CHAPTER 2

NATIVE AMERICANS AND CHRISTIANITY: THE ROLE OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE DEROGATION OF NATIVE AMERICAN RIGHTS

Native American peoples survive today despite nearly 500 years of oppression at the hands of Western civilization. Having dominated Europe for more than a millennium, institutional Christianity arrived on American shores intimately involved in the colonial conquest, and has enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with Western powers ever since. Not content with the opportunity for proselytization, the Church extended this relationship to include legitimation of and even participation in the processes of oppression and genocide.

> By the time the American Indian came face to face with the doctrine of Christ it had hardened in a mould of bigotry, intolerance, militancy and greed which made it the mortal enemy of the native American. [1]

Any account of the derogation of Native American rights must do so with reference to the systematic complicity of Christianity in the process.

The history of the derogation of Native American rights has been well documented for both the colonial and

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1. Wilcomb E. Washburn, Red Man's Land / White Man's Law: a study of the past and present status of the American Indian (New York: Scribner, 1971), 3-4.

the U.S. periods. [2] The history of Christian missionary efforts and their impact on Native American culture and society has been recorded as well. [3] At the intersection of these concurrent histories lies the often overlooked partnership between Western political and religious institutions, the subject before us now.

NATIVE AMERICAN RIGHTS

It is important at the outset to have some understanding of the Native American rights that have been abrogated. In a generalized theory of indigenous peoples' rights, the right to self-determination emerges as the fundamental attribute of nation-state identity. Self-determination is important as it is made manifest in three dimensions of national life: governmental autonomy, territorial integrity, and cultural identity. It is clear that sovereignty,

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2. See the following, for example: William R. Jacobs, Dispossessing the American Indian: Indians and Whites on the Colonial Frontier (New York: Scribner, 1972); Lyle N. McAlister, Spain and Portugal in the New World 1492-1700 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); and Edward H. Spicer, Cycles of Conquest: The Impact of Spain, Mexico and the United States on the Indians of the Southwest, 1533-1960 (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1962).

3. See the following, for example: Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., Salvation and the Savage: An Analysis of Protestant Missions and American Indian Response, 1787-1862 (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965); Henry Warner Bowden, American Indians and Christian Missions: Studies in Cultural Conflict (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); and James P. Ronda and James Axtell, Indian Missions: A Critical Bibliography (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1978).

land, and cultural freedom have all been threatened during the course of European intrusion in the Western Hemisphere. For example, Figure 2 illustrates the progressive reduction of Indian land holdings in the U.S., 1492 to the present.

Native Americans thus face a paradoxical situation in attempting to understand the apparently altruistic teachings of the Christian faith in light of its Western manifestation.

> To us, it became evident at the outset of our contact with European peoples that their Way of Life possessed an apocalyptic separation between its creed and its deed. [4]

For reasons that were as much political, economic, and cultural as they were theological, institutional Christianity joined forces with colonial powers in a partnership of conquest.

COLONIAL CHRISTIANITY

The Spanish

The discovery of America by Columbus in 1492 was cause for both excitement and consternation in Catholic Spain. The presumed presence of vast material riches in the New World caught the attention of the Spanish rulers and led them to move swiftly to exploit the new discoveries. Seeking the blessing of Pope Alexander VI (a Spaniard) in this venture of conquest, they at the same time answered the

