

The Sacred and
the Profane
- Mircea Eliade

The extraordinary interest aroused all over the world by Rudolf Otto's *Das Heilige* (The Sacred), published in 1917, still persists. Its success was certainly due to the author's new and original point of view. Instead of studying the *ideas* of God and religion, Otto undertook to analyze the modalities of *the religious experience*. Gifted with great psychological subtlety, and thoroughly prepared by his twofold training as theologian and historian of religions, he succeeded in determining the content and specific characteristics of religious experience. Passing over the rational and speculative side of religion, he concentrated chiefly on its irrational aspect. For Otto had read Luther and had understood what the "living God" meant to a believer. It was not the God of the philosophers—of Erasmus,

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for example; it was not an idea, an abstract notion, a mere moral allegory. It was a terrible *power*, manifested in the divine wrath.

In *Das Heilige* Otto sets himself to discover the characteristics of this frightening and irrational experience. He finds the feeling of terror before the sacred, before the awe-inspiring mystery (*mysterium tremendum*), the majesty (*majestas*) that emanates an overwhelming superiority of power; he finds religious fear before the fascinating mystery (*mysterium fascinans*) in which perfect fullness of being flows. Otto characterizes all these experiences as numinous (from Latin *numen*, god), for they are induced by the revelation of an aspect of divine power. The numinous presents itself as something "wholly other" (*ganz andere*), something basically and

totally different. It is like nothing human or cosmic; confronted with it, man senses his profound nothingness, feels that he is only a creature, or, in the words in which Abraham addressed the Lord, is "but dust and ashes" (Genesis, 18, 27).

The sacred always manifests itself as a reality of a wholly different order from "natural" realities. It is true that language naively expresses the *tremendum*, or the *majestas*, or the *mysterium fascinans* by terms borrowed from the world of nature or from man's secular mental life. But we know that this analogical terminology is due precisely to human inability to express the *ganz andere*; all that goes beyond man's natural experience, language is reduced to suggesting by terms taken from that experience.

After forty years, Otto's analyses have not lost their value; readers of this book will profit by reading and reflecting on them. But in the following pages we adopt a different perspective. We propose to present the phenomenon of the sacred in all its complexity, and not only in so far as it is *irrational*. What will concern us is not the relation between the rational and nonrational elements of religion but the *sacred in its entirety*. The first possible definition of the *sacred* is that it is *the opposite of the profane*. The aim of the following pages is to illustrate and define this opposition between sacred and profane.

WHEN THE SACRED MANIFESTS ITSELF

Man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane. To designate the act of manifestation of the sacred, we have proposed the term *hierophany*. It is a fitting term, because it does not imply anything further; it expresses no more than is implicit in its etymological content, i.e., that something sacred shows itself to us.¹ It could be said that the history of religions—from the most primitive to the most highly developed—is constituted by a great number of hierophanies, by manifestations of sacred realities. From the most elementary hierophany—e.g., manifestation of the sacred in some ordinary object, a stone or a tree—to the supreme hierophany (which, for a Christian, is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ) there is no solution of continuity. In each case we are confronted by the same mysterious act—the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural "profane" world.

The modern Occidental experiences a certain uneasiness before many manifestations of the sacred. He finds it difficult to accept the fact that, for many human beings, the sacred can be manifested in stones or trees, for

¹ Cf. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, New York, Sheed & Ward, 1958, pp. 7 ff. Cited hereafter as *Patterns*.

Handwritten notes:
 sacred world
 the sacred world
 1950-1954

Handwritten notes:
 The sacred world
 the sacred world
 1950-1954

(2)

example. But as we shall soon see, what is involved is not a veneration of the stone in itself, a cult of the tree in itself. The sacred tree, the sacred stone are not adored as stone or tree; they are worshipped precisely because they are *hierophanies*, because they show something that is no longer stone or tree but the *sacred*, the *ganz andere*.

It is impossible to overemphasize the paradox represented by every hierophany, even the most elementary. By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes *something else*, yet it continues to remain *itself*, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu. A sacred stone remains a *stone*; apparently (or, more precisely, from the profane point of view), nothing distinguishes it from all other stones. But for those to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred, its immediate reality is transmuted into a supernatural reality. In other words, for those who have a religious experience all nature is capable of revealing itself as cosmic sacrality. The cosmos in its entirety can become a hierophany.

