Their ebb and flow were connected with the rhythmic capacities and periodic nature of Sin. Sin also created the grasses of the world.

The moon is frequently a lascivious being associated with the wanton powers of fertility. Often the moon is venerated as the source of sexual life and originator of reproductive processes such as menstruation and intercourse. The Canelos Quichua of eastern Ecuador, for example, treat Quilla, the moon, as a central supernatural being. When the new moon is immature, it is called *llullu Quilla*, the "green" or "unripe" moon. During these phases it is a prepubescent girl unable to conceive offspring or fashion pottery or prepare beer. The adult moon, *pucushca Quilla*, however, is a lascivious male whose incestuous exploits are recounted in myth. The moon's illicit exploits with his sister, the bird Jilucu, engendered the stars. When they discovered their origins, the stars wept and flooded the earth (Norman Whitten, *Sacha Runa: Ethnicity and Adaptation of Ecuadorian Jungle Quichua*, Urbana, Ill., 1976, p. 45).

Among the Siriono of eastern Bolivia, Yasi (Moon) is the most important supernatural being. He once lived on earth as a chief, but after creating the first human beings and teaching them the fundamentals of culture, he ascended into heaven. The waxing of the moon occurs as Yasi washes his face clean by degrees after returning from the hunt. The Siriono build lean-tos made of leaves in order to protect sleepers from exposure to the dangerous rays of the moon. These would cause blindness. Yasi provokes thunder and lightning by throwing jaguars and peccaries down to earth (Holmberg, 1960).

Mountains are a ubiquitous object of cult. In the Kuni-saki Peninsula of Japan, for example, a tradition that dates back to the Heian period establishes a systematic, metaphorical relationship between the image of the mountain and the salvific power of the *Lotus Sūtra* (Grapard, 1986, pp. 21–50). The sacred mountain of this peninsula represents the nine regions of the Pure Land and is an important pilgrimage center. Its eight valleys are the eight petals of the lotus blossom that represents the Diamond Mandala and the Womb Mandala. These structures become the basis for the architecture of temples, the divisions of the text of the *Lotus Sūtra of the Wondrous Law*, and the program for the spiritual lives and geographic travels of pilgrims. All of these isomorphic structures represent the Pure Land of the Dainichi Nyorai. "This mountain is the permanent residence of the

heart-mind of the Marvelous Law. It is the Lotus Pedestal on which the Buddha rests" (verses attributed to Enchin and quoted in Grapard, 1986, p. 50). The sacred mountain embodies the six realms (*rokudō*) of existence: that of the gods, human beings, titans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hells. Within these realms, arranged in a vertical hierarchy, all beings and all forms of rebirth have their place. Mount Haguro, another sacred mountain on the northern part of the Japanese island of Honshu, serves as the center of worship during four seasonal feasts. The New Year celebration is one of the most important and dramatic of these, for at that time the sacred combat between the old and the new year determines the outcome of the future year (Earhart, 1970; Blacker, 1975, chap. 2).

In South America, offerings are made to the mountains of the Andes throughout the year to sustain and stimulate the life of the community. The mountain is a divine body in whose life all beings participate and from whose abundance and well-being all benefit. The community cultivates food from the body of the mountain. It gives forth fluids (water, semen, milk, and blood) that sustain life. Sacrifices and offerings placed in specific holy sites on the mountain replenish the fat, the power source, of the mountain body (Bastien, 1985, pp. 595–611).

Waters are frequently presented as supernatural beings worthy of worship. Water, according to mythic accounts, is often the source of primal life. Such is the case in the Babylonian creation story recorded in the *Enuma elish*, wherein Apsu and Tiamat (fresh water and sea water, aspects of the primordial ocean) mingle chaotically to give rise to all subsequent forms of life. Springs, rivers, and irrigation waters are the centers of religious attention throughout the world. They are celebrated not only during the episodes of the agricultural cycle but also at moments of rebirth into initiatory societies and at moments of initiation into culture itself. Immersion water, standing in a stream or under a waterfall, or other forms of extended exposure to water serve as ordeals commonly associated with initiation. For the Akwē and Chavante peoples of Brazil, for example, the lengthy exposure of initiands to water recalls the time when mythical heroes created the world's contents at the time of the flood.

