



Immersion and Indigenous Theology: Reflections from NAIITS

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A Note from the Editor

Greetings to you all, colleagues, friends, and readers of WCIDJ! I am delighted to take this opportunity to announce a recent partnership initiative between William Carey International University (WCIU) and the North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies (NAIITS) in support of the education of Native North Americans and other indigenous peoples in the area of biblically and theologically framed education and community development. To celebrate this partnership, WCIU and NAIITS co-hosted a Winter Institute, in Feb/March 2014, on Indigenous Theological Reflections: Understanding History, Engaging the Future. At the Institute Dr. Terry LeBlanc, Casey Church, and Bryan Brightcloud led presentations and workshops on both the indigenous theologizing process and expressions. As you may agree with me after viewing some of the videos of the Institute included in this issue, NAIITS leaders, representing their community of believers, have obviously thought and ploughed deep in contextual theology and presented a lot of thought-provoking stories and reflections to us. These seem to reflect the “first fruits,” growing out of the community of believers’ faithful labor in response to the leading of the Spirit of God, in light of the Scripture — “real and edible grain,” in Howard Snyder’s words, and pointing to the future fruitfulness, “and ever-increasing fruitfulness.” The global community of faith needs to hear their story and be enriched. We await to witness the coming fruitfulness of NAIITS as we also seek to learn from one another and build up “the whole body.”

WCIDJ devotes this entire issue to reflections from NAIITS on Immersion and Indigenous Theology. We are honored to have Dr. Terry LeBlanc, founding chair and current director of NAIITS, as our Guest Editor, who will introduce the issue to you. I trust you will enjoy reading the articles and viewing the video presentations. As always, you are welcome to join the dialogue, discussion, and debate through commenting on the articles and blog postings, and sharing insights on your own social networks.

Yalin Xin is Associate Professor of Intercultural Studies at William Carey International University, Research Fellow with the Center for the Study of World Christian Revitalization Movements and Senior Editor for William Carey International Development Journal.

Guest Editorial

TERRY LEBLANC

A few years ago I spoke at a conference on cross-cultural ministry. I had been asked to address the necessity of contextualizing both the message of gospel and its means of communication. During the question and response following the talk, it appeared evident that one attendee was having a difficult time picturing some of what I meant. In a follow-up conversation, it was obvious he could neither grasp what contextualization really was, nor whether it was really necessary. As far as he was concerned, God's word was simply God's word and since it promised not to return void, we simply needed to preach it faithfully!

The person above, you will not be surprised to discover, was a Euro-North American for whom the notion of gospel expressed within culture has become like the adage of water for a fish; she is submerged in it but is neither conscious of the water nor the submersion. In fact, though they point out that others live their lives within it, they are adamant nothing surrounds them. For centuries, as a result of such thinking, faith in Jesus, communicated in very circumscribed ways, has demanded a very particular response. When that response was not forthcoming, the existence of faith was cast in doubt — sometimes the individual believer themselves questioned the validity of their faith.

Over the course of the past thirty plus years, my constant focus of ministry and teaching with Indigenous peoples has been the contextualization of the gospel — in preaching, discipleship, and the construction of community life and worship with those who choose to follow Jesus. All of this was undertaken with an effort that it be rooted in Indigenous culture and context, not some import. As an Indigenous person the issue continues to be of great concern to me since people like the individual I referenced above persist in the belief that an essentialist mono-cultural Christian experience exists.

In this volume, you will find articles that open a window onto some of what this struggle has meant to Indigenous peoples and others who, in support of Indigenous people in North America and

Terry LeBlanc is Mi'kmaq/Acadian in his 42nd year of marriage to Bev. He and Bev have three adult children – twin daughters and one son. He holds a PhD in Intercultural Studies from Asbury Theological Seminary, specializing in Theology, Mission and Anthropology. He is the founding Chair and current Director of NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community.

elsewhere, are seeking to reflect differently on that experience. Damian Costello, for example, revisits the story of Lakota holy man and Catholic convert, Nicholas Black Elk, to ask questions not simply about agency in his own conversion, but his subsequent activity in contextualizing Christian faith and life. All being undertaken, Costello would suggest, as a means of cultural preservation within Christian experience.

Moving forward to the 21st century, we have the combined work of Adrian Jacobs, Terry LeBlanc, and Richard Twiss, engaging contemporary challenges to contextualization. In their article, “Culture, Christian Faith and Error,” not unlike the concerns of Black Elk’s era, Twiss, LeBlanc and Jacobs seek to identify how one expresses genuine faith in Jesus that is simultaneously and authentically expressing the uniqueness of one’s cultural location and identity. The authors provide some working definitions of critical terminology in the Native North American culture and faith debate, and then offer some helpful analysis of cultural appropriation within Christian faith.

This issue also contains the reflections of Cree pastor and scholar, Ray Aldred, on the resurrection of story — the gospel story that is. Expanding our view of the nature and function of story, Aldred asserts that it is the gospel story proper that is the appropriate but also necessary starting point for Indigenous people to enter faith — not, as recent Christian history makes clear, Western propositional statements of truth so commonly shared as if they were the gospel. The gospel story proper is of primacy, should be a first order concern, and should be placed in the hands of indigenous people as such.

Casey Church, Pottawottomi pastor and community leader, reflects on the contextualization of Christian education itself — long the domain of western pedagogical philosophies, methods, and content. When worldview and learning styles that are so obviously different are forced into a mould that neither suits nor accommodates their shape, in the guise of Christian education and discipleship, what are the outcomes? Mistrust. Reticence. Distance. Church suggests that a model of education that is effective will be competence focused using clearly contextual content and method, and delivered by Indigenous instructors.

Finally, our attention is drawn to the theological deliberations emerging in the Native North American and wider Indigenous context. Terry LeBlanc reflects on some of the traditional philosophical, biblical, and attitudinal starting points for Western theology suggesting that these need to be revisited — and not simply to make Christian faith more concomitant with Indigenous understandings. Instead, LeBlanc argues, the shifts he identifies will position the gospel of Jesus to be more effective in its address of contemporary issues such as the environmental debate and inter-religious dialogue — among others.

In all, this volume contains a sampling of the work that has been done around the issue of contextualization in the years since NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community came into existence. Dr. Ralph Winter, Dr. Paul Hiebert, and others applauded the emergence of NAIITS. They could see what might be possible if, we were to address the concerns Warner Bowden identified as late as 1981 when he noted,

“If the [Western church] as a whole restricts the Indians’ freedom to act and worship along indigenous lines, it will perpetuate a short sighted parochialism and deny what is best for itself as an amalgam of many people.”



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William Carey International University • 1539 E. Howard Street • Pasadena CA 91104
editor@wciujournal.org • www.wciujournal.org

Culture, Christian Faith and Error: A Work in Progress

ADRIAN JACOBS, RICHARD TWISS AND TERRY LEBLANC

A First Word

The subject of this paper is a contentious issue for many people in the Native Christian world today. It has been made very complex because of the personal and social “baggage” attached to it. Many people feel it is an area best left alone. It is our feeling however, that to “leave it alone” is to consign countless more Aboriginal people to an eternity separated from their Creator — one whose love for them is so great that He sent his son to die that they might have life. It is for this reason that we pursue anew this need in the Native work in Canada and the U.S.

Many people will misconstrue our motives and call into question our theology — some, even our faith in Jesus. But, for the sake of those for whom

this approach to ministry — contextualization and the appropriate and Christ-centred cultural expressions of Christian faith — is the answer to their blockades of faith, we are prepared to argue our case.

So that the issue of our faith and belief might be clear, we offer the following as our statement of faith in the one and only Sovereign Lord of the universe, His son Jesus Christ and the work of His Holy Spirit.

Statement of Faith

We believe there is one God eternally existing in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God as father is Author, Creator, and Sustainer of all creation. According to His good pleasure and will, he created all that is, including animals, plants, earth, skies, waters, and First man and woman.

Adrian Jacobs is Turtle Clan of the Cayuga Nation of the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy. Today he follows the way of Jesus and has a heart for relating to North American Aboriginal people, especially traditional and neo-traditional Natives, with culturally informed service and a creative methodology of delivery. His personal and professional studies have concentrated on Native worldviews and cultures with a view to positive influence through a culturally affirming approach.

Richard Twiss (1954 – 2013) was a member of the Sicangu Lakota Oyate, and was the Co-Founder and President of Wiconi International.

Terry LeBlanc is Mi'kmaq / Acadian in his 42nd year of marriage to Bev. He and Bev have three adult children – twin daughters and one son. He holds a PhD in Intercultural Studies from Asbury Theological Seminary, specializing in Theology, Mission and Anthropology. He is the founding Chair and current Director of NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community.

We believe the Bible is God's recorded revelation to humankind, and that it is divinely inspired, authoritative, and written for all peoples everywhere. These are the sacred writings of God.

We believe in the deity of Jesus Christ, His virgin birth, sinless life, physical death, bodily resurrection, ascension into heaven, and His return to earth in power and glory. He is the Bright and Morning Star, Ancient of Days, and Chief Shepherd for the peoples of the earth. We believe that He alone is the sent one, the only mediator between God and man.

We believe in the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit, that He empowers and indwells believers to live Godly lives. We believe that humankind was created in the image of God, but because of rebellion rejected the path of beauty, wandering in darkness and alienation from God. Only through faith, trusting in Christ alone for salvation, can that alienation be removed and the peoples of the earth be restored to the path of beauty once again. Jesus performed the "once and for all ceremony" that restores us to that beautiful path with God. He did this through His death on a cross, and His resurrection from the dead after three days in a grave. By this He broke the power of death and made a way for all tribes and nations to return to a relationship with their Creator.

Additional Notes:

1. Theologically, we are strongly opposed to syncretism in any form, specifically when cultural practice in any way begins to encroach on the authority of God's Word and in particular, the work of the cross. Our aim is to provide a theological framework for defining syncretism.

2. We agree fully and completely with the perspective offered by Dr. Chuck Kraft in his book, *Anthropology for Christian Witness*: "We implicitly and explicitly committed ourselves to the Protestant Bible as the revelation of God and, therefore, normative with regard to the understandings we advocate concerning God and His relationships with and desires for humans. He it is who originat-

ed, oversees and keeps working all that exists. **We see, then, God as existing above and outside of culture yet working through culture in His interactions with human beings.**" [Emphasis added.]

3. We also share the concerns expressed by David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen. They write, "Two dangers in approaching the task of contextualization -the fear of irrelevance if contextualization is not attempted, and the fear of compromise and Syncretism if it is taken too far. **There is a need to use existing cultural forms that can be baptized and pressed into the service of Christ if the Gospel is not denied in the process.** Unless this is done it is likely that only the surface layers of a culture will be changed. But since by definition contextualization appropriates indigenous linguistic and cultural forms, it always risks cultural and religious Syncretism. **The only viable choice in the face of these two dangers is a contextualization that is true to both indigenous culture and the authority of Scripture.**" [Emphasis added.]

For generations the emphasis has been on the fear of compromise at the gross negligence and expenses of the Native people themselves; the result being the relative ineffectiveness to impact Native people with the most powerful message and reality known to humankind. The aim of this paper is to simply encourage people and to help bring a missiological balance into our traditional Native cultural context — the place where most non-believing Native people live and die without Christ. We hope to explore Biblical ways to see our cultural forms redeemed and used for the cause of Christ among our people.

The Need for Definitions

It is extremely important to understand one another in order to have intelligent discussion. Great misunderstandings can be avoided if we take the time to settle on some basic definitions of terms. We offer below our understanding of the more important terms and concepts in the discussion.

Culture

This term reflects broad and sometimes different understandings but is generally considered to take-in all aspects of a person's or group's life. Culture is what is considered "normal" or acceptable behaviour, thinking, or values for a group of people. Every human being is part of a broader culture. Culture is a neutral term as every person is part of one. Culture has sometimes been equated with Native religious ceremonies. Religion is only a small part of the broad term culture and cannot be equated with it. Culture takes in:

1. Language: the thread of the fabric of culture;
2. Social relationships: who we are as family, clan, nation and how we interact;
3. Religious understanding: cosmology, ceremonies, morals, taboos, written codes or Scriptures, or oral traditions;
4. Material products: objects, buildings, tools, weapons, implements produced;
5. Aesthetics: what is considered beautiful or pleasing in art, drama, dance, music, singing, etc.;
6. Environment/geographic setting: urban, suburban, rural, remote, arctic, maritime, island, continental, mountainous, etc.

Cultural Blindness

When we have little or no interaction with others of another culture we can be culturally blind or unaware that we have a culture. When we first encounter someone of another culture our natural response is, "They are strange. Why do they do that? That doesn't make sense? How weird? Their ways are wrong and mine are right." This is a natural ethnocentric response to difference that is common to all peoples.

Ethnocentrism

Our human tendency to establish standards based on our group. Our ethnic group is seen as normal and understandable with the right standards of behaviour, thinking, and values. Ethnocentrism is our emotional response to the observed

differences of others of another culture. Somehow, we are civilized and they are not.

Cultural Bigotry

This is when someone refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of one from another culture. Cultural bigots have pre-judged others as wrong and consider themselves to be right. The Body of Christ is meta-cultural. Cultural bigotry impoverishes the Church by marginalizing everyone but "our group". The eye says to the ear, "I have no need for you!"

Cultural Oppression

Cultural oppression is considered to be the deliberate suppression of a culture by the dominant culture. The dominated culture is devalued in order to justify the hegemony of the dominant culture. This has resulted in cultural genocide when Native languages die and the elders no longer remember the old ways.

Assimilation

This has been the policy pursued by the government to eliminate aboriginal status and incorporate Natives into the larger Canadian mainstream society. This has been accomplished by: the promotion of agriculture to former hunting societies, a western educational system, the Indian Act, residential schools, laws outlawing Native cultural and religious practices, and enfranchisement. This has been mostly a failure.

Cultural Revitalization

This is when a movement sweeps large numbers of Natives back into the traditional, Aboriginal ways of thinking and behaving through relearning the Native language and living the old system. Traditional governments and clan relations are resurrected. Natives born, raised, and living as traditionalists, are joined by neo-traditional converts raised in more assimilationist homes.

Traditionalism

Traditionalism is the valuing and process of passing on ideas, ways, and values of the past to the

succeeding generation. It is looking to the past for the ideal. Tradition is not inherently evil or wrong. Jesus said the Pharisees nullified the word of God by their tradition. This kind of tradition that goes against God's word is the kind that is wrong. The Jews were a traditional people who looked back to and honoured their ancestors. Christians today still look back to people like the apostle Paul for ideal theology, values, methodology, and ministry.

Contextualization

This is conveying the truth of God's word in the context of a receiving culture in a way that is relevant and makes sense to them. This requires:

1. Understanding the socio-cultural context of the Biblical passage;
2. Interpreting the meaning of the passage;
3. Conveying the meaning of Scripture in the context of a specific receiving culture.

As we have been careful to exegete Scripture we must also be careful to exegete the culture we are trying to reach. This is where Christians who are knowledgeable and experienced in a certain culture can make the best critique of our contextualization attempts.

Ethnotheology

Ethnotheology is the result of understanding, interpreting, and applying the Word of God in the worldview of a specific culture. What we see as fundamental reality and the way things are is influenced by our worldview. Our beliefs, values, and behaviour are products of our culture and our interaction with the Word of God. We spend time and effort on what we, in our culture, consider to be important. We reveal in our actions what is valuable to us. We concern ourselves theologically with what we consider to be the main issues of life. We busy ourselves studying the Scriptures in order to answer the pressing questions of our life and issues that are important to us. The issues, questions and concerns of one culture differ from those of another culture. *Where will you spend eternity?* may not be the most important question to ask or

answer in the lottery and casino culture that looks for a quick unearned windfall. *How can I be healed?* may be a very meaningful question for a culture that has many medicine societies that perform ritual cures.

Metatheology

This is where ethnotheologies submit themselves to the critique of the larger body of Christ. We must speak the truth in love to one another. We are not independent but interdependent. We are our brother's keeper.

Epistemology

This is how we "know" or how we perceive truth or reality. This word takes in the notion of objectivity and subjectivity. The western world esteems objectivity and looks askance at subjectivity. The only person who is totally objective with a full grasp of reality is God. Human beings can know truth. However, our grasp of truth is not full orbbed. We are limited in our apprehension of truth due to the limitations of our humanity and faculties. We can know the truth but we don't know all the truth. Each one of us is affected by our culture and world-view in our apprehension of the truth.

Our languages reflect our values. How we create categories is affected by our cultural assumptions. How we summarize or retell a story reveals our biases and values. When we look into the Scriptures we see different aspects of the truth. We do not see different or conflicting truths but different facets of the same truth. Evangelical anthropologist Paul Hiebert says there are among evangelical Christians at least two kinds of people idealists and critical realists.

1. Idealists: These sincere Christians believe that what they see and understand is reality. There is one reality and they see it. Sometimes people from a dominant culture have never really experienced the otherness of another culture. They may have noted significant differences but are not profoundly changed and view differences as simply strange, defective, or even wrong. Due to mono-

cultural blindness they equate their theology with the Bible. There can be only one theology. You must agree with them before you can dialogue. If you do not agree with them then you are wrong to begin with. They assume a parent-to-child role with pre- and post-conversion people. “I know the truth and you must learn from me what it is. When you understand what I understand then you will have arrived at the truth. I must demolish your understanding of truth because it is not truth and replace it with the truth I possess.”

2. Critical Realists: These equally sincere Christians recognize human limitations and cultural biases and the resulting subjective apprehension of truth. There is one reality and each human being in fellowship with God sees some aspect of it. Often these people have truly experienced the otherness of another culture and it has changed their lives. The comfortable assumptions of their own people are now re-examined and re-evaluated. This is an unsettling experience and much energy is expended in reorientation. These people realize that their view of truth and reality is not the only one. They realize other people have valid rationales for what they understand and do. Christians of other denominations and culture have a grasp of some aspect of the truth that they may have missed. They make room for other people’s honest efforts to live out the truth of Scripture in the contexts of other cultures and societies.

Docetism

From the Greek verb “to seem”. Bruce L. Shelley explains the term: “The [word] comes from the teaching that Christ was not really a [physical flesh and blood] man, he was a spectral appearance. He only seemed to suffer for man’s sins since we all know divine phantoms are incapable of dying.”¹

Gnosticism

One of Christianity’s earliest threats was Gnosticism, a blending of the gospel with certain philosophical theories held by the Gnostics. From the Greek word gnosis meaning “knowledge or right knowledge”, Gnosticism is the teaching or belief

that you are saved by the right knowledge. According to the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, the chief points in the Gnostic system were:

1. cosmological dualism: consisting of matter and spirit, the former evil and therefore not created directly by a good spirit, and the other good; the essential separation of matter and spirit, matter being intrinsically evil and the source from which all evil has arisen.

2. esoteric knowledge: means of salvation, i.e., being freed from evil material existence to enter into pure spiritual life.

