1989

Review of Renewing the World: Plains Indian Religion and Morality.

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Although at midcentury the distinguished anthropologist A. Irving Hallowell suggested a new field, “ethnometaphysics,” at the interface of philosophy and anthropology, there was no stampede to explore it. Philosophers for the most part remain Western cultural narcissists and chauvinists, while anthropologists labor to become scientifically “respectable.”

Howard L. Harrod is neither philosopher nor anthropologist. Working in the genuinely synthetic discipline of religious studies, he has
produced one of a bare handful of ethnometa-
physical essays. He himself describes what he is
doing in *Renewing the World* simply as “interpre-
tation” of “meanings.”

His book focuses on four northwestern Plains
cultures: the Algonkian speaking Blackfeet,
Cheyenne, and Arapaho, and the Siouan
speaking Crow. Harrod submits the self-con-
sciously “objective” and meticulous ethno-
graphic accounts of early descriptive ethnogra-
phers to a more abstract, cognitive
analysis to provide us a point of view more nearly
internal to the culture in question and more
aware that a plurality of cultural worlds, each
perfect in its own terms, exists.

Harrod discusses the epistemic function of
dreams and visions in these four Plains world
views then analyzes their cosmogonical and cos-
mological ideas. His detailed discussion of their
ethical precepts emphasizes the negative (and
often comic) moral instruction afforded by the
various Trickster figures. The book concludes
with an account of a northwestern Plains en-
vironmental ethic.

Plains peoples, Harrod suggests, refracted na-
ture and conceived an environmental ethic
through a metaphor of kinship. He is particu-
larly skillful in characterizing the ambiguity
Plains peoples expressed at the necessity of kill-
ing and eating their animal kin.

*Renewing the World* also contributes to an-
other new and undercultivated science that we
might call “ecology of mind.” A world view is
an adaptation to an environment that under-
pins the visible and concrete aspects of a cul-
ture. The sun dance and its meaning is as much
an adaptation to the Great Plains environment
as the tipi. Harrod expresses the way the semi-
arid, windswept land of thermal extremes, grass,
buffalo, and newcomers (like the horse and gun)
helped shape the outlook of the four peoples.

Particularly interesting were his occasional
and all too brief suggestions that ideas among
the Plains-dwelling Algonkians might be fruit-
fully compared with older Algonkian cultures.
The Cheyenne may have lacked the intellectual
reckoning with the moral ambiguities of hunt-
ing developed among the Montagnais-Naskapi,

perhaps because the latter had not readapted to
a hunting life after a horticultural sojourn.

Although Harrod points out that the peoples
whose ideas he studies have no word for religion
and therefore no concept of religion as a special
domain of life bounded by the secular, he, like
other religious studies scholars, insists on writ-
ing about American Indian “religion.” My
greatest disappointment with this book is the
unwillingness of the author to listen as atten-
tively to what the peoples he studies do not say
as to what they do. And among the things they
do not say is “religion.” Scholars seem to insist
on the term to get on with their talk about
“religious” symbols, “sacred” bundles, “rituals,”
and “prayers.” We must ultimately interpret the
world view of other cultures through the cate-
gories provided by our own, but I think that we
can do better if we go beyond the tendentious
categories of religious studies.

Harrod’s prose is admirably plain, un-
adorned, and unobtrusive, but neither lively
nor finely crafted, though the writing becomes
more fluid and supple as the book progresses. *Renewing the World* is, however, readable and I
recommend it highly.

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