The man of the archaic societies tends to live as much as possible in the sacred or in close proximity to consecrated objects. The tendency is perfectly understandable, because, for primitives as for the man of all premodern societies, the *sacred* is equivalent to a *power*, and, in the last analysis, to *reality*. The sacred is saturated with *being*. Sacred power means reality and at the same time enduringness and efficacy. The polarity sacred-

profane is often expressed as an opposition between *real* and *unreal* or pseudoreal. (Naturally, we must not expect to find the archaic languages in possession of this philosophical terminology, *real-unreal*, etc.; but we find the *thing*.) Thus it is easy to understand that religious man deeply desires to *be*, to participate in *reality*, to be saturated with power.

Our chief concern in the following pages will be to elucidate this subject—to show in what ways religious man attempts to remain as long as possible in a sacred universe, and hence what his total experience of life proves to be in comparison with the experience of the man without religious feeling, of the man who lives, or wishes to live, in a desacralized world. It should be said at once that the *completely* profane world, the wholly desacralized cosmos, is a recent discovery in the history of the human spirit. It does not devolve upon us to show by what historical processes and as the result of what changes in spiritual attitudes and behavior modern man has desacralized his world and assumed a profane existence. For our purpose it is enough to observe that desacralization pervades the entire experience of the nonreligious man of modern societies and that, in consequence, he finds it increasingly difficult to rediscover the existential dimensions of religious man in the archaic societies.

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such-and-such block have eyes only for Suzie, the hearer were to conclude that Suzie was the only girl on that block.

If science cannot tell us what (if anything) is outside our universe, what can? Nothing definitively, but it would be foolish not to draw on every resource available. Inclusively, things are neither as science says they are nor as religion says they are. They are as science and religion, and philosophy, and art, and common sense, and our deepest intuitions, and our practiced imaginations say they are. What all of these complementing resources—with the exception of modern science, which works with a limited viewfinder (see Chapter Twelve)—have said about the Big Picture throughout human history has shaken down into a single, wondrously clear and inspiring worldview. This worldview, which I consider the winnowed wisdom of the human race, is found distilled in the world's great enduring religions.

I myself consider this convergent report to be the best measure of truth about the whole of things that we have, but I cannot prove that, so I will say only one more thing about truth before turning to this chapter's main concern. The pragmatic theory of truth defines it as what works. I am not fond of that theory, but as long as we do not allow it the last word, it gives us things to think about, and here its interesting deliverance concerns the placebo effect. Physicians have found no remedy to be as universally effective as the placebo. Psychologically that translates into If you think something will help, it does help; or, more generally, If you think affirmatively, your immune system responds affirmatively.

If that is the psychosomatic truth of the matter, its metaphysical extension is that an affirmative attitude toward life pays off. It seems safe to say that the five-point comparison of the traditional and scientific worldviews in the preceding chapter shows the former to be more conducive to a positive lifescance than is the latter,

CHAPTER 3

THE TUNNEL AS SUCH

With questions of truth suspended, the scientific worldview fared poorly in the preceding chapter. Some of its partisans may have gone along with what was being said on the assumption that once truth entered the picture the scientific worldview would regain its stature; if so, the strategy that I announced for that chapter had some effect. Because the traditional worldview is coming from behind, one has now to labor to get it a hearing. Had I started with the question of its truth, buzzwords such as *Copernicus* and *Darwin* would have rushed in and minds would have snapped shut against the past—such at least was my fear.

Ready now to hear what truth has to say on the comparative accuracy of the two worldviews, we find it to be very little—nothing definitive, actually. We generally assume that the findings of science have retired the traditional outlook, but that has been our big mistake, for those findings pertain to the physical universe only—*cosmology* in my vocabulary—whereas the *metaphysical* question is whether that universe is all that exists. To think that science can speak to that question is like thinking that people floating through space in a huge balloon could use the same flashlight that illumines its interior to see where the balloon is situated in space. Or (to change the analogy), it is as if, on hearing that the boys on

CONCLUSION

An interview in the issue of the *New Yorker* that is on the stands as I conclude this chapter has Albert Gore pointing to "a kind of psychic pain at the very root of the modern mind." It is poets, though, not politicians, who deserve the last word, so I will invoke two of them to round off this chapter.