Therefore, “[m]atter is not evil in the Bible, but is God’s creation The body likewise is not evil and salvation is not an escape from it.” [Emphasis added.]² Furthermore, “The basic belief of Gnosticism is dualism. The belief that the world is ultimately divided between two cosmic forces, good and evil. In line with much Greek philosophy, the Gnostics identified evil with matter. Because of this they regarded any Creator God as wicked. Creation by a deity, they felt, was not so much impossible as it was indecent. Their own Supreme Being was far removed from any such tendency to evil.”³

Gnostic Christians believed that there was a distinct separation between the material and spiritual worlds. The spiritual world was the only one that mattered, since it was the seat of knowledge and contained the ultimate truth. The material world was an illusion and not to be trusted.⁴

Docetic Gnosticism

In Docetic Gnosticism what we struggle with is a dualistic belief that if God is in something it needs to transcend the ordinary—has to become outwardly different in order to distance itself from the natural/physical, i.e. evil world. This natural world has to be overcome by correct knowledge—the intellectual, rational world of thought—or, as Gnostics would say, spiritual essence. “It cannot accept a natural expression of God among us.”⁵ As this relates to Native cultural expressions, the missionary could not see or accept that Native culture was just as capable of expressing Christian

worship, virtue, and living, as those cultures of European origins. Instead Native culture was viewed as earthly, primitive, pagan, and natural and thus needing to be replaced. Euro-American/Canadian cultural values were often imposed on Native believers in the name of Biblical standards.

Effects on Mission

The above definitions, as practiced to various extents in the church throughout its history, created significant impact on mission by defining the theology and practice of mission. More often than not, the unspoken but obvious outcome was a “Replacement oriented theology of mission which essentially said, “We are Christian, you are not. Therefore, everything we do is Christian: how we dress and act, the way in which we govern, our social systems and customs, our language and world view. And so, for you to become Christian, everything you are and do must be replaced.” And, of course, the obvious culture of replacement was European.

A proper way to view mission would have been (and would be today): “We are Christian because we have embraced the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ; you are not because you have not embraced this message. But, we see the hand of God at work in you. Let us tell you about the one who can fulfill that work. His name is Jesus and He is the Creator’s son.” Properly presented, this is what the Jerusalem Council advocated in Acts 15 and what Paul practiced in Acts 17 on Mars Hill. This represents a Fulfillment oriented theology of mission.

Are our only options as Native North Americans: 1) to live in two worlds in frustration or cultural schizophrenia; or, 2) to remain insulated in the small safe zone that rings us with a Christian sub-culture that is defined for us by Euro-Americans? In the first, Christianity fills only a portion of a believer’s existence; in the second, it may take up more of one’s life, but reality is reduced to that which can carry the Christian [Euro] label.⁶

“Our confusion about the world and our place in it begins with how we think about the world and our place in it. Since we are products of our

culture [Euro-American] as well as of our faith, we must be prepared to look in both directions”⁷

The North American Native view is actually much closer to the classic unsynthesized Hebraic-Christian view of life than is the contemporary western evangelical’s segregated view. Western people especially have a deep-seated inclination to make a radical distinction between the sacred and the secular, neatly dividing their concerns and activities into these airtight compartments.

Many non-Western and non-Christian societies, on the other hand, do not make this distinction. “All life is intimately related to deities and spirits, worship and ritual. It seems clear that the Western tendency to think of the business of living as ‘distinct from stewardship, worship, and spirituality’, had a negative effect in a society that, in spite of its lack of knowledge of God, nevertheless did not put worship, sacrifice, and ritual in a separate compartment from the production of marketing goods.”⁸

The prophet Balaam’s conversation with a donkey is recorded in Numbers 22:21-33. A classic Greek (Western) world view, when confronted with the Biblical account of Balaam’s talking donkey, would question whether or not a donkey could actually literally talk. A classic Hebrew (Native) world view would be more concerned with what the donkey had to say, rather than whether he could actually talk or not.

A classic Greek (Western) world view would say that any Native who believes a tree could talk would be involved in animism, spiritism, and/or pantheism, though Jesus spoke directly to the winds and the waves and they “heard” Him and actually obeyed. The following passage captures the Hebraic worldview of man’s connection with creation:

But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish of the sea inform you. Which of all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind (Job 12: 7-10).

Could this verse be misconstrued to sound like it is promoting animism or spiritism?

As Christians we would all benefit by seeing our Christianity as central to everything that we do. We would stop viewing our employment situations as secular “non-religious” work, and Sunday mornings as our spiritual activity. Jesus has called us to be His followers twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. We are spiritual beings living in this physical world.

Gnosticism brings or produces legalism, fear, bondage and rules as a way of distancing itself from the physical/natural world. Gnostics forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth (see 1 Timothy 4:3).

In Colossians exclusiveness and harsh legalism are said to be very damaging to Christian freedom and disrespectful to the human body as indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Already present was the Gnostic error that God had no connection with matter as demonstrated by the following Scripture: “Therefore let no one judge you in food and drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or Sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ” (Colossians 2:16). “Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules? Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch! These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence” (Colossians 2:20-23).

Such harsh practices or “spiritual disciplines” had become very common among early Gnostics. Contrary to Christian teaching they sought spiritual deliverance by self-abasement and severity to the body, not by grace and faith in Christ. In this dualism we find a strong inclination toward legalism.

Consequently, as Native believers we have been instructed by this Gnostic-like influence for generations and have been led to believe that the traditional cultural practices of our people are worldly and spiritually destructive. **THIS IS WRONG!**

When we become born-again, we die to the principles or rudiments of this world, not the cultural forms, i.e. language, music, art, dance, kinship structures, etc. Paul’s admonition is to not ascribe undue authority or power to our traditions (principles/rudiments) giving them control over us and once again becoming in bondage to them. He did not say to the new Jewish believers: **STOP BEING A JEW—LEAVE YOUR CULTURE AND BECOME A GREEK.** The challenge we face is to redeem those aspects of our cultures in Christ that we have surrendered and given away so that God’s work among us will be strengthened.

Issues of Concern

Culture and Conscience

First Corinthians 8:1-13, 9:19-23, 10:14-33, 11:1-16 and Romans 14:1-23, 15:1-7 deal with issues of conscience in the first century Greco-Roman cultures of Corinth and Rome. The issues the early church dealt with were:

1. meat offered to idols
2. head coverings
3. vegetarianism
4. drinking wine
5. following the Law of Moses
6. Jewish Sabbath and holy days
 - kosher diet
 - circumcision.

Some of the principles considered in dealing with these issues of conscience and culture were:

1. Respect one another’s conscience: Acceptance of other’s values and respect for their conscience is a common theme. We should not rush headlong into something without considering the consequences of our actions.

2. Do not argue: Fighting in an argumentative way does not serve the purposes of Christ. We should not be afraid of expressing our honest opinions but we do not need to hurt others with schismatic attitudes.

3. What is wrong to one person may not be wrong to another: Each person should be fully convinced in his or her own mind and true to their own convictions. If I consider something to be sin I should not engage in it or I will be sinning. If I am free to do something, my convictions are before God the righteous Judge.

4. Love is concerned about building people up, not flaunting its freedom: Reaching people with the good news of Jesus Christ and helping Christians grow in their relationship with God is what caring Christians should concern themselves with. It is arrogant disregard of culture and conscience that turns our freedoms into offenses.

5. Don't do things that make the weaker brother stumble: Biblical knowledge will strengthen the weaker brother and we cannot expect him to function at our level. A weaker brother is one who is young in the Lord and a novice when it comes to knowing the Word of God. Christians who have been saved for years and have sat under the ministry of the Word of God are not weaker brothers. Some ministers use this rationale of not making the weaker brother stumble to then not do anything that would offend another Christian. If this is ultimately what God, through the apostle Paul, wants, then Jesus was one of the greatest violators of this principle. Jesus did a lot of things that offended others such as:

- ate and drank wine and visited/befriended sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes;
- told parables against the religious leaders;
- chose Galileans for his disciples;
- spoke alone with a Samaritan woman;
- rebuked people in public.

Acts 10 and 11 on Culture

The experience of Peter in bringing the good

news of Jesus to the first uncircumcised non-kosher Gentile is a real lesson to us on cultural issues. The first disciples of Jesus did not understand his post resurrection command to go into all the world and preach the gospel to all peoples and make disciples of every nation. They interpreted this to mean they were to go to every Jewish person in all the nations. It took Peter's experience with Cornelius to finally conclude "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18b). God gave Cornelius and his household eternal life and filled them with the Holy Spirit even though the men were uncircumcised and they all ate non-kosher food.

Peter crossed cultural barriers creating a lot of disturbance and misunderstanding but was eventually vindicated. The experience was probably traumatic enough for him to forgo further Gentile evangelism and for him later to become known as the Apostle to the Jews.

Acts 15 on Culture

The church at Antioch was the first to experience widespread Gentile mission and develop it under the leadership of Barnabas and Paul. Cross-cultural issues became a hot topic, especially for the mother church at Jerusalem. Many Jewish believers in Jesus Christ were zealous for the Law of Moses and insisted the Gentile converts needed to be circumcised and follow the Law in order to be saved. In the great debate it was finally concluded that Gentiles did not have to become Jews culturally be or continue to be saved. Peter's experience with the Italian Cornelius was the clinching example that God saved/saves Gentiles without circumcision or kosher diets.

More to the point, however, is the very likely reality that the concern of the "believers from the sect of the Pharisees" was more than simply a requirement that the gentiles keep Mosaic traditions and the commandments of the Decalogue. In fact, it is probable that they were referring instead to the whole of the culture of Judaism which had grown up around the Decalogue and the Mosaic laws and customs, else the Pharisaic traps laid for

Jesus make little sense. It must therefore be seen that the requirements that the believers of the Pharisees were seeking to lay on the Gentiles were cultural as well as spiritual, demanding cultural assimilation as a part of conversion.

Gentile converts fortunately, were simply given four prohibitions that were universal human concerns under Adam and Noah. Fornication was the violation of the marriage covenant established by God with Adam. Eating meat offered to idols involved following someone other than God as Adam did in the Garden of Eden. Eating blood or meat not drained of blood (i.e. strangled animals) violated God's command to Noah. Certainly these issues were also concerns of the Mosaic Law and keeping these four prohibitions would have aided Gentile-Jewish fellowship.

Applicable to Aboriginal mission and ministry in North America, the lessons learned from Acts 10, 11, and 15 are:

1. Aboriginal people do not have to become culturally Euro-Canadian or American in order to become Christians or in order to be better Christians. The whole assimilationist approach of western Christian mission to Aboriginal people is critiqued for its naivete, rebuked for its arrogance, and condemned for its gross violation of human dignity.

2. Euro-North American missions and churches are not equated with ultimate true Christianity but are recognized as the legitimate expression of the contextualization of Euro-North American understanding of Biblical truth.

3. Aboriginal churches and missions should be careful not to duplicate western colonial mission by exporting its version of Christianity as the ultimate true standard of Christianity.

Four Basic Church / Mission Responses to Native Culture

Rejection

Rejection has been the most common response to cultural clash leading traditionalists

to conclude that Christianity is the white-man's religion. Native culture is replaced by the Euro-Canadian culture of the various denominations doing church or mission among First Nations people. Here the Native language is given up for English or French. Native names are rejected and replaced with Christian names usually given at baptism. Native dress and hairstyle gives way to western norms. The communal value system based on clans or other traditional means of relating is abandoned for patriarchal nuclear families that relate on a larger level at church. Traditional hereditary governments or appointments by virtue of observed skill are rejected for democratically elected systems. Euro-Christian hymns, organs, pianos and other instruments replace native instruments and styles of singing. Dance is rejected outright as pagan and Christian professionals and liturgy substituted. Communal structures with circular seating patterns that emphasize equality and participation are forsaken for Euro-Canadian church buildings that emphasize a hierarchical approach.

It must be said in support of a rejectionist approach that clearly unbiblical concerns were rightly rejected. Many sincerely devoted believers in Jesus Christ thought they were doing the right thing by taking this approach. It was their dedication to the Lordship of Christ that was at the heart of their actions. Some suffered for their convictions and we honour them. The Gospel is prophetic and challenges error. In our attempt to be more graciously contextual it is our desire not to compromise what is essential and fits us for eternal relationship and harmony with Jesus Christ our Lord.

We strongly suggest a purely rejectionist approach has not been conducive to mission among First Nations people. Jesus did not spend all of his time confronting sin. He fulfilled Jewish Messianic expectations. He forgave sin and affirmed the value and personal worth of people. He crossed cultural, geographic, gender, and racial barriers. Sinners felt welcome in his presence and were convicted and led to holiness. The goodness of God in Jesus led many to repentance. °He went around doing good and healing all those who were oppressed of the

devil. His strongest rebuke was for self-righteous dehumanizing religious autocrats who cared nothing for people.

Absorption

Absorption of Native culture within the overarching Christian culture has been another response. Unbiblical Native beliefs and rites are tolerated or translated into acceptable Christian forms and terms. As long as you fulfill the accepted requirements for Church membership your non-Biblical Native beliefs are overlooked. Here is the spiritual Dr. Jekyll / Mr. Hyde who goes faithfully to church then to unbiblical Native ceremonies. Here the Native culture has not been critically examined, challenged nor redeemed. The double life leaves Christianity and Native culture in two separate categories. A question of the authenticity of the Christian experience is raised. Has there been a true conversion to Christ?

Syncretism

Syncretism is the most feared response to Native culture among most Evangelical Christians. No one wants to compromise his or her commitment to Christ and the importance of His redemptive work.

Syncretism in this context means taking the non-Biblical Native beliefs and practices and making them one with Christianity. There are many areas of Native belief, practice, and values that are in agreement with the Bible. There are other areas where there is obvious and serious disagreement. The question arises: *How do you affirm Native beliefs, practices, and values that are in agreement with the Bible without compromising the uniqueness and supremacy of Christ and His redemptive work?*

Jesus Christ is the only Saviour of humanity from eternal separation from God. He has redeemed us to God in His death, burial and resurrection. Jesus has given us a commission to go into all the world, to all people of every culture, and preach this good news and make disciples. God has commanded every man and woman to repent for He will judge all by Jesus Christ. We are committed to historic evangelical Christian truth. Much in

Native culture can be affirmed, as it does not contradict the Bible. Some aspects of Native culture seem to be neutral with no clear Biblical prohibition or critique. Some Native beliefs, practices, and values are clearly in disagreement with Biblical teaching. Any effort to harmonize these non-Biblical Native Issues with Christian truth or practice is to be condemned as religious syncretism. Anything that takes away from the preeminence of Christ or His redemptive work is suspect.

Sanctification

Sanctification of Native culture is what many in the Aboriginal Christian Community would like to see happen. Christianity is an international, multi-cultural, multi-linguistic, multi-ethnic, and multi-faceted organism that should not narrowly be identified with western culture. In the process of sanctification the Word of God, as guided by the Holy Spirit and discerning Christians, critiques Native culture. Aspects of Native culture that need to be changed are examined by a sound hermeneutic process and experienced Biblically literate Christians. Illuminating this process of sanctification is the goal of this paper. Obviously we cannot possibly answer all of the questions that may arise in any given Native cultural issue. We would like to suggest a framework for guiding the process.

Applying the Sanctification Process to Native Cultural Issues

Cultural Exegesis

Cultural exegesis requires an unbiased examination of the issue under consideration. Too often our prejudicial attitudes colour our perceptions. This is why a teachable heart is needed in the Christian believer. Cultural outsiders sometimes can provide a helpful perspective. Knowledgeable and experienced Native informants will give those examining a cultural issue an insider's perspective. Some helpful questions to ask can be categorized as follows:

1. Investigation

What: What is done? What precipitates this

event? What are the obligations of the participants?

How: How are these things done? How involved are the participants? How obligated are the participants to doing or believing something?

Who: Who is involved? Who is responsible? Who does this affect? Who are the experts?

Where: Where are these events performed? Where are the resources for this found? Where are the participants from?

When: When are these things done? When is it over? When is the next time? Etc.

2. Analysis

Why: Why are these people involved? Why are these things done? Who are the experts?

What: What values are behind this event? What does it mean to participate or not be involved? Etc.

3. Christian Response

What: What should we do? What will this mean to other Christians or non-Christians? What questions will we be required to answer?

How: How will we proclaim and live the truth? How can we show the accepting love of Jesus who was a friend of sinners and a holy person? Etc.

Each question may open a whole new avenue of questions to ask. Our goal in this area is to understand as accurately as we are able before plunging ahead with something that may end up conveying the wrong idea.

Socio-Cultural Hermeneutic

Our efforts at cultural exegesis will raise the question of what the Bible says about each issue. This is where it will be necessary to have a sound

hermeneutic that considers the socio-cultural context of the Biblical passages under consideration. This is where theological scholarship is needed. We must understand that western Christianity represents the efforts at contextualizing Christianity in western culture. It gives us insight to see how western Christians have taken the eastern writings of the Bible and applied their understanding of Scripture using their western context. Western Christianity, however, is not the norm to be applied to every culture. There should be a truly indigenous expression of Christianity in the various Native cultures.

Options available

Cultural exegesis may suggest one of the following options be taken:

1. Adopt the practice: Bring it into the church family as it is, an issue of enriching diversity.
2. Avoid the practice: It offers nothing good, and may bring that which is harmful; or, it is just plain suspicious.
3. Affirm the practice: It is clearly an issue of cultural and social diversity.
4. Allow the practice: It is an issue of personal liberty and choice as per Romans chapter 14. No other comment is made Biblically.

Comparing Spiritual Traditions and Practice

Spirituality

One way a person's "spirituality" can be understood is by categorizing it according to the key system that defines or structures its main tenets or allegiances. This is the lens through which all other elements of life are viewed. Stated another way, it is the thread that weaves its way throughout the various facets of life and culture. A person's world view is defined and shaped as he or she observes life through this lens or draws the thread through successive areas of life and culture.

Spirituality then, is about more than just the point of view that someone has about the super-

natural realm. It is also about this lens of a person's life, this thread that weaves its way throughout all of the various facets of life whether it be the arts, social structures, economic and religious systems or any other aspect of culture. This may be perceived, because of its pervasive nature, as the essence of a person's world view. And, as a person's world view goes, so goes her or his spirituality. For the First Nations individual this is a "natural creation" lens. For the western individual this is more likely to be a "material things" lens.

Cultural Locus

There is a widely held, but we believe, mistaken notion that western spirituality is compartmentalized — that it has no common thread or "viewing lens"; whereas indigenous people's spirituality is holistic and integrated with is an obvious inter-connecting thread that runs throughout. This misunderstanding can be brought into clearer focus if we determine what the central thread is for each of the two cultures and note how it affects each. This central thread can be considered the "cultural locus." For people of a western world view, this cultural locus is rooted in the pursuit of success, financial growth, progress (defined as increasing technological and material advancement), "getting ahead" or, climbing the social/intellectual ladder in pursuit of an end state defined by "security and stability." In contrast, indigenous people's locus is in earth systems and creation, harmony with other elements of natural creation, stewardship of the land, restoration of brokenness, preservation and maintenance of created order — in pursuit of a state similar to the Hebrew concept of "shalom".

The Look of Error

As the chart below suggests, each world-view has the potential to move people toward positive, Godly behaviour or, excess and sinful behaviour. Each system is equally "integrated" in that the cultural locus weaves its way throughout the various elements of each culture. And, there is equal potential for a positive "Creator-centered" expression of the cultural locus or, a negative "creature-cen-

tered" expression. The potential, when acted upon, just looks different for the Aboriginal person as over against the western person. For one the sinful expression is in worship of the creaturely comforts that Mammon provides; the other expresses itself in worship of the natural environment and the things of the created order.

Is the person who worships at the altar of Mammon any more or less lost than the one who offers her or his allegiance to the Baals of this world? Of course, the answer is no. Our attitude toward the religions and beliefs of the Aboriginal person as over against those of the western person however, would suggest otherwise. The chart below may help to clarify this difference.

Western	Native North American
Physical World view: Creation is below and subject	Physical World view: Creation is beside and shared
Approach to World: Conquer	Approach to World: Steward
Focus: Creating things/ Mastery	Focus: things creating/ Harmony
Drive: Security	Drive: Sufficiency
Acquire/Utilize/Accumulate	Acquire/Utilize/Temporize
Spirituality: Materially Integrated	Spirituality: Holistically Integrated
Idolatry: Material Idols [Mammon]	Idolatry: Material Idols [Baal]

Who is the Creator Anyway?

