These are living things I move among, immeasurably older and larger and more deeply affixed to their place on earth than I am, and imbued with vast experience of a kind entirely beyond my comprehension. I feel like a miniscule upstart in their presence, a supplicant awaiting the quiet counsel of venerable trees.

Richard Nelson, *The Island Within*

**University of Alberta**

# Nature as Sacred Space: Beyond Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane*

by

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Dedicated to Stillwater Farm, near Smithers, British Columbia: a place where you might see the sacred blooming in a field, or bubbling up out of a pond.

## Abstract

In religious geography, anthropology, and other fields, Mircea Eliade's sacred-profane dichotomy continues to be influential in the study of sacred space and sacred architecture. However, the limitations of this dichotomy become apparent when it is applied to North American Indigenous religious traditions. This thesis therefore compares and contrasts Eliade's definitions and theories of sacredness, and specifically his notions of sacred geography, with those of various North American Indigenous traditions. The objective is an expanded definition of sacred space based on the relational or ecological model, which I have derived from these traditions. In this model, sacredness is not seen as separate from the natural world, but rather the natural world itself is considered inherently sacred.

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*Contents*


Introduction ........................................................................................................................ 1

Foreground 1

Background 4

Chapter One: Eliade and Sacred Space ............................................................................... 10

Introduction 10

Mircea Eliade 11

Eliade’s Terminology and Definitions 15

Sacred Construction 21

The Sacred-Profane Dichotomy 26

Nature as Sacred Space 29

Eliade’s Influence on Current Scholarship 33

Conclusion 38

Chapter Two: Indigenous Religious Traditions ..................................................................... 45

Introduction 45

Difficulties and Clarifications 50

The Sacred in Indigenous Traditions 57

Hierophanies in Indigenous Traditions 69

The Relational Model 79

Renewal 81

Conclusion 87

Conclusion.......................................................................................................................... 94

Foreground 94

Background 101

Works Consulted ........................................................................................................ 105

# Introduction

In her 2008 essay "Sacred Landscapes: Expanding the Definition of the Sacred" Canadian scholar Erin Sawatzky suggests that the Western definition of the sacred and sacred spaces should be expanded, or "broadened" (Sawatzky, 2008, p. 17). Taking Sawatzky's essay as both an inspiration and a starting point, this thesis will contrast the Western definition of sacred geography (as exemplified by Mircea Eliade) with a non-dualistic and ecological definition (as exemplified by North American Indigenous religious traditions), in order to broaden the definition of sacred geography. To put it another way, this thesis will examine Indigenous theories of sacred geography, which will necessitate a critique of Eliade's theories.

## *Foreground*

My primary text will be Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane*. Despite its age (first published in 1957), this work remains important to the subject of sacred geography simply because many human geographers and other scholars continue to refer to it. In the first chapter I will introduce Eliade and describe his theories on sacredness and sacred geography, particularly his framework of the sacred and the profane. This includes some specific recurring themes such as the hierophany (in which the sacred shows itself to human beings) and the sacred center or *axis mundi* (where the human plane of existence is able to communicate with the divine). I will also provide examples of human geographers and writers within other

disciplines who have been influenced by this framework, or who use similar frameworks, in order to demonstrate how Eliade's theories on religion and sacred geography have retained their significance.

Although Eliade's theories can be applied successfully in a wide variety of contexts, when applied to many Indigenous North American religious traditions I have found that they are simply not thorough or inclusive enough. Indigenous traditions generally do not operate within such a dichotomous or dualistic framework as the sacred and the profane. On the contrary, in these traditions the natural world itself is considered sacred, and therefore sacredness is everywhere. It is not an isolated phenomena; it cannot be understood apart from its surroundings. Many if not all Indigenous religions do recognize the theme which Eliade calls hierophanies; in fact they are of the utmost importance to those belief systems. The difference between Eliade's hierophanies and those found within Indigenous traditions is that in the latter, people live in close reciprocal relationships with the hierophanic beings. Many Indigenous traditions also utilize the concept of a center, or *axis mundi* – but rather than being immortalized by a permanent structure within a built environment, as in Western or "world religion" traditions, in many Indigenous belief systems the center is often acknowledged as just one dynamic part of the spiritual and ecological whole, arising when necessary but then returning again to the natural surroundings and elements from which they came.

Unlike the dichotomous Western or modern perspective, the Indigenous notion of sacredness is generally comparable to an ecosystem, in which human beings and other creatures, as well as spiritual or supernatural beings, are all considered equally parts of the natural world. Sacred space is not separate from human beings but rather it depends upon

reciprocal relationships, and occasionally even kinship relationships, between humans and the variety of other beings who exist within the sacredness of nature. Eliade takes the line between the sacred and the profane for granted, and this has informed the definitions of sacredness and sacred space which geographers and scholars in other disciplines continue to adhere to. In many examples of Indigenous traditions, though, this line is not clearly demarcated (indeed, the line might not exist at all) and hence Indigenous notions of sacredness and sacred geography are not easily defined or described by a framework like Eliade's. In other words, as Sawatzky suggests, the definitions of sacredness and sacred space need to be reconsidered. Furthermore, many Indigenous religious traditions treat the notion of the profane very differently as well: in the traditions I examined, the profane is not inherent in the natural world, as Eliade would say, but rather it exists as the result of human behaviour, which makes necessary the regular practice of rituals and ceremonies which seek to renew and restore balance to the world.

In chapter one I will elucidate Eliade's theory of the sacred, the sacred-profane dichotomy, and the notions of hierophany and center. In the second chapter, I will look at examples of Indigenous North American beliefs and practices, and compare these notions with Eliade's. Using these traditions, in the concluding chapter I will demonstrate how Eliade's sacred-profane framework is problematic; I will also indicate ways in which the definition of sacred geography might be broadened.

## *Background*

This thesis should be understood not as an individual or isolated piece of research, but rather as part of a larger project. This future project might address the notion of human alienation from the natural world, and explore ways in which the human-nature relationship might be reconsidered or reconceptualised. As many scholars in a wide variety of disciplines point out, we in the affluent and technoscientific West live in a state of intense and unprecedented alienation from our natural surroundings. This alienation is reflected in the current ecological crisis, which includes pollution, mass extinctions of animal species, and climate change. It is also reflected in our social and spiritual malaise, for example in the rise of depression, addictions, and other psychological disorders. North Americans might be described as homeless; most of us are disconnected from the sources of our food and water; most of us are not connected in any meaningful way to the physical places in which we live.

Much could be said about this situation, of course, and we might approach it from many different perspectives: historical, psychological, sociological, etc. We might explore the philosophical or spiritual roots of this alienation in the paths set before our ancestors by the ancient Greeks and ancient Hebrews. We could choose to study the political and economic factors at work during the age of European exploration, including the brutal colonization of the so-called New World. We might critique modern industrial capitalism, or consumerism, which includes the need to treat the natural world as nothing more than a source of raw materials, valuable only because of their usefulness to human progress. We might also approach this issue

from the perspective of religious studies: Eliade, writing over fifty years ago, was already describing the desacralization of the natural world and the human dwelling place.

A relevant point is raised by the pioneering human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan. He suggests that during the era of European expansion and colonization, the very act of long-distance travel may have contributed to the desacralization of nature. Sea voyages "may in themselves have had an effect in breaking up cyclical time and the vertical [that is, deity- or heaven-centered] cosmos, substituting for them linear time and horizontal [anthropocentric] space" (Tuan, 1974, p. 149). For people who did not travel long distances, Tuan is suggesting, the natural world played a major role in their religious beliefs. Human connectedness to physical places included living within the cycles of the natural world, and recognizing spiritual or sacred existence within nature. When people traveled across oceans, these cycles were disrupted: stars, seasons, and other predictable features of the earth lost their value as sacred and became recognized as relative or contingent. The human connection to specific places and landscapes lost its importance; sacredness was no longer seen to dwell in physical places.

One of the key facets of Eliade's definition of sacred space is the notion of orientation: there must be a fixed point, or a center, with which to literally and figuratively orient oneself. Here Tuan suggests a way in which we have become disoriented: explorers or travelers, while they still would have depended on the night sky for navigation, did not experience the stars and other heavenly bodies in the same way that their ancestors had. Their ancestors located sacredness on the earth and in the heavens, or they sought to understand the sacred by studying the natural world, including the night sky. According to Tuan, the seafarers no longer looked to heaven or earth for the sacred, or any understanding of it. When people traveled long

distances, these things lost their context. People had effectively removed themselves from their natural surroundings. The natural world remained useful for material purposes, but it lost its deeper significance in the seafarers' lives. I think that our present state of disconnectedness is an echo of this phenomenon. In other words, we in the industrialised West have continued on the same trajectory as Tuan's seafarers, and this has contributed to our present state of homelessness and ecological crisis. We are not connected in any meaningful way to physical places or to the cycles of the earth; indeed in our society, we do not need to be connected. In fact, it has even become desirable not to be. Our technology ensures that we are insulated from natural phenomena like weather, temperature, and darkness. We are even further removed from nature than the early European seafarers, who at least used the night sky for navigation. Physical places and the natural world have become arbitrary for many of us, and the sense of sacredness that was once attached to them has been long removed.

Therefore I agree with Sawatzky (2008) when she suggests that we need a new definition, or an expanded definition, of sacredness. This definition must include a new approach to the natural world, and a new perspective on our relationship to it. The processes of disconnecting and desacralizing, exemplified by Tuan's example of long-distance travel, needs to be examined and reconsidered. There must be another way to look at the human relationship with the natural world. This is why I have chosen to look at some of the religious traditions of Indigenous North America. Indigenous traditions generally acknowledge the natural world itself as sacred, or as composed of sacred elements, and therefore they can provide us with a useful contrast to our present era of disconnection and desacralization, which has led us to homelessness, alienation, and ecological crisis. Hence broadening the definition of

sacredness is not a purely academic objective: it is also something that might be applied to our own society and to our personal lives. It is ultimately a question of connectedness, and of belonging (*cf*. Harrison, 1992; Lopez, 1990; Seton, 1966; Turner, 1994).

It should be made clear that I am not suggesting we in North America try to "become" Indigenous, which would be just another form of cultural appropriation and colonialism. However, the question remains, how *can* we hope to belong on this continent, and to become, in effect, "natives" of this place? This tension might be best exemplified, I think, by a short essay entitled "Summoning the Land" by the Canadian poet Tim Lilburn. In the passage cited below, Lilburn sets up something of a dialogue between himself and the American poet and nature writer Gary Snyder.

Referring to our current state of alienation, Lilburn (1999) suggests that many people in North America "have seen that they are not truly here and in a panic of placelessness they have grabbed the stories of others to root themselves in the strange land." Snyder (1995) is guilty of this, Lilburn claims, citing Snyder's essay "The Incredible Survival of Coyote," in which Snyder describes how he and his friends simply "took" the Indigenous mythical figure of Coyote as their own. "There's something a little too quick in this," Lilburn insists. It is not derived from real connectedness to the land; it is not earned. Lilburn does concede that of course we "would be foolish... not to listen to those who had lived in a place for thousands of years," but the fact remains: you "can't just pick up stories and songs... and call them yours, treat them as your food." This would be appropriation, and it would also be inauthentic: a borrowed costume, or a mask, rather than a true sense of belonging. The real thing, Lilburn insists, would have a different appearance. "Europeans, helpless as we may be, have to find our own way of

authentically being here, have to learn our own songs for this place." He goes on to ask: "What would our songs be? Where would they come from? Keeping quiet and listening is one place. This style of singing, of getting ready to sing, comes naturally to us out of the European contemplative tradition. Having nothing and listening, leaning into what we don't know, hoping it will take us in" (Lilburn, 1999, p. 18, 20).

The tension, obviously, is between the two poets' methods of dealing with the same problem: how to belong here (in North America)? How can modern Westerners connect with, and become rooted in, this continent? Snyder chooses to learn the languages, myths, and songs of the local Indigenous people, and strive to make them his own, and hence to make this place his own. Lilburn balks at this, suggesting that it is all a little too convenient; it is not authentic and perhaps it will always ring false. We cannot simply take other people's stories, and pretend they are our own! He insists we must stay here, living in this place, and listening. He proposes that we take up the European contemplative tradition, something that is ours already, rather than try to use something that belongs to someone else. This is where the tension lies. How to listen to these peoples, North America's Indigenous peoples, and learn from them – without simply appropriating their traditions and practices?

This thesis will provide at least one possible answer to that question, by demonstrating ways in which the natural world itself can be regarded as sacred. The objective of this thesis, in other words, is twofold: first to define sacred space according to the classic Eliadean framework, and second to offer a critique of that framework in the form of a counter-definition, based on examples from Indigenous religious traditions. In light of the current ecological crisis, and the present state of human alienation from the natural world, it is my

contention that Indigenous concepts of sacred space might make more sense, and might serve us better than the Eliadean concept.

# Chapter One: Eliade and Sacred Space

## *Introduction*

This chapter will serve as a brief introduction to Mircea Eliade, and to some of his definitions and terminology. Because I am interested in sacred geography, I will focus on Eliade's theories of sacredness and particularly his notion of the sacred and the profane. This sacred-profane dichotomy, central to much of Eliade's thinking, is exemplified especially in his 1957 work *The Sacred and the Profane*, which I have chosen to use as my primary text. In this chapter I will discuss this dichotomy as it is expressed in Eliade's views of sacred construction, or sacred architecture, and in his views of nature as sacred space. Finally, because Eliade's theories on sacred space are not new, it will be necessary to demonstrate the continued influence they have on recent and current scholarship in the subjects of religious studies and human geography. Eliade's sacred-profane theory was published in the 1950s but I will argue that, based on the diverse scholarship that continues to rely on it, his work is still relevant today. After I have introduced Eliade's theories, especially his sacred-profane dichotomy, and demonstrated the continued influence of these theories, I will be able to critique them using an alternate view which can be found within many Indigenous North American religious traditions.

## *Mircea Eliade*

Eliade (1907-1986) is one of the better-known of the classic religious studies theorists. According to Gary E. Kessler in *Fifty Key Thinkers on Religion*, Eliade was “the most influential historian of religions of the last century” (Kessler, 2012, p. 139). Religious historian Daniel Pals calls Eliade a “truly multicultural scholar,” which might explain his widespread appeal and influence (Pals, 2009, p. 271). Eliade was a prominent scholar from an early age in his native Romania, after which he studied yoga in India – it was the subject of his dissertation – and held academic positions in both France and Italy. His career ended in the United States, where his writing and teaching at the University of Chicago made him a “pivotal figure in the development of religious studies” (Kessler, p. 139). His theories have also been influential in the fields of anthropology, history, mythology, and psychology. Fluent in several languages, Eliade was a hugely prolific writer of essays, articles, and even novels, as well as comparative and historical studies of religion. His works on shamanism and religious symbolism were published over fifty years ago, but they are still used in university classes today.

I find myself agreeing with many of Eliade’s ideas. For example, his criticisms of the modern tendency to remove meaning and value from things, and indeed to desacralize the cosmos, resonate with me and in particular with my concern for the natural world. I especially appreciate his depiction of the human dwelling place. He describes how the home, in many different cultures and eras, was closely associated with sacredness and sacred symbolism. In more recent years, however, the home has become a part of the modern industrialized world; that is, it has become desacralized and relativized. By treating a house as nothing more than a

mass-produced "machine to live in," for example, we have further disconnected ourselves from much of the symbolism that our ancestors found meaningful (Eliade, 1957, p. 13; 17; 23-24; 50-51). Like Eliade, I too believe that our current society has become increasingly industrialized and commodified, and that this has often resulted directly from the removal of religion and religious symbolism – that is, the notion of the sacred – from our lives. And as I mentioned earlier, if this was true when Eliade was writing over fifty years ago, then how much more is it true today?

For this thesis, however, I am specifically interested in Eliade's theories of sacredness, and the ways in which this sacredness leads to the notion of sacred space, or sacred geography. A central concern of this thesis is whether the natural world itself might be regarded as sacred. In this context, I believe that Eliade's notions of sacredness and sacred space are not as thorough as they could be. Following Sawatzky's insistence that "sacred spaces need to be evaluated from the culture to which they belong, so that the Western definition of the sacred can be broadened" (Sawatzky, 2008, p. 17), Eliade's theories on sacred geography need to be updated. Therefore, this thesis is not intended to be an introduction to Eliade and his theories so much as a criticism of some of those theories. In particular, I will criticize the dichotomy that Eliade identifies between the sacred and the profane. This dichotomy, he insists, is an essential component of all religious belief. Later I will suggest instead that some beliefs do indeed exist (and function successfully) outside of the sacred-profane dichotomy.

First, however, it will be necessary to provide an introduction of Eliade and his theories. According to Pals, Eliade was opposed to any reductionist theory of religion. He insisted that religion must be understood on its own terms, and not explained as a "by-product" of social,

psychological, economic, or any other study. An attempt to explain religion using these reductionist approaches, in Eliade's thinking, would be to miss "the one unique and irreducible element in it – the element of the sacred" (Pals, 2009, p. 272). Indeed, the sacred was first and foremost in Eliade's thinking: everything else results from or derives from that single concept. The sociologist Emile Durkheim, for example, recognized the sacred-profane dichotomy but suggested that the sacred was a social construct. Eliade did not agree: "the reality of the sacred is unique and unlike anything else" and it cannot be reduced further to anything other than itself (Pals, 2009, p. 272). The sacred can be defined only on its own terms; as the classic scholar of comparative religion Rudolph Otto described it (cited in Eliade, 1957), it is the *ganz andere* – the wholly other – and therefore it should not be expected to conform to rational thought or predictable formulas.

The sacred dominates the lives and societies of religious people, because it shows how the world can be; it prescribes the way in which life should be lived. Religious humanity, or what Eliade calls *homo religiosus*, "longs to live in the sacred even while having to live in the profane" (Kessler, 2012, p. 140). In other words, religious people are defined by their yearning for the perfect and everlasting, which might be compared to nostalgia for a lost paradise. *Homo religiosus*, particularly in traditional or (in Eliade's words) "primitive" cultures, strives to live as close as possible to the sacred. For Eliade, religion itself is the human response to the sacred. Nevertheless, there is always a tension involved, created and maintained by the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane. No matter how hard people strive for the sacred, the fact remains that they still have to live in the profane world. According to Pals, Eliade's "realm of the sacred" is "so utterly unlike that of the profane world, it can only be described indirectly, through the

suggestive effect of images and symbols" (Pals, 2009, p. 273). The great variety of rich symbolism that can be found throughout the mythologies and religions of the world might be seen as tangible evidence of this tension. It reveals the universal human attempt not only to describe the sacred, but even more importantly, to live in close contact with it.

