Native Christianities

Christian religion is hardly monolithic, neither singular nor set in stone, and this is nowhere more true than for Christianities that have gone native. How are native theologians reconceiving Christian faith amid their social circumstances? How should we evaluate theological propositions in light of cultural difference and colonial conflict? How might a cross-cultural approach to African American religion generate new insights on native Christian history? How is contemporary native theology similar to, and different from, black theology in the United States? How have native Christian leaders navigated the complexities of religious identity? How do tribal churches evoke, sustain, and express their collective spiritual reality?

While studying various theologies of liberation in Berkeley, I began to wonder if similar kinds of theological expression were emerging from native Christian contexts. In the spring of 1989, I completed a master's thesis titled "Native Americans, Theology, and Liberation," which included the key sections excerpted here. I organized my research around the relationship between tribal and Christian traditions in the struggle for survival, and I concluded that biculturalism is the best path to liberating conceptions of native Christian faith. My thesis committee was chaired by Choan-Seng Song, a distinguished theologian and Reformed church leader from Taiwan. Entering the PhD program that fall, I enrolled in his advanced course on Third World theologies, where I reconsidered the biculturalist paradigm in connection with the ruptures of Western colonialism. My essay on "The Bitter Medicine of Religious Change" analyzed

three distinct adaptive strategies; now admitting the limits of biculturalism, I argued for the indigenization of native Christianities as an organic, autonomous, open-ended process. Professor Song allowed me to serve as his teaching assistant for several years, and later he would arrange for my participation in a series of meetings with indigenous Christian leaders in Taiwan.

On the home front, I found African American religion to be a productive field for comparative study. A seminar on the history, theology, and ministry of the black church provided an opportunity to ponder "Black Religious History in Cross-Cultural Perspective." Native people make cameo appearances in the scholarship on black religion; I was struck by the interplay between indigenous American and indigenous African traditions during the antebellum period, and by the discrepancy between black denominations independent since the early nineteenth century and native churches still dominated by missionary institutions. This course was one of several I took with black theologian and pastor George Cummings, who also chaired my doctoral committees. One of my comprehensive exams entailed a methodological comparison of "Black Theology and American Indian Theology" in the contemporary period. I tried to identify commonalities as well as critical divergences that signal distinctively native contributions to the liberationist movement, and to Christian theology more generally.

I returned to my work in this area several years later, while teaching at UC Santa Cruz, when I decided that my first book project would be an edited anthology on the problem of native Christian identity. After updating and expanding my research, I arranged the selected essays in four thematic sections and wrote a theoretical and

historical introduction to these writings. I traced the genesis of this emerging genre to four intersecting developments: native literature, social activism, denominational organizing, and liberation theology. Now convinced that the last thing we need is more patented academic jargon, I opted for generic terminology to label "Native Christian Narrative Discourse," a descriptive phrase foregrounding two common methodological strategies. The book title Native and Christian was originally punctuated with a question mark, but I removed it before submitting the final manuscript for publication; shortly thereafter, I stumbled across a new book titled Arab and Christian?, a scholarly monograph on minority Christianities in the Middle East. Native Christians are not the only ones torn between a declarative and an interrogative, between imperatives and exclamations: the convoluted grammar of religious identity.

Language is also an essential issue in a recent book on Kiowa hymns I reviewed for the Journal of the American Academy of Religion. Some of these songs I undoubtedly heard as a child at Redstone; others I learned decades later at Norman First American United Methodist Church, while teaching at the University of Oklahoma. Native Christian life is ever idiosyncratic, bearing the traces of cultural tradition, historical experience, and denominational creed. This vernacular spirituality speaks in an idiom not always intelligible to Western rationalism, and "It Comes Out in Song" and in other forms of affective expression. Indeterminacy is, after all, the hallmark of transcendence, and of any human effort to manifest the ineffable.