The devil is not a creator. He cannot create something out of nothing. He cannot bring into existence something that was previously non-existent. The act of creating is outside of the devil's sphere of existence, authority or power.

What the devil can do is to twist the design, distort the meaning, profane the holy, and pervert the God-given intention or purpose of a created thing for his own evil and destructive desires. In other words, Satan can only attempt to pervert

those things God has created for His glory to wickedness, not create something out of nothing for evil.

In our opinion, one of the most damaging and erroneous assumptions made about Native people relates to our cultural traditions and beliefs having such a strong tie or connection to the earth. The assumption is made that these created material things must too be regarded as the material/physical and therefore evil world, and must be distrusted and forsaken. This assumption is not Christian. It is Gnostic. This has caused much pain among Native people and has severely hindered the communication of the Gospel among First Nations people.

At the fall of First Man and First Woman in the Garden, a curse came upon creation because of sin. The earth is still the Lord's and despite the curse it did not become inherently evil — only cursed. So now, because of the curse, the earth/creation is also waiting for its redemption. Who is waiting for its liberation? Who or what is groaning in the following passage?

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation itself was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time [Romans 8:19-22].

Evaluating Cultural Practice

Cultural practice must always be subject to evaluation to ensure it does not carry a meaning not intended; or, if it has had a previous meaning, that it can be reclaimed for Kingdom use. The idea of “Form, Function, Meaning” is useful in helping to make an evaluation.

Simply stated, form is any material/physical object. Forms could be musical instruments, sym-

bols or designs, articles of clothing, plants or animals, etc. Meaning is simply what an object means to a person or group of people. An object might have a historical meaning for one region or tribe and an entirely different one for another. Function is used in the sense that an object is believed to perform a certain religious or spiritual function.

This concept of form, meaning, and function is a core issue in understanding culture in the evangelistic and redemption process. There is a great deal of misunderstanding and confusion concerning religion and culture. Can one separate a form and its previous meaning, especially where religion is concerned?

For example, is an eagle feather always to be regarded as an object whose sole meaning, as believed by some, is that of some type of ceremonial religious object? Is there ever a time an eagle feather can be given a new meaning? If so, by whom? In a Christian context, can a Native believer raised in an urban situation choose to wear an eagle feather, while a Native believer raised in a traditional reservation setting not wear one? Would one be right and the other wrong?

What would the Biblical precedent or position be on the use or wearing of eagle feathers? Should the believer from a Northern Plains tribe for whom the eagle feather is a problem be the one who determine its negative meaning for all other Native believers across North America? What does the Bible teach us about the wearing of bird feathers? Or cow skin? Or pig skin? Or sheep hair?

Comparing economic and social practice, “religious” objects and, material things can help to clarify how to view issues of cultural practice and their usefulness and appropriateness to Christian life and faith. In the following chart we have expanded “Form, Function, Meaning” to include “Focus”, that is, toward whom or what is this practice or item's significance directed? The chart is offered as a means of illustrating the complexities of evaluations based solely on an item's previous or potential uses.

Item/Practice	Form	Function	Potential Focus and Meaning
Sweet Grass	Herb/Grass	Cleansing Purification Mediation Deodorizer Arts Crafts	Worship <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Godly • Ungodly Social ties Aesthetic value
Drum	Rim Skin or membrane Lacing Stick(s)	Music <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rhythm • Percussion Entertainment Mood <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moral • Profane 	Secular <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social activity • Events • Entertainment Sacred <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worship • God Other spirits
Piano	Strings Keys Petals	Music <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Melody Entertainment Mood <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moral • Profane 	Sacred <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worship <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – God – Other spirits Secular <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Events • Entertainment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Bars/Pubs
Eagle	Bird Created thing	Reflect God's glory <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beauty Man's use <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survival • Aesthetics 	Symbolism Worship <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God as creator • Thing as creation Illustration/Teaching
Television	Man-made Electronic device	Communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entertain • Inform • Educate • Persuade • Advertise 	Moral purpose Amoral purpose Immoral purpose
Men and Women	Created beings	Procreation Worship Fellowship <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God (Jn 17) • Others Entertainment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wholesome/Evil 	God Human beings Evil

Item/Practice	Form	Function	Potential Focus and Meaning
Devotions	Spiritual discipline	Worship Fellowship • Learning Superstition • Protection	Godly • Spiritual vitality Ungodly • Bondage

Redeeming or Rejecting

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation itself was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Romans 8: 19-22.

Creation has an original intent. All things were created by Him and for Him and for His good pleasure they exist. God created all things for His glory. In developing a contextualized style of ministry we are looking to see cultural forms or creation, restored to original intent -praise and worship to Almighty God. Fallen humans use God’s creation “handiwork” in a misdirected manner for idol worship. Worship involves the use of musical instruments, dance, art, and ceremony — all human handiwork. Can this handiwork — traditional dress, drums, some ceremonial practices, dance — be redeemed and restored to original intent by Christian people?

What makes something evil? Can something previously used in an idolatrous manner be sanctified for Christian use?

We see certain forms or practices that cannot be used in any form for Christian worship. This is not an exhaustive list but would include, for example: 1) Liturgical use of mind-altering substances; 2) Sacrifice of living things and blood sacrifices; 3) Promotion and participation in sexual immorality; and, 4) Physical torture and self-abuse.

Native culture, as all the cultures of mankind, reflects to some degree the attributes of our Creator Himself, however tarnished. It is in Christ that we find the ultimate fulfillment of His Holy and sovereign purpose for us as a people. If He has a unique role for us to play or a contribution to make in the fulfilling of His purposes for our nation in these days, then as the Church we must reconsider the place that we give to the Native expression in the evangelical mainstream in North America.

Dr. Chuck Kraft from Fuller Seminary writes, We see God working in terms of Jewish culture to reach Jews, yet, refusing to impose Jewish customs on Gentiles. Instead non-Jews are to come to God and relate to Him in terms of their own cultural vehicles. **We see the Bible endorsing, then, a doctrine we call Biblical sociocultural adequacy in which each culture is taken seriously but none advocated exclusively as the only one acceptable to God.** (Emphasis added.)⁹

Consider these very powerful insights as they apply to Native culture:

- Biblical Christianity is never found apart from a culture. It is always part of a culture.
- The Christianity of the New Testament was a part of the GrecoRoman world of the first century.
- No such thing as “plain” Christianity exists.
- Christianity always expresses itself through a culture.

“Christianity is unique in that it can be expressed equally well in any culture.” (Emphasis added.)¹⁰ Sometimes we think many Native

Christians believe that we are the only people group in the world, which is exempt from this reality. Why are we so distrustful of our cultural identity? Why as Native Christians do we believe our drums, music styles, dance and art forms have any less value in the Kingdom than do English hymns, German organs, Welsh choruses, Irish ballads, Italian frescoes and Roman architecture?

Most of those cultural forms have been used in idol worship, promoting immoral lifestyles, and supporting all manners of sinful and ungodly behaviours. Yet, as cultural forms, they are very acceptable in the mainstream of evangelical Christianity. Why theirs and not ours?

We believe God gave us our drums, songs, languages, customs, traditions, dances, and beliefs as a way to worship and walk with Him in a way that is beautiful, unique, edifying and ultimately deeply pleasing to Him! He did not give them to us to frustrate, wound and embarrass us. As a loving Heavenly Father, He did not give us inherently bad or evil things. Regardless of the way that sinful people ended up using drums, ceremony, dances, etc., that fact does not make those things evil or bad in and of themselves — only misdirected.

If, as some statistics suggest, 90-95% of our Native people who die, perish without Christ, we as Native Christians need to re-examine our methodology for bringing the gospel among Native people so as to be more culturally relevant and therefore spiritually impacting.

Many times Christian Native leaders misinterpret and wrongly apply the Scriptures regarding culture. They exhort their fellow Native Christians to “come out from among them and be separate” and “touch not the unclean thing” in reference to our Native cultures, as if to say our cultures are evil and unclean. There do exist idolatrous and sinful practices that must be repented of, but the Word of God is not calling us to repent or turn away from being who God made us — Native people. When we come to Christ, Jesus does not ask us to abandon one sin-stained culture only to embrace another sin-stained culture.

John Fisher writes in his book, *What On earth Are We Doing*,

“Nowhere in the New Testament is there any call to believers to form a separate culture from the world. We were created to be separate from the world, but never to leave. Some Christians confuse 2 Corinthians 6:17 as a call to leave the world. Paul is talking about an internal, personal holiness, not a separate culture he wants us to create, as if living in it will make us holy by osmosis. But in forming our own culture, all we have done is to leave the world without a witness from the inside, where we are supposed to be.”¹¹

Our God is too small if He exists in only a portion of our existence. Our God is too small if we need a Christian [non-Native] label before we can even locate Him. Our God is too small if we believe he inhabits a world smaller than the whole world as we know it.

“How did we begin to worship such a culturally anemic God, and how do we find our way out? Does our Christianity [as Native people] have anything to do with how we spend our time, how we entertain ourselves, how we work, how we play, how we vote, how we buy and sell, and how we participate in the world [Native culture] around us?”¹²

We believe that the reason 90-95% of our Native people are still without Christ is because of the rejection of our culture as Christians. We have been left without a witness for Jesus Christ from within the cultural contexts of our spiritual, traditional, and ceremonial life experiences.

A Further Word on Syncretism

The issue of syncretism is a great concern for many in the Native work. We believe in order for syncretism to be accurately understood it must be approached from a theological or doctrinal perspective, rather than a purely socio-cultural one. It seems many people today confuse the two and what we end up with is confusion and division between socio-cultural practices and actual Biblical error.

Rev. Lloyd Commander, Cayuse, Umatilla Confederation, is a Missiologist and educator in the International Church of the Nazarene. Commander is former Academic Dean at the Nazarene Indian Bible College in Albuquerque, and is currently Director of Education for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla. He has written, “Most [Native] people do not understand syncretism therefore they hold on to what some highly esteemed [Native] leader or leaders have said in regards to its definitions and expression. Also, it seems to me, that this kind of reasoning is FEAR based. Fear has no place in the Jesus Way.” He went on to say, “I believe it is a world view carry over from people’s [Native] non-Christian background and also a way to control or try to control people because that is the way Christianity has been modeled to Indian people.”¹³

Commander offered this definition of syncretism: “The union of two opposite forces, beliefs, systems or tenets so that the united form is a new thing, neither one nor the other.”

Rev. Adrian Jacobs offers this definition of syncretism in his article entitled, *Syncretism, Meeting of the Two Roads*: “Syncretism is the attempted union of different or opposing principles or practices — trying to marry two different and even opposing philosophies or religions. Without qualification the syncretist says that the assumption can be made that because the two are similar they are the same-synonymous.”¹⁴

The Native American Church would be an example of this. In their services they use the Bible and sing Christian songs. Yet the one thing that sets them apart is their prescribed use of the hallucinogenic drug found in peyote as part of their liturgy. The peyote is intended to increase one’s receptiveness to God and therefore make the participant more holy and closer to God as a result. They have attempted to form one new religion out of two that is neither Christian nor traditional Native. This is syncretism.

Some Illustrations and Expanded Ideas

We would like to suggest that syncretism is

much more than an application, misuse or practice of a particular cultural form, ie. music, language, dance, custom, social practice, ceremony, art, etc. Nor is it simply the combining of, or use of, similar or even identical ceremonial forms, methods or liturgies. Syncretism is a theological issue of faith and allegiance, not merely wedding religious forms.

Because a Satanist burns candles purchased at K-Mart during his animal sacrifices, it does not make us syncretistic to burn candles purchased at K-Mart during our New Year’s Eve service. We want to submit what we believe to be some solid Biblical perspectives for syncretism for your consideration:

- Syncretism is a belief or practice, whether in an Euro church on Sunday morning or a Native ceremony, that attempts to replace or distort the historical doctrines of justification, righteousness, atonement, holiness, redemption, sanctification, salvation, etc.
- It is anything that tries to replace, augment or add to the long standing doctrines of historical Christianity.
- Syncretism is any belief or practice that says Christ’s work alone is not enough.
- Syncretism is believing that by performing a particular religious ceremony or practice, one can alter the essential human spiritual condition in the same way that Jesus does through his death on a cross and resurrection from the dead.

On the other hand:

- Syncretism is not baptizing in a creek or bathtub. Syncretism is not meeting in an Elks Lodge, using a drum, playing an electric guitar on Sunday morning, worshipping singing a traditional Choctaw hymn, wearing a ribbon shirt, wearing an eagle, pigeon or chicken feather, owning a television, listening to a non-Christian CD or sleeping in a tipi.
- Biblically speaking, it is not necessarily owning a dream catcher, attending a give-a-way

to honour a relative, attending or dancing in a Pow-Wow, square dancing or hanging a buffalo skull in your living room, or even burning a stick of raspberry incense or braid of sage or sweet grass.

In light of the definition of Syncretism we are working with, doing these things is not necessarily being syncretistic or compromising of God's Word or one's Christian testimony.

We agree we must be careful that we do not become a stumbling block to new believers or weak/undisciplined believers in how we use our liberty in Christ. Yet we must be willing to employ whatever means necessary to see our Native people redeemed in Christ and saved from an eternity of separation from God.

Are we willing to become weak for those who are weak, "under the law" for those in bondage, "traditional" for the traditionalist, and "culturally relevant" like the Apostle Paul among the cultures of our own Native Tribes for the sake of the gospel? Can we use our liberty in Christ to go to where lost people go?

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law, I became like one under the law (though I myself are not under the law), so as to win those under the law. ... To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. 1 Corinthians 9:19-24

As Native leaders it is we who must be careful that we do not allow Biblical ignorance to lead to an unfounded fear of syncretism among ourselves. We must counsel, pray and dialogue to prevent syncretism from becoming an emotionally defined standard for a type of modern day inquisition meant to root and burn out of Native Christians any tie to their culture and tradition. When we do

this, what we are doing is basically denying God's handiwork in us.

Allegiance

Another issue is what is referred to in missiological terms as Dual Allegiance. Simply stated it is when a person comes to Christ and attends church for the Christian functions and ceremony but goes to the medicine man when he or she has a need for power or some supernatural function. His or her allegiance is divided between the two systems of belief.

There are a number of Christian Native theologians and academics around the country who are currently studying and working to give us some solid Biblical definitions from missiological, anthropological and historical perspectives as to the differences between cultural forms, meanings and functions. The problem is Native believers who give as much strength of authority to a cultural form as they do the truth of Scripture. They fear the cultural form as much as the Spirit of God. It is a kind of dual allegiance when a person gives or places equal significance, or estimation of power and authority, to both Satan and darkness as they do to God and Light. This is true of both newer and older more mature believers.

This mindset leads to a split view of reality for the Native believer in regard to his or her culture. As a follower of Jesus Christ it is important for me to know that I can be fully Native and fully Christian. They are not mutually exclusive realities. Satan is not more involved in my Lakota or Mi'kmaq tradition, ceremony and culture than he is in Dutch, Spanish, French or Chinese.

Idolatry and Cows

The story of the golden calf stands tall in the books of idolatry. The creation of a stubborn and impatient people, they sought to temporize the living God in the form of a calf made of gold, capturing Him for their worship, making His presence permanent among them. But, idolatry is not really about bulls nor is it about gold. If it were, God

might have destroyed all the cattle in the world and caused all economies based on gold to collapse. Even though the Hindu religion elevates cattle to the position of an idol, God is not angry at animals. Idolatry is about misdirected worship or allegiance. God does not judge us on our outward appearances but the inward condition of our hearts.

Idol worship is not about woodcarvings, stone statues, animals, mountains, astronomical bodies, but worship in the human heart — allegiance.¹⁵ Dual allegiance would be when a person believes that participating in a sweat lodge or smudging (fanning the smoke of burning sage or cedar over one's body) actually purifies his mind, spirit and soul in exactly the same way that the blood of Christ does.

Some Illustrations for Consideration

1. Incense and Prayer

Suppose a Greek Christian enjoys the fragrant cinnamon aroma of a burning candle or sandalwood incense. She enjoys the fragrance purely for its ascetic value. Now suppose that she finds it personally meaningful to occasionally bum the candle or incense during her devotional prayer time. For her, it brings to mind the Scripture in Revelation that depicts prayer as incense, symbolically and literally, rising up to the very throne of God for His pleasure. The smell and smoke symbolically reminds her that through faith in Jesus Christ, God hears and answers prayer. Can you see anything wrong with this picture?

Now change the scenario and imagine that it is a Native Christian who enjoys the fragrant aroma of burning sage, sweet grass, or cedar -in effect incense. Again, imagine that this Native believer is also symbolically reminded by the sight of the ascending smoke, and aroma of the burning cedar bark, that prayers, through faith in Jesus Christ, are literally ascending upward to the very presence of God. The smoke and smell is a symbol or picture of the prayers of the saints spoken of in the Bible. Can you see anything wrong with this picture? In the Book of Revelation there are two references (5:8 and 8:3f) to incense being the prayers of the saints:

[T]he twenty four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

and,

Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand.

2. What About Drums?

During a typical Sunday morning church service electric guitars, synthesizers, tambourines (miniature hand drums) pianos, brass instruments, and/or a drum set are used in worship. A good drummer can add a lot to a worship band. Keeping a steady rhythm, adding some complimentary fill and a good bass beat are enjoyable and noticeable musical components.

Now, suppose the drummer sprained his ankle playing basketball the day before, and not wanting to eliminate the bass drum or re-injure his ankle, he decided that rather than try to use the foot pedal to pound out the beat on the big bass drum, he would turn it over on its flat side and use his drum stick instead. He noticed that with the new angle of the drum, several drummers could join him in pounding out the beat on the bass drum, so he invited several of his friends to join him and gave them each their own drum stick. To make a louder sound, he made their sticks with larger heads. Now on Sunday mornings, there were five or six guys who volunteered to help play that big bass drum in the worship band. Does the Bible have anything to say about the angle a bass drum is played or how many can play it? Is it Christian to play it with a foot pedal placed on its edge, and unchristian to lay it flat and beat it with a stick? What about using an elk skin drum made by a Christian Native pastor on Sunday morning?

3. What about Feathers?

When our [Lacota] boys turn thirteen we have a special gathering of friends and family to honour them. We prepare a meal for everyone, and we ask several Christian men and women who have areas of skill or success to say a few words of encouragement and challenge to them about their area of strength. We give them their first leather bound Bible with their name on it. We also give each of them a plaque with the verse from Isaiah 40:30-31 that reads: “Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength, they will soar on wings like eagles; They will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” And, attached to that plaque is a beautiful and finely beaded eagle feather.

The eagle feather is a visual and symbolic reminder to them of the Biblical realities of youth and putting their hope and faith in God. Even from a distance, when they can't read the text of Scripture inscribed on the plaque, the feather reminds them of the reality and truth of God's Word, that if they put their faith in Jesus Christ, they can soar like an eagle in the midst of life's temptations and difficulties.

Is there anything syncretistic or compromising of God's word with the plaque? If an eagle feather can be used on a plaque, could it be used as a piece of jewelry, adorning an article of clothing or worn in the hair?

4. The Cross: Symbol of Roman Torture

Christianity is loaded with forms, meanings and functions. There is nothing “Christian” about a cross. The cross was around a long time before the birth of Christ and was universally considered under Roman rule to be a symbol of human torture, suffering and death. It was identified as evil and sinful. And yet, the shape of a cross (a symbol or form) has come to be identified with Christianity. Crowns, doves, crosses, fish shapes, steeples, pews, olive (anointing) oil, etc., are all form/symbols that have meaning to Christians and fulfill a function.