Bertolt Brecht is best remembered for his plays, but critics consider his poems more profound. The relevant one here is titled "To Those Born Later":

*Truly I live in dark times!
The innocent word is folly.
An unlined forehead
Suggests insensitivity.
The man who laughs
Just hasn't heard
The terrible news.*

Stephen Dunn is less well known, and the style of his poetry is as different from Brecht's as one could imagine. In its own way, however, it too works to pull the contents of this chapter together, so I shall quote "At the Smithville Methodist Church" in full:

*It was supposed to be Arts and Crafts for a week,
but when she came home
with the "Jesus Saves" button, we knew what art
was up, what ancient craft.
She liked her little friends. She liked the songs
they sang when they weren't
twisting and folding paper into dolls.
What could be so bad?*

*Jesus had been a good man, and putting faith
in good men was what
we had to do to stay this side of cynicism,
that other sadness.*

*O.K., we said, one week. But when she came home
singing "Jesus loves me,
the Bible tells me so," it was time to talk.
Could we say Jesus*

*doesn't love you? Could I tell her the Bible
is a great book certain people use
to make you feel bad? We sent her back
without a word.*

*It had been so long since we believed, so long
since we needed Jesus
as our nemesis and friend, that we thought he was
sufficiently dead,*

*that our children would think of him like Lincoln
or Thomas Jefferson.*

*Soon it became clear to us: you can't teach disbelief
to a child,*

*only wonderful stories, and we hadn't a story
nearly as good.*

*On parents' night there were the Arts and Crafts
all spread out*

*like appetizers. Then we took our seats
in the church
and the children sang a song about the Ark,
and Hallelujah*

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and one in which they had to jump up and down for Jesus,

I can't remember ever feeling so uncertain about what's comic, what's serious.

Evolution is magical but devoid of heroes.

You can't say to your child

"Evolution loves you." The story stinks of extinction and nothing

exciting happens for centuries. I didn't have

a wonderful story for my child

and she was beaming. All the way home in the car she sang the songs,

occasionally standing up for Jesus.

There was nothing to do

but drive, ride it out, sing along in silence.

"We hadn't a story nearly as good." We need not restrict ourselves to the Jesus story in this, for its counterparts turn up in every tribe and civilization. Jews have their Passover story of a miraculous escape from Egypt. In the Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna, on the eve of a horrendous battle, wrings the meaning of life and death from Krishna, disguised as his charioteer. The Jataka Tales have Siddhartha Gautama in his incarnation as a rabbit throwing himself on a fire to save luckless hunters from starving. The list has no end.

THE TUNNEL'S FLOOR

Imagine a missionary to Africa. Conversion is slow going child comes down with an infectious disease. The tribal doctors are summoned, but to no avail; life is draining from the hapless infant. At that point the missionary remembers that at the last minute she slipped some penicillin into her travel bags. She administers it and the child recovers. With that single act, says Appleyard, it is all over for the tribal culture. Elijah (modern science) has met the prophets of Baal, and Elijah has triumphed.

If only that tribe could have reasoned as follows, Appleyard continues; if only they could have said to themselves, This for-eigner obviously knows things about our bodies that we do not know, and we should be very grateful to her for coming all this distance to share her knowledge with us. But as her medicine appears to tell us nothing about who we are, where we came from, why we are here, what we should be doing while we are here (if anything), and what happens to us when we die, there seems to be no reason why we cannot accept her medicine gratefully while continuing to honor the great orienting myths that our ancestors have handed down to us and that give meaning and motivation to our lives.

If only those tribal leaders had the wit to reason in that fashion, Appleyard concludes, there would be no problem. But they do not have that wit, and neither do we.

From that fictionalized condensation of Appleyard's book, I proceed to develop its thesis in my own way, beginning with the reception his book received.

Before I had laid hands on Appleyard's book, I attended a conference at the University of Notre Dame. Finding myself at breakfast one morning with the noted British scientist Arthur Peacocke, I asked him about the book, for it had first appeared in England and I thought Peacocke might have gotten the jump on me in

A First American Views His Land

First Man
behold:
the earth
glitters
with leaves:
the sky
glistens
with rain.
Pollen
is borne
on winds
that low
and lean
upon
mountains.
Cedars
blacken
the slopes—
and pines.

