

Contents

An Introduction to World Religions	9
Teaching Strategies	
1. Studying the World's Religions	27
2. Primal Religious Traditions	33
2-A What Harm Is in Our Sun Dance?	
3. Hinduism	48
3-A Tell Me More About This Self	
3-B Teacher Evaluation: The Game of <i>Samsara</i>	
3-C Peer Evaluation: The Game of <i>Samsara</i>	
3-D The Fruits of Action	
3-E The Master and the Untouchable	
3-F <i>Karma Marga</i> : "The Path of Works"	
3-G "The Dance of Love"	
4. Buddhism	69
4-A The First Sermon at Deer Park	
4-B The Lion, the Elephant, and the Merchants' Cries	
4-C Right Meditation	
4-D Right Speech	
4-E The Fasting Siddhartha	
4-F Objects Used in Tibetan Rituals	
4-G Monks	
4-H Kuan-Yin	
5. Jainism	95
5-A The Biographies of the <i>Tirthankaras</i>	
6. Sikhism	105
6-A The Ten Gurus of Sikhism	
6-B The Sikh Khalsa	
7. Confucianism	115
7-A Confucius Says	
7-B Chinese Calligraphy	

8. Taoism	128
8-A Who Is the Sage?	
9. Zen Buddhism	137
9-A The Riddler	
9-B <i>Koans</i> : Food for Thought Intuition	
9-C "The Sound of One Hand"	
9-D The Haiku of Basho	
10. Shinto	149
10-A "The Canticle of Brother Sun"	
11. Ancestors of the West	157
11-A A Zoroastrian Symbol	
11-B Greek and Roman Gods Today	
12. Judaism	168
12-A Rings of Interpretation	
12-B Wisdom from a Hasidic Master	
12-C Miriam's Shabbat	
13. Christianity	186
13-A Images of Jesus	
13-B "In the Beginning Was the Word"	
14. Islam	201
14-A The Story of Noah	
14-B The Ninety-nine Names of God	
14-C Wisdom from the Sufi Masters	
15. Religion in the Modern World	216
15-A An Interreligious Interview	
15-B Teacher Evaluation: An Interreligious Interview	

Appendices

1. Sample Test Questions	235
2. Audiovisual Recommendations	286
3. For Further Reading	294
4. The Comparative Study of Religions	305
5. Worldviews: Religions and Their Relatives	320
Acknowledgments	330

The second issue from chapter 1, dealt with briefly there, involves the perspective this course takes on the world's religions. In a word, mercifully left

CHAPTER 2

Primal Religious Traditions

Major Concepts

- A. **Religion of the Australian Aborigines.** All religions are rooted in the primal traditions of early peoples. The foundation of Australian Aboriginal religion is the concept of the Dreaming, when supernatural beings called Ancestors roamed the earth, shaping the landscape and creating various forms of life, including the first humans. The spiritual essence of the Ancestors remains in the various symbols they left behind and also within individuals. Totemism is common to many primal traditions, including the religion of the Australian Aborigines. Aboriginal religion is a process of re-creating the mythic past of the Dreaming in order to tap into its sacred power, primarily through rituals re-enacting myths. Aboriginal society is carefully structured on a foundation of taboos. Initiation rituals bring about the symbolic death of childhood to pave the way for spiritual rebirth.
- B. **An African Tradition.** The Yoruba religion of Africa tries to maintain a balance between the human beings of earth and the gods and ancestors of heaven, while guarding against evil sorcerers and witches. The Yoruba believe that their supreme god, Olorun, is the original source of power in the universe, but the lesser gods—the *orishas*—are most significant in Yoruba religious life. Both the *orishas* and the ancestors (deceased humans with supernatural status) possess sacred power that can help or harm the living, and are worshiped through rituals at shrines. Esu, a trickster figure who is both good and evil, mediates between heaven and earth and is universally worshiped among the Yoruba. Trickster figures are common to many primal traditions. A number of Yoruba ritual specialists facilitate communication with a particular deity or ancestor. The Yoruba consider divination, through which one's future can be learned, essential for determining how to proceed in life.
- C. **Religion of the North American Plains Indians.** The religion of the Plains is somewhat representative of Native American religion in general. The members of one large Plains tribe, the Lakota, call the supreme reality Wakan Tanka, whose name refers to sixteen separate deities. A trickster figure, Inkotomi, mediates between the supernatural and human worlds. Inkotomi taught the first humans their ways. The Lakota believe that four souls depart from a person at death, some of which may be reborn in new bodies. The vision quest is common to many primal traditions, and helps people purify themselves and access spiritual power. Another ritual common

to all Plains tribes is the Sun Dance. The tribal members prepare for this ceremony by constructing a lodge around a tree—the *axis mundi*—which is the link between the earth and the heavens and represents the supreme being. The dancers tear their flesh as a sacrifice to the supreme being.