The forms themselves can mean something totally different to non-Christians. Turn the cross upside down and it takes on a whole different meaning for a Satanist. Take the olive oil into the kitchen and it takes on a different function.

Why then, as Native Americans, are our traditional or ceremonial symbols and forms considered evil or unbiblical, and worse yet “unfit” for use in a Christian context? Why is using a Native drum considered syncretism, but a Hawaiian drum not? Is this God's plan?

Corn pollen has an entirely different meaning for the Navajo people than it does for the Mohawks. Difficulties arise when the Mohawk believer uses corn pollen for a legitimate aesthetic use in the presence of a Navajo believer. Tipis are the traditional housing for the Plains people. Tipis are also used by the Native American Church for their services in the Southwest. Because the peyote people use tipis, does this mean that believers in the Southwest should avoid using a tipi because it is syncretistic? What would happen if Plains people decided to begin using hogans for their peyote ceremonies in the Dakotas? Would the Lakota believers identify hogans as ungodly ceremonial lodges and stay away from them?

Interpretive Frameworks

We recognize the spiritual warfare dynamic in many of these issues! Some items have been and are dedicated to the worship of idols or spiritistic practices. We understand that there are times that demonic strongholds must first be broken and the authority of Christ established in the use of some things. But this is not necessarily true in every instance and for every thing. These are difficult questions. But remember what we are after is raising the proverbial ceiling and expanding the options that we have regarding our views of culture and its place in God's purposes. As is the case with all cultures of the world, so with Native cultures, different things take on different meanings. Allowing a meaning from one culture or people to dictate or dominate another people's understanding is not normative.

This is perhaps the strongest witness and most compelling testimony confirming God’s desire and purpose to see and use our redeemed cultural practices for His glory and honor. Our songs, dances, regalia, languages, arts — all of these cultural forms — can be used for the communication of Good News among the peoples of the earth who identify with them and, their meanings can be re-oriented — to the praise and honour of Jesus Christ!

Who will say, “Here am I Lord. Send me!” As Cayuga, Lakota and Mi’kmaq Native men, we believe, like Esther the Moabite, we have been born for such a time as this. We challenge you in a spirit of love, humility and respect, to reconsider the place you give to your traditional cultural practices as a Christian Native man or woman. Perhaps at no other time in the history of world missions has a people group been so uniquely positioned by Almighty God to serve as Ambassadors of Peace. Courage and perseverance have always been values held in high regard among our nations. By God’s grace and mercy we have persevered — we are still here!

Let us with faith and courage respond to God’s obvious call to rise up in the strength of our cultural identities as the redeemed of the Lord, ready to take the Gospel of Christ to the ends of the earth.

Endnotes

1. Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas, Texas: Word, 1995), 50.

2. *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1982), 484ff.

3. Shelley, 50.

4. R. John Fischer, *What on Earth Are We Doing? Finding our Place as Christians in the World* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant, 1996), 19.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 29.

7. Ibid., 30.

8. David Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1980), 338f.

9. Charles Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness*,

(Orbis Books, 1996), 91.

10. Grunlan & Mayers, as quoted in Fischer, 230.

11. Fisher, *What on Earth are We Doing*, 26.

12. Ibid., 29.

13. Lloyd Commander as quoted in Fisher, *What on Earth are We Doing?*

14. Adrian Jacobs, *Syncretism, Meeting of the Two Roads*, n.d.

15. Please read Isaiah 44:14-19 for a good study in dual allegiance.

Indigenous Theology: Abating Colonial Impact

TERRY LEBLANC

For generations, Native North Americans and other Indigenous peoples have lived the false belief that a fulfilled relationship with their Creator through Jesus required rejection of their own culture, and the adoption of another – European in origin. In consequence, conventional approaches to mission with Indigenous peoples in North America and around the world have produced relatively dismal outcomes. The net result has been to subject Indigenous people to deep-rooted self-doubt at best, self-hatred at worst. As Isabelle Knockwood, a survivor of a Church-run Residential School observed,

I thought about how many of my former schoolmates, like Leona, Hilda and Maimie, had died premature deaths. I wondered how many were still alive and how they were doing, how well they were coping, and if they were still carrying the burden of the past on their shoulders like I was.¹

Countless efforts, over the past four centuries or more, have even targeted not so much to spiritual transformation as to social and cultural annihilation

(many of these spawned in the 20th century alone). The relatively unambiguous mandate of many mission conferences in the 20th century was, ostensibly, to continue civilizing and christianizing — a task begun as far back as the earliest mission of the Jesuits at the beginning of the 17th century. Their collective failure to produce the outcomes intended might cause us to conclude that Indigenous people possess a unique spiritual intransigence to the Gospel.

But that would not tell the whole story.

The real tale is best told through a more careful examination of the numbers of Indigenous people who, despite the tragic engagement of Christian mission in their lives and communities over the centuries, still claim affinity to one tradition or another of the Christian church of these there are many. Here we discover people from the Arctic to Mexico stumbling heavenward within the Kingdom of God despite the bleakness of their current social realities — much of which is clearly and unequivocally connected to the wrong-headedness of mission to their people.²

Terry LeBlanc is Mi'kmaq/Acadian in his 42nd year of marriage to Bev. He and Bev have three adult children – twin daughters and one son. He holds a PhD in Intercultural Studies from Asbury Theological Seminary, specializing in Theology and Anthropology. He is the founding Chair and current Director of NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community.

The North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies (NAIITS)³ emerged in response to a growing need to transform these otherwise depressing, death-dealing, historical statistics into life-giving reconciliation — of people with their Creator, of individuals with themselves, and of humanity with the rest of creation. A small cadre of mature Native practitioners directs NAIITS, most of whom have been personally invested in exploring and living out the theology they are espousing for more than twenty-five years. Theological and biblical understanding resonant from within the cultures and traditions of Indigenous people has emerged from this interaction.

Christianity, as presented to us over the centuries, offered soul salvation, a ticket home to eternity, but had been essentially unconcerned with the rest of our lives — lives that history makes clear, were nonetheless fully exploited by those bringing the salvation offer. It was in 1999, with this and more in mind, that the renewed controversy over Indigenous cultural and theological contextualization of the gospel compelled our small group of Indigenous Jesus followers to respond. Since that time, our unwavering commitment has been to facilitate transformation and growth through the power of the gospel as over against the propositional, controlling, westernized, religious expression of that gospel often presented to us. At times this has been a daunting task, since the juggernaut of Western mission, theology, and theological method has tended to decry as heterodox, anything of a contrary nature.⁴

Central to our purpose is the challenge of a deep-seated western ethnocentrism in theology and mission — at least as experienced among our own people. We believe success in this endeavour will encourage Native followers of Jesus to more effectively contribute to the wider community of Christian faith — a contribution we see as needful, not only for ourselves, but also for the wider church. It is our view that the essentially mono-cultural, mono-philosophical foundations of Christian faith in North America have stultified theological and therefore missiological development

for many decades, relegating the praxis of faith to variant but nonetheless unhealthy patterns of self-absorbed individualism. Questions that might offer opportunity for real change are not asked or, if asked, are responded to out of the same unchanging interpretive and philosophical framework.

Our response to all of this is visible in several shifts that I sketch out below.

First Shift

First, we have shifted away from the dualistically framed philosophies within which European and Euro-North American theologies have been classically undertaken, to a more holistic philosophical frame of reference. Active engagement with traditional Indigenous thinking and a more biblically faithful position toward the gospel has been the result of this shift. To Indigenous people, life is not easily captured in the simple binaries and either/or realities still so comfortably situated within Western thought. The Hebraic “both/and” is much more akin to our philosophy than the Greek “either/or.” To be sure, this has been addressed time and again in Christian theological and academic circles, but to little, if any, resolution.

Consider, for example, the continuing Western struggle to understand that the whole of creation is the focus of God’s redemptive activity in Christ. The Christian Scripture is abundantly clear that redemption through Jesus’ work on the cross has implications far beyond our generally limited focus on the restoration of human beings alienated from their Creator. If the covenant of Genesis 9 were insufficient to make the case, Paul is quite clear that the creation groans in travail awaiting its own redemption (Romans 8:18-25). Yet, even as we give tacit assent to this in our Christian theologies, we fail miserably to account for the work of the Spirit — dare I say, the gifts of the Spirit — so abundantly evident in the rest of Creation through which that groaning is becoming increasingly unmistakable, and from which we might learn something about the means and trajectory of our common salvation were we to listen more carefully.

Most times the best we seem able to offer as a robust creation/redemption theology is a wonderful, pastoral scene or awe-inspiring panoramic of the rest of creation projected on the screen behind the lyrics of the hymns and choruses we sing. Seldom in evangelical writing does the idea that Jesus came to give his life so that the rest of creation might also be redeemed find a voice.⁵ Make no mistake; our current environmental quandary is the outcome of Christian theology, framed in dualist thought over many centuries, gone awry.

Compounded dualisms resident in classical Christian theology have also, from our vantage point, created senseless divisions of reality into the sacred and profane, sacred and secular, natural and supernatural. Westerners are once again discovering that not everyone in the world assumes life is to be experienced on two separated planes of existence, isolated from the rest of a supernatural creation because they have arbitrarily dictated its delimitations. For most of us in the Indigenous world, everything expresses the sacred, for it all proceeds from the sacred being, from God — regardless of the means of its creation. Not only is it fully sacred, but also clearly, despite scientific discovery, still a significant mystery.

Second Shift

The second shift is in respect of our biblical starting point. Western theology, in the firm grip of Augustine's articulation of sin and sin's nature, has inevitably commenced its theological undertakings with the Genesis experience of chapter three — the "fall." Scraping the bottom of the sin barrel, then turning it over to see what lies beneath, has occupied much of Western Christian thought down through the centuries. It is precisely this practice that made it theologically possible for missionaries and monarchs, Popes and priests, vicars and viceroys, to proclaim our lack of humanity and soullessness — to pronounce, as did missionaries of the 17th century, "These heathen must first be civilized so that they might then become fit receptacles of the Gospel of Jesus Christ."⁶ Curious

that a people who believed in the omnipresence of God could announce his absence from what they deemed to be a godless, heathen land and people! This is tantamount to the theist believing the deist's truth.

Compounded dualisms together with this Genesis three start, created the European frames of reference whereby Indigenous peoples could be relegated to a state less than human and therefore subjected to a capricious death at the hands of European colonials as per Aquinas' own thought centuries before...

"Unbelievers deserve not only to be separated from the Church, but also... to be exterminated from the World by death." Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1271.

This and other sentiments exactly like it are what grew from the interlacing of a Genesis three starting point with theologies rooted in binary thinking. Recently I was confronted by the ideas of a prominent evangelical that our efforts at contextualization of the gospel — of cultural appropriation in worship — were leading people astray, since pre-contact Indigenous people were overcome with lust and murder, idolatry and devil worship. He further noted that Western civilization came to our social, spiritual, and cultural rescue since nothing of value existed within our societies and cultures. This is an intriguing thought given that the words of many Europeans in the earliest period of contact and mission rebut this. Consider the following statements, among many hundreds, or more that could be mustered in defence of a different view, for example...

And, in this respect, I consider all these poor savages, whom we commiserate, to be very happy; for pale Envy doth not emaciate them, neither do they feel the inhumanity of those who serve God hypocritically, harassing their fellow-creatures under this mask: nor are they subject to the artifices of those who, lacking virtue and goodness wrap themselves up in a mantle of false piety to nourish their ambition. If they do not know

God, at least they do not blaspheme him, as the greater number of Christians do. Nor do they understand the art of poisoning, or of corrupting chastity by devilish artifice (Marc Lescarbot, in *The Jesuit Relations*, 1610).

And...

Moreover, if it is a great blessing to be free from a great evil, our Savages are happy; for the two tyrants who provide hell and torture for many of our Europeans, do not reign in their great forests – I mean ambition and avarice. As they have neither political organization, nor offices, nor dignities, nor any authority, for they only obey their Chief through good will toward him, therefore they never kill each other to acquire these honours. Also, as they are contented with a mere living, not one of them gives himself to the Devil to acquire wealth (Le Jeune, in *The Jesuit Relations*, 1634).

Now reflect, for just a moment, on the political landscape of Europe from 1492 through to the 20th century — of the countless wars over land, the lust for more that drove Europe's and then North America's "development" — and tell me what you think about murder, idolatry, greed and lust! Daniel Paul, Mi'kmaq author and historian, reflecting on these very contradictions, wrote a book titled, 'We were not the Savages.' Apropos given the continued aversion to full truth telling concerning historical mission and its context.

To the NAIITS community, resolution of these conflicting images requires that we begin at the start of the biblical narrative, Genesis one. We feel it important to ask questions about the thought, the plan, the idea, and intent of God, interpreting all we see and experience in light of this plan — before we ask how it is that it became "subjected to futility." Shift two seems particularly important and relevant in this post-resurrection era where all of creation — not simply the human soul fit for heaven — has been and is being redeemed and restored through Jesus.

Third Shift

If the first two shifts have not already done so, the third shift brands us as suspect to some. It runs along two tracks. The first track concerns Christian notions of the spiritual. Reading the devotional and spiritual masters of the centuries (consider, for example, the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius), one would be tempted to conclude several things. First, one could readily assume that things spiritual are primarily cognitively embraced and experienced. Rationalist theologies and mission praxis, much of which has been based in propositional truth, and the positivistic, evidentiary approach to decisions about God, owe their existence to this understanding, a product of Enlightenment thinking. The second track emerges when we ask Christians about their understanding of the spiritual. Responses suggest that being spiritual is about behaviour — whether I have devotions, read scripture, pray a particular way, fast etc. It would appear from their comments that what I do is my spirituality!

Some years ago now I spent several days on the streets, sleeping in the back of my vehicle, searching for a young crack addict. He was my relative and falling deeper and deeper into the grip of his addiction. Accompanying me on one of those days was a Euro-Canadian pastor friend. Having finally tracked the young man down, we sat together on the street curb listening to the story the addicted young man told. At a pause in the story, my pastor friend made a comment about the young man's church upbringing, contrasting this with his current state — to which the young man replied, "You don't think I'm spiritual, do you?" And this is precisely what most Christians have come to believe: spirituality is about behaviour, not a quality extant within human beings by the very act of having been created — irrespective of behaviour!

A corollary to this second track emerges, becoming more crystalline within inter-religious dialogues. The corollary is, simply stated, that there are various kinds of human spirituality — Buddhist, Christian, Hindu etc.; with various subsets to all of these. For Christians to suggest this, how-

ever, is passing strange; Christians are not polytheists. They affirm instead that there is but one God, and that all of humanity has been imparted with the singular image and likeness of that God, not “gods.” How then, the multiplicity?

Our history as Indigenous people, and our general disposition toward life, suggests that all of creation is of a spiritual nature — not just human beings. We also see this clearly expressed in a non-metaphoric, non-anthropomorphic, non-epitomized read of scripture (e.g. Genesis 1:28-30; Job 12:1ff; Romans 8:22ff). This has implications for how we view the work of Jesus and the cross — not simply as providing for soul salvation, but rather ensuring the restoration of all things to the plan and intent of God (refer to shift two!). Experience with both the biblical text and life itself tells us that all of creation is possessed of a spiritual nature — and all is the focus of God’s redemptive activity in Jesus. Christian theology, particularly evangelical theology in the USA, has struggled to comprehend this, assigning the labels pantheism or panentheism to a more inclusive understanding of the nature of the spiritual which includes the rest of creation as a concomitant focus for Jesus’ work on the cross. To be sure, human spirituality is augmented, and therefore differentiated from the rest of creation by the gift and impartation of God’s image and likeness — now marred by the collapse of creation’s harmony. But this does not diminish the spiritual nature of the rest of creation, rendering it inanimate “stuff.”

Fourth Shift

Though there are other shifts we have made, a significant fourth lies in our understanding of story. To us, communal narrative serves a hugely compelling and significant function. It can be both objective and factual, containing clear teachings for life, which, if ignored, put one in dire peril, while simultaneously mythic and broadly flourished for narrative effect — all in an integral collection where one form is not valued above the other. Each form or genre of story, each teller of a story within the

grander narrative of the community, is fitted within the wider collection; a compendium the community stewards through the generations to teach about the world and the way of life within it. Removing one, subjecting one to dissection, or truncating its meaning by casting doubt on its authenticity, when the ancestors have clearly included it, destroys the whole.

As one of our members has said, “Changing the story of the Three Little Pigs to remove the house of sticks and go directly to the house of bricks is to lose the story. My grandchildren would respond and say, ‘Nookum, that’s not the way the story goes!’” This means, to most of us in the NAIITS community, that the Christian scriptures must not be dissected by literary method — or even contemporary narrative theological technique — so as to arrive at the “essence of the story” and its teachings or the central story-teller’s words; doing so truncates the story, rendering it impotent.

With these considerations and many others in mind, NAIITS has created the first theological education programs of their kind, offering undergraduate through post-graduate degree programs in partnership with credible evangelical educational institutions. Our hope in doing so is to bring change for our people, and others who may wish to come along on the journey — all rooted in the story of the person, work, life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

For more information:

<http://www.naiits.com/>

Endnotes

1. Knockwood, Isabelle. *Out of the Depths: The Experiences of Mi’kmaq Children at the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie*, Nova Scotia. 1992. P. 134.
2. Native North Americans “lead” in all the negative social statistics in Canada and the United States as well as in Mexico: poor health, addictions, family violence, unemployment, homelessness, lack of education etc. are all extremely high in First nations, Inuit, Métis and Native American communities.
3. Now simply known as NAIITS: An Indigenous

Learning Community.

4. It needs to be said, at this point that neither conservative nor classic liberal Christians – particularly in the USA — are significantly different in this expectation. Both, with their respective points of dogma, expect their particular tracks to be followed.

5. I note the very recent work by Howard Snyder and Joel Scandrett, *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, as a recent change in thinking.

6. Chrestien LeClercq, 1620 New Relations of the Gaspesians.

The Resurrection of Story

RAY ALDRED

In the last 22 years of ministry one of the reoccurring themes I have encountered is that Christianity is a “white-man’s” religion. Thus, I propose that Western theology as traditionally practised is no longer adequate to communicate all that Christianity is and could be among the Aboriginal people of Canada. In particular the reductionist tendencies of the two dominant Western theological trends have in effect cut off Aboriginal people from the gospel story.

Both fundamentalist and evangelical theology has tended to place the gospel story second to their theological propositions or truth statements. For Aboriginal people the gospel story is lost because in order to embrace this form of Western theology, one must first adopt a particular Western paradigm of truth-telling. Ultimately uniformity is most prized, rather than unity in the midst of diversity.

At the same time liberal theology has tended to focus so much upon personal experience that the

gospel story is lost amidst a myriad of personal testimonies. As a result community is lost and an extreme individualized religion fills the land. Isolation is confused for diversity and coexistence is equated with community. In the place of abstracted truth statements or personal religious experience, I propose that Aboriginal Christian theology could begin with the gospel story proper. In this new resurrection of story, our initial guideposts include both Aboriginal oral tradition and post-liberal narrative theology.

Fundamentalism and Propositional Truth

Much of the 20th century missionary efforts among Aboriginal people have been carried out by groups with a fundamentalist theological orientation and the church communities established by them likewise share that mould. The fundamentalist theological movement has sought to reduce the gospel

Ray Aldred, Th.D., (ABD), (Wycliffe College), is husband to Elaine and father of four adult children. He is a Cree from the Swan River Band in Alberta. Ray completed his B.Th. and his M.Div. at Canadian Theological Seminary, graduating both degrees Summa Cum Laude. Former Director of the First Nations Alliance Churches in Canada, Ray currently teaches theology at Ambrose University College and Seminary.

