



Indigenous American Religious Advice

For Our Troubled Age

Ward McAfee

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Nature, the First People and the spirit of our ancestors are giving you loud warnings. Today, December 10, 1992, you see increasing floods, more damaging hurricanes, hailstorms, climate changes and earthquakes, as our prophecies said would come. Even animals and birds are warning us with strange change in their behavior such as the beaching of whales. Why do animals act like they know about the earth's problems and most humans act like they know nothing? If we humans do not wake up to the warnings, the great purification will come to destroy this world just as the previous worlds were destroyed.

Address by Thomas Banyacya, Hopi Spiritual Spokesman,
Before the U.N. General Assembly, December 10, 1992

Introduction

Chief Seattle and Chief Joseph, both of the 19th century, warned their conquerors in words similar to those of Thomas Banyacya in 1992. This prophecy has been persistent over the past several centuries. Now, as the realities of climate change and species extinction are widely recognized, this message is being heard by the majority society.

The centuries-long genocide of Indigenous Americans at the hands of those whom they term “invaders” is familiar. The details of this encounter are horrific, involving not only physical violence but also many ongoing



unwholesome developments that always accompany the attempt of one culture to eradicate another. But contemporary times have produced another perspective. Today, it is clear that the earth is in crisis. Modernity, once seen as providing unending progress, is running amok. Climate change and species extinction are the most obvious long-term problems. Descendants of the “invaders” are aware that they have been poor stewards of God’s created order. They are open to learning from many sources, including Indigenous Americans who have much to say that goes beyond their harsh treatment at the hands of European colonizers.

First and foremost, Indian* theologians relate that authentic religion capable of nurturing a reverential attitude toward the on-going creative processes of the Earth must be rooted in definite locations. They tell us that human beings in a meaningful relationship with Creation must largely stay put and be committed to the particular circumstances of one region. In past ages, Indian tribes ranged far and wide in trading expeditions and even moved when circumstances demanded it, but characteristically Indigenous peoples maintained a mythological understanding of stability in their timeless and sacred locations. While at certain times and places Christian

* In this essay, terms such as Indian, Native American and Indigenous American will be used interchangeably, a style used by the Indigenous authors cited here.



groups have similarly tried to maintain that their religious norms were unchanging, by and large the story and style of Christianity is one of historical development whereas Indian religions value maintaining stasis or equilibrium within particular ecosystems. In short, the Indian mentality is “spatial” more than “historical.” In western civilization, the dominant paradigm of historical development allowed modernity to take root and eventually flourish.

Indigenous people tell us that their ancestors considered human beings as co-inhabitants with the other creatures sharing their sacred locations rather than as a master species commissioned to reshape the natural order. Each tribe knew the particular rhythms of their unique place and lived accordingly. California Indians farmed oak trees by various methods that included both irrigation and intentional burning of brush for a predictable supply of nutritious acorns. The Sioux knew when and where to hunt the buffalo. But in all cases, Indigenous tribes never surrendered their mental rootedness to a particular place. They knew their limits and boundaries and thought of maintaining their place in a balanced existence in which they were not the only creatures that mattered. Other animals, the trees and even



rocks were regarded with reverence. These kinds of sensibilities, Indigenous prophets emphasize, have been forgotten in the modern world.

Some contemporary Euro-Americans, such as Bill McKibben and Wendell Berry, have called for Americans to reorient their living patterns to specific places for both a more efficient use of natural resources and a restoration of a reverence for the land that is only possible in a specific locality. Amish Americans have long practiced a close attachment to location and community that is in harmony with Indigenous ways. With each passing year, a growing minority of Americans are open to changing living patterns in order to be more “Earth-friendly.” In 2007, in preparing a new edition of New Oxford American Dictionary, Oxford University Press USA selected “locavore” as the “2007 Word of the Year.” The invention of four San Francisco women, “locavore” is defined as a person who eats “only food grown or produced within a 100-mile radius.” Once made, this choice encourages a human identity with a specific location, a consciousness that pervades the writings of McKibben and Berry. This new sensibility is unfriendly to the workings of a global economy.

Overall, these examples of resistance are spotty at best. Modern and modernizing people everywhere generally hold a global economic



consciousness. For a century, California oranges have been shipped to Florida, and Florida oranges to California. Now we fly Chilean wines to wine-producing California. Our living patterns bear almost no attachment to a particular place. Native American prophets warn that this must change if our species is to achieve a sustainable existence. Yet how can we turn away from an economic system that has become familiar, comfortable and profitable to large numbers of people? Where should we begin? Where should we look for our salvation?