Eliade identified the sacred and the profane as a universal human category, Pals claims, "paired opposites" that can be distinguished across all times and places. The sacred, for Eliade, is the sphere "of the supernatural – the realm beyond earthly life, full of changeless perfection, order, power and beauty." By its very definition, the sacred does not include the social or personal aspects of everyday life, or the carrying out of mundane everyday activities. The profane, on the other hand, includes all of these and more: the profane is the "entire changeable, chaotic, often dreary realm of ordinary human earthly life, stained by struggle and suffering and bordered by death" (Pals, 2009, p. 272).

Eliade's landmark work *The Sacred and the Profane* was his attempt to define religion. He claimed that religion can only be defined in terms of the sacred. According to Kessler, for Eliade the most basic feature of any religion is the sharp contrast, or distinction, between the sacred and the profane. The profane includes everyday events and activities, which are generally ordinary and insignificant. It can be unimportant and mundane, but the profane can also include decidedly negative aspects of life, such as chaos and impurity. The sacred, on the other hand, "is a realm of extraordinary events that are highly significant," and also a "realm of order and perfection in contrast to the disorder and imperfection of the profane" (Kessler, 2012, p. 140). It is for this reason that I have chosen *The Sacred and the Profane* as my primary text for this thesis: I am interested in this sharp contrast that exists, according to Eliade,

between the sacred and the profane, and the ways in which this is expressed in sacred geography.

## *Eliade's Terminology and Definitions*

Before I can remark on Eliade's notions of sacred space or his sacred-profane dichotomy, it will be necessary to discuss some of the terminology that he uses to define them. To begin with, all of Eliade's other terms and theories are dependent upon the notion of the sacred. Eliade was influenced by Otto, and especially his book *The Idea of the Holy*. The idea of the sacred, for Otto, "was not an idea, an abstract notion, a mere moral allegory. It was a terrible *power*, manifested in the divine wrath" (Eliade, 1957, p. 9). According to Eliade (1957), Otto describes

> 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 flowers. 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. (p. 9-10)

Eliade's notion of sacredness, as the central defining feature of both sacred space and the sacred-profane dichotomy, should be understood as that which is utterly and completely other. One aspect of this otherness is its tremendous and frightening power: the sacred is majestic and dangerous. Nonetheless people yearn for it, seek it out, and strive to live as close as

possible to it. This might seem foolhardy but it is perfectly understandable, according to Eliade, because "the *sacred* is equivalent to a *power*, and, in the last analysis, to *reality*. The sacred is saturated with *being*" (Eliade, 1957, p. 12). It might be frightening, and even dangerous, but life in close proximity to the sacred is actually the only real and deeply authentic life a human being can live. This is precisely the life that religious humanity yearns for.

People might attempt to live close to the sacred, and they might hope to commune with it in some meaningful way, but ultimately they are not in control of the relationship. Indeed, they have no control at all: human beings are completely at the mercy of the sacred. The only hope for *homo religiosus* is that the sacred will reveal itself. Eliade calls these revelatory phenomena hierophanies. Any "act of manifestation of the sacred," or any event in which "something sacred shows itself" to human beings, is a hierophany (Eliade, 1957, p. 11). In his 1958 work *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Eliade claims that we must "get used to the idea of recognizing hierophanies absolutely everywhere, in every area of psychological, economic, spiritual and social life." Every different society, throughout history and in all parts of the world, "chose for itself a certain number of things, animals, plants, gestures and so on, and turned them into hierophanies; and as this has been going on for tens of thousands of years of religious life, it seems improbable that there remains anything that has not at some time been so transfigured" (Eliade, 1958, p. 11-12). Anything can potentially become "transfigured" into a hierophany, in other words, and so it is likely that somewhere, at some point, every object and every social or psychological activity has been hierophanic.

This is pertinent to the notion of sacred geography, because it is a hierophany which causes a place to be recognized as sacred: "Every sacred space implies a hierophany, an

irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different" (Eliade, 1957, p. 26). A sacred place is the exact point at which the sacred shows itself; without the appearance or the recognition of a hierophany, there can be no sacred space. Indeed, every hierophany "transforms the place where it occurs: hitherto profane, it is thenceforward a sacred area" (Eliade, 1958, p. 367). Hierophanies cause breaks, or interruptions, within the homogeneity of physical space, which make some parts of it qualitatively different from others.

Eliade gives the example of Moses in chapter 3 verse 5 of the biblical book of Exodus: "'Draw not nigh hither,' says the Lord to Moses; 'put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground'" (Eliade, 1957, p. 20). In this passage, the sacred shows itself to Moses in the tangible form of the burning bush, and in the audible form of the voice of God. The hierophanic activity caused this site to become a significant and indeed a sacred space. The desert all around it, however, remained homogeneous or non-sacred. Eliade suggests that these homogenous spaces are "without structure or consistency, amorphous. Thus when sacred space is identified, so is non-sacred space. This creates the "opposition between space that is sacred... and all other space, the formless expanse surrounding it" (Eliade, 1957, p. 20). To summarize: according to Eliade, the sacred reveals itself to humanity in the form of a hierophany; the hierophany causes a break or interruption in physical space, which introduces a new kind of space: sacred space. And for this one specific point, or site, to become known as sacred space requires that all of the other surrounding space must be non-sacred, or profane. This is Eliade's dichotomy.

The precise location of a sacred space is necessary for orientation. When the sacred shows itself to humanity, there is not only a break in the homogeneity of physical space. Eliade claims that there is also a "revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse... In the homogeneous and infinite expanse, in which no point of reference is possible and hence no *orientation* can be established, the hierophany reveals an absolute fixed point, a center" (Eliade, 1957, p. 21). Orientation is not possible without the location of a center, a precise point from which one can then determine the location of the cardinal directions. This is true in a literal sense, when seeking one's bearings using an actual compass; it is also true in a spiritual sense. Here I will remind the reader of Tuan's (1974) seafaring reference from the introduction: orientation is necessary for navigation at sea, and figuratively speaking, it is also necessary for finding one's way in life. Eliade's notion of the center metaphorically provides this orientation and therefore the ability to navigate successfully in a religious sense. A hierophany ultimately annuls the homogeneity of space, and reveals a fixed point (Eliade, 1957, p. 28). The revelation of a sacred space therefore makes it possible to "acquire orientation in chaos of homogeneity." The center point is of the utmost importance; without it we are lost.

To dwell in the profane, on the other hand, is to maintain "the homogeneity and hence the relativity of space." In homogenous or profane space, no true orientation is possible: the center is not absolute but relative; "it appears and disappears in accordance with the needs of the day." Eliade claims that in this situation – which is our own present situation – there is no longer a "true world" in which to live. There is no longer a fixed point with which to orient oneself. Like Tuan's seafarers we have removed ourselves from that which we once considered

vitally important, and now we are left to fend for ourselves. At this point the universe itself becomes fragmented and shattered, Eliade claims, and becomes an "amorphous mass consisting of an infinite number of more or less neutral places in which man moves, governed and driven by the obligations of an existence incorporated into an industrial society" (Eliade, 1957, p. 23-24). In other words the cosmos has become desacralized, or profane, because it is relativized. In a wholly profane space, which Eliade describes as both homogeneous and chaotic, there can be no orientation – metaphorical or otherwise – and therefore human beings become lost.

Eliade claims that all traditional societies, which he equates with *homo religiosus*, assume an opposition "between their inhabited territory and the unknown and indeterminate space that surrounds it." In this opposition, the occupied world is equated with the cosmos, or the real world; everything outside of it is foreign and chaotic." This "cleavage" between inhabited and organized space, and the unknown space extending beyond its frontiers, is the sacred-profane dichotomy (Eliade, 1957, p. 29; *cf*. Kover, 2009). On one side of the divide there is a cosmos, or sacred space; on the other side there is a chaos, or profane space. Eliade suggests that a cosmos, or sacred space, can be made out of the chaos by clearing uncultivated ground or by conquering and occupying territory. In either case, he says, there is a "ritual taking possession" by which everything that was chaotic or profane is made into a world (that is, it is cosmicized or made sacred). He suggests that this is a process of "creating the space anew," or consecrating it. Eliade points out that this type of thinking continued, even in the West, down to the beginning of the modern era. He gives the example of the Spanish and Portuguese, who discovered and conquered the New World and took possession of it using religious terminology.

“The raising of the Cross,” he says, was one form of this territorial consecration: “The newly discovered country was ‘renewed,’ ‘recreated’ by the Cross” (Eliade, 1957, p. 31-32). The European explorers perceived the New World as a chaos, which needed to be consecrated or made into a cosmos; they saw it as profane space, but they were able to convert it into sacred space.

Recognition of the center does not only represent the location of a hierophany, or the point where the sacred manifests itself in space; nor is it only a fixed point by which people might orient themselves. According to Eliade, the center also makes possible the “founding of the world,” that is, the creation of organization out of formlessness or cosmos out of chaos. Furthermore, when the sacred creates an interruption in homogeneous space, it also “effects a break in plane, that is, it opens communication between the cosmic planes” (Eliade, 1957, p. 63). At the center an opening is made, between the human (or profane) world and the divine (or sacred) world. At this point communication has been made possible between the three planes or levels of existence: the earth, heaven, and the underworld. Eliade suggests that this communication is often expressed through the image of a universal pillar, the world navel or *axis mundi*. This cosmic pillar can be found “only at the very center of the universe, for the whole of the habitable world extends around it” (Eliade, 1957, p. 36-37). The *axis mundi* image is found throughout much of Eliade’s work, and in fact he suggests that similar symbolism is found almost everywhere. Pillars, ladders, vines, columns, mountains and trees – including divinities dwelling in trees, and various versions of the Tree of Life – can be identified in Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Indian, Norse, and Aboriginal Australian traditions, among others (Eliade, 1958, p. 271-278). *The Sacred and the Profane* contains numerous references to the

center and the *axis mundi* (Eliade, 1957, p. 36; 37; 47; 57; 64; 75; 128; 173; 183), and the same imagery is prevalent in Eliade's work on shamanism, in which he provides almost countless examples of shamanic travel between heaven, earth, and underworld using variations on the theme of the *axis mundi* or center (Eliade, 1964, p. 38; 42; 70; 120; 157; 169; 224; 269; 404; 430; 447; 492). The center, in other words, is of utmost importance to Eliade's notion of sacredness and sacred space. It implies orientation, which can be both literal and figurative, and it allows for the possibility of communication between humanity and the sacred.

## *Sacred Construction*

*Homo religiosus* seeks to live as near as possible to the sacred center. A specific country might be said to exist at the center of the earth; similarly a city could be seen as the intersection of the cardinal directions (that is, the center). Temples or palaces, as significant ritual structures or seats of power, might be even more specific representations of the center of the universe. But even the human dwelling place, be it a permanent house or a nomadic shelter, can also be seen as the center (Eliade, 1957, p. 43; 53). According to Eliade, there are two methods of consecrating or "ritually transforming" the dwelling place into a cosmos. The first is to assimilate it to the cosmos "by the projection of the four horizons from a central point (in the case of a village) or by the symbolic installation of the *axis mundi* (in the case of a house)." The second is to repeat, "through a ritual of construction, the paradigmatic acts of the gods by virtue of which the world came to birth" (Eliade, 1957, p. 52-53). The act of

consecration can transform a physical space from chaos to cosmos, or from profane to sacred. It is also a human attempt to participate in the cosmos by symbolically participating in, or re-enacting, the creative works of God or the gods.

The center can be a single house; it can be a designated building or space such as a religious structure; it can also be an entire territory or country. With this in mind, we might think of the center as not only a single fixed point but rather a series of concentric circles, with the primary religious or political structure – or possibly the dwelling place – in the absolute middle of other ever-widening circles represented by the city, country, and so on. This suggests the possibility of more than one center, and indeed Eliade admits for the possibility. He says there can be a great number, perhaps even an infinite number, of centers of the world. This poses no problems for the notion of the center, because "it is not a matter of geometrical space, but of an existential and sacred space that has an entirely different structure, that admits of an infinite number of breaks and hence is capable of an infinite number of communications with the transcendent" (Eliade, 1957, p. 57). A large number of people could consider their own personal dwellings to be simultaneously the center of the universe; at the same time they might also recognize a local religious or political structure, such as a temple or palace, as a cosmic center. Since the center is not a literal space so much as a figurative or spiritual concept, it does not have to follow the logic of the physical world. Indeed by its very definition as sacred, and therefore as *ganz andere* or "wholly other," it would not be expected to abide by this logic.

This may sound as if human beings themselves are responsible for sacred space. On the contrary, Eliade insists that the center, or sacred place, "is never 'chosen' by man; it is merely

discovered by him; in other words the sacred place in one way or another reveals itself to him" (Eliade, 1958, p. 369). As mentioned previously, human beings seek to involve themselves with the sacred, and to live in close proximity to it, but they are not in control of the relationship. It is always the sacred which shows itself to human beings through hierophanies. People then respond to these events by participating in the primordial creative work of the gods, by building sacred structures or otherwise consecrating the territory. A sacred space might be a structure erected by human beings upon a sacred space, or center; a sacred space can also exist where nothing has been built.

The idea of a sacred place, according to Eliade, involves a repetition of the hierophany which first consecrated the place by "cutting it off from the profane space around it." This repetition might be the building of an altar, temple, or other sacred structure. A hierophany therefore not only sanctifies a specific location in "undifferentiated profane space," it also ensures that "sacredness will continue there. *There*, in *that* place, the hierophany repeats itself." This is what Eliade means when he claims that people can actively participate in the creative work of the gods: after recognizing a sacred space (that is, recognizing the location at which the sacred reveals itself), they can commemorate and maintain this space by consecrating it. This consecration might include massive and complex architecture, or simply an *axis mundi*-like pillar or pole. In this way, because of the human construction and involvement, the place becomes "an inexhaustible source of power and sacredness and enables man, simply by entering it, to have a share in the power, to hold communion with the sacredness" (Eliade, 1958, p. 368). A place can become a permanent "center of the sacred." Naturally these structures have been imagined in a great variety of ways throughout history and in different

countries; nonetheless, Eliade claims that “they all present one trait in common: there is always a clearly marked space which makes it possible... to communicate with the sacred” (Eliade, 1958, p. 368). Whether or not they resemble the *axis mundi*, or incorporate it in some way, they all function in a similar way: they all work as an “opening,” or a point of communication, between the human world and the sacred.

Sacred architecture should not be seen only in light of the *axis mundi*, however. Another important point is the enclosure, or wall, which might simply be a circle of stones, built to surround a sacred place. According to Eliade (1958), these sanctuaries existed as early as the Indus and Aegean civilizations. The purpose of the enclosure, or wall, is twofold: it signifies the continued presence of a hierophany within it, and it protects people by keeping them apart from that hierophany. After all, Eliade reminds us, the sacred is dangerous “to anyone who comes into contact with it unprepared” (p. 370-371). The wall is important because it separates the sacred from the profane. In practical terms, it keeps the sacred in, and it keeps the profane out. The threshold (or door, or gateway) which is a part of the wall is also important because, like the *axis mundi*, it is an opening through which one realm may interact with the other (p. 371). The *axis mundi* or pillar might be seen as the vertical element of sacred construction; that is, it is not only vertical in shape but also symbolically aligned upward to the heavens, or to the gods. The wall is therefore the horizontal element of sacred architecture, based on both its obvious physical form and its figurative function as barrier preventing movement between the profane (human) and sacred (hierophanic) spaces. Both vertical and horizontal axes depend upon the location of the center: the *axis mundi* represents the exact location of the center, and the surrounding walls represent the horizons, or cardinal directions, which project outward

from it. The same principles can be applied to any sacred construction, be it nomadic dwelling or tent, ziggurat or pyramid, temple or church, house or palace, village or city (*cf*. Tuan, 1974).

Furthermore, Eliade tells us that long before city walls served any military purpose, "they were a magic defence, for they marked out from the midst of a 'chaotic' space... an enclosure, a place that was organized, made cosmic." He suggests that these symbolic defences were common in Europe and also in parts of Asia. During an epidemic in northern India, for instance, "a circle is described around the village to stop the demons of illness from entering its enclosure." The walls or enclosures in European cities may have served two purposes, functioning as a fortress to defend against both human enemies and spiritual enemies. The circle drawn on the ground in India, on the other hand, may not have stopped human movement but was believed to defend against evil or profanity. Indeed, Eliade claims, the image of a circle can be observed in "many magico-religious rituals." Like the physical wall of stone or brick, it is a "partition between the two areas of different kinds" (Eliade, 1958, p. 371). It is not only a circle of protection, it is a barrier between the sacred and the profane. The act of sacred construction, then, is an example of human beings participating in the creative work of the gods; it is also a way of relating to the sacred, both literally and symbolically. It represents an acknowledgement of the sacred center, and a continued attempt to live in close proximity to it. People wish to live near the sacred, but yet the sacred can be dangerous and so they cannot be too close: they must build a wall between it and themselves. Hence sacred architecture also represents the tension involved when human beings seek the sacred: they desire closeness, but cannot get too close; they look to the sacred for protection, but they also need protection from the sacred itself.

Sacred architecture is just one aspect of the larger field of sacred geography, and rather than discuss it any further I intend to revisit Eliade's sacred-profane dichotomy. To summarize these various thoughts on architecture, though, it might be helpful to return once more to the image of the vertical and horizontal axes. All sacred constructions, Eliade (1958) suggests,

> represent the whole universe in symbol: their various floors or terraces are identified with the 'heavens' or levels of the cosmos. In one sense, every one of them reproduces... the 'center of the world'... every consecrated place, in fact, is a 'center'; every place where hierophanies and theophanies can occur, and where there exists the possibility of breaking through from the level of earth to the level of heaven. (p. 373)

Sacred space is a microcosm: a representation of the world, or the universe; this is a common Eliadean theme (Eliade, 1957, p. 45; 1958, p. 271). The cosmos itself, which is the universe as seen by religious humanity, is replicated in the act of sacred construction. This is how human beings participate in the creative acts of the gods. Furthermore, the shapes and symbols of the cosmos are recreated in the forms of sacred architecture. The resulting structure might be understood as a scale model – a manageable, "human-sized version" – of the sacred universe, which enables proximity to the sacred.

## *The Sacred-Profane Dichotomy*

Sacred architecture is but one facet of the larger subject which I wish to address, which is Eliade's dichotomous theory of the sacred and the profane. I refer to this theory as dichotomous because it depends entirely upon the separation of sacred and profane. It requires a division between them, which might be visualized as a wall that keeps the sacred in

and the profane out. This dichotomy suggests that the sacred is utterly different from the profane: "Man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane" (Eliade, 1957, p. 11). The sacred and the profane are mutually exclusive; they do not overlap, and there are no "gray areas" between them. Everything else in Eliade's theory is contingent upon this point. For example, sacred architecture is not possible without it. Indeed, according to Eliade, religious life is not possible without it.