Ray is also both contributor and product of the NAIITS consortiums approach to theological and biblical training and a part-time faculty with NAIITS. His earned doctorate is in Theology.

to a set of propositions. The inherent problem in this approach is the fact that the propositions themselves do not tell the story of how Western culture arrived at these conclusions. The process of reading, interacting with the text, and observing one's society is overlooked or reduced to a set of pithy statements that one signs to say that one is part of the group. (For example, I had to sign a set of propositions in order to work in the Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada). The true process by which one arrives at these doctrinal conclusions is not taught. That process is traditionally the realm of the experts who produce a set of statements that are intended to encapsulate the gospel but may in reality replace the gospel.

Fundamentalist theology with its supplanting of the gospel story with a set of propositions carries with it several negative implications for an authentic Aboriginal Christian spirituality. First and foremost it promotes a spirituality based upon Western empiricism, which is neither "Aboriginal" nor "spiritual." Fundamentalist propositionalism with its assumption that one's own statements are the essence of eternal truth precludes any ability to change in order to account for new information or a new context.¹ This inability to change that is inherent to fundamentalist theology effectively cuts off Aboriginal people from developing an Aboriginal Christian spirituality. Ironically fundamentalism was a reaction against or an attempt at reconciling conservative Christianity with Western empiricism. As such it is a Western Christian attempt at contextualization of the gospel. However, in failing to see its own contextualization it supposes that it is the "only" way one can practise Christianity. Thus it restricts the development of an "Indian" Christianity.

Fundamentalist theology assumes that Aboriginal people will assimilate and adopt a western, modern, worldview. Five hundred years of history reveal that Aboriginal people are unwilling to assimilate. Aboriginal people continue to maintain their cultural identity.² Many desire to live in harmony with the Creator through his Son Jesus Christ but fundamentalism with its propositional

truth is not reconcilable to people maintaining their identity as Aboriginal. One must look elsewhere for a starting point that is more compatible with Aboriginal people.

Some turn to classic liberal theology for a different starting point. After all, liberal theology seems much more open to different points of view. The movement seems to embrace every position except for those who claim to be exclusive — surely there would be a place found for an Aboriginal Christian spirituality. This author believes that like fundamentalist theology, liberal theology is also inadequate to provide a holistic starting point for Aboriginal Christianity.

A classic liberal position in seeking to be all encompassing is a form of reductionism because it too seeks to assimilate all into its own position. Classic liberal theology in seeking to affirm everyone's position ends up reducing everyone's spirituality to an individualized personalized faith. As such it fails to be able to understand the communal nature of the gospel story. The gospel story is about groups of people in dynamic relationship with God through Christ and with one another. Liberalism ultimately reduces Christianity and faith to what everyone does all the time. Thus, it sets aside a Christian Aboriginal spirituality by saying what was there before the arrival of the gospel is adequate. In essence then, a liberal theologian may say that to be Christian and Indian is unnecessary because you only need to be "Indian" and there is no need to be Christian. Thus the liberal position assumes itself able to determine the suitability of Christianity for Aboriginal people. Again, this is not helpful in seeking to live an authentic Aboriginal Christian spirituality.

This personalization of faith, whereby the authority of the validity of one's faith rests upon one's personal experience, seeks to affirm the individuality of faith but ends up moving the locus of authority from the believing community to the believing individual. This poses two difficulties for a harmonious spirituality. First, instead of a choir of voices presenting a picture of Christ incarnate in

a particular culture, one ends up with a cacophony of voices each presenting their individualized position. Western individualization ends up producing isolation instead of community. Second, the liberal theological model tends to devolve community into the aggregate total of moral units together at one place in one time. It has no meaningful way to talk about community outside of the sum total of individuality. For this reason this position has not been helpful for Aboriginal people who see their identity extending forward to their children and backward to their ancestors. No place is found for this in a liberal theological approach.

Mark Twain said “Faith is believing what you know ain’t so.”³ It appears that the classic liberal position seems to adopt a “Mark Twainian” faith when it accepts, as does the fundamental position, a dichotomy between faith and facts. The liberal position seems to assume that faith, like ethics and morals, lies in the realm of the subjective and facts lie in the realm of truth. The former makes up one’s private world; the latter is where one lives a public life. This approach to life is unacceptable to an Aboriginal mindset, which assumes that the spiritual is as real as the physical universe. In the end the liberal theological universe assumes that the Western universe, with its dichotomy between faith and facts, real and unreal, subjective and objective, is the real universe.⁴ Everything is reduced to a non-descript blandness. Again this is an inadequate starting point because harmonious relationship with God through Christ and with his people is reduced to individualized “feelings”.

On this basis, I would argue both the fundamentalist position and liberal position have proven inadequate to describe and communicate an Aboriginal Christian spirituality. A better place to begin an Aboriginal Christian spirituality is with story. There is a need for the resurrection of story. A modest attempt to resurrect the gospel story will include borrowing some elements from Narrative theology together with elements of Aboriginal oral tradition.

The Language of Story

In order for an Aboriginal Christian spirituality to thrive it must happen within the context of community. However, there needs to be a new language of community or a recapturing of an ancient language of community, the language of story. The language of Western empiricism manifested as fundamentalist or liberal theology is not adequate for it is the language of science and individual study. Hope for a truly Aboriginal Christian spirituality lies in placing the gospel story as the first thing. This will allow a spirituality that not only shapes the gospel story but is shaped by the gospel story.⁵ As was stated from the outset, missions in Canada have never placed a great importance on imparting the gospel story into the hands of Aboriginal people. Both fundamentalist and liberals implicitly, and explicitly in some cases, assume that Aboriginal people will adopt their Western lens and technique. But, by saying that the gospel story is the first thing one provides a better environment for a faith community to develop where an Aboriginal Christian spirituality is lived out. The text or gospel story becomes the language of community and the means by which the community is formed.⁶

The priority of the gospel story from which one derives a Christian Aboriginal spirituality is in keeping with how identity and oral tradition work among Aboriginal people. In order for an authentic Christian Aboriginal spirituality to develop one needs to be able to hear truth as a community that is larger than just the sum total of individuals in a room at one time. There is a need to understand how the gospel story communicates to groups of people and becomes the language of a faith community. Western Christianity struggles with a concept of expanded community, but Aboriginal oral tradition is helpful at this point.

It needs to be made clear that I do not presuppose that Aboriginal oral tradition contains stories that are similar to biblical narratives and thus reveals more proof that we are all going in the same direction, just via different routes. There is no desire to supplant the biblical narratives with

a set of Aboriginal traditional stories. To do this would be to buy into a liberal kind of approach that reduces everything to a Carl Rogerian, “you’re okay, I’m okay.” Rather, this is an appeal to understand the ethics of storytelling that still exist in Aboriginal oral tradition. This is not about understanding how ancient Aboriginal myths and fables might substitute or accomplish a contrived utilitarian purpose, but rather how real Aboriginal history — the real stories — can be understood to have a place in the biblical narrative. And how the gospel story, the canon of scripture, can encompass and be reconciled with Aboriginal people so that an Aboriginal Christian spirituality can thrive.

This author’s own historical roots are within a cultural group in which oral tradition was important. The Aboriginal people of Canada used the medium of story telling to pass on and preserve the wisdom of the elders. These stories were considered the property of the extended family or group. There were certain ways in which stories were used and ways in which certain meaning was derived from them. There were particular contexts in which certain stories were applicable. It is important to understand that the identity of the storyteller is more than that of autonomous individual. The first ethic of storytelling is that although the storyteller is usually an individual, his or her identity is expanded to include the whole community. He or she does not just speak for himself or herself; but speaking as representative of something bigger than oneself.

The one telling the story is part of a succession of storytellers who have entered into *understanding*. Another proper ethic among storytellers is that they do not ‘know’ a story but they ‘understand’ something. The difference between these two words, at least for one interviewed Aboriginal elder, is that ‘knowing something’ meant one had originated an idea. Thus, the person who said “I know” was displaying arrogance because he or she assumed that wisdom had begun with them. On the other hand the person who said, “I understand”, was acknowledging that wisdom was something that flowed from the Creator and they were

merely entering into a ‘river of understanding’ as it were. So then, a storyteller may exercise creativity but the story is in control, not the storyteller.

The Community in Story

It must also be understood that an individual’s identity includes not only one’s present community but it also extends to those who have come before. Again one can observe this among the Aboriginal people of Canada. A member of a family wants to honour their parents, grandparents and ancestors by behaving in an honourable manner. If a promise was made to one’s ancestors, it was made to the present person also. One of the current debates in Canadian politics centers on the present generation’s understanding of promises made to previous generations by the government. These promises center on tax exemption and are preserved in the oral tradition. The promises made to ancestors are binding upon the present generation because they were present in the identity of their grandfathers. Identity is understood by the Aboriginal people to include those who have come before, and those who will come after. This is illustrated by praying for one’s grandchildren, even before there are any grandchildren.

Could not a resurrected gospel story function as the story of Christian Aboriginal people? After all the biblical narrative gives clues that the writing of text was a communal function. It is possible that a community was the author of the text and the biblical texts bear witness that this is the case. The language of 1 John, for example, reveals that the person holding the pen has the whole community of faith in mind as the author. First John 1:1 states “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life....” The plural pronouns make plain that the author is not an autonomous individual but a spokesperson for the community of faith. It is possible then, to conclude that at least in 1 John the community was a type of author.

It is interesting that in the past many fundamentalist and liberal biblical scholars seemed willing to acknowledge an original author and subsequent redaction occurring but they seemed unwilling to think of the text coming out of a community, in essence a text as a group project.⁷ Questions over who the original author was and editorial changes seem to have been used to remove the authority from the gospel story and to place it under the Bible scholar's expertise. An understanding of Aboriginal oral tradition aligns with some of the insight put forward by Brevard Childs.

In *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, Childs explores the concept of canon as not only a list of the books that the church holds as authoritative, but canon "as the rule that delineates the area in which the church hears the word of God".⁸ Thus canon serves as the context for interpretation. Childs states that the canon as a context does not mean that the books of the Bible are archives for history but rather are the means through which God works among his people.⁹ The text of the Bible cannot be separated from the community of faith because the community is shaped by the text and the community shapes the text. What is interesting for this discussion is that the whole setting of canon involves the work of God in his people through his Spirit over an extended period of history.

The unity of the canon then is testified to by the Church — not only the Church that decided on the final form of the canon but the whole Church over history. God in Christ revealed by his Spirit shapes his people using his word and at the same time his people shape the canon. God is behind the books but there is a group acknowledgement that the canon is used by God to shape his people.

Childs points out that the "juxtaposition of the two Testaments in a particular order and form creates a context that is different from either of the two Testaments alone".¹⁰ Thus, the sacred Scriptures of the community of faith, which took several hundreds of years to take their final form, is clearly the work of an ongoing interpretative community.

Ultimately it is the concern to preserve the story of the gospel that drives the community into forming the canon — a gospel story used by God to shape the very people preserving the story.

The author of 1 John speaking on behalf of others is acknowledged later by the believing community as a voice within the canon. This canon is shaped by the community and used by the community in its own shaping. This shaping does not originate with them, but God. For this shaping is carried out by the group by the power of the Spirit. Having said all this, would it then be fair to say the process of group re-creation ends with the Church of the past? God's work did not cease with the closure of the canon. His work continues through his people to this day. The canon serves as a link to the primitive Christian community. Succeeding communities of faith embrace the canon and stand in the place of the primitive community. This means that those who have owned the gospel story and have been owned by the story are taken into or receive an expanded identity. Thus an Aboriginal faith community which is shaped by the canon of Scripture, the gospel story, is fully Christian and fully "Indian".

This idea of communal identity seems rather evident in the biblical story. Our sinfulness is somehow linked to Adam's fall. Our righteousness is linked to that which was done by Christ some two thousand years ago. Christ even prayed for those who were present with him, but also those who would come to believe through the testimony of the ones who were with them (John 17). It would be short sighted to think this was restricted to only those living then or in the short time after Jesus' ascension to be included in His prayer. Perhaps, Jesus was praying for the grandchildren.

There are numerous other places where the biblical story makes plain that the Christian community, the Church, defines the Christian's identity. This identity includes those living and those past. This definition of identity means that each subsequent community of believers stands in the place of those who have come before as a type of

author, an agent of the story, to use Stanley Hauerwas' terminology.¹¹ This notion of the community as agent is an apt description of the Church's identity as the receiver of the story but also the storyteller who re-creates the story by its witness.¹²

This expanded idea of identity, as has been shown, is not a new idea. This expanded view of identity is an alternative to the modern autonomous individual. This understanding of Christian identity means that any speaker within the group has access to a wide range of experience, broader than his or her own.¹³ This means that the speaker is not speaking for himself only or from himself only, but is a spokesperson for the community.¹⁴ In this way the speaker is like a storyteller in oral culture. He or she is passing on the wisdom of the community. For the preacher, like the storyteller, is part of something bigger than herself. The community is larger than the individual and God is transcendent over all and the Holy Spirit is using the preaching event to create a people who "use their language correctly".¹⁵ The Church needs to understand that not only are they a character in the gospel story but also the storyteller.

At this point some may object that one will end up with a myriad of stories and each one of these be given the same place as the biblical narrative. Some from the liberal camp may even endorse the latter. But understanding that identity extends beyond just the individual means that there is a limitation to reconstruction. The preacher is not freed from his community to make silly interpretative decisions. The preacher must be faithful to the experience of the community flowing out of the biblical text. The preacher is a spokesperson for the community; the individual communities witness for the larger church; and the Church is "the public communal indirect presence of Christ."¹⁶ All this serves to put limits upon what is acceptable and unacceptable interpretation. The objection that moving the authority of interpretation from the objective autonomous scholar to the believing community will result in relativism proves unfounded. In fact, as Richard Rorty points out, the detached individual is the one more

tempted to uncontrolled relativism than the fully enmeshed member of a community:

Relativism, by contrast, is merely a red herring. The realist is, once again, projecting his own habits of thought upon the pragmatist when he charges him with relativism. For the realist thinks that the whole point of philosophical thought is to detach oneself from any particular community and look he hears pragmatist repudiating the desire for such a standpoint he cannot quite believe it. He thinks that everyone, deep down inside, must want detachment. So he attributes to the pragmatist a perverse form of his own attempted detachment, and sees him as an ironic, sneering aesthete who refuses to take the choice between communities seriously, a mere 'relativist.' But the pragmatist, dominated by the desire for solidarity, can only be criticized for taking his own community too seriously. He can only be criticized for ethnocentrism, not for relativism.¹⁷

The Story as First Thing

By putting the gospel story in the hands of Aboriginal people as a first thing, one would begin (and we are already seeing) an Aboriginal spirituality that is a faithful incarnation of Christ in the world, through his Spirit, in his people, shaped by his word—an authentic spirituality that is both "Indian" and "Christian".

So, fundamentalism and liberalism have limited value in helping develop Aboriginal Christian spirituality. These two movements as expressions of Western Christianity have rendered Christianity unpalatable to Aboriginal people who want to maintain their cultural identity and be Christian. However, it is unlikely at this point that either one will completely fade from the North American Christian landscape. This modest proposal, to have a new starting point by resurrecting the gospel story to a renewed place of being the first thing, may prove helpful as Aboriginal people move forward in developing an authentically Aboriginal

Christian spirituality.

Finally, Aboriginal oral tradition, in particular their understanding of how narrative functions and their ethics of storytelling, serve as a helpful critique of an inherent arrogance that exists within fundamental and liberal theologies. Both these systems assume that they have arrived at a point where they can evaluate the gospel story and 'know' it. The fundamentalist position then reduces the gospel story to proposition so they can control it, and the liberal position reduces the gospel story to myth and makes one a spectator of ancient events, left only with one's personal experience.¹⁸ Leslie Newbigin points out that the West will not move from evaluating the gospel with a scientific empiricism to having its scientific empiricism evaluated by the gospel until it hears the gospel told back to it from other cultures.¹⁹ Perhaps this is beginning to happen.

Endnotes

1. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Society* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 16f. 2.

Achiel Peelman, *Christ is a Native American* (Ottawa, Ontario: Novalis-Saint Paul University, 1995), 21-23.

3. Mark Twain, "Following the Equator: Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar. The full quote reads: There are those who scoff at the school boy, calling him frivolous and shallow. Yet it was the school boy who said, "Faith is believing what you know ain't so".

4. Ibid., 41.

5. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 33.

6. Ibid.

7. Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, n.d.), 66-77.

8 Ibid., 99.

9 Ibid., 99f.

10. Ibid., 109.

11. Stanley M. Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World and Living in Between* (Durham, North Carolina: Labyrinth, 1988), 59.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 60.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

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17. Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity" in Lawrence Cahoon, ed., *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1996), 582f.

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Authentic Christian Education from a Native American Point of View

LEONARD “CASEY” CHURCH

Introduction

We have come to this point in the contextual movement after many years of following the religious expressions of a culture far different than our own. History has shown the mistakes that have been made by well-intentioned missionaries, individuals who were educated in theology from a perspective foreign to the Native mind. Having sat under the tutelage of ministers and theologians who are not in relevant connection to our Native American culture, we are seeking to better understand what it means to be a Christian who is Native and how then to express ourselves in meaningful ways in our worship.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the implications of forming new models of education from a Native American point of view. The Western worldview and understanding has been a hindrance to the spread of the gospel among the Native peo-

ples of North American. George Barna, in his book entitled *Evangelism That Works*, says, “We must be sensitive to the people we are called to reach...and this sensitivity which we have not gotten, needs to undergo some very relevant shifts in order for a new generation of church leaders to be able to far surpass the efforts of earlier models of ministry.”¹

I will attempt within the scope of this paper to engage us on a journey of realization and move us towards acceptance of models for Christian education that will enable Christianity to express itself differently than in previous generations. Our hope for the development of new Christian education models will depend upon emerging leaders embracing a new paradigm, which if incorporated will see many more Native Americans accepting Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Casey is a Pokagon Band Potawatomi member. His Potawatomi name is Hole in the Cloud. He is of the Bear clan from his mother's side, the late Mary Church (Pokagon), a Pokagon Band Potawatomi member and the Crane clan from his father's side the late Leonard Church, Nottawasippi Huron Band. His wife Lora, their five children and he live in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Casey earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Anthropology at Grand Valley State University where he studied the culture and religion of Native American peoples. Casey also holds a Masters of Arts in Inter-Cultural Studies degree from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California where he studied culturally appropriate approaches to Christian theologizing in the Native American context. Currently, he is furthering his education in this topic by pursuing Doctoral degree in Inter-cultural Studies also at Fuller Theological Seminary.

Where We Have Come From

We are well aware that Native Americans were not discovered, but rather we discovered lost travellers to our shores. From that point of contact with Europeans until now there has been mistrust and misunderstanding about each other. Historically, Western styles of school were used to intentionally assimilate Native Americans into American culture. Boarding schools [residential schools in Canada] functioned along with the relocation strategies used by the United States Government to remove not only the Native Americans from their culture, but also from their land. Craig Smith, in his book *Whiteman's Gospel*, says, "The motivation for ministry wasn't to win Indians to Christ and allow Christ to meet them in the midst of their culture, language and identity. Rather, it was to 'Americanize' them."² Rev. Smith continues by noting that, "We must address head on the mistakes of the past and offer positive solutions and deal with them."³

In spite of the American systems Native Americans have managed to retain much of our integrity and identity. It has been said that the United States is a melting pot, but there is something about a Native American that does not melt. I believe it is in this aspect of Native American uniqueness, this untapped resource, where we must seek for further understanding of education that empowers.