- D. **A Mesoamerican Religion.** Aztec religion emphasizes the interrelationship between myth and ritual. The Aztecs built their civilization on the foundation of cultures that had come before them. They believed that the Toltec god Quetzalcoatl had presided over an age of prosperity and cultural brilliance, which his earthly devotee, Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, had ruled as priest-king. The Toltecs provided the Aztecs with a mythic pattern for civilization. Aztecs identified the city of Teotihuacan as the origin of the cosmos. Aztec cosmology featured a close correspondence between time and space, and the Aztecs understood the universe to be built around four cardinal directions plus an *axis mundi*. The Aztecs also regarded the human being as an *axis mundi*, with two divine forces—one in the head and one in the heart—nurturing basic needs. Human sacrifice and mastery of language were two ways of fulfilling religious needs. Though the Aztec empire ended with the fall of Tenochtitlan to the Spanish army, aspects of Aztec culture survive today. In most primal religions, including those of Mesoamerica, the boundaries between the supernatural and the human worlds are easily crossed. The sacred and the secular are intertwined. Primal religions are constantly changing to adapt to modern life while retaining their ancient foundations.

Pages
23–26

Concept A: Religion of the Australian Aborigines



Review Questions: Religion of the Australian Aborigines

Question 1. Why are some forms of religion called primal? Describe some of the characteristics of primal religions.

Answer. Primal religions tend to come before other religious traditions. They are not based on scriptures or written teachings; they pass down myths and stories orally from generation to generation; they tend to be the religions of tribal peoples who dwell in villages, as opposed to large cities, although there are some exceptions; and they are diverse.

Question 2. What elements of the natural and human world did the Ancestors create or establish in the period of the Dreaming?

Answer. The Ancestors gave shape to the landscape and created the various forms of life, including the first human beings. They specified the territory each human tribe was to occupy and determined each tribe's languages, social rules, and customs. They also left behind symbols of their presence in the form of natural landmarks, rock paintings, and so on.

Question 3. What survives in the symbols left behind by the Ancestors?

Answer. The spiritual essence of the Ancestors. The sites where the symbols are found are thought to be charged with sacred power.

Question 4. Explain the terms *totem* and *taboo*.

Answer. The term *totem* refers to the natural form in which the Ancestor appears in the Dreaming. A totem may be an animal or a rock formation or other feature of the landscape. The term *taboo* refers to the system of social ordering that dictates that certain things and activities, owing to their sacred nature, are set aside for specific members of the group and are forbidden to others.

Question 5. Why is ritual essential if Aboriginal life is to have meaning?

Answer. It is only through ritual that the sacred power of the Dreaming can be accessed and experienced.

Question 6. How did Aboriginal rituals originate?

Answer. Aboriginals believe that the rituals were taught to the first humans by the Ancestors in the Dreaming.

Question 7. What purposes are served by Aboriginal initiation rituals?

Answer. Aboriginal initiation rituals awaken young people to their spiritual identity with their totemic Ancestors, and at the same time refine their social identity within the clan. The rituals prepare the way for the spiritual rebirth that is a necessary step toward adulthood. Also, during the rituals, young people learn the essential truths about their world and how they are to act within it.

Question 8. Identify two acts of Dieri initiation rituals that symbolize death.

Answer. [Any two of the following answers are correct.] Circumcision, knocking out a boy's two lower incisor teeth and burying them in the ground, and inflicting wounds intended to leave scars on a boy's neck and back.