The profane is all around us: it is homogenous and chaotic, and we live in it. The sacred breaks through that profane space, however, through a hierophany or revelation. Henceforth that location is set apart: recognized as the center, it becomes a sacred place. Because the sacred is wholly other, it is not expected to follow the rules of normal life; in fact it is expected not to. Therefore, for example, there might simultaneously be numerous or even an infinite number of different sacred centers. A center recognized by one person or group may not be recognized by another. The center can be a permanently fixed point, as in the case of sacred architecture. However, the center can also be portable, as in the case of nomadic people who carry their symbolic *axis mundi* with them when they travel. The center may not be readily visible or apparent, in other words, to an observer. However, it can probably be recognized by observing its adherents, by observing the behaviour of the people who acknowledge it as the center. "Pointing out the contrast between the behaviour of nonreligious man with respect to the space in which he lives and the behaviour of religious man in respect to sacred space is enough to make the difference in structure between the two attitudes clearly apparent" (Eliade, 1957, p. 63). We might compare examples of traditional cultures, in which people treat

their own homes as sacred space, with modern industrial people who treat their homes as machines, or as mass-produced commodities.

On the topic of dwelling places as sacred structures, sacred architecture is clearly derived from and dependent upon the sacred-profane dichotomy. A hierophany allows people to identify a specific place, or a center, from which to orient themselves. This orientation makes possible the building of sacred architecture. The center, or *axis mundi*, allows for the outward projection of the cardinal directions. In architecture this projection is accomplished through the building of walls. Once this is completed, the sacred place is henceforth separated from the surrounding profane space. The wall, which I have called the horizontal axis of sacred architecture, is especially emblematic of Eliade's sacred-profane dichotomy. Whether it is a magical line or circle drawn on the ground, or a fortified wall that also serves practical and military purposes, the horizontal axis assures that the sacred and the profane are kept apart from one another.

However, the dichotomy itself should not be thought of only in terms of built environments. Construction is just one way in which human beings have attempted to relate to the notion of the sacred. Another way is through the understanding of time. Eliade claims that every example of sacred construction, and indeed every type of human contact with the center, "involves doing away with profane time, and entering the mythical *illud tempus* [that is, the time before time] of creation" (Eliade, 1958, p. 378). Thus sacredness – and the sacred-profane dichotomy – can thus be experienced temporally as well as spatially. *Homo religiosus* can participate in the creative work of the gods not only by the physical act of construction, but also by symbolically returning to the time of creation. *This time*, this present moment in which we

exist, might be understood as a microcosm of the time of creation. This is what is hoped for when people strive to commune with the sacred. People might attempt to dwell in sacred time as well as sacred space through the observance of liturgical calendars, Sabbaths, holidays (or holy-days), saint's days, solstices, and all types of festivals. Indeed, Eliade discusses the notion of sacred time at length (Eliade, 1957, p. 68-113), but I refer to it here only to show that architecture is just one possible approach of many. While the experiences of both sacred space and sacred time may be hugely significant in the life of religious humanity, they are still merely details of the "big picture," which Eliade describes as the sacred and the profane. The entire world, indeed the entire universe, can be defined within the two categories imposed by the sacred-profane dichotomy. With this dichotomy in mind, my next step will be to examine Eliade's perception of the natural world.

### *Nature as Sacred Space*

My intention in this thesis is to explore the possibility that *nature itself* can be sacred space. Significantly, there is some ambiguity in Eliade's comments about the natural world. The sacred-profane dichotomy, which might so far be relatively simple to understand, becomes convoluted when Eliade (1957) discusses the natural world. For example, he claims that:

> nature is never only 'natural'; it is always fraught with a religious value... the cosmos is a divine creation; coming from the hands of the gods, the world is impregnated with sacredness. It is not simply a sacrality *communicated* by the gods, as is the case, for example, with a place or object consecrated by the divine presence. The gods did more; *they manifested the different modalities of the sacred in the very structure of the world and of cosmic phenomena*. (p. 116, emphasis in original)

By suggesting that the sacrality in nature is not communicated by the gods, Eliade contradicts his own claim that sacred space is made possible only through the revelatory event of the hierophany. Furthermore, by suggesting that "the world is impregnated with sacredness" he also contradicts the claim that before the sacred interrupts it in the form of a hierophany, all of physical space is homogeneous and profane.

Eliade continues to describe the sacredness of nature: "the world exists, it is there, and it has a structure; it is not a chaos but a cosmos, hence it presents itself as creation, as work of the gods. This divine work always preserves its quality of transparency, that is, it spontaneously reveals the many aspects of the sacred... The cosmic rhythms manifest order, harmony, permanence, fecundity. The cosmos as a whole is an organism at once *real*, *living*, and *sacred*" (Eliade, 1957, p. 116-117, emphasis in original). This passage sheds some light on the problem of the apparent contradictions, but does not entirely solve it. Without saying it outright, Eliade seems to be suggesting that the natural world itself is a hierophany, or perhaps it has been for some people (that is, for "religious man" or for people in traditional societies). Indeed, here Eliade specifically calls the natural world a cosmos, which elsewhere he equates with order and the sacred, as opposed to chaos and the profane. Contrary to his claims about the homogeneity and profanity of physical space, here Eliade seems to be suggesting that nature itself is sacred.

However, a close reading of Eliade's description of hierophanies suggests otherwise. The natural world itself is not sacred; on the contrary, "nature always expresses something that transcends it... a sacred stone is venerated because it is *sacred*, not because it is a *stone*; it is the sacrality *manifested through the mode of being of the stone* that reveals its true essence"

(Eliade, 1957, p. 118, emphasis in original). A stone is not sacred because of what it is, that is a stone; it is sacred only because of what it can represent. In other words, nature is actually not inherently sacred, but it is sacred only because it has the ability to express something beyond itself. From this perspective, it appears that nature is still profane, or homogenous, and like any profane space it is ripe for interruptions from the sacred. A stone is just as likely as anything else to become a hierophany, or the site of a hierophany. The natural world is sacred only when the sacred interrupts it – it is sacred only when it represents or reveals something else – therefore it is not sacred by itself.

Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, which was published a year after *The Sacred and the Profane*, presents a much less ambiguous picture. It is as if Eliade has made up his mind, and resolved the question that he posed in the earlier publication. Using the example of stones again, he claims that they "are venerated precisely because they are not simply stones but hierophanies, something outside their normal status as things," in other words "a thing becomes sacred in so far as it embodies (that is, reveals) something other than itself" (Eliade, 1958, p. 13). People have never valued or revered a natural object like a stone, Eliade says, simply because it is a stone. Rather, the stone becomes an object of devotion "because it represents or imitates *something*, because it came from somewhere. Its sacred value is always due to that something or that somewhere, never to its own actual existence" (Eliade, 1958, p. 216, emphasis in original). The natural object is not sacred, but can become sacred only when it embodies or represents something else.

Eliade also says the same is true of places, for example in the case of a landscape or other natural space which might be considered sacred: "even when it is some whole sphere

that becomes sacred – the sky, for instance, or a certain familiar landscape... The thing that becomes sacred is still separated in regard to itself, for it only becomes a hierophany at the moment of stopping to be a mere profane something, at the moment of acquiring a new 'dimension' of sacredness" (Eliade, 1958, p. 13). That an object or place must be "separated in regard to itself" before it can be considered sacred is telling of the dichotomous nature of Eliade's theory. There is no ambiguity here. Whether we are discussing a single object like a stone, or an entire landscape, the point is that it is not inherently sacred. Sacredness can only come to it, in the form of a hierophany, from outside of itself. Indeed, the object or place must actually cease being itself – that is, cease being a "mere profane something" – before it can be sacred. The natural world cannot be a hierophany; it can only be the setting for a hierophany.

This is the point I would like to make about Eliade's theories of sacredness and sacred geography: according to Eliade, sacredness in any natural object or place is contingent upon outside influences, i.e. hierophanies; sacredness is not inherent in the natural world. In other words, for Eliade the natural world is equated with homogeneity, chaos, and profanity, and must be interrupted by the sacred before it can be associated with sacredness. In the next chapter I will explore another set of religious traditions which operate outside of this dichotomy. This will form the basis for my critique of Eliade's theories.

First, however, I will end this chapter by returning once more to the question which I posed at the beginning: the question of Eliade's relevance to current scholarship. Now that I have introduced him, as well as the basic terminology of his theory, it will be possible to demonstrate Eliade's continuing influence.

## *Eliade's Influence on Current Scholarship*

Kessler might claim that Eliade was the twentieth century's "most influential historian of religions" (Kessler, 2012, p. 139), but the question remains: exactly what influence has Eliade had? Who has he influenced? Eliade's theories of the sacred, and sacred geography, remain relevant for a variety of scholars writing in the fields of human geography, religious studies and anthropology, among others.

Eliade's influence also extends beyond scholarly writing, and into the realms of journalism and popular culture. For example, there is a recent (March 2012) *New York Times* article which contains a reference to Eliade and his sacred-profane dichotomy. Eric Weiner, a travel writer, describes his exposure to "thin places," which are often religious or sacred sites that can elevate human consciousness and mindfulness. According to Weiner, "Mircea Eliade, the religious scholar, would understand what I experienced... Writing in his classic work *The Sacred and the Profane*, he observed that 'some parts of space are qualitatively different from others'" (Weiner, 2012, p. 1). This example might help to demonstrate the widespread influence that Eliade continues to have in contemporary North American culture.

The religious historian and geographer David E. Sopher's classic work on sacred space, *Geography of Religions*, makes ample use of Eliade's theories. Sopher explicitly refers to Eliade's sacred and profane dichotomy more than once, for example when describing Australian Aboriginal people's relationship with the land: their "world is 'made a cosmos,' in

Eliade's words, by being ritualized; beyond is chaos" (Sopher, 1967, p. 47). Referring to the Eliadean notion of the hierophany, Sopher claims that "particular places may be associated with a manifestation of sacred power" in the lives of traditional peoples (p. 49).

Sopher also cites Eliade when discussing built religious environments, or sacred architecture, and the consecration or "cosmicization" of unknown territories as a repetition of "the paradigmatic work of the gods" (Sopher, 1967, p. 30-31). Furthermore, Sopher agrees with Eliade's point about the sacred center as the starting point for all sacred construction, from nomadic dwellings to permanent structures. He points out the fact that "Eliade stresses the theme of the universe unfolding from some central point where man makes his home. 'Just as the universe unfolds from a center and stretches out toward the cardinal points, the village... comes into existence around an intersection'" (p. 32). He discusses the notion of the sacred center elsewhere as well, referring to it as the "primary foci of sanctity" and the "religious center" around which structures are built, and to which pilgrimages are made (p. 50; 52).

In *Spiritual Path, Sacred Place*, architectural theorist Thomas Barrie also cites Eliade, describing the path of a pilgrimage as "a road of life... a peregrination to the center of the world" and the pilgrimage site as the center, or *axis mundi* (Barrie, 1996, p. 30-31). Barrie makes several other explicit references to Eliade, for example when describing both the desacralization of modern society (p. 4; 254) and the architecture of temple buildings (p. 164); his bibliography contains five titles by Eliade. Barrie's definition of sacred spaces includes a direct quotation: "According to Eliade the sacred place was an interruption of the infinite and formless immensity that surrounded it; 'an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different.' It was a

place differentiated from the surrounding profane space" (Barrie, 1996, p. 53). Furthermore, Barrie discusses themes which may not have been explicitly derived from Eliade's writings, but which certainly fit within Eliade's theoretical framework. For example, Barrie contrasts the sacred and the profane when discussing sacred architectural sites (p. 52; 55), and he describes a sacred place as an *axis mundi*, or symbolic center of the world (p. 63).

Anthropologists Brian Molyneaux and Piers Vitebsky (2000) make use of several Eliadean themes in their work on sacred geography, *Sacred Earth, Sacred Stones*. They refer to the sacred and profane dichotomy, for example, suggesting that sacred architecture divides that which is "special," or sacred, inside from that which is "ordinary," or profane, outside:

> Marking off an enclosed space sets up a distinction between what lies within and what lies without, and combines the human need for shelter with a powerful and widespread cosmological principle. In the home a boundary may separate private from public space; at the edge of a jungle village it may separate the human from the wild. The temple boundary marks off a holy, pure and powerful space from an outer space that is ordinary and unclean. (p. 200)

This could be a direct reference to Eliade's walls, or what I have called the horizontal axis of sacred architecture: both literally and symbolically, it forms a barrier between the sacred and the profane. It is also an enclosure that simultaneously maintains the sacred space and protects the sacred from the polluting influence of the profane. Furthermore, Molyneaux and Vitebsky suggest that gateways or doors in walls and other built structures are "often given exaggerated significance" due to the "perceived importance of what is inside the building." Gates and doors are therefore often distinguished architecturally, "by features such as arches, pillars, or porticos," and are sometimes heavily fortified even if they have no military purpose (Molyneaux & Vitebsky, 2000, p. 218). This observation about the symbolic as well as figurative

characteristics of walls and gates strongly suggests a reference to Eliade and his sacred-profane dichotomy. While these few examples from Molyneaux and Vitebsky are not explicit references to Eliade, they do situate the authors within his theoretical framework.

Molyneaux and Vitebsky also discuss the center, or *axis mundi*, at length. Using terminology that might be borrowed directly from Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane*, they refer to the center as the "world's navel" and the "cosmic pillar." They provide examples of this symbol as it can be observed in various shamanic religions, in the totem poles of the Kwakiutl and other West Coast Indigenous peoples, as well as the vertical structures of Asian yurt dwellings, Far Eastern pagodas, Greek and Roman pillars, and European church and cathedral architecture. Molyneaux and Vitebsky also mention the use of fire and smoke in a nomadic dwelling place as a variant of *axis mundi* symbolism. Furthermore, they suggest that the center, "the point of opening from one level to another," can also be symbolized by both mountains and ladders. (Molyneaux & Vitebsky, 2000, p. 42; 57-64; 126; 180). Although the authors do not cite them as such, most if not all of these examples could have come directly from Eliade.

Molyneaux and Vitebsky also refer to the cardinal directions (Molyneaux & Vitebsky, 2000, p. 119; 187; 194), and the construction of sacred space as a rite of consecration, which can "symbolically repeat the creation of the cosmos" (p. 174). They refer to the sacredness of the human dwelling, which is another Eliadean theme. The house, according to Molyneaux and Vitebsky, may be a place of dwelling but it can also simultaneously be "a physical model of another structure, such as... the cosmos" (p. 198). In this case they refer to the Eliadean theme of sacred space, or consecrated territory, as microcosm. Again, although they do not specifically mention Eliade's name in these discussions, the authors are clearly operating within a

theoretical framework that is compatible with his. Furthermore, since they do list Eliade in their bibliography, it is probably safe to say that at the very least they were influenced by his work on sacredness and sacred geography.

There are other scholars who fit this description as well. The human geographer Tuan, for example, has clearly been influenced by Eliade. Tuan's groundbreaking work *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* makes one overt reference to Eliade's notion of hierophanies: "sacred spaces are the locations of hierophany... If Mircea Eliade is right, an early and fundamental idea in the sacredness of place is that it represents the center, the axis, or the navel of the world" (Tuan, 1974, p. 146). Tuan also includes other references to Eliadean themes such as hierophanies, the sacred center, and the cardinal directions (p. 27; 153; 160). Tuan also discusses the sacred-profane dichotomy: the act of building a house or city, he claims, involves the "ritual transformation of profane space" and in the course of this transformative process, the profane space becomes sacred (p. 146). While Tuan does not cite Eliade when he makes this claim, he is certainly operating within a theoretical framework which is compatible with Eliade's.

Other scholars who fit this description include human geographer Roger Stump, native studies scholar Erin Sawatzky, environmental geographer Chris Park, and religious historian David Kinsley. Stump's recent (2008) work *The Geography of Religion: Faith, Place, and Space* includes several references to hierophanies as integral to the formation of sacred spaces (Stump, 2008, p. 26; 301; 320). Sawatzky, in her 2008 article "Sacred Landscapes: Expanding the Definition of the Sacred," describes the sacred-profane dichotomy using slightly different terminology: for her, sacred space is understood as a separation of the sacred and the

mundane (Sawatzky, 2008, p. 12; 13; 16). Park, in his book *Sacred Worlds: An Introduction to Geography and Religion*, also makes references to Eliadean themes such as the sacred center and hierophanies (Park, 1994, p. 20; 245). Kinsley's *Ecology and Religion: Ecological Spirituality in Cross-Cultural Perspective* contains similar references, although he also does not specifically mention Eliade. He refers to the sacred center, including the notion that both trees and pillars of smoke can be symbolic of the *axis mundi*, as well as the dichotomy between sacred and profane space (Kinsley, 1995, p. 12; 14). These latter references are less pronounced, but they do suggest an affinity – intentional or otherwise – with Eliade's work.

I am not arguing that these various writers are disciples of Eliade by any means, or even that they would agree with everything that Eliade has written. It seems unlikely, but for all I know some of them may not even be aware of Eliade's work. However, from this brief survey it should be evident that Eliade has been and continues to be influential to the study of sacred geography; scholars in this field working throughout the past several decades have continually returned to his work. Nor is this listing meant to be exhaustive; but even with this limited selection, we are able to see the type of influence that Eliade has had and continues to have.

## *Conclusion*

After the initial introduction to Eliade, I began this chapter with the claim that the *sacred* is of the utmost importance for the rest of Eliade's theories on sacred geography. The sacred defines and prescribes how people should live, and indeed it dominates all aspects of

religious life. People yearn for the sacred, actively seek to commune and communicate with it, and strive to live in close proximity to it. This yearning, seeking, and striving have taken on a wide variety of forms in different places and times, but nonetheless they have some things in common. These patterns are what we would generally recognize as characteristics of a religious life. For Eliade, these patterns include the sacred, the hierophany, and the center. They also include ways in which people try to relate to the sacred, or orient themselves around the center, such as the consecration of territory and the construction of sacred architecture.

The sacred is prominent in both the thoughts and the deeds of religious humanity, who Eliade calls *homo religiosus*. However, the sacred by its very definition also presents several problems, or tensions, for religious people. First, because human beings are profane, and live in the profane world, they cannot ever achieve the closeness with the sacred that they desire. People try to communicate with the sacred, but they cannot. A second tension is based on the fact that the sacred is dangerous to people. Eliade describes it, for example, as a "terrible power" (Eliade, 1957, p. 9). Human beings cannot achieve the closeness with the sacred that they desire, because it will potentially harm or even kill them. Humans cannot achieve closeness, furthermore, because they are too far removed from it; their profanity separates them from it. The sacred is too fundamentally different. According to Eliade, the sacred is *ganz andere*, or "wholly other," which suggests that it is simply beyond human comprehension and understanding. It also suggests that the sacred will not conform to human logic or expectations.

