

A response to James Larking's, 'Sacrifice and the Preservation of the Environment in Native American Belief' (*Sacred Web 17*)

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Mr Larking's, 'Sacrifice and the Preservation of the Environment in Native American Belief' (SW17), touches upon a key element of the critique of the modern dilemma, being the environmental crisis and the question of sustainability. This article is a short reflection upon some important thoughts of the "Native American" peoples. However, its brevity means that it is open, to a degree, to certain oversimplifications, to which I would like to address the following remarks. These are intended as a recognition of the complexities of the issues in general, rather than a critique of this article as such, which serves its purpose precisely by instigating such ruminations. In summary: Mr Larking recognises the role of sacrifice as a means of repaying the debt we owe to "Mother Earth" for her nurturing us, and thus maintaining a balance, both spiritually and, as a consequence, ecologically.

The first thing one need do when offering "ancient peoples" as a comparison with moderns, as Mr Larking is doing, is recognise the complexities of such a comparison. It is not as simple as to talk of "ancient peoples" as being "traditional," for the traditional mentality, which is to say a mentality that sees the sacred in everything, is not *necessarily* "ancient," and in fact certain "ancient" civilizations are patently "modern," the obvious example being Rome. As Martin Lings reminds us:

In the phrase "human societies" the plural reminds us that the modern world is not the only human world that has degenerated with the passage of time. Each of the four ages may be said to constitute in itself a lesser cycle, beginning with a "youth" and ending with an "eld"; and there are yet lesser cycles within them-for example, the civilization of ancient Egypt, or that of ancient Rome.¹

¹ Lings, *The Eleventh Hour*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1987, p. 62.

Likewise, there are many people of God who live in the contemporary world.

A further complexity rises from the manner we, as moderns, are tempted to view "ancient" or traditional societies. As Mark Perry has observed, one must be careful to avoid the "twin pitfalls" of modern attitudes towards "ancient man" of either 'pretentious depreciation or that of an overly sentimental romanticism'². The former is the pitfall of a mentality desperate to believe in its superiority in blind defiance of traditional doctrines and natural evidence of the laws of degeneration. The latter is the pitfall of a mentality seeking desperately to flee the burden of its own time. Both have this in common: they are unwilling to see their own position in the context of a cycle of humanity. They either wish to disown what came before or avoid what has come.

Mr Larking's article does not seek to shirk a sense of responsibility; however, his emphasis on the moral and spiritual superiority of the ancient Americans leaves it prone to being read as the type of sentimental romanticism Perry describes. When Mr Larking writes that Native Americans 'were aware that the earth, their Mother, sustained them and that they should not abuse her' (p.138), that they 'did not take the fertility of the earth for granted' (p.138) and, 'The ancient peoples of the Americas had no need to repair their world as they never destroyed it' (p.140), it is only too easy to see the Native Americans as some kind of "eco-warriors" or eco-guardians," to uses crass modernisms.

Romantic stereotypes muddy our understanding of the complexities of the traditional mentality. By way of an example of this problem, Michael Steltenkamp, in the preface to his biography of Black Elk, *Black Elk Holy Man of the Oglala*, recalls an incident while driving with a friend from a traditional Lakota background.³ During the ride they shared a can of soda. When the can was emptied the friend asked Steltenkamp if he would mind if he threw it out the window? The question took Steltenkamp by surprise. Here was a young man who reminded him of the pre-reservation period, when the Plains were free of twentieth-century pollution. Taking advantage of the moment, Steltenkamp asked his

² Perry, 'The Forbidden Door': *Sophia Vol.7, No.2*, 2001, p.155.

³ Steltenkamp, *Black Elk, Holy Man of the Oglala*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1993, p.xi.

friend, 'Did you ever see the television commercial that showed an Indian man in buckskin paddling down a river? When he landed, someone threw trash at his feet, and the Indian man was pictured with a tear on his cheek?' His friend was pensive for a few moments before he replied, 'Yeah, what's *he* crying about?' Steltenkamp tells this story to highlight the "legacy of stereotypes" we have inherited concerning the "native Indian."

Of course this is a single incident, and Steltenkamp's friend, for all his "pre-reservation" appearance may have been infected, so to speak, by a modern blindness to pollution. On the other hand, one might explain this by noting that the refuse of the ancient Indians was essentially biodegradable, and thus the Indian might well dispose of it by such a "thoughtless" manner as throwing it out a car window, as the case might be. Thus the Indian does not necessarily have to be "ecologically aware."⁴ At the same time this does not necessarily mean that the Indian did not care for the earth, his "Mother." That which comes from the earth returns to the earth, dust to dust; this is not an abuse, rather it is an example of ancient man's unconscious relationship in the scheme of nature.