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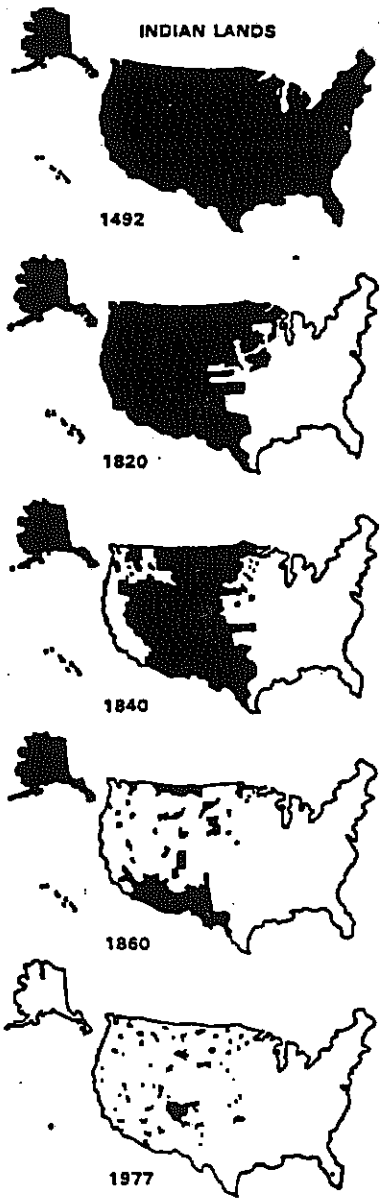
4. Theology in the Americas Native American Project, Position Paper (Detroit II) (New York City: Theology in the Americas, 1980), 4.

FIGURE 2: INDIAN LAND HOLDINGS, 1492-1977*



*Excerpted from Ralph Scissons and Vine Deloria, Jr. (eds.), "Theology, Law and American Indians" (thematic issue), Church and Society 75, no. 3 (January/February 1985), 4.

question of what to do with the native population. The Church was only too glad to oblige their wishes while opening a new field for mission work.

The papal bull "Inter Caetera" spelled out the terms of this cooperative arrangement, whereby the Church declared that

> we by the authority of almighty God . . . do for ever . . . , give, grant, assign, unto you, . . . all those lands and islands.
>
> Furthermore we command you . . . to send to the said lands and islands, honest, virtuous, and learned men, such as fear God, and are able to instruct the inhabitants in the Catholic faith . . . . [5]

Having established (to their own satisfaction) Spanish title to the New World, the formulation of the "Requerimiento" articulated the relationship between conquest and conversion: natives who chose to convert to the Christian faith and to accept vassalage under the Spanish ruler would be welcomed, but those who did not could expect invasion, war, plunder and slavery. What is more, "the deaths and losses which shall accrue from this are [the natives'] fault, and not that of their Highnesses, or ours, nor of these cavaliers who come with us." [6] Some thirty-five years later Pope Clement VI modified this stance somewhat, declaring in

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5. Alex Lopez, "A Historic Document of Early Spain," Indian History 6 (1973), 31.

6. Washburn, 7-8.

the bull "Intra Arcana" that even conversion itself could be brought about "by force and arms, if needful." [7]

As the first missionaries to the Americas, the Franciscans supplied the religious ammunition in the war waged by Spanish conquistadors. Though Franciscan policy prevented missionaries from preceding the troops in any region, they were included in most expeditions. In 1539 a Franciscan, Marcos de Niza, helped map unexplored territory as preparation for conquest and for the exploitation of mineral wealth. When Spanish authorities were considering withdrawing from the more distant regions in 1608, missionary fathers inflated their convert counts in order to dissuade King Philip II from such a decision. Wanting to sustain missions in his empire, the king elected to fund the friars himself, and "the Franciscans interpreted the king's decision as an affirmation of their central role in provincial affairs." [8] When the Pueblos united in revolt against the Spanish in 1680, Pueblo attacks were directed largely at the missions.

The French

France, England, and other European powers understandably ignored the exclusive nature of Spanish and Portuguese claims in the Western Hemisphere, and embarked on their own programs of conquest and colonization. The Recollets, a

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7. Ibid., 10.

8. Bowden, 44.

French branch of the Franciscans, met with little success in their efforts in North America, primarily because their methods depended on concurrent European-style colonization. The French had little interest in political domination, though, and instead pursued trade and de-emphasized permanent settlements. By 1625 the Jesuits had established their presence in northeastern North America, where they practiced an incarnational approach to missions which sought to indigenize the Christian faith. While the success of their work among the Hurons depended to some extent on the preservation of trade alliances, the Jesuits did not consciously assist French political objectives. Jesuit missionary efforts met an abrupt end when the Iroquois League attacked the Hurons in 1648; by 1650 the Huron diaspora was complete.