Indigenous prophets urge us to rethink Christianity, the bedrock of western civilization. The Earth crisis has revealed its anthropocentrism as extremely dysfunctional. Mary Evelyn Tucker, who with her husband John Grim is a co-director of the Forum on Religion and Ecology, applauds the Native American critique of Christian human-centeredness: “In reexamining history we are less inclined to exalt the human in light of a continuing inhumanity to persons and of an assault on the Earth. More than ever before, we question our purpose, our function, and indeed our very being.”¹ To some, this might sound as self-hatred, but it is more a rejection of human excess and a willingness to hear Indigenous advice. Before the coming of the

¹ Mary Evelyn Tucker, “The Ecological Spirituality of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin,” *Spiritus, A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, 7 (Spring 2007): 16.

Whites, Indigenous peoples regarded themselves as part of nature, not separated as a master species. This earthly and holistic consciousness, Indigenous prophets tell us, has to become universal.

These prophets warn that focusing too tightly upon a monotheistic God is part of the problem. It is not that Indian religions are hostile to monotheism. Most varieties of Indigenous American religion refer to something akin to a “Great Spirit.” But this unifying force has always been regarded as highly mysterious and not the sole spiritual property of any particular group. Indian religions are not exclusive in orientation. They have always recognized that many tribes have their own unique relationship to the Great Spirit in their respective sacred places. Being spatially oriented, tribal religions always have focused on the specific, knowable and familiar. As such, Indian religion is “down-to-earth” and readily engages common people toward earthly concerns while maintaining what some have termed a “cosmic consciousness.” This mentality is experiential rather than word-oriented and intellectual.²

² Ritual is an important part of Indigenous religion. Practitioners of Indigenous American religious ceremonies, dances and rites are generally averse to sharing the deepest meaning of their faith traditions with outsiders. While there are some Indian New Age religious entrepreneurs eager to inform those who are hungry to learn tribal ways, they are regarded as charlatans by the elders who maintain these traditions. Vine Deloria, Jr. has provided a cursory review of preferred religious practices among various North American tribes in his For This Land, Writings on Religion in America (New York and

Vine Deloria, Jr.

In modern times, Vine Deloria, Jr. stands out as an Indigenous prophet. His God is Red: A Native View of Religion is a thought-provoking analysis that has appeared in many editions. Deloria hailed from a Sioux family long devoted to the Christian faith. Both his father and grandfather had been Episcopal priests. He himself served on the National Executive Council of the Episcopal Church in the late 1960s. Shortly thereafter, he underwent a significant life change and rejected Christianity in favor of restoring ancient tribal religious traditions. His personal experiences and educational pursuits convinced him that Christianity was incapable of being reformed to meet the needs of our troubled age. He emphasized that in Native Indian religions, as practiced in their complete fullness long ago, a deep awareness was nurtured that the individual is part and parcel of the on-going processes of creation.

London: Routledge, 1990): 122-125. Richard Erdoes, Crying For a Dream: The World Through Native American Eyes (Santa Fe: Bear and Company Publishing, 1990) is another attempt to communicate Indian experiential religion in writing and accompanying photographs. Also see Peggy V. Beck, Anna Lee Walters, Nia Francisco, The Sacred Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life (Tsaile, Arizona: Navajo Community College Press, 1996).

Most importantly, this awareness was common among all in the tribe, not just a select few.³

Deloria criticized not just Christianity but all of the religions shaping modern civilization. To a greater or lesser degree, all of them are exclusive in their foundational principles, a bad tendency that he claims leads to dreams of manifest destiny, war, conquest and domination of others. Specifically, both Christianity and Islam seek to proselytize all of humankind. By contrast, Indigenous American religions are by their intrinsic nature tied to particular localities. As such, they are not universal, although they are harmonious with much that appears in the Christian scriptures. Above all, each tribe is respectful of other Indigenous stories that are rooted in places far removed from their own unique space. While specific Indian tribes certainly engaged in wars of conquest, they generally remained respectful of the spiritual stories of those whom they conquered. As such, Indian religion embodies a non-exclusive attitude quite uncommon among the religions of the West.⁴

A tone of bitterness colors the writings of Deloria. In explaining the Indigenous perspective to readers who are from the majority culture, Deloria

³ Vine Deloria, Jr., God Is Red: A Native View of Religion, 30th Anniversary Edition (Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 2003), 81, 94.

