

Introduction

Andy Rooney, the well-known television commentator and syndicated columnist, wrote in a recent opinion piece, "while American Indians have a grand past, the impact of their culture on the world has been slight. . . . Their genius was for living free in a wild state"1 Rooney's primary concern in the article was to suggest that native people are misguided in their opposition to the use of Indian mascots by sports teams; he wanted to argue that native people have more important problems to address in their communities. Yet as Rooney constructed his argument he employed many of the defamatory misrepresentations of native life which are perpetuated by the popular and scholarly discourse of the dominant society, including sports mascots. Rooney stereotyped native people as brave, stoic and fiercely independent; Rooney dismissed native land claims as unrealistic and irrelevant; Rooney exaggerated the inevitability of native assimilation to mainstream lifestyles; Rooney ignored native verbal and material artistry; Rooney blamed native people for their own unemployment and illiteracy; erroneous conclusions understandably followed from misguided presuppositions and distorted evidence. Abandoning his trademark style of playful social commentary in an attempt at critical analysis, Rooney repeatedly caricatured native life in order to make his point, as in this passage:

The two million American Indians alive today are reluctant to concede that it's no longer practical to maintain a lifestyle that is an anachronism. The time for the way Indians lived is gone and it's doubly sad because they refuse to accept it.

They hang onto remnants of their religion and superstition that may have been useful to savages 500 years ago but which are meaningless in 1992.

No one would force another religion on them but what if an Indian belief, involving ritualistic dances with strong sexual overtones, is demeaning to Indian women and degrading to Indian children?

Should they, on Indian land within the United States, be encouraged, with government money, to continue that?

Instead of showing that recent protests against the Washington Redskins and the Atlanta Braves are "silly," Rooney actually demonstrated that the problem extends far beyond the world of professional sports.

Rooney's invidious cacology reflected his lack of familiarity with native people, and it unfortunately also represents attitudes toward native people which are common among many non-native Canadians and Americans. Public familiarity with native history, culture and contemporary life is a complex product of romanticized literary and film representations, commercially and politically exploited images, and historical encounters described from a colonial perspective; few non-natives enjoy first-hand experiences with native communities. The perspectives Rooney articulated permeate American popular culture; they are also rooted in the Western intellectual tradition and even in the scholarly study of native life. When Rooney suggested that native religions are little more than superstitions, that they are anachronisms useful only to

savages, and that they survive today only as remnants, he drew from a tradition of scholarship which has guided the observation and analysis of native religious life since Christopher Columbus first speculated that the Tainos "can easily be made Christians, for they seem to have no religion."²

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This dissertation represents my attempt to understand, to articulate, and to interpret selected aspects of the religious life of contemporary native people in Canada and the United States. Western scholars have studied native religions extensively and have interpreted them as cultural systems or social institutions, but they have often focussed on historical reconstruction and on the analysis of observable phenomena (beliefs, myths, rituals, objects) rather than on questions of individual and communal religious identity. Many native communities today are characterized, for a variety of reasons, by unusual forms of religious diversity. Understanding how contemporary native people imagine and express their own religious identities in the context of their religiously diverse communities is an important dimension of studying native religions. I will develop a theory of contemporary native religious identity by suggesting an interpretation of an important case study, the Indian Ecumenical Conference.

The Indian Ecumenical Conference was an annual summer gathering first held in 1970 on the Crow Reservation of Montana and on the Stoney Reserve of Alberta thereafter; it was widely known in Indian country and involved native people and their religious leaders

from all over Canada and the United States. The Conference was ecumenical in the broad sense of the word; a wide range of contemporary native religions--from tribal traditions to intertribal groups to Christian churches--were represented at the annual gatherings. The Conference was a unique experience in other ways as well; it was the first large-scale, intertribal, interreligious gathering of native religious leaders since the beginning of Christian missionization, and it took a distinctively native approach to understanding and negotiating the relationship between indigenous and Christian religious traditions among native people. I will engage in a multidisciplinary study of three distinctive features of the Indian Ecumenical Conference and then summarize and synthesize my interpretations by suggesting how they contribute to the development of a theory of contemporary native religious identity.

For the purposes of this project, I am using the collective noun native people and the adjective native as generic signifiers: these terms refer to all aboriginal, indigenous people north of Mexico, also commonly called American Indians and Eskimos, Native Canadians and Native Americans, and known by a variety of assumed and imposed tribal designations; these terms include both acknowledged and unacknowledged communities and both "full-blood" and "mixed-blood" individuals; and these terms encompass Canada and the United States. The contemporary period began during World War II (the founding of the National Congress of American Indians in 1944 is a convenient milestone), though I am concerned primarily with the period since the mid-sixties. I am using the phrase

religious identity in a sociocultural sense; it refers to the ways in which native people imagine and express themselves, communally and individually, in the context of their religiously diverse communities.