In Scandinavian mythology Ægir (the Sea) is the boundless ocean. His wife, Ran, casts her net through the ocean and drags human beings into its depths as sacrificial offerings. The nine daughters of Ægir and Ran represent the various modes and moments of the sea. All of these divine beings dwell in the magnificent castle at the bottom of the ocean where the gods occasionally gather around a miraculous caldron. Apparently the cult of disposing of caldrons at the bottom of seas or lakes is associated with this mythology.

Water monsters are also the object of cultic action. They are placated or combated to stave off a repetition of the cosmic deluge. Aquatic dragons embody the fertile principles manifest in moisture. They must be slain or tamed to release their fecund powers and to prevent drought. Thus the Chi-

nese dragon Yin gathers together all the waters of the world and controls the rain. Images of Yin were fashioned at times of drought and at the onset of the rains (Granet, 1926, vol. 1, pp. 353–356).

The earth is sacred in many traditions and is the object of devotion and affection. As the source of life, Pachamama (Mother Earth) of the Andes is worshiped on various occasions throughout the year. The agricultural cycle is coordinated with her menstrual periods, the times when she is open for conception. The earth is frequently a partner of the sky or of some other celestial fertilizing divinity. Among the Kumanana of southern Africa, for example, the marriage of the sky and the earth makes the cosmos fertile. Liturgical life is directed toward the fruitful accomplishment of this union. Among North American Indian peoples such as the Pawnee, the Lakota, the Huron, the Zuni, and the Hopi, the earth is the fertile partner of the sky and the source of abundant life. The care extended to the earth takes involved forms of worship. The earth is also frequently the locus of burial. As such the earth becomes an ambivalent source of regenerative life, for it is a regeneration accomplished through devouring. All that is buried in the earth and rises to new life must undergo the decomposition of the seed. Rituals associated with the earth, such as agricultural orgies, frequently reenact this furious and destructive episode of degeneration in imitation of the experience of the seed in the earth.

Plants, trees, and vegetation also have their place in worship. The tree of life or the cosmic tree expresses the sacredness of the entire world. Scandinavian myth offers the example of Yggdrasill, the cosmic tree. Yggdrasill sinks its roots into the earth and into the netherworld where giants dwell. Divinities meet daily near the tree to pass judgment on the world's affairs. The Fountain of Wisdom flows from a spot near the tree as does the Fountain of Memory. Yggdrasill miraculously renews itself in spite of the fact that an enormous serpent named Niðhoggr (Nidhogg) gnaws at its roots. The universe will continue to exist because Yggdrasill perdures. An enormous eagle defends it from its enemies and the god Óðinn (Odin) tethers his horse to its branches.

Other kinds of vegetation also manifest sacred powers and divinities. Thus the Vedic and Puranic creation accounts identify the lotus floating upon the water as a manifestation of the divinity and of the universe. Miraculous trees, flowers, and fruits reveal the presence of divine powers. Rites of spring frequently center on plants, boughs, or trees that are treated as sacred. The fertility of the cosmos is symbolized by the union of male and female plants or by the blossoming of a bough from a specific species of plants. Around the world, the agricultural cycle is hedged around with religious acts directed toward the furthering of the powers of fertility manifest in various crops. In particular, the moments of sowing and reaping are marked by sacrifices. The seeds themselves undergo a form of sacrificial death as do the harvested stalks at the end of the growing season. The picking of first fruits and the gathering of the last sheaf of the fields is frequently the occasion for religious festival and ceremony.

Animals have also stimulated the religious imagination in such a way as to warrant devotion. Animals, birds, fish, snakes, and even insects have all become the focus of adoration in one culture or another. Often their bodies represent the transformed expression of supernatural beings that underwent metamorphosis at the beginning of time (Goldman, 1979).

