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**Sacred Language: The Nature of Supernatural Discourse in Lakota.** By W. K. Powers. University of Oklahoma Press. Norman, 1986. 320 pp. Cloth \$24.95.

**Renewing the World: Plains Indian Religion and Morality.** By H. L. Harrod. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1987. Cloth \$22.50.

The theme of religious interpretation predominates in the two books at issue in this review. Both authors attempt to go beyond their own "cultural relativism," citing earlier researchers for their ethnocentrism, the most notorious being the French anthropologist Levi-Strauss. Powers' interest is in analysis of "sacred language" among the contemporary Lakotas of Pine Ridge (South Dakota), while Harrod's concern is with comprehension of theological morality among the Northern Plains peoples in the 1850s. Both authors try to provide a new and therefore fresh and fairer perspective on "primitive" (community-based, tribally-oriented) American Indian spirituality, as compared to the "great" monotheistic systems of organized religion, primarily Christianity among the "civilized." A major question is whether they do in fact accomplish the job they have set out for themselves.

*Sacred Language* appears well-intentioned as Powers describes the Lakota language on the Pine Ridge Reservation as living and contemporaneous rather than archaic. Although he is writing about a specific group, his work implies a general relevance to other traditional indigenous groups in North America. The author's implicit position is that the Lakota, and other "primitive" spiritual systems are on an "equal footing" with the world religions of "civilization." His research appears to center around this point, focusing on the dichotomy of sacred and profane usages of language as well as the roles of ritual specialists in both theological approaches.

As an exercise in comparative religions, his is more sensitive than most to the relational and egalitarian aspects of the traditional Lakota "world view," especially as contrasted with such hierarchical and centralized religious bureaucracies as classic Catholicism. However, he ultimately proves quite unable to build upon this auspicious foundation by drawing anything other than the most muddled sorts of conclusions, a matter best illustrated by his confusing attempts to formulate sequences of meaning

within Lakota sacred language by his polarized formulations, such as Sacred: Profane; Individual: Society; Illness: Health; Death: Life (p. 179), which are dialectically deficient. In the end, Powers poses more questions than he answers.

The author's problems seem largely due to his method and training as a structural anthropologist, a rebellious "protege" of Levi-Strauss, specializing in linguistics and ethnomusicology ("ethno" may be taken as synonymous with "subcultural" in this field). He practices the typological approach to analysis for substantiation of the notion of "cultural variation" in an attempt to support his stance on "religious pluralism." Hence, his exposition is characterized by linear conceptualizations which are dramatically ill-suited to apprehend the dialectical nature of his subject matter. This results, almost inevitably, in his assessment of Lakotas making a sublime virtue of "incomprehensibility" (synonymous for Powers with Lakota sacrality) while describing perceived ambiguities within Lakota language and culture. Despite his understanding that Lakota "sacred language" and common language are one and the same, but with different contextualizations, Powers still cannot recognize the profane in the sacred and vice versa since his linear analytical construction sees them as polar opposites.

As much as the author tries to represent himself otherwise, he is still operating with preconceived notions of "Indian-ness" which blind him to a broader understanding. In other words, *Sacred Language* abounds with biased and subjective value judgments which are subtly ethnocentric in their implications. For example, he can be accused of a certain degree of sexism by virtue of his skirting the issue of androgyny in traditional Lakota culture (a matter addressing the spiritual power of femininity), the transexuality of berdacheism (winktes in Lakota culture), and his erroneous assertion (p. 189) that traditional Lakota tribal policy is/was exclusive to male leadership.

Harrod's book focuses on the religious experience of other Plains peoples: Arapahoes, Blackfeet, Cheyenne, Crow in their more traditional cultural contexts of the 1850s. His work emphasizes interpretation of Indian institutions and cultural patterns "on their own terms" and not clouded by (non-Indian) romantic imagery. He also stresses the study of religion and morality from the ecological (natural) as well as cultural context, claiming this view avoids materialistic or deterministic theory. His

methodological approach is more interdisciplinary than Powers, and exhibits a firm theological base within the dominant Christian paradigm. He also acknowledges the limitations in his historical (rather than topical) analytical framework.

Harrod centers his research around the Indians' humanitarian predilection for what he calls "kinship among beings." He interprets that ". . . this primordial form of mutuality and inter-relatedness (called kinship) . . . expressed the peoples' sense of a pre-given moral order (p. 166.)" The problem with this clearly accurate point is that he goes on to expand it to the level of diatribe, a situation which leads him to an even more obvious ethnocentric bias than Powers. Harrod's "broader approach" appears in the end to offer little more than insight into the restrictive methodology of his choice, the Christian theological paradigm.

The author's hegemonic analysis is best exemplified by his conceptual handling of the trickster archetype in Plains religions, an entity he depicts as solely malevolent. Among many, if not most traditional indigenous groups of peoples, the trickster is actually a duality with a creative as well as a destructive side to its nature, and with sometimes even harmonious as well as comic aspects. Harrod distorts this multi-faceted being into a sinister or even evil projection, enforcing "moral order" (which Christians often do). Thus, even though Harrod appears to have a more holistic approach in confronting philosophical issues, he becomes entangled in precisely the same ideological snares as Powers.

Both authors would have benefited by paying attention to Vine Deloria's (*God is Red*, 1973) more metaphysical approach in confronting differences in "world views" and establishing criteria for understanding indigenous spiritual beliefs *outside* the Christian paradigm. Deloria demonstrates that "there are opposing tribal concepts to Christian concepts," That "the [differences are] more than merely conceptual," and goes on to posit that it is the *non-philosophical* qualities of American Indian spiritual systems which render them significant in this day and age. He observes that Native American spirituality is polytheistic and pantheistic in nature, especially when compared to the scientism and pyramidal man/God fixation of monotheistic systems such as Christianity. The latter tradition, in which both Powers and Harrod seem hopelessly mired, has forced the myopic belief that religion

*as such* is always the exclusive property of Western (monotheistic) man at the expense of all other religious creeds.

Métis leader Charles Colcord ("Indian Religion Before the Missionaries," *Wabanaki Alliance*, Jan., 1980) supports Deloria's orientation toward pantheism by arguing that Christian missionaries fostered the monotheistic idea of a "Great Spirit" among Indians; native peoples actually believed in a "pantheon of demigods" who controlled their universe. Colcord also notes, contra Harrod, that traditional Indians did not mix their ethics with religion since moral principles of good and evil were not sharply defined. Hence, there was never a conception of an "Indian hell" or heaven.

In conclusion both books reviewed herein demonstrated considerable promise in their inception. Both fail abysmally in living up to themselves, largely because they ultimately have less to do with their own purported subject matter than with their respective authors' need to intellectually absorb Native America into Euroamerica. Both Powers and Harrod are guilty of the most common sin in contemporary American intellectualism: both have utterly ignored the voices emerging from the non-European reality about which they profess to write.

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**Peoples of Prehistoric South Dakota.** By Larry J. Zimmerman. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985. 143 pp. \$16.50 Cloth.

The culture history of the prehistoric and historic Native Americans in South Dakota has been the subject of anthropological research for over 100 years. Yet, until recently, there has been surprisingly little attention paid by scholars to presentation of this vast wealth of knowledge in a way that is understandable and interesting to the general public. The objective of this book is to address this concern by providing an overview of South Dakota prehistory directed toward a lay audience.

This volume is organized in a similar manner to other popular regional prehistories, notably Lynn Alex's *Iowa's Past: A Guide*