One hundred centuries ago. There is a wide, irregular landscape in what is now northern New Mexico. The sun is a dull white disk, low in the south; it is a perfect mystery, a deity whose coming and going are inexorable. The gray sky is curdled, and it bears very close upon the earth. A cold wind runs along the ground, dips and spins, flaking drift from a pond in the bottom of a ravine. Beyond the wind the silence is

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acute. A man crouches in the ravine, in the darkness there, scarce visible. He moves not a muscle; only the wind lifts a lock of his hair and lays it back along his neck. He wears skins and carries a spear. These things in particular mark his human intelligence and distinguish him as the lord of the universe. And for him the universe is especially *this* landscape; for him the landscape is an element like the air. The virgin wilderness is by and large his whole context. For him there is no possibility of existence elsewhere.

Directly there is a blowing, a rumble of breath deeper than the wind above him, where some of the hard clay of the bank is broken off and the clods roll down into the water. At the same time there appears on the skyline the massive head of a long-horned bison, then the hump, then the whole beast, huge and black on the sky, standing to a height of seven feet at the hump, with horns that extend six feet across the shaggy crown. For a moment it is poised there; then it lumbers obliquely down the bank to the pond. Still the man does not move, though the beast is now only a few steps upwind. There is no sign of what is about to happen; the beast meanders; the man is frozen in repose.

Then the scene explodes. In one and the same instant the man springs to his feet and bolts forward, his arm cocked and the spear held high and the huge animal lunges in panic, bellowing, its whole weight thrown violently into the bank, its hooves churning and chipping earth into the air, its eyes gone wide and wild and white. There is a moment in which its awful, frenzied motion is wasted, and it is mired and helpless in fear, and the man hurls the spear with his whole strength, and the point is driven into the deep, vital flesh, and the bison in its agony staggers and crashes down and dies.

This ancient drama of the hunt is enacted again and again in this landscape. The man is preeminently a predator, the most dangerous of all. He hunts in order to survive; his very existence is simply, squarely established upon that basis. But he hunts also because he can, because he has the means; he has the ultimate weapon of his age, and his prey is plentiful. His relationship to the land has not yet become a moral equation.

But in time he will come to understand that there is an intimate, vital

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link between the earth and himself, a link that implies an intricate network of rights and responsibilities. In some unimagined future he will understand that he has the ability to devastate and perhaps destroy his environment. That moment will be one of extreme crisis in his evolution.

The weapon is deadly and efficient. The hunter has taken great care in its manufacture, especially in the shaping of the flint point, which is an extraordinary thing. A larger flake has been removed from each face, a groove that extends from the base nearly to the tip. Several hundred pounds of pressure, expertly applied, were required to make these grooves. The hunter, then, is an artisan. His skill, manifest in the manufacture of this artifact, is unsurpassed for its time and purpose. By means of this weapon is the Paleo-Indian hunter eminently able to exploit his environment.

Thousands of years later, about the time that Columbus begins his first voyage to the New World, another man, in the region of the Great Lakes, stands in the forest shade on the edge of a sunlit brake. In a while a deer enters into the pool of light. Silently the man fits an arrow to a bow, draws aim, and shoots. The arrow zips across the distance and strikes home. The deer leaps and falls dead.

But this latter-day man, unlike his ancient predecessor, is only incidentally a hunter; he is also a fisherman, a husbandman, even a physician. He fells trees and builds canoes; he grows corn, squash, and beans, and he gathers fruits and nuts; he uses hundreds of species of wild plants for food, medicine, teas, and dyes. Instead of one animal, or two or three, he hunts many, none to extinction as the Paleo-Indian may have done. He has fitted himself far more precisely into the patterns of the wilderness than did his ancient predecessor. He lives on the land; he takes his living from it; but he does not destroy it. This distinction supports the fundamental ethic that we call conservation today. In principle, if not yet in name, this man is a conservationist.

These two hunting sketches are far less important in themselves than is the long distance between them, the whole possibility within the dimension of time. I believe that in that interim, there grew up in the mind of man an idea of land as sacred. X

- At dawn
- eagles
- lie and
- hover
- above
- the plain
- where light
- gathers
- in pools.
- Grasses
- shimmer
- and shine.
- Shadows
- withdraw
- and lie
- away
- like smoke.

Shimmer

"The earth is our mother. The sky is our father." This concept of nature, which is at the center of the Native American world view, is familiar to us all. But it may well be that we do not understand entirely what the concept is in its ethical and philosophical implications.