Text Activities: Religion of the Australian Aborigines

Activity A

Empathy—seeing something from another's perspective—helps us gain the insight we need to understand and appreciate the diversity of world religions. Striving to understand the Aboriginal concept of a mythic geography offers a good opportunity for practicing empathy. Think of a favorite outdoor area, such as a place in the wilderness, a beach, a park, or your backyard. Imagine that every notable landmark has great religious significance and that your every move within the area is undertaken as if it were a religious ritual. Now describe the area and your experience of being there.

Activity B

Every society has rituals that re-enact origins, just as the Aborigines do. Some contemporary rituals are religious in nature, whereas others involve patriotism and other aspects of society. List as many such rituals as you can, briefly explaining how each is a re-enactment of an original event.

Activity C

To what extent does your society apply restrictions similar to those of the Aboriginal concept of taboo?

Activity D

What experiences have served as rituals of initiation for you, marking your passage from childhood to adulthood?



Additional Activities:

Religion of the Australian Aborigines

Primary Source Reading

See *Primary Source Readings in World Religions* (Saint Mary's Press, 2009) for the selection titled "The Birth of the Butterflies," as well as the accompanying leader's guide for suggestions about how to use this reading in your study of Australian aborigines.

Choosing a Totem

1. Engage the students in a discussion of totems and totemism. Cover the following points in your own words:

- Think of ways that people in families or in society are seen as representatives of a predecessor. For example, a girl might be referred to as the spitting image of her great-grandmother, an environmentalist might be called a contemporary Thoreau, and a civil rights activist could be identified as a modern Martin Luther King Jr.
- Think of ways that your family members identify with an earlier generation. For instance, some families pass a wedding ring, Christmas ornaments, or recipes from one generation to the next, and American Protestants began a tradition of passing on Bibles with pages for recording births, deaths, and marriages.
- Maintaining such connections, which we often take for granted, has much in common with the ideas of totems and totemism (though it is by no means identical with those concepts).

2. Direct the students to complete the following tasks in class:

- Choose a relative or friend you know well, preferably someone at least ten years older than you. Spend some time thinking about that person and then list his or her qualities—for example, hot tempered, patient, wise, and silly. Next, think of an animal, plant, inanimate object, or feature of the landscape that seems to strongly represent the character of the person you chose. This will be that person's "totem." Write a detailed description of this totem next to your list of the person's qualities, taking care not to use any of the words from that list. In your description take into consideration the totem's behavior and surroundings—anything about it that gives it a clear identity—as well as its outward appearance.

3. Instruct the students to choose a partner and to decide which person in the pair will go first. Then tell the first partner to read her or his description of the totem aloud to the second partner. Explain that after listening to the totem description, the second partner is to list the qualities she or he believes might be part of the character of the person for whom such a totem was chosen. Ask the partners to compare their lists of qualities and discuss the similarities and differences noted. Then tell them to repeat the task with the second partner's totem description.

4. Emphasize that this exercise merely approximates the concept of totemism, but it may also make it clear that such a concept is not so far removed from the way we think about people, and their characteristics, in our everyday life.

Understanding Taboo

At first glance the students may consider the concept of taboo to be controlling or elitist. By using analogies of childhood, social, and religious restrictions the students have experienced, the following discussion can help them understand taboo as being protective and beneficial rather than restrictive and detrimental.

1. Ask the students to recall restrictions from their early childhood, such as rules about the use of scissors or sharp knives, limits on the hours spent viewing television, and orders that they not leave the backyard. Raise questions like the following ones:

- If you were a young child, how might you describe these restrictions? Would these regulations seem reasonable?
- From the perspective of your current age, how do you describe these restrictions?
- If you were a parent, would you place similar restrictions on your young children?

2. Broaden the discussion by encouraging the students to identify restrictions in social and religious contexts. Examples could range from regulations specifying roles that only an ordained clergy member can perform in some worship rituals, to rules identifying who can enter the stage door after a concert or play. Invite the students to evaluate these other restrictions using the insights gained from the discussion of childhood restrictions. Focus on two or three restrictions that have been experienced by many of the students, and pose questions like the ones that follow:

- How do you describe these restrictions? [Possible answers: elitist, protective, and respectful]
- Who, if anyone, directly benefits from these restrictions?
- If one benefits, should all?
- Do those who do not directly benefit from the restrictions receive any benefit at all? [For example, restrictions on who can enter the stage door after a rock concert benefit the audience indirectly, because they help prevent the stars from being mobbed and injured, thus enabling them to entertain fans at future performances. Also for example, though a clergy member may be the only one who can perform a particular act in worship, the entire worshiping community benefits directly by observing and responding to that act.]