⁴ Deloria, God Is Red, 99.

cannot avoid expressing the pain accumulated during many centuries of European cultural domination. Christianity is held out for especial condemnation, as much of this oppression was done in its name. The First Foreword to his book, written by Leslie Marmon Silko of the Laguna Pueblo, explains Vine Deloria's attitude this way: "In God Is Red, Vine explains how Christianity is at the root cause of the great weakness of the United States—the inability to respect or tolerate those who are different."⁵ It is clear that Deloria developed his own intolerance toward Christianity as a result of what he perceived as Christianity's original sin of intolerance for any other religion. God Is Red considers the Christian style as an unwillingness to hear any religious insight that appears foreign or alien—and much in Indigenous religion can easily appear alien. In this regard, Deloria cites Walking Buffalo, a Stoney Indian from Canada, who long ago articulated the Whites' inability to listen to Indigenous perspectives:

Did you know that trees talk? Well they do. They talk to each other, and they'll talk to you if you listen. Trouble is, white people don't listen. They never learned to listen to Indians, so I don't suppose they'll listen to other voices in nature. But I have learned a lot from trees; sometimes about the weather, sometimes about animals, sometimes about the Great Spirit.⁶

⁵ Deloria, God is Red, viii.

⁶ Deloria, God is Red, 89.

Deloria also blasts what he regards as Christianity's bad habit of framing its teaching in the form of "abstract religious principles." He compares this unfavorably to the Indigenous religious identity that is "virtually indistinguishable from the earth itself." Throughout his book, Deloria repeatedly shows that he is familiar with western philosophical constructs that he criticizes. One suspects that this familiarity derives from that period in his life when he valued and seriously studied Christian philosophical thought. The Second Foreword to God Is Red explains that Deloria challenges "the presumed inherent hegemony of the western intellectual tradition" so that "many bright Indian youth—a future generation of Indian scholars"—may come to realize the greater validity of their own native traditions. Describing the better way of Indian religion, Deloria writes: "Religion for them [Indigenous peoples] is an experience and they have no reason to reduce it to systematic thought and the elaboration of concepts." He blames the Earth Crisis on a mentality that conceives of this world "as a testing ground of abstract morality" and calls for "a more mature view of the universe as a comprehensive matrix of life forms." "Religious experiences," he writes, "are not nearly as important to Westerners as their creeds,

theologies, and speculations—all products of the intellect and not necessarily based on experiences.” His attack is unrelenting.

It is the non-philosophical quality of tribal religions that makes them important for this day and age.... Modern society has foreclosed the possibility of experiencing life in favor of explaining it. Even in explaining the world, however, Western people have misunderstood it.

His message is clear: If one focuses on words and ideas, one will never hear the trees talking.⁷

Among the Christian “abstractions” that Deloria questions is the idea of “God” itself. Indian religions, he reports, do reference the “Great Spirit” or the “Great Mystery,” but their ceremonial songs are not about any such indefinable entity. Instead, “they are directed to plants, birds, animals, and the earth asking for assistance in performing rather mundane tasks.” The “Sacred Energy” or “Great Mystery” is too amorphous and general for such specific matters. Being immediately oriented to identifiable earthly concerns, Indian religion does not focus on an afterlife. Death—death of animals or humans or insects—is viewed as part of the rhythm of nature. The bones of the dead reside in the sacred locale of the tribe, which helps

⁷ Deloria, God Is Red, xii, 146, 154, 288-289, 295.

define it as sacred. “Heaven” (The Happy Hunting Ground) is vaguely acknowledged but is not emphasized.

Deloria contrasts what he regards as the pre-Columbian’s “healthy attitude toward death” with what he regards as Christianity’s pathological obsession over it. Here, he highlights “the message of Christianity” as fundamentally flawed: “Death was early considered as unnatural to the creation and as an evil presence resulting from the disobedience of Adam in the Garden of Eden.” As a result of early Christianity’s death-denying message, that religion became wedded to an “overemphasis on eternal life.” Over the centuries, “people became separated from participation in the life cycles of the natural world and death became something to be feared.” For Deloria, it is one more sharp contrast between Indian religion and Christianity that reveals the latter in a bad light: “For the tribal people, death in a sense fulfills their destiny, for as their bodies become dust once again they contribute to the ongoing life cycle of creation. For Christians, the estrangement from nature, their religion’s central theme, makes this most natural of conclusions fraught with danger.”⁸