This resistance to explanation even extends to scholarly attempts at defining religion: according to Pals, Eliade is opposed to any "reductionist" theory of religion based on psychology, sociology, or other academic disciplines. Since "the reality of the sacred is unique

and unlike anything else," it should only be defined on its own terms (Pals, 2009, p. 272). In Eliade's view the sacred cannot be explained as, or reduced to, anything other than what it is. (Hence the sacred is problematic both for those who seek communion with it, and for those who seek to study it.) Finally, despite their best efforts, people are not in control of their relationship with the sacred. On the contrary, human beings are completely at the mercy of the sacred. The human relationship with the sacred, namely the desire to live in close proximity to it and to commune with it, is always and inextricably linked to these problems, or tensions. The religious experience, then, is an ongoing attempt to negotiate these tensions. The wide variety of religious and mythological symbolism, according to Eliade, is evidence of the many ways in which people from different times, places, and cultures have expressed this attempt.

I am interested in the idea that the natural world itself can be considered sacred, and so the religious symbolism that concerns me most is that of sacred geography, or sacred space. Sacred space, for Eliade, is created when profane or homogenous space is broken or "interrupted" by a hierophany. A hierophany is a revelatory phenomenon, or an instance of the sacred showing itself to human beings. Eliade emphasizes the fact that a hierophany can be virtually anything – any object or activity in nature, society, or human psychology – and throughout human history hierophanies probably have been represented by most if not all of these things. The most important aspect of hierophanies, for my purposes, is that they take place in specific locations, which henceforth become sacred spaces. A sacred space is made possible when profane or homogenous space is interrupted by the sacred. This event, or moment, is a hierophany and it results in the identification of the sacred center.

The center is the most important element in Eliade's formation of sacred space. The center allows human beings to orient themselves, in the same way that the literal pole star has been used by navigators at sea. Eliade's figurative, or symbolic, orientation assumes the sacred as its absolute fixed point, by which people can live authentically in the cosmos. However, just like the sacred, the center is not easily defined or categorized. It can be an actual fixed point on the landscape, enabling the construction of permanent sacred architecture, but it can also be mobile, as in the case of nomadic people who believe their dwellings are sacred centers, and yet move them from place to place. Furthermore, there can be more than one "center of the universe"; perhaps even an infinite number of centers. All of this makes sense, within the non-human logic of the sacred, because the center is symbolic rather than literal.

Finally, the center is represented by the image of the *axis mundi*, or world pillar. The *axis mundi* has been variously portrayed around the world and throughout history as a tree, pole, mountain, or ladder, among other things. It can be architectural, such as a tower or man-made mountain; it can also be organic, such as a vine, a navel, or even a column of rising smoke. In any of its forms, according to Eliade, the *axis mundi* operates as an opening or a point of communication between the human world and the sacred world. It is not only the "break" which the sacred makes when it irrupts into chaos or profane space; it is also a conduit between the realms.

Sacred construction, according to Eliade, is a consecration of new territory: people are able to make profane space into sacred space, by organizing it and making order out of chaos. In other words, *homo religiosus* can commune with the sacred by taking part in the primordial handiwork of the gods. Both the consecration of territory and the building of sacred

architecture represent human re-enactments of the creative works of the gods. By the construction of, and the continual interaction with, their “scale model” of the cosmos, people can participate in the activities of the sacred. Sacred space, in this view, is a microcosm of the entire universe.

Furthermore, sacred architecture represents a recognition of the location of a hierophany; that is, a recognition of the center. The construction may be a simple altar or it may be a grand temple, but in any case *people build on the site where the sacred has shown itself to them*. Sacred architecture is also the human attempt to maintain the communication made possible by the center, or the *axis mundi*. Indeed, sacred structures often include overt *axis mundi* imagery such as central pillars, columns, or posts. These are what I have called the vertical axes of sacred architecture, and as such they serve a practical purpose (i.e. holding the roof up) as well as a symbolic purpose (communication with the sacred). All sacred construction represents the human attempt to live close to the sacred: for example, a human dwelling place, village, or city might be built around the sacred center. It also represents the tension involved when people strive for the sacred but are unable to draw too near: sacred construction includes enclosures, or walls, which serve to keep sacrality *in*, and to keep profanity *out*. The wall itself can be a tangible symbol of the sacred-profane dichotomy: it can protect the sacred from the polluting influence of profanity and at the same time it can protect human beings from the potential danger of the sacred. Gates, doors, and other openings in walls function in much the same way as the *axis mundi* – except the movement in this case is horizontal rather than vertical – the sacred cannot be touched or contacted directly but it can be accessed indirectly, or communicated with, through openings in the barriers that divide the sacred and the profane.

This is what I have identified as the horizontal axis of sacred architecture which, like the vertical axis, serves both practical and symbolic purposes.

Eliade also describes sacred time, which is essentially no different from the spatial depiction of sacredness: just as profane or mundane *space* can be broken by the revelation of a hierophany, so can profane *time* be broken or interrupted. Spatially, sacredness might be represented by the form of the center, or the *axis mundi*; likewise, it can be represented temporally by a holiday, Sabbath, or a significant day or period of time. In both cases, the everyday world is interrupted and there is a sharp contrast between the two resulting states. In other words, according to Eliade, people's activities or the things that they do can be sacred, or they can be profane, *depending on when they do them*. The sacred-profane dichotomy can be expressed in terms of time as well as space.

Finally, Eliade discusses nature as sacred space. I have pointed out an apparent ambiguity here: from one perspective, Eliade emphasizes the fact that nature – the universe, or the cosmos – should be regarded as sacred. In *The Sacred and the Profane*, he suggests that the "mere life of the cosmos is proof of its sanctity, since the cosmos was created by the gods" (Eliade, 1957, p. 165). Because it is alive, and because it was created by the gods, the natural world is sacred. Nature *itself* is a hierophany; the cosmos is therefore sacred and meaningful. However, Eliade's views of nature are not as simple as this. He claims that the natural world is sacred, but in the same book he contradicts himself by saying that nature (including any natural object, event, or element) functions as nothing more than a vehicle for a hierophany. In other words nature is not inherently sacred, and it cannot be sacred, except when it is visited or

interrupted by sacredness in the form of a hierophany. It seems impossible for both of these claims to be true: either the natural world is sacred or it is not.

This apparent ambiguity is clarified in Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, which was published one year after *The Sacred and the Profane*. Here Eliade says that stones are venerated "because they are not simply stones but hierophanies," and that something "becomes sacred in so far as it embodies (that is, reveals) something other than itself" (Eliade, 1958, p. 13). There is no more ambiguity: he makes it clear that the sacredness of natural objects and landscapes is derived only from the hierophanies that make them sacred, and never from their own actual existence (Eliade, 1958, p. 216). A stone, to use Eliade's recurring example, is not sacred because of what it is. Rather, it is sacred because through the action of a hierophany it has *ceased to be itself*. A stone is not sacred because it is a stone; it becomes sacred only when it has stopped being a stone and become something else. A natural object or place is simply not sacred, and cannot be sacred, for its own sake. Furthermore, because the natural world is not inherently sacred, it must be inherently profane. The sacred-profane dichotomy allows for no "gray area." The natural world is chaos, or homogenous space, and it can only be made sacred by means of a hierophany.

The following chapter will present another view of the sacred, derived from some of the religious traditions of Indigenous North America. These traditions present us with an entirely different model of sacredness; using this model, I will critique Eliade's sacred-profane dichotomy. Other Eliadean notions, such as hierophanies and sacred time, will also be addressed but I will specifically explore the notion of sacredness in the natural world.

# Chapter Two: Indigenous Religious Traditions

## *Introduction*

In the previous chapter I outlined Eliade's terminology and theories of the sacred, and how they inform his notions of sacred geography. I also briefly listed some other scholars, working in fields such as human geography and anthropology, who have been influenced by Eliade or who operate within similar theoretical frameworks. In this chapter I will test some of the same terminology and theories, using examples from a variety of Indigenous North American religious traditions, in order to arrive at a new definition of sacred geography.

I have chosen my examples of Indigenous religious traditions from a variety of sources, most of them works of anthropology, for two purposes. First, because I wish to examine traditions from throughout the North American continent, I sought writers whose work describes cultures representing diverse geographical, ecological, and subsistence perspectives. Because I intend to identify patterns or convergences among these various traditions, I also sought writers who engage in this type of comparative work themselves. Second, many of the writers I have selected are interested in the same thing that I am interested in: the human relationship with the natural world. These relationships, and in particular their religious expressions, form the basis of my contrast between Eliade's notions of sacred space and those of various Indigenous traditions.

In many Indigenous religious traditions, the sacred is understood very differently from Eliade's depiction. He describes physical space as homogenous, chaotic, and ultimately profane; it can become sacred only when it is interrupted or influenced by the sacred. In much Indigenous thinking, on the contrary, physical space itself is sacred. It is not homogenous or chaotic, and therefore it does not require any outside influences or interruptions in order to be considered sacred. The natural world does not need a hierophany to be sacred, and it does not need to cease being itself. All of *time* is sacred as well, which is why many Indigenous traditions emphasize "normal" activities such as the gathering and preparing of food as sacred activities. I should make it clear, however, that not all Indigenous traditions follow these patterns; and not all of them contrast sharply with Eliade's framework. Therefore for the purposes of this thesis – that is, to identify Indigenous sacred space traditions which contrast with, or are not compatible with, Eliade's sacred-profane framework – I have chosen examples from certain cultures and geographical regions, but excluded others.

In many Indigenous religious traditions, all physical space – all of the natural world – is sacred, and yet there are still specific locations which are considered sacred places. The sacred, in this view, might be imagined as the surface of a lake which is occasionally interrupted by bubbles that rise from below and burst through the surface. The water in these places is agitated, but then returns to its previous state of being. The sacred might also be compared to a grassy field with wildflowers: the flowers grow and bloom, "interrupting" the field for a time, and then they return to the soil. In some cases these sites remain sacred for longer periods of time, but that does not change the basic image of the flowers as unique "eruptions" of sacredness into an already-sacred field. The difference between this image and Eliade's view

lies in the way in which we understand the surface of the lake, or the field. In both metaphors – the lake and the field – the interruption does not bring sacredness to a profane space, or order to chaos; instead it is a unique or significant expression of sacredness in an already sacred space.

Hierophanies exist in Indigenous traditions too, and in fact they are immensely important. Hierophanies can be animals, plants, rocks, and supernatural beings, among other things. As in Eliade's view, a hierophany is an instance of the sacred showing itself to human beings. In numerous Indigenous traditions hierophanies occur in dreams and visions as well as waking life; they can be communal, but they are often personal. Sometimes a hierophany results in a sacred place similar to what Eliade describes; that is, the identification of a sacred center and perhaps the erection of sacred architecture. This would be an example of the metaphorical flower that blooms in the field, and then stays there. However, it is not always the case that a hierophany results in the recognition of a specifically sacred *place*: in the Indigenous context a hierophany often results in a relationship between the sacredness that reveals itself, and the human being to whom it is revealed. In fact people often actively seek out hierophanies, particularly hierophanic beings, in order to secure these relationships (for example in a vision quest).

The relationships which people form with hierophanic beings are varied and complex, but they often fit within a framework of kinship. Many Indigenous religious traditions operate within a relational or ecological model: plants, animals, human beings, and spiritual or supernatural beings are all involved in an interconnected web of relationships. There is no profane space (or time, or activity) which must be interrupted by a hierophany in order to

become sacred. On the contrary, in much of Indigenous thinking Eliade's sacred and profane are not only inextricably mingled, but they are dependent upon one another. Everything exists and interacts within reciprocal relationships, and the maintenance of these relationships is extremely important for spiritual as well as subsistence purposes. This system of beliefs is often described as animism, in which all beings are potentially persons, with intelligence, souls, and kinship networks of their own. Furthermore, the definition of "beings" is expanded in these traditions to include what we might consider inanimate objects, such as stones, or elemental forces such as winds or thunder. A bear or a bird might be a person, with a mind and a spiritual life just as complex and elegant as a human being's; but so might a tree, a river, or a star (*cf*. Ingold, 2000; Neihardt, 2000; Snodgrass & Tiedje, 2008).

It follows that if all beings are sentient persons, then some must be related to others. Indeed, the relationships which many Indigenous peoples maintain with their natural surroundings are often explained in kinship terms, for example a particular species of animal or plant might be described as literally related to a particular group of human beings. This concept has generally been described as totemism. These kinship ties between humans and other beings are often very old, originating in the specific mythologies or oral histories, but they can also be dynamic and current: new relationships can be formed at any time. Hierophanies are still taking place.

This relational view generally results in a deep sense of human embeddedness in the natural world, and hence human responsibility toward it (*cf*. Basso, 1996). However, kinship relationships are not without their difficulties. If the animals that people kill and eat are potentially relatives – or at the very least, they are believed to be beings with intelligence and

souls; that is, *people* – then hunting can result in great tensions and moral dilemmas. Part of the maintenance of relationships, then, is to mediate these tensions and appease the beings who are hunted. Therefore there are ceremonies which seek to restore damaged relationships, or renew the populations of plants or animals which have been harvested. These ceremonies also seek to alleviate negative feelings or hostility which may have been caused by the foolish or selfish behaviour of human beings. In this way, these Indigenous people actively participate in the natural world, not as outsiders using it for commercial gain but as members of a large network of social groups and families seeking to maintain order and balance.

In this view, the profane is not a natural or inherent state (as in Eliade's homogenous space) and it does not need to be interrupted by the sacred. Rather, sacredness is the natural state and profanity comes about due to human ignorance and wrongdoing. When people do not show proper respect for other beings, for example, or if hunters do not treat a prey animal appropriately, this is a profanity. Ceremonies of renewal must be enacted in order to restore this balance when it is lost; that is, to return the natural world to its state of sacredness. This perspective on the sacred and the profane provides us with a sharp distinction from Eliade's dichotomy. In some respects Eliade's theories are sound when applied to Indigenous religious traditions, but in others they are completely incompatible and cannot be reconciled. I agree with Sawatzky (2008) when she suggests that "the Western definition of the sacred can be broadened" (p. 17), and I propose that for North Americans at least, a closer and more respectful consideration of Indigenous traditions might be an appropriate place to begin.

## *Difficulties and Clarifications*

Before I turn to some of the sacred space traditions of Indigenous North America, there are a few points that should be clarified. The first involves basic terminology, because Indigenous people are referred to in several different ways. Nomenclature includes the adjectives indigenous, native, and aboriginal; these are generally used interchangeably. "First Nations" is currently used in Canada, and "Indian" is more common in the United States; use of the word Indian is also common in ethnographies and older literature. While the word is considered incorrect by many Canadians because of its potentially racist overtones – and because, some would argue, it is a misnomer – Indian is still the term most widely used south of the border. The fact that the term is so common (for example, many Canadian Indigenous people refer to themselves as Indians) further complicates the issue. Some of the texts I will examine are older, and others are American, and so even if we try we simply cannot avoid the word "Indian." For the present discussion I will use the adjective Indigenous; however, when other terminology appears in the literature I will treat it as interchangeable.

This may not be good enough, according to scholars like Gary Paul Nabhan. He is critical of the fact that "individuals from two hundred different language groups... are commonly lumped under the catchall terms 'American Indian' or 'Native American'" (Nabhan, 1997, p. 157). I agree that these are catchall terms, however not any more so than the terms "Asian" or "North American." I suspect that the existence of a catchall term is not the problem, so much as the stereotypes that might accompany it. Be that as it may, for the sake of accuracy I will follow Nabhan's example and use specific names whenever possible.

Finally, there is the perhaps more trivial issue of capitalization. Sometimes the terms mentioned above are capitalized, but not always. “Indian” is, but “native” may not be. There seems to be no general consensus. Therefore, following the current guidelines of the University of Manitoba’s Aboriginal Issues Press, in this thesis I will capitalize the word Indigenous. Personally, I would argue that this is a sign of respect. It is correct to use capital letters when writing “European,” or even “Western European”; I would argue that if some people-groups or regions merit proper-noun status, then they all should.

Another issue I should briefly address here is stereotypes. It is a common misconception to assume that all North American Indigenous peoples were the same before European contact, or that they are all the same now. Their cultures and religious views, and in particular their relationships with the natural world, have been widely generalized. This has resulted in mistaken views, including that of the Noble Savage. As American scholar Peter Nabokov reminds us, it is a mistake to assume that “before the arrival of the Europeans, the religious attitudes of Indians toward the natural environment were frozen in time” (Nabokov, 2006, p. xiii). Indeed, long before the arrival of Europeans, Indigenous peoples were responding to changes in the environment and other circumstances, and these processes of change and adaptation have continued to the present day.

Another persistent misconception is the notion that Indigenous peoples live in the past. While it might sound relatively harmless, in fact this can be extremely problematic, resulting for example in a “catch-twenty-two” situation. If Indigenous people choose to be “traditional” (that is, to fit into other people’s misconception that they are frozen in the past), then they can be effectively excluded from modern society and the economy. On the other hand, if they opt to

participate in modern society, they often forfeit their rights to lands and resources because they are no longer deemed "traditional." By defining "tradition" in specific ways, colonial powers have been able to evict Indigenous peoples from their own traditions. However, as Nabokov points out, these cultures have always been adapting to changes in their surroundings. It was – and continues to be – pure arrogance on the part of the European newcomers to assume that their (our) arrival would somehow become the point at which other cultures' traditions would stop adapting. This particular issue is addressed in more detail by writers like Paul Nadasdy (1999), Julie Cruikshank (1998), and Hugh Brody (1981; 1987), but for the sake of brevity I will not devote more time to it here.

Nabokov also calls it a mistake to assume that all Indigenous people have similar attitudes toward the environment. This is a common popular stereotype used to describe Indigenous peoples: that they all lived in perfect harmony with other living creatures, in a pristine and idyllic wilderness. This stereotype is another example of an identity imposed from the outside; an identity that denies the ability of these cultures to adapt. "In the past, when Indian rituals and beliefs were more dependent upon and interwoven with highly localized ways of living off the land, their differences may have been more pronounced. But even today, we have no monolithic Indian culture, no single web of relationships to nature" (Nabokov, 2006, p. xiv). This complexity and wide diversity make it exceedingly difficult to discuss Indigenous traditions as if they are all one "type." Sam Gill, another American scholar of Indigenous traditions, reminds us that every Indigenous culture on the continent is unique, "with its own language, its own history, its own religious institutions, traditions, practices, and beliefs" (Gill, 2005, p. 10). Furthermore, the detailed and localized knowledge required in order

to thrive in specific places, climates, and ecosystems would ensure that many of these cultures were different from one another. Certainly they often did have complex relationships with nature – and some of them may have even approached balance with the environment – but these approaches were not all alike and neither are the cultures themselves.

