

The Native American Church (NAC), also known as Peyotism and Peyote Religion, is a Native American religion characterized by mixed traditional as well as Protestant beliefs and by sacramental use of the entheogen peyote. The religion originated in the U.S. state of Oklahoma in the late nineteenth century after peyote was introduced to the southern Great Plains from Mexico. Today it is the most widespread indigenous religion among Native Americans in the United States, Canada, and Mexico, with an estimated 250,000 adherents as of the late twentieth century.

The religion probably originated among the Kiowa in Oklahoma about 1890 and reflects the influence of traditional peyote use among Mesoamerican groups such as the Huichol. In 1918 many peyotists were brought together as the Native American Church.

Peyotism, or Peyote Religion, most widespread indigenous religious movement among North American Indians and one of the most influential forms of Pan-Indianism. The term peyote derives from the Nahuatl name *peyotl* for a cactus. The tops of the plants contain mescaline, an alkaloid drug that has hallucinogenic effects. It was used in Mexico in pre-Columbian times to induce supernatural visions and as a medicine.

From the mid-19th century, use of peyote extended north into the Great Plains of the United States, and probably first developed into a distinct religion about 1885 among the Kiowa and Comanche of Oklahoma. After 1891 it spread rapidly as far north as Canada and is now practiced among more than 50 tribes. Statistics are uncertain, but reports suggest nearly a fifth of the Navajo in 1951 practiced the peyote religion (despite strong tribal council opposition) as did one-third of Oklahoma Indians in 1965. The Native American Church claimed some 225,000 adherents in 1977.

The various forms of peyotist beliefs combine Indian and Christian elements in differing degrees. Among the Teton, for example, the Cross Fire group uses the Bible and sermons, which are rejected by the Half Moon followers, who, however, teach a similar Christian morality. In general, peyotist doctrine consists of belief in one supreme God (the

Great Spirit), who deals with men through various spirits, which include the traditional waterbird or thunderbird spirits that carry prayers to God. In many tribes peyote itself is personified as Peyote Spirit, considered to be either God's equivalent for the Indians to his Jesus for the whites, or Jesus himself. In some tribes Jesus is regarded as an Indian culture hero returned, as an intercessor with God, or as a guardian spirit who has turned to the Indians after being killed by the whites. Peyote, eaten in the ritual context, enables the individual to commune with God and the spirits (including those of the departed) in contemplation and vision and so to receive from them spiritual power, guidance, reproof, and healing.

The rite characteristically, but not always, takes place in a tepee around a crescent-shaped, earthen altar mound and a sacred fire. The all-night ceremony usually commences about 8 pm Saturday and is led by a peyote "chief." The services include prayer, singing, sacramental eating of peyote, water rites, and contemplation; they conclude with a communion breakfast on Sunday morning. The way of life is called the Peyote Road and enjoins brotherly love, family care, self-support through steady work, and avoidance of alcohol.

Peyotism has been much persecuted. Although peyote was banned by government agents in 1888 and later by 15 states, Congress, backed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the churches, and some Indian groups, resisted repeated attempts from 1916 to 1937 to have its use prohibited. In self-defense, peyote groups sought incorporation under state laws—first in Oklahoma as the First-born Church of Jesus Christ in 1914, then as the Native American Church in 1918, and by 1960 in some further 11 states. In the 1960s appeals by peyotists in the name of constitutional freedom of religion were supported by anthropologists and others and upheld in several state supreme courts.