The issue, in this scenario, is not one of "eco-awareness" insomuch as it is an issue of the consequences of the industrial revolution; that is, it is not the act of throwing the can out the car window which is at fault, rather it is the existence of the can (and for that matter, the car!).⁵ This, at least, is a possibility. It is certainly not my intention of presenting a definitive explanation of the American Indian mentality here; rather, let me stress again that these comments are intended to highlight the complexities of this issue, in the hope that someone better qualified than myself might treat this in more detail.

A popular element of the critique of modernity focuses on the flagrant pretensions and abuses of our technocratic age, dominant among which is the "rape" of the environment.

⁴ This is our phrase and not Mr Larking's.

⁵ Philip Sherrard remarks: 'If we have fabricated a society whose forms now dehumanize us, this is because prior to such a fabrication on the external plane we have already given assent to the thought-forms which deny and cripple the growth of our humanity. Correspondingly, if we are to remake our society in the image of an integrated humanity, we must first be clear in our minds what it means to be human' (*Modern Science and the Dehumanization of Man* in Fernando (ed.), *The Unanimous Tradition*, Colombo: The Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 1991.p.172).

These pretensions and abuses are, in the end, accidents of what fundamentally signifies a modern age, namely, the loss of the sense of the sacred, as Mr Larking rightly notes. Nevertheless, the popular mind sees mainly what is most immediate, and nothing evokes fear and guilt like the threat of losing the habitat that sustains us. It is here that we are most prone to romanticizing the past with visions of ancient or traditional man as some sort of "eco-guardian." This in itself is part of the problem, for the idea of needing to "defend" the environment presupposes the very abuses that precisely did not exist as yet for ancient man. Similarly, the vision of ancient man as "ecologically aware," and as such avoiding abuses out of an understanding of where they would inevitably lead, risks misinterpreting the traditional mentality.

The modern mentality is criticised for being one of disposable consumerism. While I do not wish to challenge this criticism, it is, nevertheless, important to understand the ideas associated with this more fully. The disposable culture is not a purely modern phenomena, given that many ancient peoples, particularly nomadic peoples, maintained lifestyles that allowed them to use and dispose of natural resources as they found them. Of course, when comparing ancient peoples with moderns, there are vital differences in terms of the nature and essentiality of the "resources." Still, what is at issue here is the idea of the "disposable" mentality, for what is first and foremost damaging to humankind is the psychological and spiritual degradation that leads to their destruction of the environment. Moreover, one might be tempted to see elements of the "disposable" mentality in the spiritual practices of asceticism and renunciation. However, with the modern disposable culture it is more the case that what we are witnessing is a kind of inversion, proper to our period of cyclic decline, as outlined by René Guénon.⁶

The romantic stereotype of ancient peoples is typified by the myth of "Rousseau's noble savage."⁷ It is typical of the most sentimental romanticism to deny the savagery of the ancient world. However, from a "traditionalist" point of view, this is, again, to miss

⁶ See Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity & The Signs of the Times*, New York: Sophia Perennis, 1995, Chs.30, 38 & 39.

⁷ Ter Ellingson offers a examination of Rousseau's noble savage, 'anthropology's oldest and most successful hoax' in his *The Myth of the Noble Savage*, California: University of California Press, 2001.

the point. As Philip Sherrard remarks of the medieval world: 'The medieval world also of course had its injustices and cruelties, its deprivations and ugliness, its suffering and sickness. It is not a question of idealizing this world, still less of proposing a return to it. It is one simply of indicating its overriding spiritual orientation and pursuits.'⁸

A further difficulty in identifying the traditional mentality arises with the confusion between an ancient and traditional society proper and an ancient society that has declined to the point of superstition, so that what was once sacred and symbolic becomes profane and "magical," to use this term in the sense that it pertains solely to the psychic domain. As Frithjof Schuon says, 'When one is speaking of ancient traditional peoples it is important not to confuse healthy and integral civilizations with the great paganisms—for the term is justified here—of the Mediterranean and the Near East, of whom Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar have become the classic incarnations and conventional images.'⁹ Mr Larking's comments on cannibalism (p.138) might be best examined in light of this distinction.