In this thesis I am interested in finding patterns. I will suggest that there are some important similarities to be found within diverse Indigenous traditions all over the continent, for example a sense of sacredness associated with subsistence activities, and a non-dichotomous notion of sacred space. These may not occur everywhere, or in every single cultural setting: as I mentioned earlier, there are also notable exceptions, for example Indigenous traditions which might not contrast with Eliade's notions of sacred space at all. However, the patterns I am interested in are widespread enough to warrant a closer look. "Panning out," as with a camera, to attempt a wider view of something does not imply that everything is the same; nor does it imply that we will arrive at stereotypical conclusions. On the contrary, by using examples from all of Indigenous North America, from the Arctic to Mexico, I hope to demonstrate the enormous variety and diversity among these traditions as well as some of the apparent patterns or convergences.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge, or TEK, is an academic field that strives to understand cultural relationships with the environment (*cf*. Berkes, 1999; Nadasdy, 1999). This knowledge is regarded as increasingly valuable for our present age of ecological degradation, mass extinction, and human alienation from the natural world. Certainly some societies are more nature-oriented than others, and I would argue that we in the (post)modern Western world have much to learn in that department. However, Nabokov also warns against romantic ideas

of Indigenous harmony with nature, ideas which can be turned to the service of modern politics or environmental advocacy. Indigenous knowledge of the environment, he claims, should not be "hijacked in order to confer the blessings of aboriginal authenticity or spiritual supremacy upon a contemporary agenda" (Nabokov, 2006, p. xiv; *cf*. Aldred, 2000). At its worst, this might be another form of colonization: taking ideas or beliefs in much the same way that earlier generations took land and resources. Nabokov (2006) continues, claiming that:

> one distorts Indian religious beliefs by reducing them to universal principles or archetypes, whether they are environmental, psychological, or religious. Before we surrender to our own concerns, with their relevance to our ecological emergencies, it may be more respectful and interesting to learn about these aboriginal [North] American thought worlds on their own terms. (p. xiv)

However, as in the debate between Lilburn and Snyder mentioned in the introduction, there is a delicate balance to be maintained. On the one hand these traditions, like any others, should be treated with respect and studied for their own sake. On the other hand, there *are* ecological emergencies to consider! If we learn from someone else's traditions, are we stealing from them? The question itself walks a dangerously fine line: too far in one direction and we are colonists, stealing things that belong to other people and appropriating belief systems that took thousands of years to evolve. (To make matters worse, these are the same beliefs that we dismissed out of hand as primitive superstitions, and tried to eliminate them only a few short generations ago.) But if we go too far in the other direction, we pursue knowledge for its own sake, or out of respect for the subjects themselves, and ignore the world around us. That is something we cannot afford to do. We are living in a time of ecological crisis, and we are desperately in need of a new direction.

I believe that there must be a middle way, a point where non-Indigenous North Americans can learn from Indigenous traditions in the same way that we learn from, for example, Greek philosophers. Unfortunately, this might be far easier said than done: for one thing, it would require that our society abandon its colonial agenda regarding both the environment and other cultures. However, this thesis is not intended to be a political treatise. Its underlying motive, as discussed in the introduction, is to look at ways in which we might once again see the natural world as sacred space. While Nabokov (like Lilburn) cautions against the quick-fix or self-help approach, suggesting instead that modern people need to stop looking for solutions elsewhere, and “take their environmental futures into their own hands,” he also concedes that we would be foolish if we did not “applaud and explore whatever tips or inspirations [other traditions] might offer for living more equitably and sustainably with the environment” (Nabokov, 2006, p. xv). In the North American context, however, this is not as straight forward as it might appear. Perhaps there needs to be a greater distance in time, like the distance between us and ancient Greece, before this can be truly possible.

Another problem with the entire topic of Indigenous cultures and religious traditions – and this is how stereotypes begin in the first place – is that we are ignorant of so many details. We simply do not know enough about many of the early Indigenous cultures and traditions. Referring to the Great Plains area of the United States, but with a comment that could be applied to any part of the continent, American scholar Howard Harrod suggests that “[v]ery little is known about the institutions and lifeways of early residents on the Plains,” and much of what we do know is debatable (Harrod, 1987, p. 5). We can use this as our starting point, then: to admit that we simply do not know enough about the subject matter to answer all the

questions we might have. Harrod is referring to the cultures in general, and not specifically their religious or spiritual aspects; but according to Gill this general lack of knowledge makes it especially difficult to discuss Indigenous religions and spiritual traditions. Part of the problem is the language we use. Using the "terminology and categories of any one tradition," for example the language common to Western religious traditions, as representative of all religions will result in a biased and perhaps inaccurate conclusion. "The bias of point of view is unavoidable," Gill suggests, "yet it is important to be mindful of limitations, potential prejudice, and error" (Gill, 2005, p. 10). One possible solution is to bear in mind that our objective as scholars is cartography: creating maps of metaphorical territory. In this particular case, we are mapping a territory which we have entitled "Indigenous North American religions" or more specifically, "sacred space according to Indigenous traditions." Gill suggests that we bear in mind Jonathan Z. Smith's formulation, that "map is not territory" (p. 9). We can study something, and write about it, but we are inevitably not capturing the thing itself. At best, guided by the work of previous cartographers, we are able to draw a new map that others might follow. The metaphorical territory Gill refers to is Indigenous North American religion; I use his map, among others, to draw this map of Indigenous sacred geography.

Nabokov (2006) stresses that one problem with understanding Indigenous sacred places is "the expectation that they will please the eye." He refers to the picturesque but often misleading scenery found in coffee-table books and calendars, whose colourful photography "may not be the best way to appreciate the time-depth, spatial variety and cultural complexities of Indian ties to their religious landscapes" (p. xiv). Nonetheless, this is another common stereotype that has been attached to Indigenous people's religious traditions: that

their sacred geography will match our artistic or aesthetic sensibilities. However, it should go without saying that what is aesthetically pleasing to one person, or culture, may not be to another. Nabokov (2006) illustrates this nicely with a quotation from anthropologist Howard Campbell, who lived among the Tarahumara people of northern Mexico.

> Almost everything I consider beautiful is not considered so by the Tarahumaras. They fear the rainbow because it steals children and marries women and causes them to have babies. Deep pools of water are where huge snakes live which will make you sick if you get too close. And Tarahumaras are sometimes scared to walk through a lovely forest for fear of the 'little people' who live under the ground. (p. 229)

The nature photography we might appreciate most, for example breathtaking depictions of rainbows, pools of water, and lush green forests, would clearly not hold the same meaning for the Tarahumara people. The Romantic stereotype of the Noble Savage, the native person living in harmony with the land, invariably includes a non-Indigenous (that is, out of context) eye for beauty. Coffee-table books and calendars select only the most breathtaking scenery, from the Euro-North American perspective, and associate these with Indigenous sacred places. Of course, sometimes these sites might happen to be beautiful from one point of view or another; but this is not what makes them sacred.

## *The Sacred in Indigenous Traditions*

Sawatzky suggests that in the Western view (which I have identified with Eliade's view) there is a dichotomy between the sacred and the mundane or the profane. Sacredness, in this perspective, "is typically isolated to one area of life"; for example, religious activities such as

going to church (Sawatzky, 2008, p. 12; *cf*. Powers, 2002). However, many Indigenous traditions take an opposite approach. In their view, the sacred is everywhere and everything in the natural world is sacred. There are no sharp dichotomies, in either space or time, to separate the sacred from the rest of life. Indeed, all of existence is simultaneously "substantial and spiritual" (Sawatzky, 2008, p. 13). All of existence is simultaneously physical and spiritual, or literal as well as figurative. Eliade might define the substantial as separate from the spiritual, but there are numerous examples of Indigenous traditions which do not. When this concept is applied to the natural world, we see that the land itself is simultaneously substantial and spiritual. According to social anthropologist Jane Hubert, "Many indigenous peoples would extend the concept of sacredness to the whole of their land... in some cultures the very land itself is sacred" (Hubert, 1994, p. 16; *cf*. Neihardt, 2000). This is the point from which I am starting: the sacredness of the natural world. Using the image of the field with flowers growing on it, the land itself is sacred and therefore does not need to be interrupted by the sacred. However, before I discuss the metaphorical flowers, the field itself needs to be described.

Nabokov describes a discussion over land rights in New Mexico, during which "a forest ranger asked [a Hopi elder], 'Just show us on this map which parts of the mountain are sacred so we can protect them.' ...the Hopi answered, 'How can we point on a map to a sacred place? The entire mountain, the land surrounding the mountain, the whole earth is sacred'" (Nabokov, 2006, p. 141). As Sawatzky suggests, "In a world where the sacred and the mundane mingle together, places of sacred significance are not easily defined or delineated" (Sawatzky, 2008, p. 13). For the Hopi elder, choosing one specific location to recognize and protect as sacred would imply sacrificing the entire sacred landscape, all for the sake of just one site. The grid approach

of the forest ranger is not only different from the Hopi's holistic approach, but it is incompatible. This same incompatibility can be observed in the dialogue of Indigenous traditions with Western religion. During a legal battle for Kootenai Falls, according to Nabokov, the Plateau people enlisted anthropologists and religious historians to help them build a case for protecting their sacred land. However, the experts cited Eliade's depiction of sacred space, including the *axis mundi* – as well as comparisons to overtly Christian language and imagery – to argue the case. According to Nabokov, "the strategy of validating Kootenai Falls as a major shrine by appealing to patterns shared by 'high' or 'world' religions put the tribe in a bind." By focusing on one single location, they undermined the protection of the larger watershed and the surrounding landscape (Nabokov, 2006, p. 164-165). The Western scientific approach, such as that of the forest ranger in New Mexico, is compatible with the Western religious approach (exemplified here by Eliade's theories), in that both can agree to focus on a single location, or a single point on a map. In the view of many Indigenous peoples, however, the land cannot be divided or segmented because it is alive with sacredness (*cf*. Price, 1994; Reeves, 1994).

Another aspect of the sacred which often plays an important role in the lives of Indigenous peoples is the gathering and preparing of food. According to Gill, "sustenance and sustenance activities are an important means of articulating religious worldview and enacting religious value. As such, most ordinary activities related to food are accompanied by or synonymous with ritual activity and religious ideas. Native Americans live their religion through their sustaining ways of life" (Gill, 2005, p. 101). There are many examples of sacred subsistence activities in Indigenous traditions. Of course the details of the subsistence activities themselves vary, depending on the region and ecology of the people in question (*cf*. Bates,

2005; Moran, 2006). Nabokov gives examples of agricultural peoples such as the corn-growing Hopi of northern Arizona, and Gill discusses the Naskapi hunters of the Labrador peninsula; both cultures identify their subsistence activities with sacredness (Nabokov, 2006, p. 94; Gill, 2005, p. 85; *cf*. Brody, 1987). Kinsley suggests that for some cultures, such as the Apache, gathering medicinal plants "was routinely undertaken as a sacred enterprise accompanied with rituals and songs" (Kinsley, 1995, p. 48). Despite the many differences in details, in all of these instances food gathering and preparation is a ceremonial or ritual activity. The land from which the food originates is sacred, and so the activities of gathering food and the food itself are also sacred. Furthermore, the *time* that people spend on these activities is considered sacred, and not profane. Hence the sacredness of everyday activities can be viewed from a temporal perspective as well as a spatial one: in these traditions there does not need to be a holy day or a Sabbath to "interrupt" profane time, because there is no profane time.

Hunting is an example of one subsistence activity which requires the careful maintenance of complex relationships with other beings. If hunter-prey relationships are not maintained, people will simply not have enough food to eat; however this practical consideration is not separated from spiritual considerations. According to Kinsley, in many hunting cultures the act of hunting itself is "a sacred occupation." There are many rituals and rules concerning the treatment of animals, which attest to the fact that in traditional hunting cultures, "hunting is as much a religious pursuit as an economic one" (Kinsley, 1995, p. 42). For the Dene, according to Canadian scholar Warren Bernauer, hunting and trapping help to define and maintain the people's spiritual connection to the land. These activities provide people with food to eat and they also "help sustain links to the worlds of spirits and animals" (Bernauer,

2008, p. 69). Anthropologist Richard Nelson discusses this connection to the worlds of other beings in an almost sacramental sense when he describes Koyukon elder Sarah Stevens, who "treated meat as a sacred substance, a medium of interchange between herself and the empowered world in which she lived" (Nelson, 1991, p. 267). The very act of eating meat, in this instance, might be seen as a form of ritual or prayer. Hunting and gathering food are sacred activities, and so are preparing and eating it. All of these activities depend upon the maintenance of relationships between humans and other beings; they are all enacted within sacred space, and during sacred time. Hence, in this view, there is no profane space, and no profane time: everything is sacred.

Using the image of the surface of a lake, I have tried to describe how the sacred is everywhere, but it occasionally "bubbles up" in certain places, then ultimately returns back to the way it was. Sacredness erupts out of sacredness, showing itself in unique or unusual ways, but each showing is still just a part of the larger whole. However, not all sacred places are so fleeting: there are examples of semi-permanent and permanent sacred places in Indigenous traditions as well. To describe them, the field with flowers is a more appropriate image: some flowers bloom for a time and then return to the soil, but others grow and stay where they are. Many of these permanent sacred places are mountains. Nabokov claims that the Black Hills of South Dakota are sacred to the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Kiowa peoples (Nabokov, 2006, p. 207-208). Other examples of sacred mountains include Katahdin Mountain for the Penobscot in Maine, Taos Mountain for the Taos people of New Mexico, and both Mount Diablo and Mount Tamalpais in California (Nabokov, 2006, p. 8-9; 77; 267-268; 273; *cf*. Reeves, 1994). Even when they are not actual mountains, the sacred sites recognized by Indigenous religious traditions are

often related to rock formations or boulders. Cree scholar Neil McLeod writes about some of these locations in the Canadian Prairies, where “Cree and other Indigenous people communicated with the landscape... Through ceremonies, prayers, and songs, [Cree people] were able to communicate with other beings and powers of the land around them... the spiritual grandfathers and grandmothers” (McLeod, 2007, p. 26). Mountains are probably one of the most widespread of all religious motifs. The height of mountains (or their closeness to the heavens), and the physical act of climbing them, provides potent symbolism. For Eliade mountains are an *axis mundi*, and perhaps that interpretation is applicable to some Indigenous traditions as well.

Journalist Don Hill writes about exploring the rock formations of Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park, in southern Alberta, with Blackfoot elder and scholar Leroy Little Bear. In their conversation, Hill (2008) suggests that:

> special places, such as Writing-on-Stone, might function and act like an amplifier, [or] an antenna to extend the range of human perception. ‘Very much so,’ Little Bear agrees. ‘That’s the reason why there’s certain locations, whether they be medicine wheels or locations like Milk River, Chief Mountain and the Sweetgrass Hills; they’re all connected. It seems that’s where all these energies come together. It’s not that it can’t happen elsewhere. But there are certain places that act as amplifiers of energy waves that flow through you and me and everyone else.’ (p. 44)

Despite the technological terminology, Hill and Little Bear are basically discussing the location of a hierophany, or a location in which hierophanies can be sought. The energy waves which human beings can pick up, and which can be amplified by some locations more than others, are hierophanic. This is an example of an Indigenous sacred space which seems to fit perfectly with Eliade’s theories. People haven’t erected sacred architecture on the site (unless the petroglyphs, or carvings in the rocks, are interpreted as architectural). Designating Writing-on-

Stone a Provincial Park, however, might be comparable to Eliade's consecration of the territory, by which the area is separated it from the homogeneity of the rest of southern Alberta.

Other examples of permanent sacred spaces include the sites of unusually-shaped stones, for example the "yoni" rock formations, also called "magic stones" or "fertility stones," located from near San Diego in California to northern Mexico. These rock formations are described as "fertility spots where childless women sought the power to conceive" (Nabokov, 2006, p. 249). These "fertility stones" are natural rock formations, considered sacred because of their unique shapes, but there are also ancient human-made boulder constructions which are considered sacred in some Indigenous traditions. Molyneaux and Vitebsky describe glacial deposits of rocks and boulders which were "arranged by prehistoric artists into geometric patterns or the outlines of human beings and animals" and medicine wheels on hilltops in the Great Plains and Prairies of North America. According to Molyneaux and Vitebsky (2000), "the precise age and origin of the stone images are difficult to determine, but oral traditions often record the legendary or mythical events behind their construction" (p. 108-109; 112-113). Boulder structures, including medicine wheels, are not naturally occurring rock formations, but Little Bear lists them as "amplifiers" nonetheless. These structures might be considered sacred simply due to their age, or their association with past peoples or mythical events; or they might be examples of sacred architecture, as Eliade would describe it, built on the sites of ancient hierophanic activity. If they are sacred because of their age, or their association with the mythical past, that would suggest that the structures themselves are hierophanic. The sacred, in other words, reveals itself to human beings through those structures. If this is so, it would be an example of the complex relational nature of Indigenous sacrality, which usually does not fit

neatly into Eliade's sacred-profane dichotomy. However, as Molyneaux and Vitebsky suggest, due to their age it is not known for certain how these particular sites came to be regarded as sacred.

I would include Indigenous sacred architecture in the image of sacredness that grows up from the ground, and then sinks back into it. This type of architecture is distinctive in that it is not built to be permanent. One example is the sweat lodge. Anthropologist William K. Powers (2002) says that the Oglala Sioux sweat lodge "is a perfect symbol for Oglala religion." When they are not being used, the structures look "rather pitiful: a dome made of willow saplings stuck into the ground, bent over, and tied in place with cloth strings or rope. *There is something exceedingly profane about them when not in use*, in contrast to the white man's shrines and churches, which are perpetually sacred, set off from the rest of society" (p. 254, emphasis mine). Here Powers gives us the image of the unused sweat lodge as *profane*, at least from the Western/Eliadean perspective. When it is not being used, the sweat lodge's uncovered framework "becomes a playground for children [and] a stopping place for multitudes of dogs, who lift their legs and declare the sacred saplings, placed there in honour of the various aspects of Wakantanka [the Great Spirit], their special territory." It is also home to insects, birds, and wandering livestock. The structure "tolerates all these intrusions," Powers tells us, "along with the constant battering of the wind... It is partly this tolerance that makes the sweat lodge potentially sacred; like humans, it is subject to the whims of nature and must abide by its relentless impositions" (Powers, 2002, p. 254). To begin with, Powers makes a point of describing just how very profane the sweat lodge structure can become: it is exposed to the elements, insects, farm animals, and worse. Upon seeing this treatment of sacred architecture,

a modern Westerner might ask the clichéd question: is nothing sacred? However, Powers suggests that this structure is sacred not in spite of this treatment but *because* it is so neglected and mistreated. It is a part of nature, including everything that goes on in the natural world; it is not being set aside in any way that would identify it as sacred in the Western or Eliadean perspective. Yet Powers tells us that the sweat lodge structure "reflects the Oglala principle of austerity and simplicity." In the Oglala view, Powers suggests, "the entire universe is a cathedral; everything is permanently sacred" (p. 254). As part of nature, the sweat lodge is part of sacredness. It does not need to be treated differently, or "dressed up"; this exemplifies perfectly the difference between Indigenous and Eliadean religious perspectives. For Eliade, the object or the building is not sacred until it ceases to be itself and, through the outside influence of a hierophany, becomes separated from its natural surroundings. Powers is describing precisely the opposite: the building is not sacred due to some outside influence, or separation from itself and its surroundings. The building is sacred for its own sake, as a part of the sacred natural world. It has not ceased to be itself, and this is what identifies it as sacred.