Pages
26–28

Concept B: An African Tradition



Review Questions: An African Tradition

Question 9. In what part of Africa do the Yoruba live?

Answer. The western regions of central Africa—Nigeria, Benin, and Togo.

Question 10. Why has the city of Ife always been the center of Yoruba religion?

Answer. The Yoruba believe it was there that the god Orishanlá first began to create the world.

Question 11. Briefly describe the Yoruba understanding of the cosmos.

Answer. The Yoruba regard the cosmos as being divided into two separate worlds: heaven (the invisible home of the gods and the ancestors) and earth (the visible home of human beings, who are descended from the gods). Earth is also populated by a perverted form of humans, witches and sorcerers, who can cause disastrous harm if not controlled.

Question 12. Who is Olorun, and what is his role in Yoruba religion?

Answer. He is the supreme god of the Yoruba, the primary, original source of power in the universe, to whom all other life-forms ultimately owe their existence. He is distant and not involved in human affairs, so he is hardly worshiped at all, except in prayer.

Question 13. What are the *orishas*? Explain their significance in the religious life of the Yoruba.

Answer. The *orishas* are lesser deities who are sources of special power that can help or harm humans, depending on how well the rituals designed to appease them are carried out.

Question 14. Name and briefly describe at least two of the *orishas*.

Answer. [Any two of the following answers are correct.] Orishanlá is the supreme deity who most Yoruba believe created earth. Ogún, the god of iron and war, was the first king of Ife. He occupies the borderline between the ancestors and the rest of the *orishas*. Esu, who is both good and evil, mediates between heaven and earth.

Question 15. What is a trickster figure?

Answer. A sort of mischievous supernatural being.

Question 16. Describe the two types of Yoruba ancestors.

Answer. (1) Family ancestors, who gained their supernatural status through having earned a good reputation and having lived to an old age, and (2) office ancestors, who were once important human figures known throughout Yoruba society.

Question 17. Describe the role of Yoruba ritual practitioners.

Answer. They mediate between the gods and ancestors in heaven and human beings on earth.

Question 18. What is divination, and why do the Yoruba regard it as essential?

Answer. Divination is learning or interpreting someone's future. It is considered essential for one to determine how to proceed with life.



Text Activity: An African Tradition

Activity E

Deceased ancestors are worshiped in many religious traditions. Are they worshiped in any way in your society? Explain your answer.



Additional Activity: An African Tradition

Primary Source Reading

See *Primary Source Readings in World Religions* (Saint Mary's Press, 2009) for the selection titled "Creation Myth," as well as the accompanying leader's guide for suggestions about how to use this reading in your study of the Yoruba.

The Art of Divination

1. Divination is an important aspect of Yoruba religion as well as of many other primal traditions. Explain that although divination takes different forms in different cultures, in most cases it is far removed from what we usually refer to as fortune-telling.

Ask the students what comes to mind when they think of fortune-telling. They are likely to respond with some negative impressions—it is inaccurate, performed by charlatans, not to be taken seriously. Then point out what the text says about Yoruba divination: "The procedure involves an intricate system of hundreds of wisdom stories, which the diviner knows by memory. The diviner determines which of those stories are relevant for an individual, and from those stories interprets the individual's future" (p. 28).

2. Give the students the following directions for an essay to be written as homework:

- Take some time to think about stories you have heard or read recently or as long ago as early childhood. Consider all kinds of stories—such as fiction, nonfiction, news, and family memories. Pick two or three accounts that you consider particularly relevant to you as an individual, and from which you might interpret something about your future. Your interpretation should include events you think might occur, the type of person you would like to become, the kind of life you would like to lead, and so on.

In writing, briefly summarize the stories you have chosen. Then write a paragraph about each story, explaining why you believe it is relevant to you. Finally, write another paragraph about each story, describing how it relates to your future.

3. Evaluate the completed assignments, then return them to the students and engage the young people in a brief discussion of questions like these:

- Is the way you predicted your future the same as the way you might expect a typical fortune-teller to do so? In what respects are the two methods of prediction the same or different?
- What type of prediction would you be more likely to trust: that of a typical fortune-teller or that of a person who interprets life stories?