I tell my students that the American Indian has a unique investment in the American landscape. It is an investment that represents perhaps thirty thousand years of habitation. That tenure has to be worth something in itself—a great deal, in fact. The Indian has been here a long time; he is at home here. That simple and obvious trust is one of the most important realities of the Indian world, and it is integral in the Indian mind and spirit.

How does such a concept evolve? Where does it begin? Perhaps it begins with the recognition of beauty, the realization that the physical world is beautiful. We don't know much about the ancient hunter's sensitivities. It isn't likely that he had leisure in his life for the elaboration of an aesthetic ideal. And yet the weapon he made was beautiful

as well as functional. It has been suggested that much of the minute chipping along the edges of his weapon served no purpose but that of aesthetic satisfaction.

A good deal more is known concerning that man of the central forests. He made beautiful boxes and dishes out of elm and birch bark, for example. His canoes were marvelous, delicate works of art. And this aesthetic perception was a principle of the whole Indian world of his time, as indeed it is of our time. The contemporary Native American is a man whose strong aesthetic perceptions are clearly evident in his arts and crafts, in his religious ceremonies, and in the stories and songs of his rich oral tradition. This, in view of the pressures that have been brought to bear upon the Indian world and the drastic changes that have been effected in its landscape, is a blessing and an irony.

Consider for example the Navajos of the Four Corners area where four states converge. In recent years an extensive coal-mining operation has mutilated some of their most sacred land. A large power plant in that same region spews a contamination into the sky that is visible for many miles. And yet, as much as any people of whom I have heard, the Navajos perceive and celebrate the beauty of the physical world.

There is a Navajo ceremonial song that celebrates the sounds that are made in the natural world, the particular voices that beautify the earth:

*Voice above,
voice of thunder,
speak from the
dark of clouds:
voice below,
grasshopper voice,
speak from the
green of plants;
so may the earth
be beautiful.*

There is in the motion and meaning of this song a comprehension of the world that is peculiarly native. I believe that is integral in the Native

American mentality. Consider: the singer stands at the center of the natural world, at the source of its sound, of its motion, of its life. Nothing of that world is inaccessible to him or lost upon him. His song is filled with reverence, with wonder and delight, and with confidence as well. He knows something about himself and about the things around him—and he knows that he knows. I am interested in what he sees and hears; I am interested in the range and force of his perception. Our immediate impression may be that his perception is narrow and deep—vertical. After all, "voice above . . . voice below," he sings. But is it vertical only? At each level of his expression there is an extension of his awareness across the whole landscape. The voice above is the voice of thunder, and thunder rolls. Moreover, it issues from the impalpable dark clouds and runs upon their horizontal range. It is a sound that integrates the whole of the atmosphere. And even so, the voice below, that of the grasshopper, issues from the broad plain and multiplicity of plants. And of course the singer is mindful of much more than thunder and insects; we are given in his song the wide angle of his vision and his hearing—and we are given the testimony of his dignity, his trust, and his deep belief.

This comprehension of the earth and air is surely a matter of morality, for it brings into account not only man's instinctive reaction to his environment but the full realization of his humanity as well, the achievement of his intellectual and spiritual development as an individual and as a race.

In my own experience I have seen numerous examples of this regard for nature. My grandfather Mammedaty was a farmer in his mature years; his grandfather was a buffalo hunter on the southern plains. It was not easy for Mammedaty to be a farmer; he was a Kiowa, and the Kiowas never had an agrarian tradition. Yet he had to make his living, even if the old, beloved life of roaming the plains and hunting the buffalo was gone forever. So, as much as any man before him, he fitted his mind and will and spirit to the land; there was nothing else. He could not have conceived of living apart from the land.

In *The Way to Rairry Mountain* I set down a small narrative that belongs

in the oral tradition of my family. It indicates something essential about the Native American attitude toward the land:

East of my grandmother's house, south of the pecan grove, there is buried a woman in a beautiful dress. Mammedy used to know where she is buried, but now no one knows. If you stand on the front porch of the house and look eastward toward Carnegie, you know that the woman is buried somewhere within the range of your vision. But her grave is unmarked. She was buried in a cabinet, and she wore a beautiful dress. How beautiful it was! It was one of those fine buckskin dresses, and it was decorated with elk's teeth and beadwork. That dress is still there, under the ground.