The English

Whereas Spanish Franciscans saw political expansion as the justification for missionary endeavors, English Puritans reversed the relationship and "declared missionary work to be a central justification for establishing towns and also for expanding westward." [9] Since their religious intolerance had been the driving force that led them to leave England for the New World, it is not surprising that their resolve to establish a holy commonwealth would dictate their attitude toward the native inhabitants. Their conception of "Praying Indians" called for a complete conversion to the

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9. Ibid., 112.

white European way of life, which included the Puritan version of the Christian religion.

Political and religious goals were blended by other groups based in England. In 1649 Parliament established the New England Company as a vehicle for supporting mission efforts in America, with English missionaries receiving financial support from the Company. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts was founded by the Church of England in 1701, with the twofold purpose of spreading the gospel and counteracting the influence of Congregationalists and Presbyterians. Founder Thomas Bray's vision of the SPG called for the establishment of mission outposts where Indians could be Christianized and civilized, while creating a buffer zone between whites and Indians.

> SPG agents usually sought to serve the crown while nurturing Church of England Christianity. In dealing with Indians, they tried to manage them as a power bloc against competing interests and enlist them as dependable military allies, first against the French and later against the republican colonists. [10]

Summary

It seems clear that colonial Christianity did not have a strong desire to separate religious motives from the European political, economic, and cultural agenda. Spanish, French, and English missionaries alike failed to question the appropriateness of European land claims based on "discovery," and were all too eager to participate in the

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10. Ibid., 136.

process of conquest and colonization. Events of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witness to the fact that the concerted European conquest was already threatening all three aspects of Native American self-determination, as lands were taken, governments ignored, and cultures assaulted. By the time the Revolutionary War ended, the fledgling United States had extensive precedents on which to base religious and political policy.

CHRISTIANITY IN THE UNITED STATES

With the emergence of the new nation and the withdrawal of the French and English from the continent's midsection, United States Indian policy shifted from a foreign to a national orientation. Though Indian nations would continue to be recognized to varying degrees for some time, the objective of white-Indian interaction changed from usurpation to assimilation. The task of "civilizing" the Indians, prerequisite for their participating fully in American life, was pursued in a variety of ways: by introducing the practice of agriculture and the institution of private property, through Western educational methods, and by conversion to Christianity. The First Amendment guarantee of freedom of religion was in practice extended primarily to the Protestant denominations, and in some sense actually served as the basis for relations with the Indians:

> Missionaries worked more than ever on the assumption that one set of cultural standards--the one shared by churchmen and politicians--promoted both spiritual

> progress and national stability. . . . Anything that threatened national homogeneity had either to be converted or removed. [11]

Indian Education

Nowhere is the partnership between political goals and religious motives more evident than in the plan for education among the Indians. While missionaries certainly helped further other means to Indian civilization, their leadership in Indian education and their willingness to cooperate with political objectives is an intriguing study. This emphasis on education fits well with Western Christianity's view that religious (i.e., ultimate) truth consists in cognitive, rational knowledge.

By 1800 the goal of assimilating Indians into white society was being articulated clearly by U.S. government officials, including President Jefferson. In 1818, Secretary of War Calhoun cited Western education as crucial to this process, and three months later the Civilization Fund Act made this official policy. It appropriated funds "for teaching [Indian] children in reading, writing, and arithmetic, . . ." [12] to be carried out by various church agencies, since the government had no other means by which to do so. As a result, "schools became the most important

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11. Ibid., 164-5.