Deloria described the Indian identity as primarily with the tribe and with the sacred living space of the tribe and not with the individual. As a result,

⁸ Deloria, God Is Red, 152, 162, 167, 169, 171, 183

individual death is not overemphasized. The tribe lives on as the individual dies. A leaf falls from a tree that continues to live. Little has changed. The individual has meaning only as a contributor to the life of the tribe, not as a self-defining entity. He sees Indian “community religions” as fundamentally different from most variants of Christianity in not “abstracting a hypothetical individual from his or her community context.” He reports that Indigenous religion teaches that the individual is not larger than nature and that the individual has responsibilities to both the community and the natural world that transcend personal desires and wishes. His advice to Christians is harsh: “Rather than attempt to graft contemporary ecological concern onto basic Christian doctrines and avoid blame for the current planetary disaster, Christians would be well advised to surrender many of their doctrines.”⁹

Native American Christian Theology

Indigenous American Christian theologians, who agree with much of Deloria’s analysis, need to be heard. Their collective insights derive from a shattered past. Similar to the rest of us, they are venturing into a most uncertain future. These fellow Christians tell us that we must join with them in a reconstruction of Christianity that emphasizes respect for the land.

⁹ Deloria, God Is Red. 195, 197, 285, 292.

Unlike Deloria, they do not regard this projected new reformation of Christianity as a lost cause even before it begins. They call for a new Christianity focusing upon a new resurrection--a restoration of balance in on-going natural creative processes. They envision a widespread religiously inspired respect for earth's rhythms overcoming our culture's current *prima facie* value of human expansion.¹⁰

Today, Indigenous American Christian theologians are embarked on a mission that begs us to reconsider long familiar theological constructs that they perceive have facilitated our current predicament. Similar to the Social Gospel theologians of a century ago, they want us to rethink our understandings of both "sin" and "salvation" in an effort "to return to a state of *communitas*." In Native traditions, they report, "the closest approximation of the Christian notion of sin...is a failure to live up to one's responsibilities to the community." Likewise, the closest understanding of "salvation" present in Native traditions is the sustainability and continuance of the tribe.

Similar to Deloria, Indigenous Christian theologians want us to rethink our emphasis on life after death. They report, "Although the stereotype of a

¹⁰ Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley and George E. "Tink" Tinker, eds., *A Native American Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), ix, 33-34; Norman W. Jackson, "Native American Theology and the United Church of Christ," *Prism: A Theological Forum for the United Church of Christ*, 5 (Spring 1990): 74-79; James L. West, "Indian Spirituality: Another Vision," (Presented on September 26, 1986, at the theological conference, "Patterns of Faith; Woven Together in Life and Mission" at American Baptist Seminary of the West, Berkeley, California).

‘Happy Hunting Ground’ is well established, the continuation of personal existence after death has less importance in tribal societies than in Christianity.” They want us to rethink our rigid monotheism. The Lakota notion of Wakan Tanka (often seen as equivalent to our God) is commonly expressed as “unity in diversity,” but it is the diversity of Wakan Tanka as knowable physical and spiritual forces in a particular sacred location that is emphasized.¹¹

These Christian theologians suggest we reconstruct the meaning of “creation” not as a one-time event but rather as an ongoing process. The pre-Columbian residents of North America were engaged daily in their physical/spiritual world order involving reciprocity as well as enjoyment of the fruits of nature. They regarded all created things as embodying a sacred energy, and they experienced a deep reverence for this totality, not merely for their own human existence in any superior or separated way. They were branded as “animists” because their attitudes did not conform to the religious categories of the missionaries who sought to force their beliefs into a realm of word constructs that bear no direct relationship to nature as experienced in unique spaces. In opposition to the traditional teachings of Christianity, these early Indigenous resisters did not think of themselves as privileged

¹¹ Kidwell, Noley and Tinker, eds., *A Native American Theology*, 19, 55-56, 61, 105, 150.



stewards of the whole. Rather they were both reverential of a mysterious spiritual power unifying all of the various parts of the whole and immediately aware of their obligations to it. Instead of fostering individual mastery, their “animism” encouraged a communal attitude relating them to tribal communities as well as all of nature.

