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Reviews

Sacred Words: A Study of Navajo Religion and Prayer. By Sam D. Gill. Contributions in Intercultural and Comparative Studies, No. 4. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981. 257 pp. cloth. \$29.95

Sacred Words reflects Gill's dissatisfaction with the standard approaches to "primitive" religion. He notes that many scholars believe that "non-literate peoples are not fitting subjects for the study of religion." As a consequence, the amount of research in this area remains negligible. *Sacred Words*, thus, must be understood as Gill's attempt to remedy this problem, and he proceeds via a study of Navajo prayer and religion.

Gill argues that "primitive" religions must be viewed as unified systems of thought, systems which provide meaning. They are both true and sophisticated in the terms in which they are practiced by believers. More specifically, Gill attempts to correct Reichard's view (*Navajo Religion: A Study of Symbolism*) linking magic and religion—one of the standard approaches. He seeks to organize, classify, and interpret Navajo prayers within their religious context. As he puts it: "What can Navajo religion reveal to us about the nature of religion and hence the nature of humankind? What is the basis for truth in Navajo religion? How does the Navajo religion truly accomplish for Navajos what they say it does and what does that tell us about religion?"

Understanding prayer to be a complex of ritual acts whose "performances engage and are informed by elements of mythology and the culture contexts in which they are performed," Gill hypothesizes that describing the structuring principles operative within Navajo prayers will reveal the premises and categories of Navajo religious processes. He isolates twenty distinct constituents of Navajo prayers by analyzing three hundred prayer texts of some fifteen thousand lines. Upon this basis, Gill identifies eight classes of prayers. He then analyzes these classes within the context of Navajo mythology, religion, and ritual practices. Among other things, he discovers a strong correlation between his structural classification and that of Navajo ceremonies. The bulk of the work is devoted to penetrating this relationship so as to reach an understanding of Navajo religion.

A very ambitious work, *Sacred Words* not only attempts to correct the confusion of religion and magic in Reichard's seminal study, but also to discern and unlock the depths of Navajo myth, religion, and ritual. Such a profound theoretical undertaking cannot, by its very nature, be accomplished adequately in one volume. Though Gill's argument regarding the structure of Navajo prayer and the linkage between prayer and ceremonial context is persuasive, his general theoretical argument about the nature of religion, critical as this argument is, demands a more detailed exposition. Gill quite rightly perceives that many, if not most, studies of "primitive" religion are in reality ethnocentric—even in sciences that claim to be free of the ideologies of their own culture. Upon this basis, he persuasively and compactly argues for a new, non-ethnocentric understanding of Navajo religion. Yet, unlike the Athapascan "culture heroes," he has not completely destroyed the monster; his powers of insight need to be more directly trained on the beast. When this is accomplished, one could better judge the power of his general theoretical arguments. Though flawed by attempting too much, Gill has produced a work that must stand along with that of Reichard, and that will hopefully correct the ethnocentrism present in many studies of American Indian religions.

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Native North American Spirituality of the Eastern Woodlands: Sacred Myths, Dreams, Visions, Speeches, Healing Formulas, Rituals and Ceremonials. Edited by Elizabeth Tooker. Preface by William C. Sturtevant. New York: Paulist Press, 1979. 302 pp. + Index. \$7.95 paper.

A persistent problem that plagues the teaching and general study of Native Americans, their cultures and religions is the gap that exists between the existence of excellent records and their availability to students and general readers. Elizabeth Tooker's *Native North American Spirituality of the Eastern Woodlands* bridges this gap for one area in North America.