It seems to me that this statement is primarily a declaration of love for the land, in which the several elements—the woman, the dress, and this plain—are at last become one reality, one expression of the beautiful in nature. Moreover, it seems to me a peculiarly Native American expression in this sense: that the concentration of things that are explicitly remembered—the general landscape, the simple, almost abstract nature of the burial, above all the beautiful dress, which is wholly singular (in kind as well as in its function within the narrative)—is especially Indian in character. The things that are not explicitly remembered—the woman's name, the exact location of her grave—are the things that matter least in the special view of the storyteller. What matters here is the translation of the woman into the landscape, a translation particularly signified by means of the beautiful and distinctive dress, an *Indian* dress.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, when I was a boy, I lived for several years at Jemez Pueblo, New Mexico. The Pueblo Indians are perhaps more obviously invested in the land than are other people. Their whole life is predicated upon a thorough perception of the physical world and its myriad aspects. When I first went there to live, the cacique, or chief, of the Pueblos was a venerable old man with long, gray

hair and bright, deep-set eyes. He was entirely dignified and imposing—and rather formidable in the eyes of a boy. He excited my imagination a good deal. I was told that this old man kept the calendar of the tribe, that each morning he stood on a certain spot of ground near the center of the town and watched to see where the sun appeared on the skyline. By means of this solar calendar did he know and announce to his people when it was time to plant, to harvest, to perform this or that ceremony. This image of him in my mind's eye—the old man gazing each morning after the ranging sun—came to represent for me the epitome of that real harmony between man and the land that signifies the Indian world.

One day when I was riding my horse along the Jemez River, I looked up to see a long caravan of wagons and people on horseback and on foot. Men, women, and children were crossing the river ahead of me, moving out to the west, where most of the cultivated fields were, the farmland of the town. It was a wonderful sight to see, this long procession, and I was immediately deeply curious. I wanted to investigate, but it was not in me to do so at once, for that racial reserve, that sense of propriety that is deep-seated in Native American culture, stayed me, held me up. Then I saw someone coming toward me on horseback, galloping. It was a friend of mine, a boy of my own age. "Come on," he said. "Come with us." "Where are you going?" I asked casually. But he would not tell me. He simply laughed and urged me to come along, and of course I was very glad to do so. It was a bright spring morning, and I had a good horse under me, and the prospect of adventure was delicious. We moved far out across the eroded plain to the farthest fields at the foot of a great red mesa, and there we planted two large fields of corn. And afterward, on the edge of the fields, we sat on blankets and ate a feast in the shade of a cottonwood grove.

Later I learned it was the cacique's fields we planted. This is an ancient tradition at Jemez. The people of the town plant and tend and harvest the cacique's fields, and in the winter the hunters give him a portion of the meat they bring home from the mountains. It is as if the cacique is himself the translation of man, every man, into the landscape.

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I have not forgotten that day, nor shall I forget it. I remember the warm earth of the fields, the smooth texture of seeds in my hands, and the brown water moving slowly and irresistibly among the rows. Above all I remember the spirit in which the procession was made, the work was done, and the feasting was enjoyed. It was a spirit of communion, of the life of each man in relation to the life of the planet and of the infinite distance and silence in which it moves. We made, in concert, an appropriate expression of that spirit.

One afternoon an old Kiowa woman talked to me, telling me of the place in Oklahoma in which she had lived for a hundred years. It was the place in which my grandparents lived, too; and it is the place where I was born. And she told me of a time even further back, when the Kiowas came down from the north and centered their culture in the red earth of the southern plains. She told wonderful stories, and as I listened, I began to feel more and more sure that her voice proceeded from the land itself. I asked her many things concerning the Kiowas, for I wanted to understand all that I could of my heritage. I told the old woman that I had come there to learn from her and from people like her, those in whom the old ways were preserved. And she said simply, "It is good that you have come here." I believe that her word good meant many things; for one thing it meant "right," or "appropriate." And indeed it was appropriate that she should speak of the land. She was eminently qualified to do so. She had a great reverence for the land, and an ancient perception of it, a perception that is acquired only in the course of many generations.

It is this notion of the appropriate, along with that of the beautiful, that forms the Native American perspective on the land. In a sense these considerations are indivisible; Native American oral tradition is rich with songs and tales that celebrate natural beauty, the beauty of the natural world. What is more appropriate to our world than that which is beautiful?