A structure is sacred because it is part of the natural world, and this includes its inevitable return to the elements from which it was built. Molyneaux and Vitebsky use the example of the Lakota sweat lodge to demonstrate the return of a sacred construction to its original state. "When the ritual is finished, the sacred ground is abandoned to the elements"; the structure is left to decompose. From a Western perspective, decay or decomposition suggest pollution, or profanity. For the Lakota people, though, the opposite is true: the sacred came up out of the ground, like a flower, and when the time comes it will return back to the ground. Molyneaux and Vitebsky compare this treatment of sacred architecture to "the

intricate and painstakingly prepared sandpaintings used in Navajo curing rituals." When the rituals are finished, the paintings are simply swept away (Molyneaux & Vitebsky, 2000, p. 107). In this view, the structure (or the painting) itself is secondary to the reality it represents: that everything in the natural world is sacred, from the beginnings of things to their endings.

Harrod (1987) describes this same process at work on the Great Plains, using the example of the Sun Dance lodge:

> Unlike people who built for their gods permanent temples and other dwellings, the peoples of the Northwestern Plains allowed the material forms of the Sun's lodge to return to the natural elements. The earth altar was quickly worn away by wind and rain, the brush that symbolized the growth of a renewed world soon withered, and the timbers out of which the lodge was constructed rotted on the Plains. The Sun's pole would remain standing somewhat longer, reminding the people of the sacred acts that had unfolded at this place. But the material forms were simply the media through which transcendent dimensions of meaning symbolically irrupted into the experience of the people. As were the lives of the people and their world, these material forms were reconstructed periodically and renewing power was again released. (p. 155-156)

The material forms are, according to Harrod, "simply the media through which transcendent dimensions of meaning symbolically irrupted into the experience of the people." Like the framework of the Oglala sweat lodge, which is left standing to be used and abused by animals and the weather, and like the Lakota sweat lodge that returns to the earth when the ceremony is finished, the materials and art of the Sun Dance lodge are not the point. The point is the sacred reality which exists everywhere, and which these structures only briefly hint at or facilitate before they return to the elements. In this case the central pole is left standing longer than the rest of the structure (and at any rate, as a larger piece of wood, it will take longer to decompose) as a tangible reminder of the sacredness that showed itself there, but this too will soon return to the earth. Again, this evokes the image of a lake, wherein all the water is sacred,

but where the surface is occasionally punctuated by moments of even more sacredness bubbling up. These moments are acknowledged by the people, for example through ceremonies and the building of sacred places, and then they recede again back into the body of water.

There are also examples of Indigenous notions of the sacred which suggest the other side of Eliade's definition, the darker side so to speak, in which the sacred is frightening and potentially dangerous to human beings. The sacred presents itself as something *ganz andere*, or wholly other: it is "basically and totally different... like nothing human or cosmic." Eliade calls it a terrible power, which is manifested in wrath; the sacred is awe-inspiring and can elicit feelings of terror in human beings. (Eliade, 1957, p. 9-10). The sacred therefore must be treated with care and respect; in some circumstances it might also be seen as something to avoid. And since the sacred often becomes associated with particular physical places, in some Indigenous traditions, it stands to reason that some of these places will reflect the terror and the terrible power inherent in the sacred. According to Nabokov, there are places where past Indigenous peoples have left markers or carvings on rocks and trees, intended to warn future generations of "the powers of these special locations" so that people would travel cautiously, or perhaps avoid the places altogether. These were considered "ominous, frightening spots" and were sometimes "associated with dangerous spirits" (Nabokov, 2006, p. xii). Molyneaux and Vitebsky suggest that the Ojibwa of eastern Canada, for example, believe some petroglyph sites to be haunted by "spirits and tricksters." In order to appease these spirits, Ojibwa people might leave offerings, or they might deliberately stay away from these places altogether (Molyneaux & Vitebsky, 2000, p. 52-53).

A specific example is Mount Tamalpais, in western California. This mountain has been considered a “poison place” by the Miwok, a place where shamans might go to seek the power to harm rather than cure. According to Nabokov, there are powers inherent in some landscapes and locations, powers which may be positive or negative. And among many of the religious traditions of Indigenous California, it is believed that evil can “erupt from landscape” unpredictably. In the Indigenous view, Nabokov claims, the sacred is “rarely a stable, unitary or altogether benign category.” Extraordinary forces are believed to inhabit or manifest themselves in physical locations, and even potentially in specific trees or rocks. These forces “can work for or against humans” Nabokov suggests, but “some are definitely better known for wreaking havoc than for bestowing blessings.” These “haunted” or “poisonous” locations can be found throughout California. Most people avoid them, but some deliberately go there attempting to gain “skills and secrets for doing wrong” (Nabokov, 2006, p. 273-274). Some of these examples seem so malevolent as to suggest that we are no longer discussing the sacred at all, but perhaps some sort of evil spirits or energies. However, Nabokov suggests that the powers dwelling (or manifested) in places might be positive or negative, and they might help humans as well as harm them. If these are hierophanies, as Eliade would call them – instances of the sacred showing itself to human beings – then perhaps there are negative hierophanies as well as positive ones. Or perhaps the sacred is just so wholly other, and thus so resistant to human understanding, that it occasionally appears negative.

## *Hierophanies in Indigenous Traditions*

In many Indigenous religious traditions, the notion of the hierophany is widespread and important. The sacred reveals itself to human beings on countless occasions, and in many ways. Unlike Eliade's definition, in these traditions there is no homogenous space which needs to be interrupted by the sacred in the form of a hierophany. Since the sacred is everywhere, a hierophany is better described as the metaphorical flower blooming in a field. A stone, for example, is not made sacred by virtue of a hierophany, or the sacred showing itself through the stone. As a part of nature already, the stone is already sacred. Therefore a hierophany does not change the stone from profane to sacred: instead it illuminates the stone's unique sacredness within a wider context of pre-existing sacredness. Finally, in many Indigenous traditions, a hierophany does not result in a sacred *place*, as Eliade would have it; rather it results in a *relationship*. To put a finer point on it, in these Indigenous traditions a place can be regarded as a living being. Thus when humans enter into relationships with the land it is understood as a reciprocal interaction between sentient beings. In this view the place (or physical landscape) is not homogenous, as Eliade would say; nor is it passive (*cf*. Basso, 1996).

Furthermore, in numerous Indigenous traditions people actively seek hierophanies; they put themselves into specific physical and psychological situations where they might best be able to make contact with hierophanies. Caves, isolated hilltops, and other sites were believed to be thresholds between the human world and the spirit world, and in these places, "individual Indians suffered, prayed and sought visions and transacted with the shy, evasive entities who lived there" (Nabokov, 2006, p. xii). Much of Indigenous religion is comprised of people's efforts

to make contact with the sacred, and specific techniques for doing so. In this view the hierophany is not always a surprise, as Eliade's use of the word "interruption" implies; instead it is actively sought after and perhaps to some degree manipulated by people. This hierophany-seeking can be communal, but it is commonly undertaken by individuals. The goal of seeking a hierophany, in these traditions, is to form a personal relationship with the sacred (*cf*. Blondin, 2006; Neihardt, 2000).

In the Ojibwa tradition, according to anthropologist A. Irving Hallowell (cited by Nabokov, 2006), hunters constantly watched for signs that might help them determine "the landscape's state of mind." They practiced scrying, or making predictions based on careful scrutiny of lake water, in order to locate spirits as well as game animals. The Mistassini Cree practice scapulimancy, or the reading of cracks in animal bones, for similar purposes (p. 24; *cf*. Kinsley, 1995). Everything in the natural world, and even the land itself, is imbued with sentience and spirit; therefore people are interested in knowing the state of mind of these various beings. Hunting and other subsistence activities, as we have seen, can have religious as well as practical or economic objectives. Brody, describing the diverse Dene, Cree, Naskapi, and Inuit traditions, suggests that "spirit power can come from any animal, including the smallest and least economically important" (Brody, 1987, p. 75). To seek a hierophany is to seek spirit power. Gaining this spirit power through the forming and maintenance of personal relationships with spiritual beings is one of the primary goals of much Indigenous religious activity.

The best example of this activity is probably the vision quest, an initiatory ritual common in many Indigenous cultures. Little Bear (cited in Hill, 2008) suggests that the vision

quest is necessary because the human mind is unable to communicate with the spirit world in normal circumstances. The vision quest therefore enables people to access the knowledge and spirit power which would not otherwise be available to them (p. 43-44). For the Kootenai people, the vision quest involves complex purification ceremonies. The one seeking a vision makes offerings to the spirit world and then spends several days and nights with no food or water, focusing instead on dreams and prayers. At the end of this time, perhaps, the spirit beings would commune with the seeker (Nabokov, 2006, p. 153-154). Similar experiences have been recorded among the Plains Cree, Ojibwa, Blackfoot, Sioux, and Hidatsa, among others (Mandelbaum, 1979, p. 159, 341; Gill, 2005, p. 71-74; Nabokov, 2006, p. 192). In the vision quest, an individual seeks a guardian or tutelary spirit which might accompany them throughout life. In some traditions only a young person seeks such visions; in other traditions it can be repeated throughout one's life. In all cases emphasis is placed on the individual's efforts, which are described as difficult if not tortuous, to make contact with the spirit world. The hierophany, in this view, is not an "interruption" at all, that is, it is not an unexpected occurrence; rather it is expected and indeed hoped for. Unlike Eliade's view in which people are completely at the mercy of the sacred, in many Indigenous traditions humans play a more active role in the relationship. Beyond that, this human contact with the spirit world, or the sacred, is not necessarily a unique or one-time occurrence. In some Indigenous contexts, communion with the sacred is maintained and nurtured for extended periods of time.

Eliade suggests that anything might be a hierophany; in Indigenous traditions hierophanies usually appear as animals, rocks, plants, and supernatural beings. Among the Plains peoples, according to Harrod, human beings receive gifts from the sacred through animal

agents. Animals "become mediators of various transcendent powers," including skills or powers which are associated with particular species, such as speed, vision, or cunning. "Whether the animal beings appear in a vision or in the context of the waking world of ordinary experience is not as important as is the prospect that power may be communicated" (Harrod, 1987, p. 87). Hunting cultures including the Athapaskan, Algonquin, Inuit, and Mistassini Cree experience hierophanies in the form of game animals (Brody, 1987, p. 73; 75; Kinsley, 1995, p. 17). The powers bestowed upon humans by hierophanies vary widely, depending on location and culture. Hierophanies in the form of birds, for example, give the O'odham people of Arizona their music. During salt-gathering treks to the Sea of Cortez, the O'odham hear the ocean birds singing in their native language. This music appears in the people's dreams, inspiring both traditional singers and modern fiddlers (Nabhan, 1997, p. 10-11).

Rocks and boulders also occupy a central place as hierophanies in many Indigenous traditions. McLeod (2007) tells of Cree stories about "big stones," or "grandfather stones," which functioned as both landmarks and "important places for Indigenous people to have ceremonies and pray" (p. 19). The Ojibwa in Manitoba also refer to certain stones as grandfathers. That both groups call these stones grandfathers, a term suggesting kinship, might imply that they saw themselves engaged in relationships with them. For the Ojibwa, though, the stones actually took an active part in the relationship: they "saw some rocks as reaching out *to them*... Potential containers of life and power, [the stones] were inhabited by small humanoids for whom their surfaces opened and closed like doors" (Nabokov, 2006, p. 27-28). Stones themselves might be hierophanies, then, and they might also be the dwelling places of hierophanic beings. Little Bear calls the rocks and hoodoos of Writing-on-Stone Park "teaching

rocks" which people might communicate with and learn from. However, "they will not sit down and tell you everything immediately... Only when the rocks begin to know you will they tell you their story" (cited in Hill, 2008, p. 42). Again, like the vision quest – and unlike Eliade's "interruption" – a hierophany might appear as a result of human effort.

If animal hierophanies are common among hunting peoples, then we might expect agricultural peoples to experience hierophanies in the form of plants. Indeed, for the Navajo of New Mexico and Arizona the sacred appears in the form of corn. "When a man goes into a corn field he feels that he is in a holy place, that he is walking among Holy People." These Holy People, or supernatural beings, include White Corn Boy, Yellow Corn Girl, and Pollen Boy. According to one Navajo informant, it is perfectly reasonable to expect a plant to speak with a human being. You simply have to "put your mind at that level" (Nabokov, 2006, p. 94, 98). Even for hunters, plants can be hierophanic. Brody claims that for the subarctic Athapaskan peoples, spirit power can come from game animals, but it can come also from plants like herbs (Brody, 1987, p. 75). Hierophanies might also take the form of trees. Kinsley supplies a statement from Walking Buffalo, of the Stoney people of Alberta: "Did you know that trees talk? Well they do. They talk to each other, and they'll talk to you if you listen... I have learned a lot from trees: sometimes about the weather, sometimes about animals, sometimes about the Great Spirit" (Kinsley, 1995, p. 47-48).

It might be argued that these are not descriptions of hierophanies at all. If every animal, rock, and plant is regarded as a sentient being, then perhaps these are simply depictions of people's relationships with these beings. That does not necessarily imply that they are instances of the sacred showing itself to human beings. However in the Indigenous context I am

examining, wherein every aspect of the natural world is imbued with sacredness, all of nature is hierophanic. Therefore every revelation of another being or another realm, and every resulting relationship, can be regarded as hierophanic. This does not refute Eliade's definition so much as expand it. Eliade suggests that everything can potentially be a hierophany; I am suggesting that in many North American Indigenous contexts, everything *is* a hierophany, and all at once.

I have described several examples of natural beings which can be hierophanic. In many Indigenous traditions there are also hierophanies which take the form of supernatural beings. The first one I should mention is the Great Spirit, or Creator, a deity often associated with the Christian God. Canadian ethnographer David G. Mandelbaum claims that belief in this deity dominates Plains Cree religion. All other phenomena is created and controlled by the Great Spirit, including the *atayohkanak*, spirit powers which act as intermediaries between the Creator and human beings. These spirit powers were innumerable, since they "possessed every living thing" including bear spirit powers, horse spirit powers, hummingbird spirit powers, and even maple tree and stone spirit powers. Thunder, wind, and the sun were "among the mightiest spirit powers," but a spirit power might also be "localized in a pebble" (Mandelbaum, 1979, p. 157). In other words, for the Plains Cree, everything is a hierophany. Furthermore, hierophanies exist within a sort of hierarchy, in this case, with "lesser" beings serving as intermediaries between humanity and the Creator. Mandelbaum (1979) describes similar intermediaries, or "patron spirits," in the beliefs of the Naskapi and the Ojibwa (p. 302-303). In this view, human beings may not be able to commune with the Great Spirit directly – that is, with sacredness itself – but they are able to commune with it nonetheless through its various other manifestations.

Little people are another widespread form of supernatural being in Indigenous traditions. Nabokov (2006) describes the “Little People” of Penobscot legend, beings which people reportedly see and encounter to this day, “behaving like long-lost friends” (p. 17-18). Traditions of belief in supernatural little people can also be found among the Micmac, Ojibwa, Cherokee, and Yaqui peoples (Molyneaux & Vitebsky, 2000, p. 52-53; 81; Nabokov, 2006, p. 29; 55; 113). According to McLeod, another example is the Cree *memekwesiwak*: “small beings, roughly two to three feet tall” who dwell near water or in pine trees. The pine, in this instance, functions as a gateway to the world of the little people, who visit human beings through dreams. Following the directions they are given, people can enter the realm of the *memekwesiwak*. After they present gifts of cloth, tobacco, and hide, the *memekwesiwak* reciprocate with medicine or spiritual gifts (McLeod, 2007, p. 28). Similar to the animal, stone, and plant hierophanies, people seek to communicate with the little people and then enter into relationships with them. McLeod suggests that these relationships, which include communication between human and spiritual realms and the exchange of gifts, help to connect human beings with the natural world.

Not all hierophanies are localized in the forms of individual animals or little people, however. It is also possible for supernatural beings to take the form of entire landscape features. As I mentioned above, a physical place or landscape can be understood as a living being. In some cases this may be a mountain; for the Cherokee, it is a river. The Little Tennessee River is the Long Man, “a wilful but benevolent superspirit,” as Nabokov describes it, who oversees the lives of all Cherokee people. Historically, only initiated singers were able to translate the sounds of his currents into human speech, but everyone participated in the life of

the river. They bathed in Long Man's body, drank from him, and received healing powers from him; infants were washed in his currents each morning. "At every critical turn in a man's life, the river's blessings were imparted through the 'going to the water' rite" (Nabokov, 2006, p. 57). Relationship with the Long Man, in other words, is both lifelong and all-encompassing. Perhaps every aspect of Cherokee life is connected in some way with the river. This is an example of a hierophany which is experienced by a whole community, not just one person. You do not seek it out, but rather you are born into it. This hierophany seems to be situated a little closer to Eliade's definition of sacred space: it is a fixed point on the physical landscape, around which a group of people literally and symbolically orient themselves. However in the case of the living river, sacred architecture is not necessary. A single supernatural being can help to connect a person to the natural world; a being like the Long Man helps to connect an entire community.

In all of these cases, a hierophany results in a relationship: through communication and the exchange of gifts with other beings, humans are able to enter into relationships with the sacred. Indeed, according to Kinsley, relating to these beings and powers is the objective of Indigenous religion. To be cut off from that relationship, on the other hand, or to live in isolation from it, would be to live "an incomplete, immature, stifled existence." To maintain this relationship is to "harness great energy and discernment," and thereby "to become fully human" (Kinsley, 1995, p. 50). This echoes Eliade's notion of the sacred as the source of the only real or authentic life that a human can live. According to a Plateau informant, cited in Nabokov (2006),

> Without guardian spirits, an Indian is like a fish without fins. He cannot live very long; he is nothing but a fool. For it is through them that we really know the sun, the moon, the mountains, the dawn and the night; it is from them that we get the strength of earth, of all nature. (p. 153)

This gives us some idea of the great importance accorded to these relationships between humans and the sacred. It suggests that without these relations, a person is disconnected from the natural world, and from its life-giving energy; it also suggests that in their absence, a person becomes somehow less of a human being. In this view, people are defined not as individual beings, but by their relationships, and by who they relate to. Indeed, these relationships appear to make a human being more authentically human, because they situate people within the context of a greater family network. Harrod claims that among the Crow and Blackfoot peoples, for example, human dealings with other beings are described as kinship relationships. Among the Cheyenne and Arapaho, kinship terms are likewise "extended to aspects of nature, such as the sun, earth, and sky, as well as to certain animals." Sacred beings encountered in visions are also described in the language of kinship, for example they might be considered a person's brothers and sisters (Harrod, 1987, p. 29; 40). In other words, while hierophanic beings might be described as *ganz andere*, and therefore frightening and dangerous, they might also be described as members of one's family. Like the Cree and Ojibwa with their grandfather stones, many Indigenous people interpret their connectedness to the natural world using the language of family. These kinship relationships are often considered to be ancient, with origins that can be traced to the distant or mythical past.

