

Conclusions

Contemporary Native Religious Identity

The Indian Ecumenical Conference was organized during a critical period in the life of many native communities in Canada and the United States. The cumulative process of land dispossession, Christian missionization, and urbanization has produced profound social crises and conflictual religious divisions among native people, and the grassroots elders and leaders who gathered at Crow Agency in 1970 had an experiential awareness of the problems affecting their communities. They believed that these crises and divisions could be overcome by cooperating across tribal and religious boundaries: by acknowledging their common experiences as native people and by affirming their shared religious heritage. Conference leaders sought to heal religious divisions and to revive religious traditions among their people, and they also wanted to address the crisis of identity affecting many native people, particularly the youth. The popularity and influence of the Conference grew quickly after 1970; hundreds of native religious leaders and thousands of native people participated in the annual gatherings during the next two decades. They came from native communities throughout Canada and the United States and represented a tremendous variety of tribal and religious traditions.

As a religious movement, the Indian Ecumenical Conference affirmed native identity by promoting the revival of native religious traditions. This movement was less concerned with achieving political or economic goals than recovering and preserving native identity, especially religious identity. The native religious revival is a product of both continuity and innovation; it involves a return to ancient traditions and a recognition of the value of fresh insights on the modern situation. Many native people live in a fragmented sacred world, but religious revival is still possible because some religious leaders have kept old ways alive while others are still receiving new messages. Religious change unfolds as a dynamic, constructive process and should be interpreted as a positive, not negative experience. Religious authority is located in oral traditions; native elders play a central role in the transmission of religious knowledge to younger generations. Personal religious experience in a communal context is primary and immediate; religious traditions can be best be described in terms of both external and internal diversity, not with categories like orthodoxy and heterodoxy.

As an intertribal gathering, the Indian Ecumenical Conference affirmed native identity by encouraging inclusive attitudes toward religious participation. These annual gatherings facilitated the process of identity formation by including all native people without regard for tribal or religious boundaries. Religious healing is a complex process and can be accomplished only by providing native communities and individuals with a high degree of freedom. Native

people negotiate their way through the complex and conflictual sociocultural milieu in which they find themselves by referring to a variety of group boundaries, and this is no less true when religious considerations are involved. Religious adaptation often involves a strategic expansion of identities, not a substitution of a single comprehensive identity for another. Effective religious leadership is functional, not institutional, and grows out of a local community, not a doctrinal affinity. Religious identity is more a function of participation than of affiliation.

As an interreligious community, the Indian Ecumenical Conference affirmed native identity by emphasizing the shared religious heritage of native people. This community rallied around a heartfelt concern for the physical, cultural and spiritual survival of native people. Religious pluralism is an inescapable dimension of contemporary native life which often produces conflict and division. This religious diversity may seem undesirable, but it merely reflects the essential pluralism of the natural world. The best approach to religious pluralism is to see different religious traditions as complementary and to emphasize their common affirmations and values. The social, cultural and religious crises facing native people, which are often the symptoms of a deeper crisis of identity, also point to the need for religious solidarity expressed through dialogue, cooperation and advocacy. Interreligious interaction is therefore a practical activity taking place within religiously diverse communities, not just a theoretical exercise taking place between religious traditions.

No case study can ever fully describe the general human or natural experience which it typifies. It is fair to say, nevertheless, that the concerns and perspectives represented by the Indian Ecumenical Conference were similar to those of many native people during the last twenty years. The Conference encompassed a broad range of native experiences by virtue of its grassroots orientation, its widespread participation, and its diverse tribal and religious representation.

Native people today identify themselves and are identified by others using a variety of criteria; native communities, social scientists, governmental and private institutions, and the general public all have different (and often contradictory and conflicting) definitions of "Indianness." For many native people, religious attitudes, practices and associations have become increasingly important factors in their identification of themselves and others as being native in the context of contemporary Canadian and American societies. Religious motivations and behaviors lie at the very heart of contemporary native life, and contemporary native religious identity is the product of a combination of individual, social and cosmological factors. It is a subjective experience involving imagination and inspiration, not a quantifiable measure of ethnic authenticity determined through social scientific analyses of cultural phenomena. Contemporary native religious identity is located in symbolic forms and systems; it is not static but a dynamic process, a dialectic of continuity and change in a similarly continuing and changing world. It is expressed through a complex

combination of boundary-defining attitudes and behaviors, some of which are imposed from without, others chosen from within. In situations of interreligious interaction, native religious traditions exert mutual influences and are subject to diverse interpretations. More than anything else, contemporary native religious identity is the result of shared interests and perceptions, networks of interpersonal relationships, the ability to empathize, and an unusual combination of mutual respect and self-deprecating humor.

This multidisciplinary study of the Conference suggests a theory of contemporary native religious identity; it also points toward a model for understanding religious identity in our pluralistic world, where social crises, cultural conflicts, and religious divisions are a continuing reality for many human communities and individuals.

One non-native participant who appreciated the broader practical and theoretical significance of the Indian Ecumenical Conference was Jay Kothare, an Anglican priest who attended the Conference four times. Kothare was raised in Bombay, India, as an orthodox Hindu and member of the Brahmin caste; he later moved to Canada and became a Christian. He recalled his experience at the Conference as being "a blessing and an enrichment of my spiritual life," and "probably the most enriching time of my life as a Christian minister."¹

It was an experience of Christian fellowship in the truest sense of the word, although most native people would balk at that way of referring to it. I have never before been with such large numbers of people, yet felt so

little tension, stress, panic. People looked each other in the eyes. There were long silences and lively banterings. No formalities, no unctuous courtesies. The whole congress was one huge experience in sharing the Peace of Christ. . . .