In addition to this uniqueness there has been the passing on of traditions and values that have helped Native Americans cling to what is left of their identity. Over the years of contact with Native Americans where Western missionaries did not see physical schools, they concluded that the people did not have education. Every culture has a system of education. Many do not look like the Western model. In most of the world's traditional societies, children learn from adults through storytelling, mentoring and active participation. It is this method Jesus utilized when He chose the twelve disciples. Within this educational model is an opportunity where we can incorporate our Native American values and traditions.

Hindrances to the Spread of the Gospel

Looking back on the history of Native Americans' evangelization, not all was lost. Even in the midst of misunderstanding and insensitivity, missionaries did manage to reach at least seven percent. But the efforts of white missionaries and Native American ministers have been influenced by the mentality that there's nothing within Native American traditions and values that can be salvaged for authentic Christian worship. Dr. Charles Kraft, professor at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, in *Anthropology for Christian Witness*, states "[W]e Americans are able to enter any situation with an open mouth. We usually begin talking before we have listened. We are likely to assume we know what's going on and therefore, begin teaching before we have really learned anything about the people and their needs."⁴

So where has the "American" approach to Native education brought us? For one, we have been indoctrinated to think the Euro-American culture is Christian and our's could never be. Dr. Kraft continues on this subject by stating, "For non-westerners, western schooling even when it is received in one's home country, tends to glorify western customs and values and denigrate those of one's home society."⁵ The backlash of this mentality has entered our Bible colleges and seminaries, to the point where an individual studying for ministry ordinarily learned virtually nothing that would be helpful in a cross-cultural ministry situation.

Also hindering the spread of the gospel was the approach many early non-Native [and now Native missionaries] utilized to influence Native people: the mentality that if Western approaches are good enough for Westerners, they are good enough for Native Americans. Craig Smith is to the point, "...many overly zealous, culturally insensitive people have shot off their gospel gun in reservation after reservation in such a way that gives no room for sensitivity and understanding of how the people they are targeting to reach view their own Native spirituality."⁶

Dr. Kraft relates this difficulty to Western schools, churches and other such institutions as he says, “We have transplanted such institutions with all good intentions on the assumption they are working well at home and that, therefore they will work well here. But they don’t seem to live up to our expectation and often we don’t know why. Indeed, they prove disruptive to indigenous values and cultural traits that we would other wise wish to maintain.”⁷

The outcome of missions has frequently left Native America with many social and personal troubles. George Tinker, professor at Iliff School of Theology in Denver says, “The Christianization of Indian people resulted in societal dissolution, alienation, and poverty. The assimilationist position has helped to implement a cultural imperialism designed to destroy the cultural integrity of the very people they intended to protect. Well-meaning missionaries brought on the problem in most cases. Theirs was the sin of Good Intentions.”⁸ They not only destroyed the culture, but also created mistrust, hatred, dysfunction, the loss of identity and worse, a people not effectively reached with the gospel. We have seen how the effects of these social ills have created a barrier for relationship building and acceptance of the message of the gospel. It has left us as contextual ministers with an enormous task.

With this much said about the struggles and tragedy of Native American people, it’s time to uncover the benefits we will gain as we explore the implementation of education from a Native American perspective.

A Model of Education from a Native American Perspective

I want to begin this section with the reminder that each culture has a means to teach the next generation how to live and behave, not only how to survive. We need to take a brief look at the underlying assumptions my people see as important in our learning processes. The perspective I am going to share is that of the Anishanbek people of the

Three Fires (Potawatomi, Ojibway and Odawa) from the Great Lakes region of North America. My perspective begins from the assumption called the “Gentle Way”. The Gentle Way is a view of life and behaviour whereby we live seeking the simple things of life. Examples include honouring the Creator, respecting our elders, behaving kindly toward others, and most importantly living a life that seeks to find peace within. These simple ways are not learned in a classroom, but from our surroundings. We learn from the animals, the birds, by listening to the water as it flows, and even from the music of our people. This way of life has also been called the “Path of Life”, as Basile Johnston, an Anishanbe author, describes:

The Path of Life leads toward gentleness, humbleness and respect.

- We honour the Great Spirit (the Creator)
- We honour our elders (our older people)
- We honour our elder brother (the animals)
- We honour women (our partners in the Path of Life)
- We keep our promises and vows
- We show kindness to everyone even to those who may disagree with us
- We strive to live at peace in spirit and body
- We honour courage
- We strive to live in moderation.⁹

These lessons of life were taught to our people throughout life by emphasizing them again and again. Our Native American education process came in three phases. In phase one, until about age seven, children were cared for and nurtured by grandmothers, aunties and elders. In phase two, from about seven years old, the younger boys went with the fathers, uncles and older cousins, to learn the ways of men. This included how to hunt, fish, make canoes, and bows and arrows. Girls remained with their grandmothers and aunties to learn the ways of women. This included learning how to raise crops, to gather plants for food and home

care, along with making nets and tanning animal hides. The third phase of education began when the people began to search for wisdom. This search would consume the rest of an individual's life. It was during this final stage of life the learner realized his/her want of knowledge and sought out the wise to teach them. They may never attain it, but they can live by these principles.¹⁰ The individual's search for wisdom leads him or her to try to live in such a manner as to bring honor to their community and to him/herself. These teachings and many others were part of the Native Americans' educational process.

The Transition to a New Model of Education

The dynamics of change can be a great barrier for any new approach. One of the basic issues in developing another model for Christian education with the Native Americans is to consider which cultural group is to undergo the changes—the Native or the non-Native? I contend Euro-American cultures look at our Native culture and interpret from their Euro-American worldview. Euro-American culture will never truly and fully understand Native culture, because in anthropological terms, they are “etic” or outsiders. On the flip side, Native people can truly understand the social interaction that takes place within their Native rituals and ceremonies, because this is their identity. Dr. Kraft speaks to this issue when he writes, “Often, though much of what we know is from books, we usually have not learned how to study people by association with them, yet it is people we seek to reach, people in their own cultural context, people who are very different from us, people we need to learn about from a social, not academic context.”¹¹

The tendency to see through one's non-Native bias and worldview creates an ongoing problem. Dr. Kraft, in his section entitled *Difficulties in cross-cultural research and study*, states, “We should be careful to evaluate their customs as part of their context without (at least at this point) passing judgement on them. Any judgement concerning

the usability of their customs within Christianity should be made at a later stage, and always by insiders under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (with or without the assistance from outsiders).”¹²

Dr. George Tinker expands on this issue as he states, “The main difficulty is that Indians' spiritual traditions are still rooted in cultural contexts that are quite foreign to white Euro-Americans, yet Euro-Americans' cultural structures are the only devices Euro-Americans have for any deep structural understanding of Native spiritual traditions. Hence, these Native traditions can only be understood by analogy with white experiences.”¹³

In general, when a Native and Euro-American person evaluate a cultural situation, there will exist radically different points of view. The major transition we as Native leaders must make is that of moving away from the assistance from outsiders and toward the insiders taking responsibility for inclusive decisions. I feel most theological schools need significant and painful soul searching to change their teaching methods in order to achieve fruitful ministry in today's Native world. With our present methodologies we can produce educators and pastors who can do an adequate job, but we must go beyond adequate and seek for more effective results. The important ingredient to create the needed change is to give the majority of the control over to the indigenous people. George Barna, in his chapter *Preparing for a New Era*, says, “Experience shows us that we cannot continue to perceive evangelism as we have in the past... [I]t will require new ways of thinking, fortified commitment to bold and risky forms.” He further states, “Reliance upon a single means or entry point designed to usher [Native] people into a lasting relationship with Christ is insufficient.”¹⁴

His research shows how important it is to have a range of methods able to meet the needs and to address the distinctive perspectives of Native peoples.

The following section will show one approach to education from my Native perspective, which can, if interfaced with our older methods, produce

the needed boost that our Native Christian educational methods need.

Incorporation and Implementation of Alternatives with Recommendations

Is the solution to return to the strong values and traditions found within us? When I realized we have been trying to solve our Native ministry problems from the Euro-American value system I had a paradigm shift. The following are reflections on how I believe we can live out this alternative paradigm.

Western versus Native American Models

Foremost what we learn from the Western model of education is how to go to school. We're taught how to study, read, write term papers, and then are evaluated in our progress with attendance, examinations and grades. The Western model stresses the accumulation of information over competence in practice. Though term papers are important, they don't offer us much in a real life setting. Further, we learn to value the merit of graduating over maintaining personal relationships, school over home, and professors over parents.

Native American education is that which takes place in the living of life, not just in the classroom. This is the key to understanding the Native American learning process. We must learn from "practising teachers" and then practice what we've learned in order to become proficient. "The purpose of traditional Native American education was both to serve the practical needs of the people (to learn life skills) and to enhance the soul (to grow in spiritual ways). Together they were part of the balance of one's journey on the path of life. To possess only the skills of living without knowledge of the spirit, would be to live a life without purpose, depth, and meaning."¹⁵

To learn in a Native American style is to observe, participate and practice, in other words, through modelling and apprenticeship. Randy Woodley notes "In the Indian world, we experience; in the Euro-American world we get facts about it. Someone has said that Native Americans

would rather participate in a ceremony, while Euro-Americans would generally rather read about it in a book."¹⁶ God has created us differently. Native Americans, even though we did use some forms of writing and symbols for learning, tended generally to learn from modelling. In speaking about leadership, Bill Hybels notes, "Ask leadership development experts what's the best catalyst for a leader's growth and they will all answer in unison: make him or her lead something. No one can grow without the real life challenges of actual leading."¹⁷

Learning by example is biblical. Jesus knew that we teach what we model and therefore states several times in Scripture, "follow My example" (I Co. 4:16, 11:1). Jesus modelled for His apprentices. He called His disciples with the invitation "Come with me and I will teach you to catch men." He did not merely inform them about catching men (Mark 1:17). Paul the apostle told Timothy to follow Christ as he followed Christ (see I Co. 11:1).

Dr. Kraft sees the benefit of modelling and practice: "Full approval comes from learning to do such things and by teaching them to others through one's example. Paul, like Jesus Christ taught by example, followed by analysis of the example. The aim was always to lead the followers to correct behaviour. Here Paul instructs Timothy concerning issues that Paul has already modelled and instructs Timothy, in turn to model these things for his followers."¹⁸

This type of educational model is neglected in much of today's ministry training, judging by my experience with Christian and secular education. Individual training from an instructor is minimal, if not non-existent. Our training institutions have become so overwhelmed with the demands of academics, that practice and modelling by an instructor goes unattended. George Barna, in his section "Preparing the Saints for the Task" states, "Offering this kind of practical encouragement and preparation is imperative."¹⁹

Richard Twiss states, "Jesus didn't tell us that to practice a truth, we have to understand it intellectually first. He didn't tell us to understand it

and do it. He said, “Do My word” (see John 14:23, James 1:22). I’ve found that understanding often comes as a result of doing, not the reverse.”²⁰ So to incorporate a learning style sensitive to a Native style, we must strive to implement these methods of learning.

Mentoring and Apprenticeship

A new model of Native Christian education designed to train current and emerging leaders will take a new orientation to the way we prepare for ministry. Many colleges and seminaries are attempting to provide one-on-one mentoring in what is known as “Office Hours”. The more students enrol, the less time can be given for person to person development. Our new orientation to education should be more personal mentoring by limiting our groups to three to twelve individuals. Those numbers are not arbitrary; they come from the approach Jesus modelled. He chose twelve and worked more closely with three. So our goal is to move toward a ratio of one teacher to three to twelve students (see Mark 3:14).

The time we spend with teachable leaders is necessary, but the investment of our time to nurture young potential leaders is critical. Barna indicates that the greatest promise we have is among the youth. “In this stage of life they are most open to Christianity and forming a value system that will shape their life style and character. They are curious, hopeful and unfettered by the woes and worries of the world, and these young people remain open to external influences in regard to spirituality.”²¹ The mentoring approach to education is, I believe, the most likely to produce the kind of leaders needed for the contextual movement to flourish. Jesus employed this method to the twelve core leaders, and the world was turned upside down.

Bill Hybels has made mentoring an increasingly important matter in his ministry using the following method: on each mentoring day Hybels meets with a group of about twelve leaders. The format is loose. He starts by sharing a few leadership lessons he has learned along the way; opens

up the discussion to everyone, and spends the rest of the time working through the challenges they all face. This method can work for us as well, by focusing our discussion on the challenges in Native contextual ministry. Hybels says, “It takes a leader to develop a leader...[and]...leaders learn best from other leaders.”²²

Emerging Native leaders want to be around other seasoned leaders in contextual ministry. Potential leaders look for Native contextual leaders who have a few bloodstains from actually trying to create contextual styles of ministry in their communities. I have seen emerging leaders wanting to emulate the various models of a few veteran contextual leaders by wanting to become better conference speakers and international travellers in ministry. To use the word in the best sense, these “groupies” follow the circuit of conferences related to contextual issues because they desire to learn more. They follow not only out of desire to learn more, but because they know in their hearts this is needed for effective evangelism to Native people. Rather than having these eager emerging leaders follow every conference across the country grabbing bits and pieces of understanding, we need several educational institutions that are preparing Native leaders for contextual ministry. We could better serve these eager learners by utilizing the conferences they attend as a supplement to what they are learning in a hands-on contextual-style school.

Emerging leaders will need to show that they took the time to internalize the vision and values it will take to become a competent minister in contextual theology. Mentoring is so important we must develop several approaches. We must teach and write of the special mentoring needs of Native Americans. We must develop curriculum to use when distance limits our interaction. It is through this development of mentoring and apprenticeship that emerging Native leaders will gain the competence leading to credentials for contextual ministry. Incorporating Native traditions and values is time intensive as with Jesus’ model, but a better approach has not been discovered. The truth is,

there's no substitute for personal investment. Those of us who are more seasoned contextual ministers must arrange our lives in such a way as to make mentoring our priority. It is our responsibility!

Reflections on Credentials

Within the development of a Native American model of education leading to competence for credentials, there must be an emphasis on impartation of knowledge combined with the implementation through actual practice. Credentials in Christian terms usually means seeking an understanding in theology. To gain understanding, we must look to the Lord as we study and teach. He is the one who works through the books, the teachers and through our life experiences. We must not just seek information in a Native theological method, but understanding—seeking to understand life culturally, relationally and spiritually. This is what we must see in a person's spiritual growth as they seek credentials.

One critical point in seeking for credentials is the ability to see Christian theology cross-culturally. Another is the ability to function in a Native context effectively and with a sense of comfort. Not all Native people can do contextual ministry, it must come from a person's calling. Emerging leaders must be able to adapt to a Native context, taking the truths of scripture and making them relevant to Native America. They must have openness to Native cultural ways and openness to understanding Native religious forms. They must recognize that God is opening new ways of expressing Native faith.

I believe it is most advantageous for our current Native leaders and emerging Native leaders to take an anthropology course, or more importantly, a missionary anthropology course. Doing so will help them to better connect cross-culturally and to see the Bible as it was written for a people of another culture—because in terms of language, customs and worldview, the Bible is a cross-cultural book.

For credentials to be earned, we must stress a Native method and not education based on a Euro-American time frame. True learning will

come when the student is competent in an area of study. We must begin applying this method to the way we learn Scripture, as well as in the methods students learn to utilize Native singing, dancing, ceremonies and rituals. Although these practices will take on their regional uniqueness, they will need to be explored and tried. We can lose the trust of an unsaved brother or sister if we endorse Native ministers who do not respect the ceremonial protocols followed and respected by traditional people. If someone wants to dance or sing in a traditional way, they need to proceed in a culturally sensitive manner. Where rituals and ceremonies are concerned this is an area where modelling by apprenticeship will play an integral role. I highly recommend any Native student wishing to study the practices and use of ritual and ceremonies to seek out seasoned contextual leaders who themselves have taken the time to learn. For if we attempt to perform some rituals without the proper training and protocols, we will do more harm than good.

The use of rituals in a Christian context comes first by gaining the respect of the people with whom we are working. Contextual sweat lodges, weddings and blessings done with incense, utilizing our sacred plants, can be done—but not without training and the gaining of trust of those we want to reach with the truth of Christ. Overall, credentials in these areas of rituals and ceremonies do not come from reading books and passing an exam, but from a journey of spiritual growth in contextual ministry.

Reflections on Competence

The American Heritage Dictionary states, "Competent" means "Properly or well qualified, capable adequate for the purpose." Is this what we're looking for in the education of emerging leaders? How does this translate into a model of education through Native eyes? It is at this point where Native and Christian values intersect. We must try to maintain a balance in the values we teach. I would like to see balance and harmony taught as essentials for the competence of our emerging leaders. I believe this is the part of Native Americans that

does not melt. Older teachers say if we live out of balance, other areas of life will be affected. The four components of life include the emotional, physical, spiritual and mental and are to be kept in a delicate balance.

Living in harmony, dancing, singing, and the use of Native teaching methods in Christian education is an underdeveloped area of study. Dr. Kraft says, "The problem is that most of us cross-cultural witnesses have not thought through exactly how much such meanings might be appropriately expressed through the forms of other's cultures. In cross-cultural situation we tend to recommend a high percentage of cultural forms that strongly resemble those of our home cultures."²³

These days we have a freedom to influence the next generation of Native leaders when they grasp the theology of contextual ministry. As the apostle Paul, who gave his churches freedom to be who they were, so too, we want our churches to look and feel and sound like our own culture. Paul's freedom was a contextual freedom, a freedom that expressed itself in characteristics of the place and people. Second Corinthians 1:24 says, "He was working with them for their own happiness." This kind of freedom is now available to us. We want the educational institutions to embody the spirit of Apostle Paul's method.

Further, Jesus' model taught His disciples by saying, "If you have ears to hear you will learn." Jesus would conclude His parables with this phrase. He also sent His disciples in pairs to practice what they had learned. Much like our Native traditional methods of learning, the students would not only engage in structured learning sessions, but also they would listen to the stories from the elders. Randy Woodley shares: "I was taught by elders to observe closely and listen closely as a task was being done and not to ask questions. After a while, I was given the opportunity to try it. And I was corrected when I messed up. I was told to pray about these things and meditate on them. Every so often my questions which were still in my heart and mind would be answered. This learning style was very different from my training in

college and seminary, where I was certified based on my knowledge of certain facts."²⁴

I contend our new students and teachers both need to be participants in this learning process. I believe the teachers should be Native to best teach Native evangelism. I believe you cannot really understand Native people unless you're Native yourself. This leads us to another issue for competence in Native ministry, we live and minister contextually. That is to say, if we support contextual ministry, but never go to ceremonies or even to Pow-Wows, what does that say about what we believe? This is what Dr. Kraft calls, "Living close to what you believe."²⁵ Students and teachers need to learn and live close to what they believe, because what we are creating in our students, in essence, is the competence to become participating teachers. The Apostle Paul was able to show his new churches how they could live out the gospel within their cultural context.

There are several major points in which I believe competence must be expressed. First, Native ministers need to develop a relationship with their Native communities. Second, competence must be demonstrated in their ability to translate the traditional teachings in the Christ-centered way we call "contextual". Third, emerging leaders must be able to live, work and act in a culturally acceptable manner. Fourth, emerging leaders should already be involved in practical ministry to their communities. Fifth, emerging leaders must be innovative and resourceful. This means they must be able to live with a "can do" attitude. Finally, emerging leaders must not be afraid to take risks, and trust the Holy Spirit who is working in their lives.

In the following section I would like to suggest a paradigm for the future.

