

Our Ecumenical Future

There is no going back to a cloistered past—not the cosmos of tribal theocracy, not the parochial empire of Christendom. How can ecumenical cooperation help heal the wounds of Christian colonialism? How should the Christian churches behave in a world of enduring religious pluralism? How have native spiritual leaders addressed the problem of modern religious diversity? How does native religious activism bear on academic theories of interreligious dialogue? How might all native people play a role in resolving religious conflicts within their communities? How did tribal traditionalists find common ground in the wilderness of postwar America? How shall we proceed into a comprehensive, communal future?

I moved to the Bay Area shortly after graduating from college, hoping to soak in the cosmopolitan ethos that California, and especially Berkeley, can offer. Berserkly did not disappoint. A couple of years later I began taking courses at the Graduate Theological Union, the acclaimed interreligious consortium known for its commitment to diversity. In 1989 the staff of the Bay Area Native American Ministry invited me to join them in their work; Paul Schultz and Judy Wellington would become important mentors and colleagues in my study of American Indian religious issues. I profiled the organization for Ecu-log, the newsletter of the Ecumenical Executive Committee of the San Francisco Bay Area, as an example of "Ecumenism in Action." It was the first published writing of my nascent academic career.

My first public lecture as a bona fide professor took place several years later, at a symposium on Christian mission sponsored by the Episcopal seminary in Berkeley. I was asked to reflect on the relationship between "Native Americans and the Church" in the wake of five hundred years of evangelization in the Americas. Organizing my thoughts around Episcopal Indian voices, I surveyed the practice of interreligious dialogue at the moment of Columbian encounter, through a half-millennium of Christian hypocrisy, and in recent efforts by native religious leaders. Those who participated in the Indian Ecumenical Conference synthesized a powerful remedy to the pathology of Columbus and his followers. The testimony of an Anglican priest from India underscores our abiding need for healing in a world of irreducible religious difference.

Having initially addressed theological questions, my graduate studies increasingly focused on interreligious concerns. The Indian Ecumenical Conference served as a suitable case study for a doctoral dissertation on "Contemporary Native Religious Identity," and after completing this manuscript I reworked pieces of it for various scholarly crowds. On the one hand, I borrowed the dissertation title for a paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Studies Association, as part of a panel I organized on religious innovation and ethnic identity; I wanted to complicate the way we think about pluralistic conflicts. On the other hand, I wrote the article "Native People and Interreligious Dialogue in North America" for Studies in Interreligious Dialogue, an international journal published in the Netherlands; I wanted to advance the way we theorize pluralistic solidarities. These are just two of

the many lessons to be learned from the collective experience of the Indian Ecumenical Conference, which notably reclaimed the original, universal meaning of ecumenism.

The publication of Native and Christian brought my work to the attention of a wider audience, and soon I was invited to write an opinion piece for the hemispheric journal Native Americas. Condensing and reframing this material for the general reader in Indian country, I pinned my hopes "On Laughing and Praying"; if there is a solution to the religious discord burdening so many native communities, surely it will involve an ample supply of both piety and humor. The journal editors later submitted this piece to the annual media awards contest of the Native American Journalists Association, which selected it as the best editorial in the native press during 1996. I was gratified to know that others share my commitment to an ecumenical sensibility.

After a hiatus of several years, I returned to the subject of my dissertation and began work on the monograph that would earn me tenure. Digging deeper into the history of the Indian Ecumenical Conference, I realized it had emerged from an earlier movement among tribal traditionalists who organized various unity meetings in the fifties and sixties. Serendipitously, I was asked to contribute an article for a scholarly anthology titled Native American Spirituality; "Intertribal Traditionalism and the Religious Roots of Red Power" documents the traditional movement and its distinctly indigenous approach to interreligious cooperation. A revised version of this piece later appeared as an early chapter of Around the Sacred Fire.

I completed my book on the Indian Ecumenical Conference while living in Norman, Oklahoma, an hour's drive east of my birthplace. Having rewritten the

manuscript as a narrative account, I opened the story in a reflexive mode, recalling an experience of nature and of unforeseen camaraderie. The local is often a microcosm of the global; interpersonal encounters can ease our preoccupation with abstraction, as I found in "Leaving My Notebook." Friendship is surely the most noble expression of ecumenism, and the clearest path to enlightened coexistence.