Question 18. In what part of Africa do the Yoruba live?

Answer. The western regions of central Africa—Nigeria, Benin, and Togo—mostly in cities.

Pages
28–
32

Concept C: Religion of the North American Plains Indians

2



Review Questions: Religion of the North American Plains Indians

Question 19. According to the interpretation of the latest evidence, when and how do scholars think human beings first came to America?

Answer. Scholars believe humans first came to North America some twenty

Question 20. Why is the religion of the Plains Indians of vital interest among native peoples throughout North America?

Answer. Scholars believe humans first came to North America some twenty

Question 21. What is Wakan Tanka?

Answer. Scholars believe humans first came to North America some twenty

Question 22. Who is Inktemi?

Answer. Scholars believe humans first came to North America some twenty

Question 23. Briefly describe Lakota beliefs regarding death and the afterlife.

Answer. Scholars believe humans first came to North America some twenty

Question 24. What do individuals try to gain access to by going on a vision quest?

Answer. Scholars believe humans first came to North America some twenty

Question 25. Briefly describe the structure and function of the sweat lodge.

Answer. The structure of the lodge, a sapling hut covered with animal

Question 26. Describe a typical vision experienced by a person who undertakes a vision quest.

Answer. The structure of the lodge, a sapling hut covered with animal

Question 27. Among the Blackfeet tribe, who presides over the Sun Dance?

Answer. The structure of the lodge, a sapling hut covered with animal

Question 28. What is the *axis mundi* in general? What is the *axis mundi* in the Sun Dance?

Answer. The structure of the lodge, a sapling hut covered with animal

Question 29. Why do some participants in the Sun Dance skewer their chests and dance until their flesh tears?

Answer. The structure of the lodge, a sapling hut covered with animal



Text Activities:

Religion of the North American Plains Indians

Activity F

Imagine yourself living in the open wilderness of the North American Plains. Why, do you suppose, did the Lakota understand their supreme reality as being closely related to the four compass directions?

Activity G

The Indians of the Northern Plains traditionally lived off the land, depending on hunting and fishing to feed themselves. What elements of the vision quest and Sun Dance rituals are related to that lifestyle?



Additional Activities:

Religion of the North American Plains Indians

Primary Source Reading

See *Primary Source Readings in World Religions* (Saint Mary's Press, 2009) for the selection titled "On the Ghost Dance," as well as the accompanying leader's guide for suggestions about how to use this reading in your study of the Lakota.

The Vision Quest

1. Engage the students in a discussion of the Lakota vision quest. Be sure they have read, from the student text, the section on the vision quest as well as Lame Deer's account of his own vision. Focus the discussion on this part of the student text's description:

A vision comes to the quester eventually, usually near the end of the stay. It arrives in the form of an animal or some other object or force of nature. A message is often communicated along with the vision. When the individual returns to camp, the vision and the message are interpreted by the medicine man. (Pp. 31–32)

2. When you feel that the students have a basic understanding of the vision quest, instruct them as follows:

- In this activity we will attempt to experience an event analogous to the vision quest. Because we can't spend days fasting on a mountaintop, we need to create another situation in which we receive a vision.
- Choose an animal or some other object or force of nature. This will become the vision of one of your classmates, so select something you know well enough to describe thoroughly. Provide a written description that contains a setting for the arrival of the vision, actions and movements of the vision, and the way the vision communicates.

3. When the students have finished writing, collect all the vision descriptions and distribute them randomly. If a student receives his or her own description, he or she should keep it and continue the activity with it. Next, give the class the following instructions:

- You are approaching a turning point in your life. It won't be long before you are no longer a high school student, but have moved on to higher education or the working world. In view of this turning point, what message might the vision you have received communicate to you? In answering this question, be sure to consider the vision's meaning as a symbol. Think about what sort of analogy it might provide about your future. Write a page-long essay interpreting your vision.

4. You can end the activity here and instruct the students to hand in their essays to be evaluated. Or you might extend the activity by inviting the students to choose partners. It may be best if the partners know each other fairly well, but that is not absolutely necessary.