Reflecting upon the interior perspective of Indigenous Americans, people holding a traditional western world view are challenged to question their deepest assumptions that have contributed to “a mentality of looking at nature as something to be conquered and subdued rather than as a living world that humans work with and within.” With others, Indigenous American Christian theologians suggest that persisting in the familiar ruts of traditional axial religions is part of the unprecedented problem now facing us.¹²

According to Indian prophetic analysis, pre-Christian Europeans began the bad western habit of objectifying the world as observers disengaged and separated from their natural context. This, Indigenous American Christian theologians observe, was the first step toward a worldview of external control and domination ultimately including an assault on the natural order

¹² Kidwell, Noley and Tinker, eds., [A Native American Theology](#), 34-36: Rosemary Radford Ruether, [Integrating Economism, Globalization and World Religions](#) (Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham, Maryland, 2005), 17.

necessary for all of life. Among ancient Greek thinkers, Pythagoras initiated the western tendency to divide body and soul, regarding the soul as divine and eternal and the body as from the Earth and therefore transitory and corrupt. Plato and the Gnostics who influenced early Christianity built upon this philosophical foundation that diminished earthly existence. Post-exilic Hebrew religion contributed eschatological and apocalyptic tendencies to defer all meaning to a presumed end of time when the Kingdom of God would be revealed to a righteous remnant. These disparate influences shaped Christianity's subsequent "otherworldly disposition"¹³

Native Americans have different names for what westerners call "God," but they are agreed concerning this highly mysterious God's essential nature, which is not that of a dominator or personal Lord who demands our submission. Rather, God is "the Sacred Energy, or Mystery or Power." The interior perspective of Indigenous Americans does not presume to define this power with any pretense of objective precision. But it is quite definite in its assurance that the appropriate way to view our human relationship to "God" is that of intimate sharing within this Sacred Energy. Their perspective is far more egalitarian (within a spiritual context of reverential wonder and

¹³ Kidwell, Noley and Tinker, eds., A Native American Theology, 39; Anand Veeraraj, Green History of Religion (Centre for Contemporary Christianity: Bangalore, India, 2005), 218-221, 249.

respect) than is the typical western perspective of hierarchical domination and control.

George Tinker is perhaps the principal Indian theologian of our time. He participated with others in writing the Second Foreword for the 30th anniversary edition of Deloria's God Is Red, proclaiming that work as giving voice to American Indian religious thought. The differing roles of Deloria and Tinker may be described in the familiar metaphor of "good cop/bad cop," with Deloria playing the latter role.* Deloria first softens up Euro-American readers with his harsh claim that Christianity is irredeemable. Tinker, the "good cop," then follows with his assurances that Christianity is still salvageable. Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., constituted a similar tandem during the Civil Rights Movement, although Martin never publicly collaborated with Malcolm, as Tinker has with Deloria. In reviewing Tinker's book Spirit and Resistance: Political Theology and American Indian Liberation, Deloria described their relationship this way: "Tinker's powerful and well-reasoned thoughts are expressed in a much kinder way than some of us are likely to do."¹⁴

* "Good cop/bad cop" is a psychological device used in police interrogations involving a team of questioners. The bad cop attacks and condemns, while the good cop plays a much more friendly role. The goal of both policemen is to get the person being questioned to cooperate.

¹⁴ See the back cover of paperback edition of George E. Tinker, Spirit and Resistance: Political Theology and American Indian Liberation (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

Use of the term “Lord” is at the top of Tinker’s suggested reforms. He points out that many disparate and quarreling groups within western Christianity find an unfortunate area of agreement in the notion that “Jesus is Lord.” That very linguistic construct, he emphasizes, encourages a bad tendency. Feminist Christian theologians, such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, have come to the same conclusion. Tinker relates his own perspective on the use of the word “Lord:” “Many Amer-European Christians seem to feed on a hierarchical view of the world which has historically privileged and continues to privilege White people on this continent and in other Third World colonial contexts.”¹⁵

Indigenous Christian theologians tell us that Christians must not only reconsider their linguistic (and mental) habits regarding Jesus Christ but also historic pretensions of Christian exclusivity. If religion is characterized by a rigid exclusivity, they emphasize, it becomes self-righteous, nationalistic, idolatrous, hateful, rage-filled and ultimately destructive of both Self and Community. Tinker concludes:

The colonizer churches themselves will necessarily have to rethink their notion of Christian exclusivity and make room for American Indian religious traditions as being potentially as powerful and salvific as the best vision well-intentioned peoples

¹⁵ Kidwell, Noley and Tinker, eds., A Native American Theology, 68-69.

have for Christianity.... It should be possible today for a mutual respect to emerge that will allow Christians to acknowledge spiritual power and goodness of [other] religious traditions.¹⁶

Envisioning a New Mentality

Can Indian wisdom and Christianity be united in a workable way that holds promise for the future? This remains a key theological question for our age as it grapples with the realities of how human activities are destroying life-giving habitat. It is not now clear how the dominant culture will respond.