The bottom-line of the spirituality of the Conference was experiencing the truth first-hand, and sharing it, reconciling and integrating varied insights, seeking the voice of the Great Spirit in everything that went on around. Nobody preached. Nobody judged. Nobody was in exclusive possession of some exotic spiritual truth. Everything spiritual had to be earthed, made incarnate, and shared through a sacramental relationship with everybody around. The feeling of sacredness that permeated the entire proceedings of the Conference was infectious. There was no set agenda. The sacred festivities did not start nor end at any particular hour. There was this ongoing celebration of the Holy in and through every act, word, and gesture. Eating a buffalo steak was as much sacramental as smoking the peace pipe or taking part in the Sun Dance. There was a good deal of humour, integrity, respect, joy, and sadness.

. . . The Conferences I have attended have opened my whole being--body, mind, and soul--to the Numinous and the Holy as no experience in the church setting has ever done for me either before or since.²

Kothare was particularly impressed by what he called the "democratic mysticism" of the Conferences.

These were ordinary native folk with extraordinary insights into the dilemma of modern civilization and the possible ways of healing Mother Earth and her children. In each native person, man or woman, I discovered a prophet, a philosopher, a poet, a mystic, and last but not least, a martyr. . . .

There was a sensual, earthy, incarnational quality to their experiences, so unlike the earth-negating pseudo-spirituality prevalent among the bohemian white people disenchanted with materialism. Every native person I met at Morley seemed to know intuitively that mystical insight was not the prerogative of a chosen few but the birthright

of every individual who was willing to live in harmony with creation. . . .

When I listened to the elders holding forth in the sacred arbour, this theme of democratic mysticism was repeated again and again. Spirituality and justice issues were mentioned in the same breath with no contradiction as you would find in the traditional teaching of the church.³

Kothare's perceptive interpretation of the Conference is remarkable in several ways. At one level, the admission by a non-native Christian minister that his involvement in an interreligious native gathering has been his truest experience of Christian fellowship and the most spiritually enriching time of his life represents an implicit--and devastating--critique of mainstream Christian spirituality. Kothare also highlighted the theological distinctiveness of the Conference when he identified its experiential, incarnational, egalitarian approach to truth and contrasted this view with the commonly held understanding of truth as rational, abstract and privileged.

Kothare's view of the Conference assumes even greater significance when it is correlated with his personal and professional experiences. Earlier in Vision Quest, the book he recently coauthored with Janet Hodgson, Kothare recalled childhood memories of seeing Victorian Gothic church buildings in Bombay where, "surrounded by the war memorials and monuments of imperial Britain, brown Anglicans worshipped with strict adherence to the 1662 version of the Book of Common Prayer, in blissful ignorance of the rich indigenous spirituality of India." Years later Kothare had

little trouble understanding the "cultural and spiritual alienation" experienced by the native Christians whom he encountered in Saskatchewan and Ontario. He also struggled with church authorities himself, over the same issues that caused problems for John Hascall in the Roman Catholic Church and for John Snow in the United Church of Canada; Kothare was stripped of his ordination by two mainline Canadian churches because of his desire "to incorporate my Hindu spiritual tradition into my Christian faith."

Far from honouring my Indian Hindu black spirituality, the church made me feel guilty for being myself. I love to chant and meditate and read Hindu and Buddhist literature along with my daily regimen of Christian Scripture; but I was warned that it was not good for the integrity of my faith. "Stop all association with your past, and be a good Christian," I was counselled. Of course, being a good Christian meant losing my identity as a black person, forfeiting my black spirituality, becoming thoroughly brainwashed into the western Caucasian mode of consciousness, and swallowing hook, line, and sinker the white version of Christianity as the only way to understand the gospel of Christ.

At the seminary, from the pulpit, in personal conversations, during interviews, and at social get-togethers, I was constantly confronted with the eleventh commandment: "Thou shalt not be a syncretist." By syncretism the church meant my integration of black, third-world spirituality with the Christian faith. Those in the church, who were so worried about my heresies, hardly paused to see that on a daily basis they themselves were injecting their own white, western, middle-class ideology into their own understanding of Christianity. It was quite acceptable to quote Plato or Hegel while discussing the Christian doctrine; but God help me if I ever mentioned Kabir, Rumi, or the Buddha.⁴

Kothare's ability to "understand and empathize (not just sympathize)" with the religious predicament of native people is not an isolated example of interreligious solidarity, and his critique of Eurocentric Christianity and affirmation of the Indian Ecumenical Conference are not the confused ramblings of a denominational malcontent. Rather, Kothare's understanding of religious identity reflects an undeniable dimension of global religious reality. Ecclesiastical hierarchs, political autocrats, and intellectual elites have attempted, each in their own ways, to suppress the multiplicity, dynamism, complexity, immediacy, subjectivity, durability and utter centrality of religious identity in a world of religious diversity and human survival. Some people have capitulated to the manipulable pretensions of imposed religiosity, despite the static, simplistic, derivative, objectifying, transient and peripheral nature of these false unities. Yet for many religious communities and individuals in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and increasingly in post-Christian Europe and among the peoples of the European diaspora, religious pluralism forms the context for social praxis and religious identity. The Indian Ecumenical Conference participated in this global movement toward religious realism by modelling an inclusive, egalitarian solution to the problem of religious diversity, a solution which addressed social crises, cultural conflicts, and religious divisions in a holistic manner and which affirmed the absolute value and the inviolable dignity of every human being.