At noon
turtles

enter
slowly
into
the warm
dark loam.
Bees hold
the swarms.
Meadows
recede
through planes
of heat
and pure
distance.

Very old in the Native American worldview is the conviction that the earth is vital, that there is a spiritual dimension to it, a dimension in which man rightly exists. It follows logically that there are ethical imperatives in this matter. I think. Inasmuch as I am in the land, it is appropriate that I should affirm myself in the spirit of the land. I shall celebrate my life in the world and the world in my life. In the natural order man invests himself in the landscape and at the same time incorporates the landscape into his own most fundamental experience. This trust is sacred.

The process of investment and appropriation is, I believe, preeminently a function of the imagination. It is accomplished by means of an act of the imagination that is especially ethical in kind. We are what we imagine ourselves to be. The Native American is someone who thinks of himself, imagines himself in a particular way. By virtue of his experience, his idea of himself comprehends his relationship to the land.

And the quality of this imagining is determined as well by racial and cultural experience. The Native American's attitudes toward this landscape have been formulated over a long period of time, a span that reaches back to the end of the Ice Age. The land, this land, is secure in his racial memory.

western
In our society as a whole we conceive of the land in terms of ownership and use. It is a lifeless medium of exchange; it has for most of us, I suspect, no more spirituality than has an automobile, say, or a refrigerator. And our laws confirm us in this view, for we can buy and sell the land, we can exclude each other from it, and in the context of ownership we can use it as we will. Ownership implies use, and use implies consumption.

But this way of thinking of the land is alien to the Indian. His cultural intelligence is opposed to these concepts; indeed, for him they are all but inconceivable quantities. This fundamental distinction is easier to understand with respect to ownership than to use, perhaps. For obviously the Indian does use, and has always used, the land and the available resources in it. The point is that *use* does not indicate in any real way his idea of the land. *Use* is neither his word nor his idea. As an Indian I think, "You say that I use the land, and I reply, yes, it is true; but it is not the first truth. The first truth is that I *love* the land; I see that it is beautiful; I delight in it; I am alive in it."

In the long course of his journey from Asia and in the realization of himself in the New World, the Indian has assumed a deep ethical regard for the earth and sky, a reverence for the natural world that is antipodal to the strange tenet of modern civilization which seemingly has it that man must destroy his environment. It is this ancient ethic of the Native American that must shape our efforts to preserve the earth and the life upon and within it.

At dusk
the gray
foxes
stiffen
in cold;
blackbirds
are fixed
in the
branches.

follow
the moon,
the long
white track
of the
full moon.

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Sacred Places

There is a place, a round, trampled patch of the red earth, near Carnegie, Oklahoma, where the Kiowa Gourd Dances were held in the early years of the century. When my father was six or eight years old, my grandfather, who was a member of the *Tian-paye*, or Gourd Dance Society, took him there. In one of the intervals of the dance there was a "give-away," an ancient Plains tradition of giving gifts as a public expression of honor and esteem. My grandfather's name was called, and he let go of my father's hand and strode out upon the dance ground. Then a boy about my father's age led a black hunting horse, prancing and blowing, into the circle and placed the reins in my grandfather's hands, still warm with my father's touch. The great muscles of the horse rippled in light, and bright ribbons were fixed in its mane and tail. My father watched in wonder and delight, his heart bursting with excitement and pride. And when he told me of that moment, as he did a number of times because I craved to hear it, I could see it as vividly as if I had been there. The brilliant image of that moment remained in my father's mind all his life, as it remains in mine. It is a thing that related him and relates me to the sacred earth.

*This afternoon is older
than the giving of gifts
and the rhythmic scraping of the red earth.
My father's father's name is called,
and the gift horse stutters out, whole,
and the whole horizon is in its eyes.
In the afternoon it headed*

*the blood memories of fathers and sons.
Oh, there is nothing like this afternoon
in all the miles and years around,
and I am not here,
but, grandfather, father, I am here.*

To encounter the sacred is to be alive at the deepest center of human existence. Sacred places are the truest definitions of the earth; they stand for the earth immediately and forever; they are its flags and shields. If you would know the earth for what it really is, learn it through its sacred places. At Devil's Tower or Canyon de Chelly or the Cahokia Mounds you touch the pulse of the living planet; you feel its breath upon you. You become one with a spirit that pervades geologic time, that indeed confounds time and space. When I stand on the edge of Monument Valley and behold the great red and blue and purple monoliths floating in the distance, I have the certain sense that I see beyond time. There the earth lies in eternity.