Historically the European invaders envisioned only two futures for indigenous peoples. Some, perhaps many, sought their elimination, and genocide was effectively practiced. The more “Christian” response called for their assimilation into Western and Christian ways. To ensure the success of this mission, Whites even took Indian children away from both their parents and tribal communities and placed them in boarding schools where they were denied the use of their own language and socialized into the alien, Western culture. This is not the kind of outcome that Indigenous Christian theologians have in mind.

¹⁶ Kidwell, Noley and Tinker, eds., A Native American Theology, 84.

Indigenous peoples have had to make many adjustments to the dominant culture, and some Native Americans have learned to work well within it, but success stories are not commonplace. The old cultures and traditions, so closely bound to the landscape, have been broken for most tribal peoples by forcing them to choose between reservations that cannot support traditional means of livelihood and an alienating urban environment. By and large, the current result reflects an unhealthy assimilation.

Native American authors describe the depth of the problem:

The average yearly income [of Indigenous Americans] is less than half the poverty level, and over half of all Natives are unemployed. On some reservations, unemployment runs as high as 85-90%. Health statistics chronically rank Native Americans at or near the bottom. Male life expectancy is 44 years, female 47. Infant mortality is twice the national average. Diabetes run six times the national average; heart disease at about five times the national average; alcoholism five times the national average; and cirrhosis of the liver 18 times the national average. Substance abuse, school dropout rates, suicide, crime, and violence are major problems among both urban and reservation populations.¹⁷

George Tinker sees no prospect for overcoming “Indian dysfunction” independent of the dominant society addressing its own “ecological

¹⁷ Kidwell, Noley and Tinker, eds., A Native American Theology, 178-179.

dysfunction.” In short, modern pathologies exhibited among Indian populations are not their problems alone. The dominant culture that encourages these societal diseases needs to be changed.¹⁸

The question for Indigenous Americans is how they can reclaim the ancient wisdom of their cultures. Indians have internalized many negative perceptions of themselves that have been dominant in the broader culture for many centuries. Getting free of this form of mental bondage will be no easy task. For their part, Indigenous Christian leaders are seeking ways to look at Christianity beyond the categories and paradigms that helped the religion facilitate colonial oppression. This remains a work in progress.

The question for Euro-Americans is whether they can learn from an indigenous spirituality to bring about needed changes. In pre-Columbian days, native religions flourished in the context of a very different way of living than what is possible for most people today. Can the Indian mentality of being close to Nature be adapted by the dominant culture to address the Earth Crisis in meaningful ways? Indian theologians such as Tinker offer no simple prescriptions. Native commentators have long been recommending that whites need to listen to Nature in order to change their own dysfunctional habits of thinking and being. As these recommendations are

¹⁸ Tinker, Spirit and Resistance, 4-5



now being heard, it is up to the hearers to decide how they should respond. As a teacher, Jesus of Nazareth never laid out clearly how to solve the multiple dysfunctions of his own time. Rather he gently nudged his hearers to consider new perspectives that they would have to wrestle with in order to make them interior realities for themselves. It is no different in our current situation. Native Americans cannot simply inject us with an Earth-friendly mentality as a physician might administer a curative potion. As has been true in all ages, we have to discover authentic religious truth ourselves.

As the Earth Crisis calls us all to live more responsibly, we must change many patterns of past behavior. It is clear that a great cultural shift will have to occur. People now wedded to a preference for individual freedom will have to change their orientation to one of individual and collective responsibilities. Indian prophets promise that individual identity will not be lost in this necessary reorientation. Native American customs of naming individuals for their unusual abilities or experiences demonstrate that any fear of obliterating an authentic individual self in this anticipated indigenously inspired transformation is unwarranted. Individual life must always be appreciated but in its way of contributing to the whole, rather than encouraging any and all personal desires.



Sioux religious traditions have long encouraged “vision quests” of individuals to discover their unique responsibility in contributing to the well being of the whole.¹⁹ Similar in some ways to the notion of the Christian “calling,” the Indigenous American vision quest more intimately links individual destiny to that of both the community and the sacred Earth. As such, it has an intrinsic social integrity that is now required in our confrontation with a fractured and dysfunctional world disorder.