According to Cheyenne cosmology, for example, "After the creator had made the earth, constituted the seasons, and made humans and animals, the entire creation is represented as

an interrelated whole, characterized by kinship associations" (Harrod, 1987, p. 49). For the Penobscot and other eastern North American peoples, the culture-hero and creator Glooskap arranged human families together with forest and water creatures, an act which "bound people to other creatures in their environments in a web of kinship" (Nabokov, 2006, p. 7). According to the Koyukon of Alaska, other species of animals are literally related to humans. During the mythical past, for the Koyukon, animals were once human beings. Some of these early humans died and "were transformed into animal or plant beings," a metamorphosis which left "a residue of human qualities and personality traits in the north-woods creatures" (Nelson, 1983, p. 16). Other Arctic and Subarctic stories describe a time when the world was still being formed, when "no clear line separated humans from animals." The ancient bond between human beings and animals is still there, Brody suggests, and "many people receive spiritual strength and insight" from it (Brody, 1987, 71). According to Bernauer, the oral traditions of the Dene people also define animals as "the ancestors of humans" (Bernauer, 2008, p. 71). Speaking of the Plains peoples, but with a statement that might be applied to all of these examples, Harrod claims that present-day human beings consider themselves "heirs of these original relationships," and therefore people can – and should – maintain relations with these other beings. These mythological and cosmological narratives affirm "deep cultural values" such as reciprocity and interdependence (Harrod, 1987, p. 53-54). There are numerous other examples of Indigenous mythologies and oral histories which make a similar if not identical point. Animals and other creatures are treated as sentient, social, and spiritual beings. They can be related to human beings; in some cases they are literally considered people's ancestors. This is the context in which the natural world must be seen, in order to comprehend the Indigenous perception of it

as a sacred space. It also explains the sense of human belonging to, and embeddedness in, the natural world (*cf*. Blondin, 1990; Ingold, 2000).

## *The Relational Model*

This embeddedness is constructed and maintained based on complex relationships between humans and other beings, both natural and supernatural. Indeed, the word "supernatural" might be misleading because it implies a dichotomy between the physical world and the world of dreams, visions, and spiritual beings. In many if not all Indigenous traditions, there may not be a clearly demarcated line between them. This inclusive interconnectedness suggests that these traditions might be defined using ecological as well as spiritual terms. Davidson-Hunt and Berkes (2003) suggest that the perception of land, for the Anishinaabe people of Ontario and Manitoba, resembles the scientific concept of the ecosystem, "except that it is an ecosystem that explicitly includes people, their culture, and history" (p. 15). This ecosystem, for many Indigenous peoples, also includes the spiritual. The name generally used to describe this religious ecology (or ecological religion) is animism, in which all creatures and objects might be imbued with sentience and spirit.

This description can be applied to a large number of traditions throughout North America. The Koyukon, for example, "live in a world that watches, in a forest full of eyes." Nelson claims that for the Koyukon, the physical landscape is "aware, sensate, [and] personified" (Nelson, 1983, p. 14). All beings are engaged in a constant reciprocal exchange, in

which the natural and supernatural realms are inseparable and “each being is an intrinsic part of the other” (Kinsley, 1995, p. 40). Nelson suggests that a forest, in this view, is “both a provider and a community of spiritually empowered beings”; this might explain the notion of the Penobscot people, that “the landscape might be lonely without human beings” (Nelson, 1991, p. 13; Nabokov, 2006, p. 9). Humans are an essential part of the landscape, but they are no more and no less important than any other beings. Indeed, on many levels the various beings are identical. Human beings breathe the same air that plants and animals do, and drink the same water. They harvest food and other necessities from the land while they live, and they become a part of the soil again after they die.

The point I would like to emphasize here is human belonging to, and participation in, the natural world. This stands in sharp opposition to the desacralized world that Eliade portrays, bereft of all meaning and authenticity, where people live commodified lives in commodified houses (Eliade, 1957, p. 50-51). It is an even further cry from our present state of ecological crisis. Considering the possibilities of modern ecological awareness and involvement, Nelson cites Australian environmentalist John Seed. When he first began his fieldwork, Seed believed that he was working to protect the rain forest. But as he became more involved, his thinking evolved and he realized, “I am part of the rain forest protecting myself” (Nelson, 1991, p. 219). He breathes the air supplied by those trees, drinks the water from those clouds, and so on. When that ecosystem is damaged, he is threatened; when they are destroyed, he will be too. This awareness of oneself as a part of one’s natural surroundings might sound odd or radical in our modern industrialized and digital context, but we should keep in mind that ours is just one way of imaging the world. For other people, including many Indigenous North Americans,

Seed's epiphany might be taken for granted, both as an ancient understanding and as an everyday reality.

## *Renewal*

In Eliade's view profanity exists in the form of homogenous space and chaos: the natural world (or parts of it) can become sacred only through the intervention of hierophanies, whereby the sacred shows itself to human beings. In many Indigenous religious traditions, however, this homogenous space is not chaotic and it is certainly not profane. In these traditions the landscape, and the entire earth, is sacred. Yet there is still an awareness of profanity. Profanity exists. But profanity is not inherent in nature in these traditions; rather it comes about *as the result of ignorant or inappropriate human actions*. Profanity can be introduced into the sacredness of nature by human beings, for example by actions motivated by greed or selfishness, which disrupt the relationships between humans and other beings. This can occur in several ways, but they all relate to the balance of the earth and its cycles. When these cycles are unbalanced, the sacred is disrupted or violated and profanity is introduced into the world.

In this view, the danger inherent in nature, expressed for example as natural disasters, is evidence that the sacred has been disrupted. Well before the arrival of Europeans in North America, Nabokov suggests, there was a keen awareness of the world as a potentially unstable and dangerous place. There were earthquakes, floods, famines, and other calamities. However,

these calamities do not occur because the world itself is flawed, chaotic or profane; they occur because of “human weakness and moral entropy” (Nabokov, 2006, p. 296). The world is steadily and constantly moving out of sync, or out of balance, as a result of humanity’s ignorance, greed, violence, and other shortcomings. Relations between humans and other beings have been neglected or damaged, causing harm to the larger ecosystem of relationships. Profanity, in the form of damaging unbalance, has been introduced into the sacred cosmos. And when this damage is severe enough, that is, when the imbalance passes a certain threshold, natural disasters occur. Therefore, in this Indigenous view, human beings need to maintain their relationships carefully. But knowing that human beings are not perfect, and therefore these imbalances will inevitably accumulate, Indigenous religious traditions often include ceremonies of renewal which seek to repair damaged relationships, and restore balance to the cosmos.

Hunting is one aspect of life for many Indigenous peoples that relies on a careful maintenance of relationships between beings, and therefore balance with the natural world. Hunting is important as a subsistence activity, but also because it expresses perfectly the interrelatedness and kinship of human beings with the sacred natural world, or the cosmos. Thus hunting is a religious occupation (*cf*. Shepard, 1978, 1992). For the Kwakiutl of British Columbia, for example, hunting is a “holy occupation” which involves a spiritual encounter between hunter and prey. According to Kinsley, the Kwakiutl hunt is understood to be a ritual, “in which the hunter fulfills certain obligations to the game animals so that they can fulfill their role of granting the hunter their meat and fur” (Kinsley, 1995, p. 42-43). Brody claims that all northern hunters likewise “insist that if animals are not treated with respect, both when alive

and dead, they will not allow themselves to be hunted. The hunt is thus a form of contract between partners" (Brody, 1987, p. 73). Citing Hallowell, Nabokov (2006) describes the Ojibwa notion of hunting and trapping in which humans must "avoid cruelty, kill cleanly and not insult the animal's remains." These obligations are carried out in the context of social relationships, developed and maintained over many generations. Inevitably sometimes this ethic of reciprocity (or contract) is broken: "humans were fallible and broke rules and behaved selfishly, but that probably explained... why muskrat or porcupines became scarce in a given year" (p. 27). If the hunt is not successful, it is seen as evidence that human beings are not fulfilling their end of the contract. In a practical sense, maintaining proper relations with game animals means that a hunter has access to meat and skins. However, if proper relationships are not maintained, or if the contract is broken, then animals will withhold themselves, and people will go hungry. Hunting is therefore an area (but not the only one) in which human behaviour can influence the balance of relationships between people and the sacred natural world. Hunting, if done improperly, can have decidedly negative consequences: for example, game animals might be scarce, resulting in a lack of food. However, improper hunting can also affect the balance of the entire cosmos; in other words, it can introduce profanity into the world. Thus many Indigenous traditions include complex rituals related to hunting, and rules which must be followed.

Nelson (1983) describes hundreds of such observances which the Koyukon must follow in order to sustain proper relationships with their natural surroundings. There are rules and taboos governing not only hunting but also the butchering of game animals, who is allowed to eat which part of an animal, and how unusable waste products are disposed of. If a hunter

ignores or violates these regulations, the vengeance enacted by spirit beings “can be as severe as death or decades of bad luck in catching a species” (p. 25). The consequences of these actions, in other words, might be much more severe than a season of scarcity. Both the scarcity of game animals and the vengeance of spirit beings suggest that profanity has entered into an otherwise sacred situation. The holy occupation of hunting, with its many complex rules and relationships, has been polluted by human carelessness or selfishness. Again, through the actions and behaviours of human beings, profanity is introduced into the sacred earth.

Because hunting involves relations between human beings and other-than-human persons – the hunting relationship is described by the Mistassini Cree, for example, as a relationship between “a lover and his beloved, a friend and friend, or a father and son” – hunting inevitably involves great moral and ethical tension (Kinsley, 1995, p. 17). Harrod claims that for the Plains peoples, moral tension was created by “the killing of animals who were believed to possess consciousness.” A moral dilemma arises when people realize that in order to live, they must kill and eat other persons. This is taking place in a context, we are reminded, where everything is sacred and where sacredness is expressed and experienced through relationships and even kinship. These animals that people kill and eat, these persons, are not only sentient beings; they may actually be relatives. Among the people of the Great Plains, according to Harrod, “killing animals is perceived as a deep violation of kinship relations” (Harrod, 1987, p. 159; 164-165). This violation might be understood as the ultimate profane act, or the ultimate introduction of profanity into the sacred world. This is more serious than a hunter who shows a lack of respect, and its consequences are more serious as well.

The careless or arrogant hunter might go without food for a time, and in extreme circumstances the vengeance of spirit beings may even claim his life; but *this* violation affects whole populations of beings, both humans and their other-than-human kin. Harrod (1987) suggests that hunting may have actually become a religious activity or a “holy occupation” in the first place because of these deep moral tensions, and the need to continually address them (p. 132; 159-160). Indeed, as an activity which can potentially affect the entire cosmos, hunting might only be understandable in religious terms. Improper hunting can potentially undermine the harmony and balance of the universe, and essentially turn the sacred into the profane. Yet it cannot stop: people must eat in order to survive. In the case of past Indigenous peoples of the Plains, the only readily available food source was the bison. People had to keep killing the bison, and so the earth’s balance was continually threatened.

The religious life of many Plains peoples, therefore, includes ceremonies which seek to restore this lost harmony. The constant threat of unbalance, the tendency toward chaos, is addressed by ceremonies of renewal. Gestures of respect for hunted animals enacted by the lone hunter might be seen as small localized versions of a renewal ceremony, but some Indigenous traditions developed large and elaborate communal ceremonies. For many Plains people, this was the Sun Dance. The Sun Dance, which symbolically associated the bison with the cyclical life of the sun, was believed to literally renew bison populations on the Plains. It was also a “ritual reconciliation” of the people with this food source, allowing the hunt to continue despite its moral ambiguities. Indeed, bison hunting was considered a holy occupation on the Plains as a result of these tensions, and the ceremonies of renewal that sought to alleviate them. People attempted to re-establish or repair kinship relations with the bison, and this

reconciliation was extended to the entire earth (Harrod, 1987, p. 159; 133). By dancing with skewers piercing their breasts, Harrod claims, some Sun Dance participants sacrificed their own flesh and blood “in order that the renewal of the world might come about and that the power at the heart of the universe would take pity on all human beings” (p. 150-151). The Arapaho Sun Dance ceremony, for example, “culminated in the central symbolism of the altar which signalled a world and a people renewed” (p. 155). The Sun Dance renewed the earth physically, and it renewed people’s relationships with the earth; regular enactment of this ceremony resulted in a deepened awareness of the kinship relationships between humans and other beings.

Hunting is one example of a subsistence activity that can – and perhaps must – create tension between beings, and threaten the balance between humans and the natural world. However, it is not the only example: different Indigenous cultures understand the introduction of profanity into the sacredness of the world in a variety of ways, and respond to it with an equally diverse range of rituals and religious ceremonies. Human weakness, ignorance, and selfishness are inevitable, and can be expressed in many ways; therefore human relationships with other beings and with the natural world are always in need of restoration. People who subsist by agriculture or by fishing, for example, may experience none of the moral tensions inherent in hunting, but yet they still participate in ceremonies of renewal. In all of these cases, emphasis is placed upon building and maintaining relationships with other beings.

In many Indigenous traditions, nature (or the earth itself) is regarded as a living organism. Harrod suggests that in the understanding of the Plains peoples, this organism can become worn out and tired like any other. In the same way, “the moral universe could become

stained and tattered, threatened by the emergence of destructive tendencies." These chaotic tendencies were held in check, and their consequences removed, "through processes of symbolic social renewal" (Harrod, 1987, p. 171-172). Profanity is always threatening the sacred, and therefore ceremonies of world renewal are necessary to restore and maintain harmony and balance. In California, comparable ceremonies are associated with the first fruits of fishing and acorn-gathering, and symbolized by extinguishing old fires and kindling new ones (Nabokov, 2006, p. 296; Gill, 2005, p. 85). Ceremonies of world renewal also take place among the Pueblo, who lend the sun their strength as it drops lower in the sky during the winter months, and among the Hopi, who symbolically participate in the water cycle of the Arizona desert (Nabokov, 2006, p. 78; 130). The natural world, as a living organism or a being who can become tired, is physically rejuvenated and restored by these ceremonies. Furthermore, the profanity which human beings bring into the world through their weakness and ignorance – and through their destructively antisocial tendencies – is repaired. These ceremonies bring the cosmos back into balance; they restore it to its natural state of sacredness.

## *Conclusion*

Based on these examples, the Indigenous notions of the sacred and sacred space are markedly different from that of the Western tradition, which I suggest is exemplified by Eliade's

sacred-profane dichotomy. Instead of a homogenous or chaotic space that must be interrupted by the sacred, the natural world is already sacred. This is evident in the conversation that Nabokov records between a park ranger and a Hopi elder: "'Just show us on this map which parts of the mountain are sacred so we can protect them,'" to which the Hopi replied, "'How can we point on a map to a sacred place? The entire mountain, the land surrounding the mountain, the whole earth is sacred'" (Nabokov, 2006, p. 141). And yet there are specific places which Indigenous people identify as sacred. I have used the image of a lake to resolve this apparent contradiction: the lake water is all sacred, but there are occasions when more sacredness bubbles up to the surface and then dissipates again into water. Hence a site may be recognized as unique, but this does not make it better or even profoundly different from its surroundings.

Sometimes sacred places are naturally-occurring landmarks, such as boulders or mountains. Other sacred sites are marked by the construction of buildings, for example a sweat lodge or a Sun Dance lodge. To illustrate this I have suggested we imagine a field with wildflowers growing in it: the entire field is sacred, but occasionally sacredness expresses itself in a unique way in a particular place or time. A metaphorical flower will bloom, and then return again to the soil. Some of these expressions of the sacred are permanent, such as a mountain. Others are not permanent, but may last for a long period of time before they decompose or return to the elements. Both the sweat lodge and the Sun Dance lodge are examples of built structures that, when their ceremonial uses have been fulfilled, are simply abandoned and left to decompose. While this might not sound like appropriate treatment of a sacred building from the typical Western perspective, this involvement in the natural world and its cycles is precisely

what makes these structures sacred. The building (or the metaphorical flower) is not as important as the reality that it represents: that everything in the natural world is sacred, from its beginning to its eventual return to the earth.

There are also examples in Indigenous religious traditions in which the sacred or the supernatural can be frightening and even dangerous. Nabokov (2006) suggests that for some of the Indigenous peoples of California, for example, there are places where it is believed that evil literally erupts from the landscape (p. 273). Some petroglyphs, or rock art sites, were originally intended to warn people of the danger inherent in a particular place. There are ominous beings that can cause mischief and even sickness or death; there are haunted and "poisonous" places that most people try to avoid. Then again, some people deliberately seek out these places in order to gain access to secret knowledge or dangerous powers. I think these instances suggest that these traditions also acknowledge something like Eliade's identification of the sacred with the *ganz andere*, or wholly other. Sometimes the sacred simply does not conform to human expectations, and it acts in ways which people cannot always understand. The sacred can be so profoundly "other," and so powerful, that it can be dangerous. In the Indigenous context, perhaps, this suggests an even greater need for the careful maintenance of proper relationships with one's surroundings and with other beings.

Eliade also speaks of sacred time, in which the sacred-profane dichotomy is expressed temporally. In his view all time is homogenous, and therefore profane; but some specific times become sacred by means of a hierophany. Hence Sunday might be set aside as a holy day, when people go to church or engage in specifically religious activities, while the rest of the week is devoted to mundane or non-religious activities. However, in the same way that all of space is

sacred in the view of many Indigenous peoples, all of time is sacred as well. Therefore we see everyday activities like the gathering, preparing, and eating of food as sacred activities. Hunting, farming, and other subsistence activities are elevated to the level of the sacred.

This broad sacralisation is achieved by recognizing that other living things – and even some inanimate objects – are sentient, intelligent, and spiritual. In this Indigenous view, all things coexist in a web of interdependent relationships. Humans are thus able to commune with the sacredness of nature, and in fact they must do so: their lives and indeed the balance of the earth depend upon the proper maintenance of relationships with other people, and with other-than-human persons. These relationships can be explained by the Eliadean notion of the hierophany, in which the sacred shows itself to human beings. In a tradition with no profane objects (or places, or times) that require the interruption of a hierophany in order to acquire sacredness, a hierophany can perhaps best be understood by the image of the wildflower blooming in a sacred field. In this view hierophanies do not change the "status" of natural objects, such as stones, by transforming them from profane to sacred. Rather, the stone is a part of nature and therefore it is already sacred; the hierophany simply illuminates the sacredness of the stone. The most important aspect of the hierophany, in this view, is the relationship that results from it.