Sacred ground is in some way earned. It is consecrated, made holy with offerings—song and ceremony, joy and sorrow, the dedication of the mind and heart, offerings of life and death. The words “sacred” and “sacrifice” are related.

Acts of sacrifice make sacred the earth. Language and the sacred are indivisible. The earth and all its appearances and expressions exist in names and stories and prayers and spells. North American place names are a sacred music: Medicine Wheel, Bear Butte, Bobaquiveri, Chaco, Sleeping Ute, Lukachukai, Wounded Knee.

Mircea Eliade has said that the sacred, in all times, is “the revelation of the real, an encounter with that which saves us by giving meaning to our existence.” Yes, I want to say, here is a brilliant equation of the sacred with reality, salvation, and meaning. But there is more, for the sacred finally transcends definition. The mind does not comprehend it; it is at last to be recognized and acknowledged in the heart and soul. Those who seek to study or understand the sacred in academic terms are misled. The sacred is not a discipline. It is a dimension beyond the

the sacred, to sacred ground, it is a kind of mystical experience, a deep and singular encounter.

Sacred ground is ground that is invested with belief. Belief, at its root, exists independent of meaning. That is, its expression and object may escape what we can perceive as definable meaning. The intrinsic power of sacred ground is often ineffable and abstract. I behold a particular sacred place, the great gallery of rock paintings at Barrier Canyon, Utah, for example. There on the massive wall are large, sharply defined works of art, anthropomorphic figures in procession. They image ceremony in its ultimate expression: humans, or humanlike gods, engaged in the drama of *being*. They perform the verb “to be.” They reflect the human condition; they signify humanity in all places at all times. They proceed from the depths of origin, from a genesis nearly beyond the reach of imagination.

The figures in the eternal procession at Barrier Canyon are related to us in story. We do not know the story, but we see its enactment on the face of the earth, that it reaches from the beginning of time to the present to a destiny beyond time. We do not know what the story means, but more importantly we know *that* it means, and that we are deeply involved in its meaning. The sacred is profoundly mysterious, and our belief in it is no less profound.

In Native American oral tradition the reverence which humans have for the earth is a story told many times in many places in many languages. Speaking of aged men and women on the northern plains, Luther Standing Bear said:

It was good for the skin to touch the earth, and the old people liked to remove their moccasins and walk with bare feet on the sacred earth. The birds that flew in the air came to rest upon the earth and it was the final abiding place of all things that lived and grew. The soil was soothing, strengthening, cleansing and healing.

to imagine an invocation of greater moment or power, or a word or concept more elemental.

House made of dawn,

House made of evening light,

House made of dark cloud,

House made of male rain,

House made of dark mist,

House made of female rain,

House made of pollen,

House made of grasshoppers,

Dark Cloud is at the door.

The trail out of it is dark cloud.

The zigzag lightning stands high upon it.

But where there is the sacred there is sacrilege, the theft of the sacred. To steal the sacred is to rob us of our very selves, our reason for being, our being itself. And sacrilege is a sin of which we are capable. Look around you.

When I was a small boy there was a box of bones in the barn of my Kiowa homestead on Rainy Mountain Creek, where I loved to go and visit my grandmother. They were the bones of a horse, a legendary hunter, a horse of exceptional speed and endurance. The horse belonged to my grandfather, who owned many horses, and who died before I was born. The bones were for me a tangible link to my heritage. They were sacred. Their very existence made of the barn a singular place, a shrine. Then one day I went there, and the box of bones was gone. Alarmed, I went to my grandmother, who whispered to me that the bones had been stolen. Even as a child I knew an unnamable sadness, a sense of loss that would from that moment adhere to my heart.

The sacred places of North America are threatened, even as the sacred earth is threatened. In my generation we have taken steps—small, tentative steps—to preserve forests and rivers and animals. We must also, and above all, take steps to preserve the spiritual centers of our earth,

those places that are invested with the dreams of our ancestors and the well-being of our children.

It is good for us, too, to touch the earth. We, and our children, need the chance to walk the sacred earth, this final abiding place of all that lives. We must preserve our sacred places in order to know our place in time, our reach to eternity.