Conclusion

We are in a process of returning to an appreciation of Mother Earth. The human race’s instinct for survival demands this. Our culture’s environmental discourse amply demonstrates this, but for this process to be corrective, it must become more than intellectual sharing. Talk is valuable only if it leads to changed patterns of living and being. Scientific knowledge and philosophical insights alone cannot persuade us. Indigenous American commentators advise us that our daily religion must become experiential and communal and rooted in specific places if it is to become transformative.

In the past, religions have been remodeled when conditions required it. We have faith that humankind will come again to harmonize with the life

¹⁹ Deloria, God is Red, 196.

rhythms of the Earth, restoring a balance that is under attack in our own time. Our future will require this restoration. Then we will know that “we are not larger than nature and that we have responsibilities to the rest of the natural world that transcend our own personal desires and wishes.”²⁰ This is the interior perspective of Indigenous Americans that is offered to everyone.

Writing in a German theological journal in 1989, George Tinker regretted that Christianity had been forced upon his people. The resulting horror taught indigenous peoples who survived that something was amiss with refined Christian theologies that promised Indians salvation in the next world while ensuring only their destruction in the present one. Tinker concludes that ultimately the Christian missionaries failed in their cause of religious eradication, in that “Indians continue to tell the stories [of their ancestors], sing the songs, speak the prayers and perform the ceremonies that root themselves deeply in Mother Earth.” And, he added almost as an aside, that his people “are actually audacious enough to think that their stories and their ways of reverencing Creation will some day win over the immigrants and transform them.”²¹

²⁰ Deloria, God is Red, 285.

²¹ George E. Tinker, “Gerechtigkeit, Frieden und die Integrität der Weihnachtsbäume,” Ökumenische Rundschau 38 (April, 1989): 180.

Decades later, Tinker continues this theme with greater emphasis and elaboration. In his Spirit and Resistance, (2004), he states his goal as “to recapture something of the premodern, pre-1492 world as a vision” to guide all of humankind. Tinker calls for “dreaming a new future.” He emphasizes that this new Christian theology will have to focus upon “the salvation of the communal whole (that is, the world)” and radically reject the “fracturing of the community into individual actors.” “The space of our existence,” he continues, will have to have a higher priority than “the time of our existence” in this new theology. A spatial emphasis alone, he advises, is capable of inculcating “the wisdom of living within limits.” And a deemphasis of “the time of our existence” cannot but help weaken certain Earth-disrespecting aspects of Christian eschatological thinking.²²

The Indigenous American perspective challenges Christian theologians to ponder their faith anew. And in doing so, hard questions must be addressed, especially regarding the Native American advice to highlight “the space of our existence.” Spatial consciousness in and of itself is no panacea. The ideologies currently generating conflicts in Kashmir and/or Israel/Palestine

²² Tinker, Spirit and Resistance, 20-27, 85, 98. In the early days of Christianity, “the time of our existence” did not characterize the faith which expected that the age would soon end with Christ’s return. As centuries turned into millennia, Christian eschatological thinking came to be characterized by “the time of our existence,” a situation in which ultimate meaning is deferred until the end of time. See footnote 24 for an explanation of how indigenous people experience ultimate meaning in each day’s existence on Earth.

have a spatial emphasis, at least to some degree. Likewise, the Nazi perversion of Christianity attempted to connect it with a particular land and people. Many negative examples exist of spatially oriented ideologies/religions that do connect people and land and use that connection to maltreat refugees and immigrants of other cultures who come to live among them. How can this evil be avoided if Tinker's advice is followed?

The Christian Bible advises that one can observe false prophecy by its fruits. Matthew 7:19 advised, "Every tree that does not bear good fruit should be cut down and cast into the fire." By this standard, traditional Christianity itself is at least in need of some pruning. The point is that any reformulations of the Christian message need to be tested by their fruits. Loving-kindness, long at the center of Christianity, needs to become the litmus test of any new constructions of it. Indeed, this attribute is reflected in Tinker's own accounting of spatiality within Indigenous American religious traditions:

Perhaps the most precious gift that American Indians have to share with other peoples is our perspective on the interrelatedness of all of creation and our deep sense of relationship to the land in particular. We are all relatives: from buffaloes and eagles to trees and rocks, mountains and lakes. Just as there is no category of the inanimate, there can be no conception of anything

in the created world that does not share in the sacredness infused in God's act of creation.²³

A reformed Christianity that incorporates a spatial emphasis in this manner is certain to avoid the chauvinism represented most perversely in the Nazi example.