Tell the partners to sit together and read to each other the vision descriptions they received, imagining that the other person's description is a second vision that is coming to them during a vision quest. Then direct the students to verbally interpret their second vision in the same light that they interpreted their first—as a message about the turning point that is approaching in their life. Next, instruct the pairs to read each other's interpretive essays and to discuss the differences and similarities between them. Finally, invite the whole class to discuss the experience, using questions such as these:

- In what ways was the activity helpful? not helpful?
- Did you learn anything new about your own desires and expectations for the future?
- Although this experience was merely an analogy for the actual experience of a vision quest, do you now have a stronger understanding of the goal of the quest? Describe your understanding.

Variation. In step 2, invite the students to draw the setting and the vision, instead of writing about them.

Outlawing the Sun Dance



Handout 2-A

The student text points out that the Lakota Sun Dance was outlawed for some time by the government in the United States. It was suppressed in Canada as well. Handout 2-A, "What Harm Is in Our Sun Dance?" contains the thoughts of an anonymous Blackfoot Indian in Canada, early in the twentieth century, regarding the restrictions against the Sun Dance. Distribute the handout and instruct the students to read it. Base a discussion or writing assignment on questions such as these:

- Do you believe that it was right for the U.S. and Canadian governments to outlaw the Sun Dance? Why or why not?
- Under what circumstances do you think a government might be justified in restricting a religious practice?
- How might you react if your government considered an aspect of your religion illegal?

Pages
32–36

Concept D: A Mesoamerican Religion



Review Questions: A Mesoamerican Religion

Question 30. In what two ways does the Aztec tradition defy the description of a primal religious tradition? In what ways is the Aztec tradition like other primal religious traditions?

Answer.

Question 31. What geographical area did Mesoamerica include?

Answer.

Question 32. According to Aztec cosmology, what god created and ordered the world? What ancient city is the origin of the cosmos?

Answer.

Question 33. Who was Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl? What was his significance for the Aztecs?

Answer.

Question 34. What did the Aztecs call their present age? What did they anticipate its fate to be?

Answer.

Question 35. How did the Aztecs understand the spatial world?

Answer. They understood the world as having four quadrants extending outward from the center of the universe (the *axis mundi*), which connected the earthly realm to the many-layered heavenly realm above and the many-layered underworld below.

Question 36. Why did the Aztecs regard each human being as a sort of *axis mundi*?

Answer. They understood the world as having four quadrants extending outward from the center of the universe (the *axis mundi*), which connected the earthly realm to the many-layered heavenly realm above and the many-layered underworld below.

Question 37. What were the special religious capabilities of the Aztec knowers of things?

Answer.

Question 38. What historical coincidence contributed to the fall of Tenochtitlan to the Spaniards?

Answer. They understood the world as having four quadrants extending outward from the center of the universe (the *axis mundi*), which connected the earthly realm to the many-layered heavenly realm above and the many-layered underworld below.

Question 39. How does the popular Day of the Dead show the survival of Aztec religious culture?

Answer.

Question 40. What three themes are shared by the primal religions studied in this chapter?

Answer.



Text Activities: A Mesoamerican Religion

Activity H

The Aztecs looked back to the Toltec tradition as a kind of golden age, providing them with a mythic pattern for the ideal civilization. In what ways do you and your society look to past traditions for cultural ideals?

Activity I

The Aztec cosmology is marked by a deep pessimism regarding the future. How does your society view the future? What can human beings offer to "nourish" the present so as to ensure a sound future?

Activity J

Considering the Aztec ritual of human sacrifice offers a challenging opportunity to see things from another's perspective. Explain how human sacrifice is part of the Aztecs' ordered and sophisticated religious worldview, given their cosmology and understanding of the human condition.

Activity K

In your experience how has the mastery of language helped to convey religious power? How does the significance of speech in the Aztec tradition compare with the significance of speech in another religious tradition with which you are familiar?

Activity L

In general, primal religions understand the boundaries between the human and the supernatural realms to be thin and easily crossed. Drawing from the religious traditions of the Aborigines, the Yoruba, the Indians of the Northern Plains, and the Aztecs, identify as many examples as you can that illustrate this understanding.



Additional Activities: A Mesoamerican Religion

A New Aztec Ritual for the Head and Heart

In this exercise the students design a modern ritual (without human sacrifice) in which they symbolically offer their heads and their hearts for the betterment of the world.