Examples of the worship of nature could be multiplied endlessly. There is hardly any object in the natural cosmos that has not become the center of cult somewhere at one time or in one place or another. How this should be interpreted is a matter of extreme delicacy. In general modern interpreters have failed to settle on a satisfactory explanation. Even the term *nature* carries a range of connotations that obscure the meaning of sacred objects of cult in many cultures. Each generation of scholars in the last century spawned a number of interpretive theories in which the worship of nature figured as a large element in the assessment of religion in general. In fact, the effort to desacralize nature in the Western perception and to identify the perception of nature as sacred with "primitive" peoples played a large role in the foundation of the social sciences and in the self-understanding of the modern West (Cocchiara, 1948). Offering a nuanced interpretation of the worship of nature would require a detailed deconstruction of the cultural sciences as well as a subtle appreciation of the religious terminology of each culture in question. James G. Frazer contended that the worship of nature and the worship of the dead were the two most fundamental forms of natural religion (1926, pp. 16–17). F. Max Müller founded his school of comparative religious studies on the principle that myths spoke about nature. E. B. Tylor also established his influential theory of animism, a still-lingering interpretation of religion on the notion that human beings projected onto nature certain animate qualities of their own character, visible especially in dream and in the rational explanations of death. Claude Lévi-Strauss pushes this intellectualized perception of nature in the formation of religion even further, contending that religion involved the humanization of the laws of nature (Lévi-Strauss, 1966, p. 221). A politico-economic interpretation of religion points to the intricate unity between nature and human beings, bound together by common origins and by reciprocities visible in ritual. According to Michael Taussig (1980), it is ritual action that aligns human beings with the helping spirits of nature. These rituals are extended in the modern rites of labor, such as those associated with miners and farmhands. The rituals dedicated to nature are aimed at enlisting nature's power in the cause of liberation of human being in the cosmos. The worship of nature, in this view, is an example of cosmological principles and the rituals dedicated to nature are also the arenas where these principles are created, renewed, and reformed (Taussig, 1980). The worship of nature has also become an important object of scholarly study in order to study nature as a category in the conceptual schemes of different cultures (Ortner, 1974; MacCormack and Strathern, 1980).

SEE ALSO Animals; Center of the World; Deus Otiosus; Earth; Ecology and Religion; Hierophany; Moon; Sky; Sun; Supreme Beings; Vegetation; Water.

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NAVĀ'Ī, 'ALĪ SHĪR SEE 'ALĪ SHĪR NAVĀ'Ī

NAVAJO RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS. Because of its colonial origin, the designation *Navajo* is in the process of being replaced by the term *Diné*, a word derived from the phrase *Diyin Diné'é* (people with supernatural powers). For this reason, *Diné* will be used throughout this article. The Diné, whose population in the 2000s has been estimated at 180,462, now live primarily on the Diné Nation (a land reserve approximately 270,000 square miles in size) located within the four corners of northeastern Arizona, northwestern New Mexico, southeastern Utah, and southwestern Colorado. Archaeological and linguistic evidence suggests that the Diné were latecomers to the American Southwest, arriving between 1000 and 1525 CE. Through contact with the Spanish and Pueblo peoples they acquired horses, sheep, goats, and agriculture. Anthropologists generally attribute similarities between Diné and Pueblo cosmologies and practices to the fact that many Pueblo refugees began to live among the Diné following the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. Many Diné elders describe this period as one of mutual exchange, rather than of unilateral influence.

COSMOLOGY AND WORLDVIEW. The path of walking in beauty and harmony, known as *Hózhóǵí*, is the basic philosophy of the Diné Nation and is the foundation for their culture, beliefs, and traditions. The path of *K'e* is based on a reciprocal relationship of kinship with the surrounding environment and the universe. The Diné *bá'ólta'í* (teacher, messenger) Wilson Aronilth Jr. explains: "According to our great forefathers' teaching, our clan system is the foundation of how we learn about our self image and self identity. . . . A wise Diné can look back into the values of his clan and see his true self" (Aronilth, 1991, p. 76). The Diné were instructed by the *Diyin Diné'é* to live within the boundaries of the four mountains located in New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado. Instruction were given by the *Diyin Diné'é* to build a *hooghan* (round house). The primary function of the *hooghan* was as a place for ceremonies and prayers.

The Diné origin myth recounts the Diné *hajtínáí* (emergence) from a series of underworlds onto *Nahasdzáán* (the Earth's surface). Using a medicine bundle brought from the underworlds, in an all-night ceremony at the place of emergence, First Man, First Woman, and other *Diyin Diné'é* set in place the "inner forms" of natural phenomena (earth, sky, the sacred mountains, plants, and animals), creating the present world (the fourth world). The Diné creation story recounts that it is in the fourth world that 'Asdzáá *Náleeché* (Changing Woman) was born; she was impregnated by