CHAPTER 4

NATIVE AMERICAN THEOLOGY: CHRISTIANITY AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF SPIRITUAL AND CULTURAL REVIVAL

"The religion of the Indian is the last thing about him that the man of another race will ever understand." [1] So wrote Dr. Charles Alexander Eastman in The Soul of the Indian (1911), his attempt to correct misunderstanding that he attributed to ignorance as well as racial and religious prejudice. Eastman, a Santee Sioux born in 1858 and raised in the traditional ways of his people, was abruptly introduced to the white world at the age of fifteen. By the time he was thirty-two he had learned English, graduated from Dartmouth College and Boston University School of Medicine, and become a Christian. Eastman's decision to return to his people led to a long and noteworthy career as physician, government official, author, and activist/reformer. Most remarkable, though, was his belief that "a person could function within both worlds by adopting the best attributes from each," and he spent "much of his life in an attempt to prove such a contention." [2] As Raymond Wilson has pointed

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1. Charles A. Eastman, The Soul of the Indian: An Interpretation (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911; reprint, New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1973), x.

2. Raymond Wilson, Ohiyesa: Charles Eastman, Santee Sioux (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), x.

out, "the inner pressures and conflicts which he faced must have been tremendous." [3]

Despite his personal adherence to the Christian faith, Eastman was a sharp critic of the "Christian civilization" encroaching on Native American peoples. He openly assailed the inconsistencies between the faith and the actions of the whites:

> When distinguished emissaries from the Father in Washington, some of them ministers of the gospel and even bishops, came to the Indian nations, and pledged to them in solemn treaty the national honor, with prayer and mention of their God; and when such treaties, so made, were promptly and shamelessly broken, is it strange that the action should arouse not only anger, but contempt? [4]

Yet, while Eastman saw little merit in Christianity as practiced widely by whites, he firmly believed that there was much in "primitive Christianity," particularly the life and teachings of Jesus, which was worthy of consideration.

> It is my personal belief, after thirty-five years of experience of it, that there is no such thing as "Christian civilization." I believe that Christianity and modern civilization are opposed and irreconcilable, and that *the spirit of Christianity and of our ancient religion is essentially the same.* (emphasis mine) [5]

Both Eastman's vision of religious and spiritual equivalence and his expression of bicultural identity were

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3. Raymond Wilson in the introduction to Charles A. Eastman, From the Deep Woods to Civilization: Chapters in the Autobiography of an Indian (Boston: Little, Brown, 1916; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), xii.

4. Eastman, The Soul of the Indian, 23.

5. Ibid., 24.

challenges to the conventional logic of assimilation. He believed it was possible to appropriate the best of both worlds--Indian and white--while upholding the unique integrity of each, and he was perceptive enough to see the importance of these issues to the survival of his people.

> I feel that I was a pioneer in this new line of defense of the native American, not so much of his rights in the land as of his character and religion. I am glad that the drift is now toward a better understanding . . . . [6]

Eastman was indeed a pioneer, in the sense that today many of his ideas are echoed by Native American theologians, who voice the same concerns for cultural and spiritual identity and are reflecting on Christian faith in similarly creative ways. While he may have been overly pessimistic in his fear that Native American culture was dying, Eastman recognized the importance of traditional beliefs in understanding and interpreting Christian faith.

THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS RENEWAL

The ongoing spiritual and cultural revival among Native Americans, in concert with resurgent activism and possessing both tribal and pan-Indian dimensions, has generated varying interpretations of the revival's consequences for religious identity. Non-Indian scholars tend to examine the ways Christianity has interacted with traditional beliefs and the various syncretistic movements this

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6. Eastman, From the Deep Woods to Civilization, 188.

inter-religious confrontation has produced. Native American theologians, on the other hand, prefer to uphold the integrity of both Christianity and traditionalism, and advocate a level of mutual respect which allows for biculturalism in society, within Indian communities, and even for individuals. The great diversity of religious expression among Native Americans today will naturally lead to a variety of interpretations. Some Indians are passionately Christian, others passionately traditional; still others have no religious identity, while a few have found a home in movements that borrow from both Christianity and traditional beliefs. There will be no simple descriptions of the nature of religious renewal among Native Americans.

Carl Starkloff, a Catholic priest and scholar who has published extensively on Native Americans and missions, has considered the question of religious renewal by surveying new religious movements. Starkloff defines these new movements as representing neither traditional beliefs nor Christianity, yet incorporating elements of both; "In general, the new tribal movements occur because the work of Christian mission has been in some sense ineffective and in some sense effective." [7] Like Leonardo Boff, Starkloff recognizes that

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7. Carl F. Starkloff, "Religious Renewal in Native North America: The Contemporary Call to Mission," Missiology: An International Review 13, no. 1 (January 1985), 83.

> a certain amount of syncretism will occur in any meeting of religions, and a healthy process of transposition of symbols would underlie the preaching of Christian faith in an exchange between equals. [8]

He goes on to consider several examples of syncretistic movements: the Longhouse Religion of Handsome Lake, the West Coast Shakers, the Dreamers (or Prophet Dance people), the Kennekuk Church, and the Native American (Peyote) Church. The intent of his survey is to establish the basis for a new Christian missiology.

Two problems with Starkloff's analysis are immediately apparent. The first is his contention that

> the task of the Church remains missionary, in that as yet there does not exist a self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating body that is a native Indian Protestant church save in a few local cases--and even fewer in Roman Catholicism. [9]

He does not seem to consider the possibility that it may very well be the Church's missionary stance which is the only thing *preventing* the widespread establishment and maturation of indigenous Christian bodies. But even more troubling is that Starkloff has determined that new religious movements, rather than the rebirth of traditionalism and the growth of biculturalism, form the context for the Church's missiological agenda.