1. Make the following points in your own words:

- The ancient Aztec ritual of human sacrifice demonstrated a belief in a powerful, inextricable connection between people and the universe. In the act of sacrificing their lives to nourish the sun, the Aztecs believed they were helping sustain the sun, ensuring that the current age would progress and life would continue to flourish.
- Today we are increasingly aware of the interdependence between human beings and nature. Unfortunately our modern world often harms nature through pollution, overconsumption of resources, and ever-increasing human population. And despite a growing awareness of the relationship between human beings and nature, individuals, communities, and nations still engage in practices that are harmful, wasteful, or even life destroying. It sometimes seems that modern society would rather sacrifice nature to feed its own desires, than sacrifice its desires for the good of the natural world.

2. Break the class into groups of two or three and tell the groups each to appoint a recorder. Instruct the recorders each to make two columns on a sheet of paper, one titled "Head" and the other titled "Heart." Direct the groups to brainstorm a list of ideas for the head, and attitudes for the heart, that are necessary for humans to enjoy a beneficial and interdependent relationship with the natural world. For example, under the title "Head," they might list, "Developing alternative fuels that preserve resources and reduce

pollution"; under the title "Heart," they might write, "Looking at my own transportation needs as an opportunity to respect the environment (by car-pooling, walking, biking, and so on)."

After a sufficient amount of time, tell the groups to now think of symbols that may evoke those ideas and attitudes, and to write them down.

3. When the groups have had enough time to think of symbols, give them the following directions:

- Using the ideas, attitudes, and symbols you just discussed, design a modern ritual that symbolically offers your heads and your hearts for the betterment of the world. The ritual does not have to be long, but it does have to include the following elements:
 - Appropriate objects and symbols (for example, photographs, illustrations, a globe, objects from nature, incense, candles, and music)
 - Appropriate readings and symbolic movements or gestures (for instance, poems, prayers, and vows to avoid certain actions or to embrace a certain lifestyle)
 - Participation of the assembly (for example, through responses to readings, singing, movement, sharing of thoughts, and bringing in of a symbol)

You may wish to collect the rituals in written form, or schedule class time for each group to enact its ritual and explain the ceremony's meaning.



Día de los Muertos

To expand the students' understanding of Aztec rituals as they have influenced present-day religion in Mexico, you may wish to invite someone from your school's foreign language department or a guest speaker to come to class and discuss the celebration of Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead). To extend the activity, encourage the students to create altars honoring the dead in their families, following the Mexican custom. You can find links to resources about Día de los Muertos at the World Religions course page on the Internet, which can be accessed from the Saint Mary's Press home page, www.smp.org.

What Harm Is in Our Sun Dance?

During the late 1800s, when many Native Americans were initially being placed on reservations, many of their rituals and customs were restricted by law. The Sun Dance was one such ritual, outlawed because Sun Dancers fasted for extended periods and cut their own flesh with sharp skewers. The dance was also thought to be politically dangerous, with the potential of encouraging Native Americans to rebel against the reservation system.

The Sun Dance became legal again in the 1930s. During the time it was outlawed, a Blackfoot Indian from the Canadian Plains offered the following argument in favor of the ritual:

You have been among us for many years, and have attended many of our ceremonials. Have you ever seen a disturbance, or anything harmful, that has been caused by our Sun-dance?

We know that there is nothing injurious to our people in the Sun-dance. On the other hand, we have seen much that is bad at the dances of the white people. It has been our custom, during many years, to assemble once every summer for this festival, in honour of the Sun God. We fast and pray, that we may be able to lead good lives and to act more kindly towards each other. I do not understand why the white men desire to put an end to our religious ceremonials. What harm can they do to our people? If they deprive us of our religion, we will have nothing left, for we know of no other that can take its place. We do not understand the white man's religion. The Black Robes (Catholic Priests) teach us one thing and the Men-with-white-neckties (Protestant Missionaries) teach us another; so we are confused. We believe that the Sun God is all powerful, for every spring he makes the trees to bud and the grass to grow. We see these things with our own eyes, and, therefore, know that all life comes from him. (Walter McClintock, *The Old North Trail, or Life, Legends and Religion of the Blackfeet Indians* [Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, Bison Books, 1968], page 508. Copyright © in the United States. Used with permission of the University of Nebraska Press.)