We cannot adopt Indigenous American religions as our own. Their spiritual stories are not ours. But their mentality or interior perspective may inspire us.²⁴ Their example may assist us in our own "search for an intimate spiritual experience of the natural world."²⁵ Our troubled age is ripe for many transformations, including religious ones. Consumerism, the dominant secular religion of our age, is unsustainable. The natural order itself is

²³ Tinker, *Spirit and Resistance*, 45.

²⁴ As the stories of indigenous American religion are rooted in specific places, they are not universal in their application. They directly communicate only to the tribe that reveres them. These stories are not transportable to outsiders. However, the mentality underlying these stories can inspire outsiders to develop something similar. To begin to understand the Indigenous mentality, one should review Mircea Eliade's classic work, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1954/2005). Primitive peoples, Eliade emphasized, do not live in historical or profane time but rather in eternal time in which archetypal sacred moments punctuate daily activities such as eating, grooming, hunting, reproducing and living in close association with the specifics of Creation known in one particular place. The stories and rituals of Native American religions are designed to recreate this mentality for their participants. Christian language holds the potential to reactivate a similar mentality. For example, Christ is commonly referred to as the tree of life, a metaphor that suggests eternity is present to us each day and need not be delayed until the end of the age. Within Christian history are memories of communities that found eternal life in sacred rituals available within this earthly existence. While we cannot simply copy Indigenous American rituals, we can look back into our own experiential religious past to reawaken a sense of eternity in the processes of a sustainable Creation. Even in recalling our own religious past much re-envisioning will necessarily have to occur, as the awareness of our circumstances is dissimilar to mental states that existed long ago. The search for authentic religion is necessarily a never-ending process actively engaging the seeker. Receiving an awareness of eternity in the present moment can never be a wholly passive experience.

²⁵ Tucker, "Ecological Spirituality," *Spiritus*, 7 (Spring, 2007): 15.



rejecting it.²⁶ As the false promises of Consumerism are exposed on a global stage, religious sensibilities encouraging ecological health will touch hearts and minds as never before.

Native American Christian theologians point us toward new considerations. There are aspects of their theology that are antithetical to familiar Christian teachings, yet there is an opening in scripture: In John 16: 12-13, Jesus reportedly advised his followers that better translations of his message would occur later when the Holy Spirit would help bring about an understanding of God's fullest intentions. We need not adopt completely the reforms suggested by Indigenous theologians, but we must work toward reforming Christianity to strengthen its capacity to preserve life in all of its rich diversity. If we do this, George Tinker's own prophecy of Indigenous advice eventually transforming us will have been fulfilled.

Questions for Consideration

1. Indigenous theologians claim that their religious traditions emphasize the particular, specific and experiential rather than the general, universal and philosophic. How is their orientation reflected in their

²⁶ Lester R. Brown, Plan B 3.0: Mobilizing to Save Civilization (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 283; also see a forthcoming essay by Gordon Douglass and Ward McAfee on "Consumerism" in John Cobb, et al., Resistance: The New Role of Progressive Christians (Westminster John Knox Press).

- emphasis of space over time? And in their de-emphasis of God (or The Great Spirit)?
2. What aspects of American Indigenous religion do not welcome outsiders?
 3. What aspects of Indigenous religion are most similar to Christianity?
 4. Would a synthesis of Indigenous and Christian traditions be desirable? Given the distinct differences between the two, is such hybrid even possible?
 5. Is Christianity capable of becoming an effective force in addressing the Earth Crisis? What aspects of the Christian heritage might reduce its effectiveness? What aspects might strengthen it?

Further Reading

1. Peggy V. Beck, Anna Lee Walters, Nia Francisco, The Sacred Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life (Tsaile, Arizona: Navajo Community College Press, 1996).
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3. Vine Deloria, Jr., God Is Red: A Native View of Religion, 30th Anniversary Edition (Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 2003).
4. Richard Erdoes, Crying For a Dream: The World Through Native American Eyes (Santa Fe: Bear and Company Publishing, 1990).
5. Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley and George E. “Tink” Tinker, eds., A Native American Theology (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).
6. George E. Tinker, Spirit and Resistance: Political Theology and American Indian Liberation (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).
7. Anand Veeraraj, Green History of Religion (Centre for Contemporary Christianity: Bangalore, India, 2005).