

Statement on Peyote

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In connection with the current national campaign against narcotics, there has been some propaganda to declare illegal the peyote used by many Indian tribes. We are professional anthropologists who have made extensive studies of Peyotism in various tribes. We have participated in the rites and partaken of the sacramental peyote. We therefore feel it our duty to protest against a campaign which only reveals the ignorance of the propagandists concerned.

Briefly put, the propagandists argue that Peyotists are simply addicted to a narcotic and intoxicant, which they use orgiastically. Peyote is a small, carrot-shaped, spineless cactus which, in the U. S., grows in the Rio Grande Valley. The top of the plant is usually cut off and sun-dried, forming the peyote button. When taken internally, it appears to have remarkable mental and physical effects, although these have not been thoroughly studied.

According to Webster's Dictionary, a narcotic is a drug that "allays sensibility, relieves pain, and produces profound sleep;" an intoxicant "excites or stupefies." According to Merck's Manual, the symptoms of drug addiction are increased tolerance and dependence. On the basis of our experience, we would say that peyote seems to have none of these effects. It does not excite, stupefy, or produce muscular in-coordination; there is no hangover; and the habitual user does not develop any increased tolerance or dependence. As for the immorality that is supposed to accompany its use, since no orgies are known among any Indian tribes of North America, the charge has as much validity as the ancient Roman accusation of a similar nature against the early Christians.

Actually Peyotism is a religion, with a national intertribal organization incorporated under the name of "The Native American Church of the United States." Its modern form, developed about 1870, is Christianity adapted to traditional Indian beliefs and practices. The basic tenets of the Native American Church are given in its articles of incorporation: "The purpose for which this corporation is formed is to foster and promote religious believers in Almighty God and the customs of the several Tribes of Indians throughout the United States in the worship of a Heavenly Father and to promote morality, sobriety, industry, charity, arid right living and cultivate a spirit of self-respect mid brotherly love and union among the members of the several Tribes of Indians throughout the United States with and through the sacramental use of peyote".

The belief is that God put some of his holy Spirit into peyote, which he gave to the Indians. And by eating the sacramental peyote the Indian absorb God's Spirit, in the same way that the white Christian absorbs that Spirit by means of the sacramental bread and wine. Peyote is used by Peyotists in two ways: spiritually and medically.

The traditional practice of many Indian tribes was to go off in isolation to contemplate and

fast until a supernatural vision was achieved. This is now replaced by a collective all-night vigil in which, through prayer, contemplation, and eating peyote, the Peyotist receives a divine revelation. For the Peyotist, this occurs because he has put himself in a receptive spiritual mood and has absorbed enough of God's power from the peyote to make him able to reach God. A scientific interpretation might be that the chemicals in peyote diminish extraneous internal and external sensations, thus permitting the individual to concentrate his attention on his ideas of God and, at the same time, affecting vision and hearing so that these ideas are easily projected into visions. [583]

The all-night rite is highly formalized. One man functions as priest, with the help of three assistants. During the rite they pray for the worshipers at fixed intervals, while the other men and women pray to themselves in low voices. Early in the rite everyone takes four pieces of peyote; later, anyone may take as many more as he or she thinks proper. Most of the time is occupied in having each man, in rotation, sing four religious songs that correspond to hymns sung in white churches.

Peyote is also considered as a catholicon, or cure-all. If a sick person is spiritually clean, the Holy Spirit in the peyote will help him get well.

We can state categorically that these two circumstances-spiritual and medical-are the only ones under which peyote is eaten by members of the Native American Church.

Finally, something should be said of the communion meal eaten toward the end of the all-night rite. It usually consists of water, corn, fruit, meat, and sometimes candy; these symbolize the major foods important to the Indians, and they pray to God to give them adequate amounts. According to the anti-peyote propagandists, the fruit and candy are eaten to get over a "peyote hangover"!

It will be seen from this brief description that the Native American Church of the United States is a legitimate religious organization deserving of the same right to religious freedom as other churches; also, that peyote is used sacramentally in a manner corresponding to the bread and wine of white Christians.