A Vision for the Future

As with anything new and different, we will face criticism. But how we handle this criticism will determine how effective we will be. It will take determination to make our new models work. We will also need to be accountable financially, personally and most importantly theologically.

In his book, *American Indians and Christian Missions: Study in Cultural Conflict*, Warner Bowden has this to say concerning Native expressions of faith: “Native American cultures if left to flower on their own will enrich world religions with fresh expressions of profound spiritual significance, whether these take forms in powerful new symbols, liturgies or ethical priorities.”²⁶ He relates to the United State’s response concerning Native expressions by saying, “If the nation as a whole restricts the Indians’ freedom to act and worship along indigenous lines, it will perpetuate a short sighted parochialism and deny what is best for itself as an amalgam of many people.”²⁷

We will be watched very closely, because of the non-Native bias, but who better to develop a new approach to Native Christian education than Natives themselves? We are in a much better position to understand what will work with our people, because we are the nationals, the “insiders” of our cultures. For years we have always had to seek Christian education from another culture’s context. Now we have the opportunity to go beyond the status quo and embrace our cultural traditions and values in a new Christian education model.

At this critical point in our development as contextual ministers and ministries, we need to take necessary risks and explore all options. like the phrase Rick Warren uses in his lecture in his Purpose Driven Church seminars. He states, “You have to sometimes go out on a limb in ministry, because that’s where the fruit is.”²⁸ It will be helpful for many individuals unfamiliar with Native education models to stretch themselves and expand their minds. The acceptance and development of a new model that incorporates Native traditions and values is unfamiliar territory and will be difficult for some to comprehend because they do not have a category for it in their minds. To get beyond this point of acceptance, non-Natives may need to create a new category, for example, by developing an academic concentration in Native educational methods at their institution. I believe if our Western style of education does not become pliable, it will hinder the development of culturally relevant

ministry models. And more importantly, it will hinder the ripple effect of sharing the life-changing message of the gospel to our Native brothers and sisters.

Summary and Conclusion

As I close on the topic of redesigning Christian education models, let’s continue to look for a brighter tomorrow. We have explored a new model and methods in which these principles can be implemented in a Native context. As the development of new education models unfolds, we will confront the issues that have prevented the gospel from being fully accepted in the Native world. I believe this model embraces the culture and worldview of Native people and when implemented will place us at the forefront of a harvest unmatched by any generation.

What will these new models look like? It is not fully known yet. My hope is that with more Native influence in the educational processes and being freed from a paternalism of our denominational leaders, a model will be developed that will include the essentials communicated here with sensitivity to God’s people who are Native Americans.

Endnotes

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2. Craig Smith, *Whiteman’s Gospel* (Winnipeg, MB: Indian Life Books, 1997), 5.
3. Ibid.
4. Charles Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 461.
5. Ibid., 462.
6. Smith, *Whiteman’s Gospel*, 20.
7. Kraft, *Anthropology*, 287.
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9. Basil Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1976).
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18. Kraft, *Anthrology*, 273.
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21. Ibid., 108.
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23. Kraft, *Anthropology*, 473.
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Black Elk Speaks

DAMIAN COSTELLO

Black Elk and his vision of the Sacred Tree are well known, primarily through John G. Neihardt, a poet who journeyed to Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in the dust of the Great Depression drought of 1931. Neihardt was looking for Native American history, tradition, and tragedy. He found these in Nicholas Black Elk, a Lakota elder, cousin of the famous Crazy Horse and witness of the Sioux Wars. After a few weeks of interviews, Neihardt went home where he wrote *Black Elk Speaks*, a sweeping dramatic tragedy of a people living in harmony with the Earth and Great Spirit, of their great battles with an invading army, and of a strong warrior defeated in the snows of the Wounded Knee Massacre, all told in the poetic English of a Native American elder.

The story of *Black Elk Speaks* consisted of two main parts.¹ The first was a great vision Black Elk had when he was nine years old. He fell sick and saw two men descend from the sky. They brought him to the clouds where they showed him the spirit horses of the four directions and the sacred tipi of the Six

Grandfathers. The Grandfathers gave him the power to heal and the power to destroy, and called him to lead the Lakota down the good red road to the sacred hoop. At the end of the journey a Sacred Tree would bloom at center of the hoop and the people would live in peace and harmony. For Black Elk, the vision was a call to be a *wicasa wakan* (holy man), a calling he struggled to live up to through the rest of the story.

The second aspect of the book addressed Black Elk's memories of the Sioux Wars, a military conflict between the U.S. military and the Lakota that lasted from about 1855 to 1890. As a thirteen-year old boy Black Elk killed an American soldier at the Battle of Little Big Horn, where the Lakota wiped out Custer and his whole division. As is well known and perhaps unnecessary to repeat, this victory was short lived. The U.S. Army eventually defeated the Lakota and settled them on reservations in present day North and South Dakota. On the reservations, the government attempted to rid Native Americans of their traditional economy and culture and adopt

Damian Costello is a non-native theologian whose field is primarily the relationship between Christianity and European colonialism. He has worked on the first hundred years of Spanish colonialism in the Americas, something he is eminently qualified for as a Spanish speaker, and having lived and worked in Caribbean mission for a number of years. He teaches at Dayton University.

American culture and farming, a process missionaries aided. Black Elk settled on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, which became his home for the remainder of his life.

In the midst of this cultural repression and poverty, a movement called the Ghost Dance arrived in Pine Ridge. Black Elk joined. He remembered putting on holy paint and dancing the ghost dance, praying for the Messiah to come and crush out the whites, and bringing a promised land just for Native Americans.²

The Ghost Dance movement caused mass hysteria among the white population near the reservations and led to the largest military operation since the Civil War. The presence of American troops culminated in the Battle of Wounded Knee, where in the December snows of 1890 the U.S. military killed around 260 Lakota, mostly women and children. Black Elk fought in the battles afterward, and *Black Elk Speaks* ends with his memory of the Wounded Knee battlefield:

I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back now from this high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream.

And I, to whom so great a vision was given in my youth, you see me now a pitiful old man who has done nothing, for the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead.³

This passage, known as the “death of a dream,” became the most quoted passage from the book and the enduring image of Black Elk.⁴ The book was ignored when it was published in 1932, and remained on the dusty shelves until the 1960s, when its melodic prose was rediscovered by young Native Americans looking for traditions taken

away by English language schools, mission churches, government assimilation programs and the encroaching American society. Black Elk's vision of the Sacred Tree became both a major inspiration and source for revitalization of traditional religious practices as well as political action, epitomized by the Siege at Wounded Knee in 1973. The American counter-culture also discovered Black Elk's vision, helping to fuel the critique of Vietnam War, racism, and pollution while inspiring many non-Natives to explore Native religious traditions. *Black Elk Speaks* remains an essential text for educators looking to introduce their students to Native America. The native intellectual and activist Vine Deloria, Jr., called *Black Elk Speaks* a “North American bible of all tribes” in the introduction of the 1979 edition.⁵

Catholic Black Elk

Because Black Elk became such an important symbol of Native resistance to Christianity,⁶ many readers were shocked to discover that the real Black Elk was very different from Neihardt's portrayal in *Black Elk Speaks*. First, a scholar of the Lakota, Raymond J. DeMallie, published the transcripts of the original interview and demonstrated that the picture of Black Elk the ‘defeated old man’ was largely a creation of Neihardt. The book accurately describes the events of Black Elk's life but shapes them in a way to emphasize the victimhood and powerlessness of Native Americans as a whole. For example, the “death of the dream” speech, was not even spoken by Black Elk.

The second surprise focused on the omission from *Black Elk Speaks* of Black Elk's life after Wounded Knee. While working in Pine Ridge, Michael J. Steltenkamp, S.J., met and interviewed Black Elk's daughter, Lucy Looks Twice. Lucy, along with the testimony of Lakota elders, of Frank Fools Crow (the noted Lakota holy man and ceremonial chief of the Lakota nation), and Jesuit records have filled in Black Elk's missing years. Unlike the defeated old man in *Black Elk Speaks*, an active, positive Black Elk emerged. During his

reservation life he became a participant in the new economy and by reservation standards was successful. DeMallie calls him “one of the most successful old-time, uneducated Indians in adapting to the exigencies of life in the Pine Ridge Reservation.”⁷ Most surprisingly, Black Elk lived as a practicing Catholic for 46 years, many of which he worked as a catechist.

Black Elk’s conversion began in the late 1880s. The end of the wars brought reservation confinement, encouraging many young restless Lakota to join traveling Wild West Shows which dramatized Native American cultures for non-Native audiences. Black Elk seized this opportunity in order to exercise the holy man’s call to search for new religious power, investigating the white world to see whether any of its ways were worth adopting.

After two years in the cities of East Coast America and Europe he wrote to his people that the only good thing about the White world is its Christianity:

Of the white man’s customs, only his faith, the white man’s beliefs about God’s will, and how they act according to it, I wanted to understand.... Now along I trust in God. I work honestly and it is good; I hope the people will do likewise. . . . Across the big ocean is where they killed Jesus; again I wished to see it but it was four days on the ocean and there was no railroad... [It would require] much money for me to be able to go over there to tell about it myself.⁸

Black Elk’s assessment was not unique; his contemporary, *Tipi Sapa*, the grandfather of Vine Deloria, Jr., is remembered saying that the “whites brought the worst and the best with them. The best was Jesus, and his message of love.”⁹

After returning from Europe, Black Elk joined the Ghost Dance after a period of cautious investigation. He left the Ghost Dance after Wounded Knee, but not before having a vision of what he called the “Son of God.”¹⁰ For over a decade he practiced healing as *yurwipi* man dur-

ing which Christian influence continued. Some of his friends urged him to give up his practice and accept baptism. His wife and two children did, but it wasn’t until an altercation with a Catholic priest in 1904 that Black Elk converted. Within a few years, Black Elk’s zeal for the faith caught the missionaries’ attention. Despite having impaired vision, Black Elk had learned to read a Dakota translation of the Bible. A friend and fellow Catholic, John Lone Goose, remembered Black Elk’s dedication to study: “Nick said he wanted to teach God’s word to the people. So he kept on learning, learning, learning. Pretty soon, he learned what the Bible meant, and it was good.... All he talked about was the Bible and Christ.”¹¹

His daughter, Lucy Looks Twice, described how pervasive the Bible was to Black Elk’s life:

He related Scripture passages to things around him, and he used examples from nature — making comparison of things in the Bible with flowers, animals, even trees. And when he talked to us about things in creation, he brought up stories in the Bible. That’s why he was a pretty strong Catholic — by reading the Bible.¹²

For Black Elk, the Word of God was an integral of Lakota life. Black Elk also had the ability — rare among contemporary Catholics but not early Lakota converts — to quote Scripture. In his discussion of Black Elk, Pat Red Elk emphasizes the ability of the early converts to remember and quote the Bible.

Even though they didn’t have any formal education, those old converts were really trained to preach. They’d say that Saint John says this here and there, and when I’d get the Bible and read it — they were right! That’s what was written. I read Scripture, but I can’t remember the right words like they used to be able to do.¹³

Because of his knowledge of the Bible and Catholic tradition, and his dedication to the faith, Black Elk was appointed to the position

of catechist. Catechists were much like modern day deacons; they assisted the priests, conducting certain services when the priests were not available, and above all, preached in Lakota. Pat Red Elk remembered Black Elk's oratory skills: "when he got up he really preached. People sat there and just listened to him. They could picture what he was talking about."¹⁴ Black Elk's skill was not without effect as he was credited with at least four hundred conversions.¹⁵ He also went to other Native American tribes to preach and witness to the gospel. He spent a short time on the Sisseton Reservation, a month on the Winnebago Reservation in Nebraska, and two months on the Wind River Reservation.

Black Elk's Christian faith remained until the end. Pat Red Elk remembers seeing Nick [Black Elk] walking the two to three miles to Manderson to go to Mass: "He was so old, so he got an early start and wouldn't catch a ride. And every Sunday, he'd join up with John Lone Goose right around where the store is now, and they'd say the rosary together. . . . By the time they got to church, they had said the whole thing."¹⁶ On August 19, 1950, Black Elk received last rites for the fourth time and died at his home in Manderson, S.D.¹⁷

Vision

For those accustomed to the image of Black Elk portrayed in *Black Elk Speaks*, the new image of a Christian preacher did not mesh easily with that of a militant traditionalist.¹⁸ What could be more opposed? For many, the staleness of Christianity could never match the beauty of Black Elk's Lakota vision. Despite the presence of some direct quotations from the Bible in the transcripts from Black Elk's interview, most commentators assume that his great vision was completely separate and opposed to Christianity. It was as if Black Elk lived two separate, distinct lives: one traditional, hidden from the view of his own community and only revealed to a strange white man; the other Christian, public, and insincere. That is certainly possible for nominal believers, but it struck me as very

odd for missionary preachers, especially given the frequency that biblical references appear in sources attributed to Black Elk.

A biblical theme found in diverse Black Elk sources, as an example, is "Love your neighbor as yourself,"¹⁹ During the 1944 interviews, Black Elk described a talk given during the mourning period after a death where the people are reminded to "love your neighbors."²⁰ He also used this language to describe the defeat of the Lakota in the 1931 interviews. "Here's where the Indians made their mistake. We should treat our fellowmen all alike — the Great Spirit made men all alike. Therefore, we made a mistake when we tried to get along with the whites. We tried to love them as we did ourselves."²¹ Black Elk takes up this theme in one of the many letters he wrote to the Lakota Catholic newspaper *Sinasapa Wocekiye Taeyanpaha*. Black Elk wrote:

In the Bible, Jesus told us that "You should love your neighbor as you love Me." So remember if you get in trouble with your neighbor, remember that God has said, "Love your neighbor." So whatever you have said or if you have done some bad thing to them, go over there and please tell them you are sorry.²²

Black Elk did not only preach this theme to the Lakota community. Lucy remembers Black Elk using this theme to preach to whites about the guilt of their participation in colonialism on a trip east with some missionaries:

At one place he said he was up there talking and saying to the audience: 'You white people, you come to our country. You came to this country, which was ours in the first place. We were the only inhabitants. After we listened to you, we got settled down. But you're not doing what you're supposed to do — what our religion and our Bible tells us. I know this. *Christ himself preached that we love our neighbors as ourself. Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.*'²³

For Black Elk, American colonialism was a violation of the biblical commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself.” In summary, we find the biblical theme “love your neighbor” in four of the Black Elk sources, three of which scholars usually interpret as having no relation to his life as a Catholic. These are not accidental or insignificant; rather, Black Elk uses this important Biblical idea to address important issues. The diversity and number of sources, as well as its use to discuss key topics such as relationships in the Lakota community and American colonialism suggests that if we re-examine these sources we will find that scriptural themes and passages permeate all aspects of Black Elk’s life and discourse.

Based on the Lakota testimony and the natural tendency for sincere believers to interpret everything in light of God’s Word, I thought there should be continuity between the vision and the Bible. There is some precedent to this view as Looks Twice claimed that Black Elk viewed the Sacred Tree as the Christian life of all people. Steltenkamp also highlighted the similarity between his vision and the Two Roads Map, which was an illustrated map of the Christian story used in evangelization. So I started to map out the direct quotations, the allusions, parallels between the two. I was fortunate to have the help of Jan Ullrich, a Lakota linguist and one of the coordinators of the Lakota language revitalization project. I started with the Sacred Tree, which has a direct quotation that all commentators accept. From there I searched the Bible, Lakota tradition, Christian tradition and mission history for further clues connecting the Sacred Tree to Christianity. The results are found on pages 43–50 in Appendix 1. It became clear that the Sacred Tree had a strong connection to Christ and the cross.

After proceeding through all the symbols and events of the whole vision, I produced a chart of the whole vision, found on in Appendix 2. Please refer to the whole chart, but here are a few examples. The two men who brought Black Elk to the clouds connect to the two men that appear to the disciples after Jesus was lifted up to the clouds (Acts 1:9-11).

The sacred tipi with rainbow door correlates to the heavenly temple in the book of Revelation, which is translated as sacred tipi and also has a rainbow. Both are located on a mountain. Black Elk’s vision is monotheistic as he said that the Fifth Grandfather represents the Great Spirit. The red road correlates with Jesus as both are *ha•kiú*. The red road ends in the promised-land where there is no suffering and even whites are redeemed.

Putting these examples and all the rest of the evidence together seems to vindicate Looks Twice’s claim and my hypothesis: there is no contradiction between the vision and Bible. Rather, there is a strong correlation between the symbols of the vision — particularly the Sacred Tree — the plot of the vision, and biblical tradition. The more I looked at the chart, the correlations between the vision and the Bible seemed less like random parallels and more like one unified whole. The number and depth of connections to Catholic tradition permeate every facet of the vision. In light of the claims of the Lakota community discussed at the beginning of this chapter — that Black Elk knew Christian biblical texts very well, connected the biblical text to the world he experienced especially the natural world, and had the ability to accurately quote specific passages — the connections between his vision and biblical tradition must be intentional. Black Elk intended to talk about the Lakota Catholic tradition.²⁴ In other words, Black Elk was not presenting fragments of Catholic allusions to describe a pure Lakota whole. Rather, he intentionally shaped one whole story of the real Lakota Catholic world in which he lived.

The vision’s Christological emphasis, historical character and dependence on the book of Revelation point to it being a Lakota telling of what Catholics call salvation history. Overall, the vision is the record of Lakota reception of Christ and their struggle with colonialism with a heavy use of the book of

Revelation. I put the pieces together and came up with the second chart, which is in Appendix 3.²⁵

Theology, Colonialism and History

So Black Elk's vision is in fact a dynamic Lakota telling of the Gospel, which read all things — his life, Lakota history, and colonial politics — in light of Christ. In other words, his critique of American colonialism in *Black Elk Speaks* was an integral part of his faith. While this may seem to be a radical claim, it wasn't even new in Black Elk's time. There were numerous precedents; one of the most famous and important given the location of this conference was the example of William Apess. Apess was a Pequot from New England. In addition to the struggle and misery inherent in all human existence, Apess suffered from the added suffering of colonialism. Displaced as a Native American, orphaned, he turned to alcohol as he searched for work and meaning throughout New England and Eastern Canada. During the Second Great Awakening the longings of his heart long wounded by sin and the injustices of society were healed by the love of Christ. In his autobiography *Son of the Forest*, Apess describes his conversion:

I felt convinced that Christ died for all mankind — that age, sect, color, country, or situation made no difference. I felt an assurance that I was included in the plan of redemption with all my brethren. No one can conceive with what joy I hailed this *new* doctrine, as it was called. . . . [M]y soul was filled with love — love to God, and love to all mankind. Oh, how my poor heart swelled with joy — and I could cry from my very soul, Glory to God in the highest!!! There was not only a change in my heart but in everything around me. The scene was entirely altered. The works of God praised him, and I saw him in everything that he made. My love now embraced the whole human family.²⁶

Along with healing his soul, the love of Christ gave him a new understanding of the colonial society around him. He now reread Native American history in light of Christ, excoriating white Americans to repent of their un-Christian domination of Natives and Africans, calling them back to the love

of God, who was always ready to forgive.²⁷ In the context of his church, a Native American community in Mashpee, he worked to embody this ideal with his congregation, leading the community to resist the imposition of white control and create Native leadership. In 1834, the Mashpee tribe, under the leadership of Apess, staged the peaceful as well as successful “Mashpee Revolt.” In it the Mashpee gained the same rights of township self-governance as all the citizens of Massachusetts as well as control over church leadership.²⁸ According to his biographer Barry O’Connell, “it is not fanciful to see him as one of the earliest indigenous leaders of an Indian rights movement.”²⁹ In other words, the love of Christ was not an abstract but transforming power for one integral new life which saved his soul and empowered his community. The love of Christ gave him the vision to critique colonial oppression, forgive his enemies, and see the possibility of a just society.