When trying to appreciate the relationship of a people with the environment, in terms of the sacred revelation it offers them, one must recognise their understanding of the position they inhabit in the relevant cycle of existence. This is to say, with Ananda Coomaraswamy, that that 'the Kali Yuga is a necessary phase of the whole cycle'; one cannot blame someone for inhabiting their period. Coomaraswamy:

..the Kali Yuga is a necessary phase of the whole cycle, and I should no more think it could be avoided than I could ask the silly question, "Why did God allow evil in the world?" ... On the other hand, I feel under no obligation to acquiesce in or to praise what I judge to be evil, or an evil time. Whatever the conditions, the individual has to work out his own salvation; ... I see the worst, but I need not be part of it, however much I must be in it; I will only be apart of the better future you think of, and of which there are some signs, as there must be even now if it is ever to become.¹⁰

⁸ Sherrard, *Modern Science and the Dehumanization of Man*, p.170.

⁹ Schuon, *Light on the Ancient World*, London: Perennial Books, 1965, p.13.

¹⁰ Coomaraswamy, *Selected Letters of Ananda Coomaraswamy*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988, p.32.

To put this another way: is it better to live in an ecologically sound time with a diminishing memory of the sacred, or, in the “abysmal mess” of our current world, where this very mess serves as a “sign of the times”? Obviously such a blunt question avoids the nuances of the issue; one would undoubtedly prefer the ideal: to live in harmony with Mother Nature recognised as Theophany. Still, the mess which we have created on earth is surely an outward sign, for those who can read it, of our spiritual decline; as such this mess is, in a sense, sacredly ordained. At the same time, the recognition of the environmental dilemma as a “sign” or symptom—and therefore contingently benefic—does not make it any less of an ill. As Guénon remarks: ‘let it be said at once, that explanation must on no account be taken for a justification. An inevitable ill is none the less an ill, and even if out of evil good is to come, this does not alter the character of evil itself: moreover, we have only used the words “good” and “evil” in this context for the sake of being better understood and without any specifically moral intention.’¹¹

Mr Richtscheid’s, *Imaginal Ecology* (SW17), goes some way to summing up the problem: ‘While the ecological movement seeks to preserve the beauty, diversity, and wonder of nature and the material world, one may be left to consider whether this endeavour might not prove more fruitful if it also regularly took into account that which transcends it’ (p.143).

An important point arises with Mr Larking’s remark: ‘Such traditions as Christianity must be revitalised by the living spirit of these ancient ways’ (p.140). I agree with Mr Larking that the expressions of truths found in ancient traditions can help reawaken our recognition of truths that may have become “dormant” in one’s own religion. But these truths are “dormant” only inasmuch as we do not recognise them. As such, it is us who need revitalising, and not “such traditions as Christianity.” Mr Larking’s language, while not his intention, risks suggesting that Christianity, and as such any of the divinely ordained religions, could be damaged by man; that it might lose its essential efficaciousness and thus need “outside” repair; that a God-given religion might become “dead” and thus need to be grafted, by human ingenuity, to the “living spirit of these

¹¹ Guénon, *Crisis of the Modern World*, London: Luzac and Co. Ltd., 1975, pp.13-14.

ancient ways.” There are several errors here. The first is to think that man might have the power to destroy what God has given. Undoubtedly there are many religious deviations, fundamentalism being a prime example in our age, but these precisely destroy man and not the essence of the religion; the Crusades did not destroy the Grace of Christianity, just as the abuses currently committed in the name of Islam do not, in light of truth, have any effect on the Glorious Message of the Qur’an. A second error would be that of syncretism; the idea that the “dead” Christianity might be brought back to life by the “living spirit” of ancient traditions, creating something “new.” But the most basic error here would be to suppose that it was *necessary* for Christianity’s revitalisation to come from without, rather than recognising that each religion contains within its world all spiritual possibilities.

Finally, one must realise that “traditions such as Christianity” were given by God precisely as needed. One recalls that Black Elk, the famous Lakota holy man, not only converted to Christianity, but became a catechist and missionary. Raymond DeMallie recalls the following interesting account, which I offer as a concluding thought: ‘Black Elk told Neihardt very little about his later life...as a missionary. ...Neihardt was curious about why Black Elk had put aside his old religion. ... Black Elk merely replied, “My children had to live in this world.”’¹²

¹² DeMallie, ‘Pine Ridge Economy: Cultural and Historical Perspectives’ in *American Indian Economic Development*, The Hague: Mouton, 1978, p.47, cited in Steltenkamp, *Black Elk, Holy Man of the Oglala*, 1993, p.19.