People might actively seek these relationships by undergoing vision quests, in which lasting relationships can be formed between humans and other-than-human persons. Hierophanies are closely related to subsistence activities, for example a hunter may form a relationship with a game animal and a horticulturalist with a particular plant, and hence the resulting relationships are practical as well as spiritual. Indeed, in these traditions there is no

clear line demarcating the practical, or the human, realm from the spiritual realm. Hierophanies can act as mediators between the various realms. Hierophanies might be animals, plants, stones, or any aspect of the natural world; they can even be entire landscape features such as mountains or rivers. They might also be supernatural powers such as the sun, wind, or thunder or supernatural beings such as little people. They can appear in dreams, visions, or waking life. For some Plains peoples, the most important hierophany is the Great Spirit who has been compared to the Christian God. Through any number of revelatory phenomena, people can gain access to the spirit world, or communion with it, which results in the acquisition of spirit power. This power, sometimes called medicine, is then applied to hunting, healing, and other aspects of life. This human communion with the sacred also results in a deeper and fuller sense of relatedness with one's surroundings. This sense of relatedness is often expressed in kinship terms. From grandfather stones in the Prairies, to animals and plants in the North who are understood to be the ancestors of human beings, there are numerous traditions where Indigenous peoples define themselves as literally related to the natural world.

When describing these traditions it is easy to depict the sacred everywhere, but this does not give us the complete picture. The profane also exists in many Indigenous religious traditions, but unlike Eliade's view, profanity is not inherent in nature. It is introduced into the natural world by human beings. The instability of the world, for example the existence of floods, earthquakes, and other calamities, is explained by human weakness and "moral entropy" (Nabokov, 2006, p. 296). The ignorance and selfishness of human beings results in the violation of relationships between humans and other beings, and hence they disturb the balance of the world itself. If enough of this unbalance or disharmony accumulates, the entire

cosmos can be thrown out of balance. On a small localized scale, improper behavior might result in a scarcity of game animals, resulting in a lack of food, but on a larger scale whole ecosystems and natural cycles might be disturbed. Hence an earthquake or a famine might be attributed to human frailty or wrongdoing. This is why there are Indigenous religious traditions which always seek to restore and maintain balance, on all of these levels. Ultimately, however, it is understood that this delicate balance *will* inevitably be disturbed – human beings are not perfect, after all – and so the regular enactment of renewal ceremonies is necessary in order to restore harmony and repair damaged relationships.

The human violation of the natural balance of the cosmos might be explained in more than one way. Hunting provides one example: if other creatures are understood to be sentient beings, and indeed perhaps even relatives, then killing and eating them creates moral tension and introduces profanity to the sacred world. The people of the Plains, who traditionally subsisted on bison, were keenly aware of this profanity and so they enacted elaborate ceremonies of renewal such as the Sun Dance in which they sought to repair the damage and restore proper relations with both the bison herds and the earth itself. Another way to explain the human violation of the balance is to imagine the entire earth as a living organism, or being. The ignorance and greed of human beings introduce chaos and destruction, damaging or exhausting the organism of the earth. Profanity is always threatening the sacred, hence it is necessary to continually perform ceremonies of world renewal. On the Plains these ceremonies are related to bison herds, but comparable ceremonies also exist in other ecological and cultural settings and within different subsistence activities. In the Arizona desert, for example, the corn-growing Hopi people ritually participate in the water cycle so that they can be sure of

adequate rainfall for the next season's harvest. Regardless of the details, the point is that people are continually relating to their surroundings, and seeking to restore balance to their lives and the lives of other beings around them. Through human fallibility and evil, the sacredness of the earth is always inevitably disrupted, or violated; therefore it needs to be repaired and reintroduced on an ongoing basis. The ceremony of world renewal might be understood as human beings restoring or maintaining their relationship with the living being which is the earth.

# Conclusion

I will begin this chapter with some critical remarks about Eliade's theory of sacredness, and particularly his sacred-profane dichotomy, by contrasting it with Indigenous religious traditions. In many of these traditions the dichotomy simply does not make sense, because sacredness is not believed to exist outside of the natural world. Instead humans and other beings, both physical and spiritual, coexist within a complex network of symbiotic relationships which I have called the relational model.

In the second section I will situate this thesis within the larger framework of the issue of North American homelessness, and human alienation from the natural world. This will include a return to the debate between Lilburn and Snyder which I described in the introduction, and some thoughts about its possible resolution. I agree with Lilburn that we should not – and indeed cannot – simply take other people's stories and traditions and make them our own; however I also submit that in light of our present ecological crisis, we need a new way of seeing the world.

## *Foreground*

Any project that discusses such a wide range of religious and subsistence traditions as this thesis attempts to do is in danger of both generalizing and oversimplifying. However I should reiterate that, as mentioned in the introduction, I am seeking to find patterns but I am

not claiming universals. As with the camera metaphor, I am panning out to such a degree that some basic patterns and convergences are visible; but that does not constitute a claim that these cultures are all the same. Quite the opposite: I hope that by using examples from all over the continent, I have hinted at the vast diversity of Indigenous cultures and beliefs.

These examples which I have selected from various religious traditions suggest that the natural world itself is considered inherently sacred. Hierophanies occur, but they are not the means by which objects or places become sacred; rather they are unique expressions of sacredness in an already sacred landscape. When the profane does enter into this landscape, it is due to some form of ignorance or selfishness on the part of human beings. This is an entirely different picture – in fact it is a complete reversal, or a mirror-image – of Eliade's sacred-profane dichotomy. For Eliade, nature is a profane space which is interrupted by the sacred; in many Indigenous religious traditions, the opposite is true: nature is a sacred space which is interrupted by the profane. The profane, in this view, is introduced by human weakness or wrongdoing. Thus for Eliade the sacred is the exception to the normal state of existence, which is the profane; but in these Indigenous traditions the entire natural world is sacred. Sacredness is the norm, and profanity is exceptional.

Furthermore, in Eliade's formula only the sacred has agency or the ability to act: humans can only react or respond to the actions of the sacred. In many Indigenous traditions, on the other hand, the sacred and human beings are both actively involved in elaborate relationships with one another, relationships in which both parties have agency. Humans are still at the mercy of the sacred, for example in a vision quest the sacred simply may not show itself to the person seeking a vision; but in many Indigenous traditions there is not a sense of

the sacred “interrupting” or surprising people with its appearance. Rather, people work to place themselves in such physical and psychological settings that the sacred will appear. The sacred is already present, and so its appearance is neither an interruption nor a surprise.

Sawatzky (2008) suggests that in the modern Western view everything from land to ideas can be understood by being segmented and measured. In this view all aspects of life are organized into separate categories or compartments, and “sacredness is typically isolated to one area of life” – that is, what we have called religion – and all other areas of life are separate (p. 12). I have used Eliade’s notions of sacredness and sacred space to exemplify this modern or Western view. Eliade’s sacred-profane dichotomy certainly explains the separation and isolation that Sawatzky describes here. Following the Eliadean definition of sacredness, we build a sacred place as a permanent structure that is deliberately set apart and different from its surroundings. A traditional Christian church, for example, stands out from the rest of the community in which it was built. The building itself is unique, and so are the activities related to it, both spatially and temporally: people can worship or perform religious activities on specific days which do not necessarily relate to the other activities in their lives, or the other days of the week. An entirely dichotomous view is possible; the sacred and the profane can be kept far from one another at all times and in all areas of life. The sacred and the profane can be kept in their places, safely as it were, with little or no overlap between them.

The variety of North American Indigenous traditions which I have examined here, however, present us with an entirely different picture. They are often “dialectical rather than dichotomous” and instead of a binary “either/or” framework, they generally view the world as “an accumulation of interactions” (Sawatzky, 2008, p. 13). Referring to the Mistassini Cree of

eastern Canada, but with a statement that I have applied broadly across the continent, Kinsley suggests that the “natural and supernatural realms are inseparable” and furthermore, each “is an intrinsic part of the other” (Kinsley, 1995, p. 40). In other words, in these traditions the world is relational, comparable to an ecosystem or an interconnected web of relationships. Everything exists and has meaning within the context of an ongoing relationship, or dialogue, with everything else. In this view if one part of the whole is separated or removed, it loses its meaning.

This is the exact opposite of the classic Western scientific view, which suggests that meaning can be comprehended by reducing things into smaller and smaller pieces and examining those pieces individually, outside of their original contexts. I am not suggesting that the scientific view is the same as Eliade’s sacred-profane formula, but I am suggesting that they have at least one important thing in common: they are both dichotomous. By this I mean they both depend upon the separation of subject and object. The classic scientific view requires that something be broken down into smaller parts before it can be defined; Eliade’s view requires that the sacred be defined apart from the profane. Both require divisions or separations; neither is relational or holistic. Therefore they both contrast sharply with the view held by many Indigenous religious traditions, in which something cannot be understood outside of its relational context. This is demonstrated by Nabokov’s reference to the park ranger speaking with the Hopi elder about sacred territory. The Eliadean point of view is the same as the park ranger’s: they both suggest that if they could locate “the” sacred place, then it could be preserved. In this instance, the one location would be deemed sacred, and the remaining land would be profane. The sacred place would be set aside for sacred activities, and the rest of the

space could be developed for tourism or industry, or used for any purpose whatsoever. The Hopi elder disagreed with this interpretation, claiming that the designation of just one site as sacred would be missing the point. The entire landscape is sacred, to the Hopi, and so pointing to one spot on a map would be both misleading and counterproductive (Nabokov, 2006, p. 141).

The relational aspect of numerous Indigenous traditions also extends beyond the world of nature to include human beings and cultures. This might be understood as an ecosystem, but unlike the common view of the natural world, this ecosystem also includes human beings. Furthermore, it extends beyond the common Western definition of sentient life to include what we would call inanimate objects like stones, and even natural phenomena like weather, as persons. The ecosystem is thus inhabited by supernatural, or spiritual, beings as well as natural or physical ones. Indeed, the line between supernatural and natural might not be clearly defined. In many Indigenous traditions, all of these beings are intimately connected to one another in continuous, reciprocal, and sometimes even kinship relationships. These relationships simultaneously include all of nature, or what Eliade refers to as the profane, as well as what he defines as the sacred. Thus the sacred-profane dichotomy is inconsistent – if not completely incompatible – with this relational or ecological view.

This spiritual-ecological understanding expresses itself in space, according to Nabokov, as “the merging of physical and spiritual habitats” (Nabokov, 2006, p. vvi). Within Eliade’s framework of the sacred and the profane, such merging is possible only in unique or exceptional situations; that is, when a place is made sacred through the influence of a hierophany. By contrast, for many Indigenous people all of nature is sacred, and therefore a

hierophany does not introduce sacredness into a profane world; a hierophany is a unique expression of the sacredness that is already present. A hierophany does not identify a specific place, or an Eliadean center, so much as it creates and reinforces relationships. Humans and other beings – which we would call natural as well as supernatural – are linked together in complex reciprocal networks. Sacred architecture, therefore, is not set apart from nature or other aspects of human life in the way a Western church building might be set apart. Because it is no more and no less than a part of nature, a sacred structure in Indigenous traditions might be temporary. It shares in the sacredness of its surroundings through relationship, participation, and ultimately through its decomposition and return to the elements. In this way, a sacred space or a sacred building is the same as a living thing, or even a human being: it spends a certain period of time on the earth and then it returns to the soil. I have used a metaphorical lake to describe this: all of the water is sacred, but occasionally more sacredness bubbles to the surface before returning to its natural sacred state. This notion of sacredness might also be depicted as a field of flowers. The field is the world, or even the universe; the flowers are hierophanies. The entire field is already understood to be sacred space, but the sacred reveals itself further in unique or unusual ways before returning to the earth.

Everything is sacred, in this view, but the profane still exists. This is evident in human suffering, such as hunger due to scarcity, as well as natural disasters and other calamities. However, profanity is not inherent in nature, as Eliade would suggest. Rather, profanity is introduced into sacred space by human beings, whose weaknesses or moral failings threaten the delicately balanced web of relationships in which they are always participating. The subsequent unbalance, or disharmony, violates the sacredness of the cosmos itself. And when

such violations, or disruptions, accumulate beyond a certain point, natural disasters can result. Whether through ignorance or wilful wrongdoing, human beings will inevitably violate the relationships that exist between all beings, and thus they inevitably threaten the harmony of the universe. Therefore these relationships, and this harmony, must be continually restored. This restoration is accomplished with ceremonies of world renewal. By enacting these ceremonies, people seek to repair damaged relationships, and ultimately to restore balance and harmony to the cosmos.

Sawatzky suggests that our definition of the sacred should be expanded, or "broadened" (Sawatzky, 2008, p. 17). This thesis has presented some of the contrasts that exist between the Western definition of sacred geography (as exemplified by Mircea Eliade's theory of the sacred and the profane) and a non-dualistic and ecological definition (as exemplified by examples of North American Indigenous religious traditions). I will conclude by suggesting that these Indigenous traditions might provide us with the means to rethink our definitions. Eliade's views, which continue to be influential, must be integrated or supplemented – or perhaps supplanted entirely – with Indigenous views if we hope to broaden the definition of sacred geography. This is work for a future project; I will not attempt this integration here.

The two approaches seem incompatible, and so we might conclude that Eliade should be discounted altogether in favor of an Indigenous view. However, Eliade's sacred-profane model can also be made to fit within the broader framework of what I have identified as the Indigenous relational model, whereby it might be seen to have value after all. In many Indigenous traditions, everything is sacred but profanity does enter the world. The profane is introduced by the disruptive actions of human beings, and this must be addressed with

ceremonies of renewal. It is at this point – before the renewal has taken place – where we might understand Eliade's sacred-profane dichotomy to belong. In a context of sacredness, there is no dichotomy; but in a context of profanity, sacredness needs to be introduced once again. Once the sacred world has been profaned, then Eliade's theories might be applied to explain the difference between the two states of being, and to describe the return of sacredness to a profane space.

## *Background*

I began the second chapter by outlining some of the difficulties involved in writing about Indigenous traditions, difficulties ranging from proper nomenclature to concerns about cultural appropriation and colonialism. Because we in North America are not removed from this subject matter, either in terms of time or space, it is a sensitive topic. We might glean practical, philosophical, or even religious ideas from past cultures like ancient Greece or China with apparent impunity. However, if we do the same with North American Indigenous peoples, we are potentially participating in the colonial enterprise of theft and exploitation that began in the $15^{th}$ century when Europeans discovered the so-called New World. I have no desire to participate in this enterprise, obviously; and yet simply living on this continent as a descendant of the original European colonizers identifies me with them.

We live in a time of ecological crisis, and most people would agree that our industrialized and materialistic way of life is to blame. Modern Westerners wreak great

destruction on the earth, for example with the many forms of pollution we introduce to it. (It is difficult not to draw a comparison between this present-day situation and the Indigenous understanding of profanity being introduced into the cosmos by human beings.) We live in a state of disconnection from nature, whereby we feel separated and alienated from our natural surroundings. We continue to interact with nature, but for the most part this means that we simply use it as a source of raw materials for our industries. Even our enjoyment of the natural world in the form of national parks, or designated nature preserves, suggests that we are treating it as a resource. We are still using it, albeit for tourism or recreation instead of industry, and therefore we are still valuing nature based solely upon our own interests and concerns. Nature is still being valued only inasmuch as it is useful for human beings. Furthermore, the very existence of nature preserves and national parks might be evidence of the Eliadean sacred-profane dichotomy at work: by designating some natural areas "pristine" or "untouchable" we are equating them with the sacred. The remaining land, therefore, is profane by default and we are free to use it however we wish.

The natural world has no value unless we assign it value; that is, if we are able to profit from it. Like Eliade, we have deemed the natural world profane and in need of redemption. However unlike Eliade's model, in our case nature is not redeemed by hierophanies or revelations of the sacred. Instead, by replacing the sacred with ourselves, we are enacting our own industrialized version of the hierophany, whereby nature is sacred (that is, useful or valuable) only when *we* interrupt it.

In light of our present ecological crisis, which stems in part from our dislocation and alienation – our homelessness on this continent – I suggest that we need a new way of looking

at the natural world. I propose that we modern Westerners should try to learn from Indigenous religious traditions, specifically their understanding of their natural surroundings as sacred. However, this proposal also ostensibly places me in the colonial camp. It seems that this issue will inevitably result in a stalemate: if we do not learn from people who might know better ways of living in (and with) the natural world, our ecological crisis will worsen. If we do attempt to learn from these people, we are potentially guilty of continuing the colonial project which was begun by our European ancestors.

I have used a debate between two prominent nature poets, Snyder and Lilburn, to illustrate this tension. Snyder suggests that we must become natives of this place (that is, of North America), and he strives to do this by studying and adopting the languages, cultures, and storytelling traditions of local Indigenous people. Lilburn agrees that we need to become native to this place, but he takes issue with Snyder's approach: we cannot simply take things, Lilburn says, that belong to other people. Instead, he suggests that we need to apprentice ourselves to the land, and be here for such a long time that we develop our own cultures and storytelling traditions based in our own places on the continent. However, Lilburn does acknowledge that we would be foolish not to listen to those people who have already completed their long apprenticeships on the land – that is, North American Indigenous peoples – and this is what I am suggesting we do as well. I am inspired by the religious traditions that have existed for thousands of years on this continent, and particularly their view of the sacredness of nature.

Therefore I am suggesting a new consideration of a very old idea: the idea that humans are spiritual beings, but we are also animals; and hence we are not separate from nature. In fact, we are intimately connected to the natural world by the very air we breathe, and the

water we drink (*cf*. Abram, 1996; Nelson, 1991). If taken seriously, this consideration might resemble a new beginning. This new beginning must include – indeed it must start with – a changed and renewed relationship between Euro-North Americans and Indigenous North Americans. Hence there must be a rethinking of the colonial enterprise which began in the 15th century, but continues to inform our policies and our everyday lives up to and including the present day. This same colonial enterprise is to blame for much of our alienation from our natural surroundings. In other words, by separating ourselves from the rest of the world, we see nothing wrong with treating it as if it has no value. Furthermore, following an Eliadean model, we might designate some parts of nature as sacred, but that simply allows us to abuse or pollute the rest of the landscape – which is designated profane by default – thereby defeating the purpose of trying to preserve the natural world at all. Many Indigenous religious traditions and the science of ecology agree on the fact that one place exists in relation to other places. A part of nature cannot be removed or separated from the greater landscape or watershed to which it belongs; rather the entire ecosystem must function as one large web of relationships.

Human beings also belong in these landscapes and watersheds. We are also involved in the interconnected relationships which define them, and which allow them to continue living. By acknowledging our own complicity, both as individuals and as a society, in the ecological damage that is happening to the natural world today, we might begin to see our place in it differently. By recognizing that we are not separate from nature, but in fact intrinsically connected and even related to every other living thing, we might begin to truly belong here.

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