12. "Civilization Fund Act" in Francis Paul Prucha (ed.), Documents of United States Indian Policy (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), 33.

focal point of nineteenth-century missionary activity." [13] The efficacy of teaching Indians "the three R's" was questioned twenty years later, and it was suggested that manual labor schools were what they needed. The missionary arm of the Methodist Episcopal Church played an important role in this proposal, which was adopted as policy by Indian Commissioner Crawford in 1838. [14]

Reservation policy became increasingly important in the second half of the nineteenth century, and here, too, the mission agencies got involved. Missionaries were reluctant to oppose the policy since they noticed that

> many Indians hostile to Christianity chose to move away rather than accept confinement, . . . [so that] the new conditions not only screened out native opposition but curtailed the nomadic tendencies of those who stayed. [15]

The treaty with the Creeks of June 14, 1866, which delineated their territory within the Indian Territory (Oklahoma), even reserved a quarter section of land for every mission society working among them, for both religious and educational purposes.

After the Civil War effected the abolition of slavery, reformers turned their attention to the faltering Indian policy. Indian wars on the Plains led to the creation of

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13. Bowden, 167.

14. See "Indian Commissioner Crawford on Indian Policy" in Prucha, 73.

15. Ibid., 188.

the Peace Commission, which in 1868 reiterated the need for education among the Indians, particularly the teaching of English. A year later President Grant's "Peace Policy," based on the suggestions of influential Quaker leaders, gave religious agencies an important position in two ways. It created a Board of Indian Commissioners consisting of wealthy Christian philanthropists, to advise the Secretary of the Interior, and it invited church involvement in the nomination of Indian agents. President Grant made explicit the nature of this partnership:

> Indian agencies being civil offices, I determined to give all the agencies to such religious denominations as had heretofore established missionaries among the Indians, and perhaps to some other denominations who would undertake the work on the same terms--i.e., as a missionary work. The societies selected are allowed to name their own agents, subject to the approval of the Executive, and are expected to watch over them and aid them as missionaries, to Christianize and civilize the Indian, and to train him in the acts of peace. [16]

Grant's assignation of civil as well as religious responsibility for Indian welfare to the religious authorities is reminiscent of King Philip II's relationship with the Franciscans in Mexico two centuries earlier.

The apportionment of Indian agencies among missionary societies was quickly accomplished and seemed initially successful. The comments of Indian Commissioner Price in his 1882 annual report reflect this policy at its zenith.

> One very important auxiliary in transforming men from savage to civilized life is the influence brought to

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16. "President Grant's Peace Policy" in Prucha, 135.

> bear upon them through the labors of Christian men and women as educators and missionaries. . . . I am decidedly of the opinion that a liberal encouragement by the government to all religious denominations to extend their educational missionary operations among the Indians would be of immense benefit. [17]

But within a decade interest in this approach to Indian assimilation had waned. Involving churches to such an extent "produced more interdenominational rivalry than it did native converts," [18] and lasting improvements in Indian welfare were not forthcoming.

As Indian population and territory decreased, the boarding school emerged as the preferred form of educational institution. "Both missionaries and government agents favored the boarding-school method, since it gave them more control over the lives of Indian students." [19] The General Allotment Act of 1887 broke up tribal territory, while the Curtis Act of 1898 effectively destroyed tribal government in the Indian Territory; Indian Commissioner Jones provided a picture of the assault on Indian cultural identity in his 1901 annual report:

> These [boarding school] pupils are gathered from the cabin, the wickiup, and the tepee. Partly by cajolery and partly by threats; partly by bribery and partly by fraud; partly by persuasion and partly by force, they are induced to leave their homes and their kindred to enter these schools and take upon themselves the outward semblance of civilized life. . . . [T]hey are transport-

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17. "Indian Commissioner Price on Cooperation with Religious Societies" in Prucha, 157.

18. Bowden, 193.

19. Ronda and Axtell, 36.

> ed to the schools--sometimes thousands of miles away . . . . [20]

The survival of missionary boarding schools to recent times is testimony to their primacy in the Christianization strategy, to the endurance of Indian cultural identity, and to the ambivalence of U.S. Indian policy over how to achieve the "Americanization" of the continent's native population.