I would argue that the evidence we have indicates that Christianity gave Black Elk the same powers. His initial investigation into the white world led him to the love of Christ, citing Paul's famous passage on love in First Corinthians. It was the same love that brought missionaries to the Lakota, fallen and imperfect as they were, to preach the Gospel and minister to them during the worst of colonial oppression. This love called the Lakota to form a community that shared resources, called the young away from the new poison of alcohol, and to a shared fellowship of the Lord. Black Elk taught the Lakota that the whites suffered as well, all the while calling whites to repentance for denying Christ. His vision was of the love of Christ that healed all suffering and brought all together.

To me, that is why the church and the world are so in need of Native American Christian witnesses, those that have run the race — Black Elk, Tipi Sapa, William Apess — and those who still run it, you who are all here today. I think of Richard Twiss ministering to Native Christians who were given bad haircuts and taught to reject their music, while he is calling the United States to honor the covenants it made before God. I think

of Ross Maracle teaching young Native Americans that the love of Christ calls them out of the despair which leads to suicide, while teaching whites to reject syncretism with materialism. I think of Adrian Jacobs struggling in Caledonia to reclaim Six Nations land in the non-violent way of Christ. You show those who reject the Gospel (because they think the love of Christ caused the colonial world) that the love of Christ is the answer. You teach those who embrace the Gospel to reject the temptation to conquer with arms and instead embrace all peoples in the fellowship of Christ. The whole world is groaning for the love of Christ that Black Elk shows us in his vision.

APPENDIX 1: Flowering Stick

The most important symbol in Black Elk's vision is the flowering stick, also called the Sacred Tree. The fourth grandfather gives it to Black Elk and says, "Behold this, with this to the nation's center of the earth, many shall you save."³⁰ The action of the journey down the sacred road culminates in establishment of the sacred stick at the center of the sacred hoop.

They put the sacred stick into the center of the hoop and you could hear birds singing all kinds of songs by this flowering stick and the people and animals all rejoiced and hollered. The women were sending up their tremolos. The men said: "Behold it; for it is the greatest of the greatest sticks." This stick will take care of the people at the same time it will multiply. We live under it like chickens under the wing. We live under the flowering stick like under the wing of a hen. Depending on the sacred stick we shall walk and it will be with us always.³¹

As the centerpiece of the Sun Dance, the tree has been an important symbol in Lakota tradition. However, Lucy claims that this tree is also a Christian symbol. Evidence for this is in the previous section, where the red man that Black Elk interprets as the Son of God is portrayed with outstretched hand in front of a blooming tree.

Black Elk's description of the sacred stick directly supports Lucy's claim as he uses two biblical references where Jesus is the subject: Matt 23:37 (see also Luke 13:34) and Matt 28:20.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how many times I yearned to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her young under her wings, but you were unwilling!³²

In this passage, Jesus is the one who gathers his children under his wing like a mother hen. In Matt 28:32, Jesus is also the subject, and assures his disciples that "I am with you always, until the end of the age."³³ Like the flowering stick of Black Elk's vision, Jesus will be with his disciples always. Both references explicitly connect the flowering stick with Christ.

Black Elk continues by stating that this sacred stick is the cottonwood tree. The Sacred Pipe and a prayer given during the 1931 Neihardt interviews give more detailed description of the cottonwood tree used in the Sun Dance. They both contain many biblical allusions that connect the tree to Jesus.

... The weak will lean upon you, and for all the people you will be a support.³⁴

Oh Great Spirit, Great Spirit, my Grandfather, may my people be likened unto the flowering stick. Your stick of sticks, tree of trees, forest of forests, tree of trees of the earth, trees of all kinds of the earth. Oh, flowering tree, here on earth trees are like unto you; your trees of all kinds are likened unto you, but yet they have chosen you. Oh tree, you are mild, you are likened to the one above. My nation shall depend on you. My nation on you shall bloom.³⁵

These two passages taken together describe the tree as mild, likened to the one above, and a support for all peoples, especially the weak. The same concepts are found in a passage from Matthew: "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn

from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.”³⁶ Like Black Elk’s description of the cottonwood, Jesus is meek and supports those who are burdened or weak. Black Elk calls the flowering stick “tree of trees and forest of forests.” He used this construction in the first passage from this section, when he referred to the flowering stick as “the greatest of the greatest sticks.”³⁷ This construct is identical to a Christological refrain used in the New Testament. In the book of Revelation, Christ is depicted riding a white horse and is called “King of kings and Lord of lords.”³⁸

Black Elk’s description of the cottonwood highlights the shelter it provides for birds: “You are a kind and a good-looking tree; upon you the winged peoples have raised their families; from the tip of your lofty branches down to your roots, the winged and four-legged peoples have made their homes.”³⁹

This description echoes Ezekiel’s passage on the messianic king, a tree that God will plant: “On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it. It shall put forth branches and bear fruit, and become a majestic cedar. Birds of every kind shall dwell beneath it, every winged thing in the shade of its boughs.”⁴⁰

In both Black Elk’s description and the passage from Ezekiel, the tree is described as good or kind, sheltering the creatures of the earth. According to Black Elk, the cottonwood will stand at the center of all peoples.

... May we two-leggeds always follow your sacred example, for we see that you are always looking upwards into the heavens.

Of all the many standing peoples, you O rustling cottonwood have been chosen in a sacred manner; you are about to go to the center of the people’s sacred hoop, and there you will represent the people and will help us fulfill the will of Wakan-Tanka.... Soon, and with all the peoples of the world, you will stand at the center; for all beings and all things you will bring that which is good.⁴¹

This description evokes the tree of life that God establishes in the New Jerusalem found in Revelation. “On either side of the river grew the tree of life that produces fruit twelve times a year, once each month; the leaves of the trees serve as medicine for the nations.”⁴² In both Black Elk’s vision and the book of Revelation, the tree is a symbol of unity. It is established in the center and brings goodness to all peoples.

The cottonwood tree and the Sun Dance are linked to the cross in the Black Elk tradition. Fools Crow compares the tree to Jesus on the cross: “So the tree ... becomes a living thing for us. It becomes human, and it dies for us like Jesus on the cross for everyone.”⁴³ He also compares the Sun Dance sacrifice to Jesus’ sacrifice.

The Sioux received the Sun Dance from Wakan-Tanka, and we honor him by doing it as he told us to. Since the white man has come to us and explained how God sent his own son to be sacrificed, we realize that our sacrifice is similar to Jesus’ own. As to how the white man feels about what we do, there was a far more terrible thing done by Jesus Christ. He endured more suffering and more pain. He was even stabbed on his side, and he died.

The Indian tribes must speak for themselves, but the Sioux feel a special closeness to God in the dance and in the piercing and flesh offerings. We even duplicate Christ’s crown of thorns in the sage head wreath the pledgers wear.⁴⁴

According to Fools Crow, the Sun Dance brings a special closeness to God (we have already seen that Fools Crow equates *Wakan-Tanka* and the Christian God) and is similar to the passion of Christ, even to the point that the dancers replicate Christ’s crown of thorns. Other Lakota agree with Fools Crow. Stephen Feraca, writing in 1963, reports that one of his informants, Gilbert Bad Wound, considers the Sun Dance a Christian ceremony. Feraca states that “he is by no means alone in this belief.”⁴⁵

Lucy remembers Black Elk viewing the Sun Dance in the same way.

They pray and say to the Great Spirit, 'Without any sinful thoughts or actions, we're going to do this for you.' That's the way they feel when they do these Sun Dance ceremonies. They purify themselves — that's why they wear the sage crown, which resembles the crown our Lord wore — and they start dancing. So the Indian, early before sunrise, had to stand there and had to go with the sun — watching it until it went down. That's the suffering, you see. And some of them even shed their blood. Christ did that too, before he died on the cross. That was the way he suffered.⁴⁶

According to Lucy, Black Elk ascribes the same Christian interpretation to the Sun Dance.

Black Elk uses the language of the passion to describe the Sun Dance in his description in *The Sacred Pipe*. In preparing for the dance, the dancer echoes the ambivalence of Jesus in the agony in the garden. "All this may be difficult to do, yet for the good of the people it must be done. Help me, O Grandfather, and give to me the courage and strength to stand the sufferings which I am about to undergo!"⁴⁷ Later, the dancer says: "I shall offer up my body and soul that my people⁴⁸ may live," as Jesus says in John 6:51: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world."⁴⁹ Both Black Elk's sun dancer and Jesus offer their body for the life of the world.

The culmination of the passion is Jesus' death on the cross, where he says in the Gospel of John, "it is finished."

When Jesus had taken the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' And bowing his head, he handed over his spirit.⁵⁰

This is a major theme in Black Elk's vision and the Sun Dance. When Black Elk completes his vision, the western grandfather tells him, "all

over the universe you have finished."⁵¹ At the end of the Sun Dance, Kablaya says: "O Wakan Tanka, this sacred place [the Sun Dance grounds] is Yours. Upon it all has been finished. We rejoice."⁵² Holler agrees with this reading, and states that Kablaya's words echo Jesus' words on the cross in the Gospel of John.⁵³

The connection between the Sun Dance sacrifice and the passion of Christ was concretely embodied by communal practice. During the summer Catholic conferences, a Sun Dance pole was erected. An altar was constructed underneath it and Mass was then said.⁵⁴ Like the summer conferences, Black Elk's account of the Sun Dance has an altar next to the Sun Dance pole.

In addition, missionaries explicitly compared the Sun Dance to the sacrifice of Christ. Ross Enochs cites Florentine Dingman, S.J., who wrote in 1907,

The late Bishop Martin Marty, O.S.B., then Abbot of St. Meinrad's was one of the first who preached to the Sioux, taking occasion, from the cruelties they practiced at the Sun Dance to appease the Great Spirit, to point out to them our divine Savior hanging from the tree to atone for our sins.⁵⁵

Marty demonstrates that from the beginning, Lakota Catholicism cultivated the association between the Sun Dance and the crucifixion.

Black Elk also uses the image of "root" to describe the sacred tree. In Black Elk's final prayer, he refers to the sacred tree as a root. "There may be a root that is still alive, and give this root strength and moisture of your good things. . . I prayed that you may set the tree to bloom again."⁵⁶ Lucy also remembers her father saying, "the Great Spirit has promised one day that the tree of my father's vision was to root."⁵⁷ The symbol of root is another biblical symbol. Jesse's stump, or the root of Jesse, was a messianic prophecy which foretold the lineage of the messiah.

But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blos-

som.... On that day, the root of Jesse, set up as a signal for the nations, the Gentiles shall seek out, for his dwelling shall be glorious.⁵⁸

According to Isaiah, a branch will grow from the root of Jesse, and will stand as a sign for what the Dakota Bible translates *Ikcewicasta*, Common people, or Indians.⁵⁹ Christians interpret this passage as a prophecy for Jesus. This image is taken up in Revelation, where Jesus is called the “the root and offspring of David, the bright morning star.”⁶⁰

The most important biblical passages for this comparison are those that refer to the cross as a tree. In Acts, Peter tells Cornelius that Jesus was put “to death by hanging him on a tree.”⁶¹ The first letter of Peter depicts Jesus as a sun dancer:

“Jesus bore our sins in his body upon the cross [in the Dakota Bible can — tree], so that, free from sin, we might live for righteousness [wóowotha•na]. By his wounds you have been healed.”⁶² This important passage unites all the previous themes of the flowering stick, the red man in front of the tree, and Black Elk’s portrayal of the Sun Dance in *The Sacred Pipe*. Jesus is pierced and hung from the tree, whose wounds are for the healing and life of all the world.

In summary, the evidence supports the hypothesis that Black Elk’s sacred tree is a Christian symbol. Black Elk’s description mirrors biblical imagery on many levels: the tree of life, the messianic root, the Sun Dance and the Passion, the use of Christological language, the description of Jesus dying on the tree in the Dakota Bible, and the vision of the Son of God in front of the blooming tree. Missionaries preached this, communal practice embodied it, and Fools Crow and others attested to its persistence in Lakota tradition. Lucy Looks Twice’s claim must be taken seriously.

Endnotes

1. See Damian Costello, *Black Elk: Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005) for the complete argument. I have time in this paper only to present the conclusions, not to argue many of the points. I will footnote the more important points in

need of clarification.

2. Raymond J. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk’s Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 257.

3. John G. Neihardt, ed., *Black Elk Speaks* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 276.

4. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 55.

5. Vine Deloria, Jr., *Introduction to Neihardt*, *Black Elk Speaks*, xiii.

6. I cannot present the details of the Catholic missions to the Lakota because of a lack of time. The problems caused by missionaries among Native Americans are well known and are assumed for this paper. Less well known are the often tolerant practices of the early missionaries. What is interesting among the Lakota is that the experience of early Lakota converts was generally better than later generations. It appears that the worst of missionary problems occurred with the mission schools, the failure of the church to develop a Native clergy, clergy less committed to learning the Lakota language, and increasing social problems on the reservation. It might be helpful to think of Richard Twiss’ presentation of the Spokane Garry, his role in spreading a vibrant Native Christianity and subsequent negative changes as white missionaries took control and colonial pressures increased. See Richard Twiss, *One Church, Many Tribes: Following Jesus the Way God Made You* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books), 138-157. See also Ross Enochs, *The Jesuit Mission to the Lakota Sioux: Pastoral Theology and Ministry, 1886-1945* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1996) for a history of Catholic missions to the Lakota.

7. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 57.

8. Black Elk, letter to *Iapi Oaye*, found in DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 10.

9. Mary E. Cochran, *Dakota Cross-Bearer: The Life and World of a Native American Bishop* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 39.

10. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 266.

11. *Ibid.*, 54.

12. *Ibid.*, 47.

13. *Ibid.*, 120.

14. Michael F. Steltenkamp, *Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 121.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, 122.

17. It is important to emphasize there is universal agreement among Black Elk's Lakota contemporaries. All portray him as a sincere Christian, even detractors. John (Fire) Lame Deer, dismisses Black Elk as a "catechism teacher" and a "cigar-store Indian," but recognizes his life as a Catholic. There is no evidence that they see Black Elk's Christianity as anything but a typical manifestation of Lakota culture of the early reservation period. Reference for Lame Deer is Peter Matthiessen, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), xxxvii.

18. Again, for the sake of time I cannot present the work of two broad movements on which my work depends: postcolonialism and post-Western Christianity. Postcolonialism emphasizes the multiple ways that colonized peoples made use of European culture and technology to counter the challenges of European colonialism. In particular, Asian and African Christians emphasize the use of Christianity and the Bible in this process. Post-Western Christianity highlights the way that Christianity itself is changing. Currently the majority of Christians are found among non-European peoples and this trend is only increasing. In addition, these thinkers highlight both the use of indigenous cultures in church life and the more traditional theologies that come out of these contexts. Two excellent sources are R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2001) and Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity?: The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003). The World Christian Gathering of Indigenous People seems to be an example of this in action.

19. See Lv 19:18, Dt 6:5, 10:12, Jos 22:5, Mt 19:19, 22:37-39, Lk 10:27, Rom 13:9, Gal 5:14, Jas 2:8.

20. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 382.

21. *Ibid.*, 290. While Black Elk's statement may seem to be a negative judgment against this Christian teaching, it must be read in context. On the preceding page Black Elk clearly states his faith in the Great Spirit and his just judgment. "Now, when I look ahead, we are nothing but prisoners of war, but the Great Spirit has protected us so far, and this Great Spirit takes care of us. . . [I]t is up to the Great Spirit to look upon the white man and they will be sorry and this great thing that happens might be just among themselves." See also page 127.

22. Black Elk, Letter to friends and relatives and the Lakota Catholic community, no date, published in *Sinasapa Wocekiye Taeyanpaha*, date unknown, ca. 1907-1908. Translated from Lakota to English under Michael F. Steltenkamp, S.J., in Ivan M. Timonin, *Black Elk's Synthesis: Catholic theology and Oglala Tradition in The Sacred Pipe*, Dissertation Proposal. Accessed approximately 11/1/02 from <http://www.ustpaul.ca/>. See also Matthew 5:23-24: "Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift."

23. Steltenkamp, *Holy Man*, 67-8. Emphasis mine.

24. An important issue that I do not have time to address is Black Elk's discussion of and possible involvement in Lakota religious tradition. The evidence seems to indicate that Black Elk and other early converts attempted to sanctify Lakota culture in the way that Adrian Jacobs describes. I have argued that Black Elk eliminated the aspects of Lakota tradition contrary to the Gospel and re-interpreted Lakota tradition in light of the saving action of Christ. For example, the Sun Dance is no longer conducted for personal power in war but for the well-being of all people and creation and seen as a re-enactment of Christ's passion. I understand the important objections to this approach and that this may strike many Christians as too syncretic. Ultimately, it seems to be an issue for contemporary Native Christians who attempt to sanctify their culture in light of the Gospel.

25. More than a year after writing the book, I realize that one of the major limitations of my work is its exclusive emphasis on the Christian aspects of Black Elk's vision. What does the Lakota content of the vision say? I am not really qualified to address this issue, but it seems like it would be similar to what Richard Twiss argues in chapter 4, "A Native Worldview" in Twiss, *One Church, Many Tribes: Following Jesus the Way God Made You*, 138-157.

26. William Apess, "Son of the Forest" in Barry O'Connell, ed., *On Our Own Ground: The Complete Writings of William Apess, a Pequot*. (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 19, 21.

27. An example of condemnation: "It is with shame, I acknowledge, that I have to notice so much corruption of a people calling themselves Christians. If they were like my people, professing no purity at all, then

their crimes would not appear to have such magnitude. But while they appear to be profession more virtuous, their crimes still blacken. It makes them truly to appear to be like mountains filled with smoke, and thick darkness covering them all around.” An example of the call for repentance and reconciliation: “You and I have to rejoice that we have not to answer for our fathers’ crimes; neither shall we do right to charge them one to another. We can only regret it, and flee from it; and from henceforth, let peace and righteousness be written upon our hearts and hands forever, is the wish of a poor Indian.” Apess, “Eulogy on King Philip” in *On Our Own Ground*, 300, 310.

28. O’Connell, *On Our Own Ground*, xxxvii.

29. *Ibid.*, 163.

30. *Ibid.*, 118.

31. *Ibid.*, 129-130.

32. Matt 23:37.

33. Matt 28:20.

34. Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, 74.

35. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 287.

36. Matt 11:28-30.

37. *Ibid.*, 129-130.

38. Rev 19:16; see also Rev 17:14 and 1 Tim 6:15.

39. Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, 74.

40. Ez 17:23.

41. Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, 74. This passage also develops Black Elk’s understanding of will and connects it to the sacrifice of Jesus. See page 11 of this chapter for a discussion of will as a Christian theme.

42. Rev 22:2.

43. Mails, *Fools Crow*, 133.

44. *Ibid.*, 136.

45. Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 154.

46. Steltenkamp, *Holy Man of the Oglala*, 103.

47. Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, 79.

48. Black Elk uses this in a universal sense.

49. John 6:51.

50. John 19:30.

51. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 132.

52. Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, 100.

53. Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 148.

54. Enochs, *Black Elk and the Jesuits*, 296.

55. Enochs, *Jesuit Mission*, 60.

56. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 295-6.

57. Steltenkamp, *Holy Man of the Oglala*, 109.

58. Isaiah 11:1,11.

59. Jan Ullrich, personal communication.

60. Rev 22:16.

61. Acts 10:39. See also Deut 21:23, Acts 5:30, 13:29, Gal 3:13.

62. 1 Pet 2:24.