THE MISSIONARY LEGACY

The identification of Christianity with Western civilization was a common assumption among European powers as they entered their colonial period. As conquering colonizers laid claim to coastal and interior regions of the Americas, the native population was confronted with a rigid, institutional Christian religion. The degree to which religious authorities were willing to cooperate in these political and economic ventures is particularly striking in the cases of the Spanish and the English. Despite constitutional provisions prohibiting it, this church/state partnership was adopted and even enlarged upon by the U.S. as the new republic sought to assimilate the few natives that had survived three centuries of disease and war.

Thus, the historical progression of discovery/conquest/assimilation impacted all three dimensions of Native Americans' rights to self-determination. Tribal govern-

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20. "Indian Commissioner Jones on Indian Self-Support" in Prucha, 200.

ments, traditional lands, and thriving cultures were systematically assaulted, with the churches' full blessing and assistance. Mission stations doubled as military outposts, while schools were "employed as a major weapon in the struggle for Indian minds, souls, and bodies." [21] Even today many religious organizations still regard Native American Christian communities as a mission field, to be supervised by white leadership. Perhaps the role of Christianity in shaping the "civilization" of the natives is best summed up by Indian Commissioner Taylor, who wrote in 1868 on this process among the Cherokees:

> . . . the mainsprings of Cherokee civilization were, first, the circumscribing of their territorial domain; this resulted in, second, the localization of the members of the tribe, and consequently in, third, the necessity of agriculture and pastoral pursuits instead of the chase as a means of existence; and as a logical sequence, fourth, the introduction of ideas of property in things, of sale and barter, etc.; and hence, fifth, of course, a corresponding change from the ideas, habits, and customs of savages to those of civilized life; and, sixth, the great coadjutor in the whole work in all its progress, the Christian teacher and missionary, moving *pari passu* [side by side] with every other cause. [22]

While "the Christian teacher and missionary" was intimately and systematically involved in the derogation of Native American rights, there is another side to the missionary legacy. The destructive influence of the agents of institutional Christianity has often been countered by the

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21. Ronda and Axtell, 35.

22. "Indian Commissioner Taylor on Indian Civilization" in Prucha, 125.

actions of individual Christians who have championed the cause of the Indians. For while the history of Christianity in North America is marked by injustice and inhumanity, many Native Americans recognize those who defended them in their struggle for survival.

> History also tells us of those Whites who helped to create positive relationships between their people and Indians. People like William Penn, James McLaughlin, and Eliza and Samuel Worcester are just some of the names that remain in tribal histories as friends and helpers. Their witness and their lives brought hope to tribes who were increasingly without hope. They worked at building an awareness of people as human beings. The Christians among them helped Indians to understand that all were created in the image of God. There are many accounts of how the goodness and love of such Whites made the difference on many occasions between life and death for Indians with whom they were associated. [23]

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Native Americans who reflect on what it means to be Christian must do so with reference to the oftentimes coercive ways in which their ancestors were converted to the faith. The white churches' historic willingness to participate actively in the taking of Indian lands raises questions about their real motives in seeking converts. Their current reluctance to support Native American activism and to defend traditional Indians' freedom of religious expression suggests that they still do not regard Native Americans with respect. Even more problematic is the continuing mission status of many Indian churches, which are still subject to

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23. Clydia Nahwooksy, "The Threads of Faith," American Baptist Quarterly 5, no. 4 (December 1986), 405.

missionary control, if not leadership, even after centuries of missionization. The lack of indigenous control (and ownership) of these Christian bodies suggests that the institutional church form may not "work" for Native Americans. But in the absence of an exemplary white church model, what shape will Native American Christianity take? Native American Christians who are concerned with cultural integrity and survival may find it necessary to draw on both the pre-institutional (New Testament) Christian identity and the pre-Christian (traditional) Indian identity in establishing a viable theological self-understanding.