Native American theologians bring a different perspective to the interpretation of religious renewal in their

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8. Ibid., 85.

9. Ibid., 93.

communities. They emphasize the health, even vibrancy, of both traditionalism and Christianity among Native Americans, and they implicitly recognize that the kinds of movements Starkloff has concentrated on are mostly localized phenomena. Steven Charleston (Choctaw) has argued that religious concerns are central to the current cultural revival among Native Americans. The most encouraging thing about this is that inter-religious hostility is being replaced by dialogue, leading to a new understanding of spiritual identity:

> Here we have two dynamic movements [traditionalism and Christianity] energizing the native cultural renewal. What is most promising is that they are both beginning to reject the old "either/or" syndrome of the past. Traditional native people are entering into dialogue with their Christian counterparts. The idea that acceptance of Christianity implies a radical "conversion," a loss of native identity, is being replaced with a new sense that the Christian faith is complementary to traditional spirituality. They can work together, enriching one another. [10]

This affirmation of bicultural identity is nothing new, as we have seen from the witness of Charles Eastman. It is also not the untested theory of a few educated elites; rather (and this point is crucial), *it is the recognition of what has been the case among individual, and even communities of, Native Americans since their very first contact with non-Indians and Christianity.*

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10. Steven Charleston, "Reflections on a Revival: The Native American Alternative," Theological Education 20, no. 1 (August 1983), 75.

THE NATURE OF LIBERATION

The trouble with the bicultural approach, at least so far as its recognition and acceptance by the dominant white culture goes, lies in the fact that it runs counter to the conventional solution to "the Indian problem." The enduring objective of white-Indian interaction, from the perspective of white society, has been to "Christianize and civilize" the "pagan savages." Native American culture, philosophy, spirituality--indeed, the entire Indian way of life--has been perceived to be useless, primitive superstition, a stumbling block on the Indians' path to full humanity. The assertion that the Native American traditional heritage is worth being proud of will be hard for many non-Indians, and even some Indians, to accept.

As Vine Deloria, Jr., perceptively pointed out in his dialogue with liberation theologians in the 1970's, any discussion of liberation in the Native American context must include this dimension of their experience. To be sure, the economic and political issues facing many Indian nations are as pressing as those in some Third World situations. At the root of these problems are the questions of sovereignty and land claims. But Native Americans cannot speak comprehensively about liberation from oppressive conditions unless the need for cultural and religious freedom is also considered. While most historians and anthropologists have

interpreted the white-Indian conflict as a struggle over things--land, gold, furs--this may not be entirely accurate.

> From the native perspective, the story of cultural conflict in North America is not a history of struggle over *things*, but over *ideas*. Even the word, "ideas," is insufficient; we might say over spiritual values or spiritual perceptions. In short, the conflict was not so much a colonial war as a religious war. It was a life and death struggle to see whose story would prevail. [11]

As Robert Michaelsen has shown, historians of religion in America have generally ignored Native American religions; "Most have written from the perspective of Christendom . . . . Natives enter their histories chiefly as objects of missionary efforts." [12]

Thus, the Native American claim to cultural and religious legitimacy is more than just a tactic in the struggle for survival; it is a call for the realization of ideals embedded in the collective American identity. When Congress passed the American Indian Religious Freedom Act in 1978, it tacitly admitted that Indians weren't being protected adequately by the First Amendment. [13] Until Native Americans are free to practice traditional beliefs and

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11. Ibid., 68.

12. Robert S. Michaelsen, "Red Man's Religion / White Man's Religious History," Journal of the American Academy of Religion 51, no. 4 (December 1983), 668.

13. Unfortunately, U.S. courts have consistently refused to recognize the act as anything more than a Congressional resolution, i.e., not bearing any legal weight beyond that of the First Amendment. See Robert S. Michaelsen, "Sacred Land in America: What Is It? How Can It Be Protected?" Religion 16, no. 3 (July 1986), 254-5.

ceremonies, and until other Americans (particularly those who are Christian) respect and affirm them for doing so, true liberation will be an unattainable goal. Such respect and affirmation will benefit all Americans, not just Indians; the decision to say no to assimilation "represents a vital contribution to the religious and theological future of the Americas." [14]

THE NATIVE AMERICAN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Native Americans might have contributed more to the religious and theological history of the Americas had their perspectives not been ignored and even suppressed. The continuing tendency to view Indians as missiological objects rather than theological subjects has led to gross deficiencies in Native American Christian leadership. For instance, a 1974 survey of seven major Protestant denominations found that there were sixty-eight ordained Indian ministers to serve 452 Indian churches. [15] The average age of these ministers was fifty-two, and only four Indian seminarians could be identified out of some 28,000 seminary students that year. [16] Fifteen years later, there are four Native American seminary professors in the U.S., with some improve-

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14. Charleston, 75.

15. R. Pierce Beaver (ed.), The Native American Christian Community: A Directory of Indian, Aleut, and Eskimo Churches (Monrovia: MARC, 1979), 41.

16. Native American Theological Association newsletter, vol. 1 (1979), 1.

ment also evident at the pastoral level. But there is still much to be accomplished before the Native American Christian community will be free of paternalism and dependency.

The Native American Theological Association was founded in 1977 in response to the leadership crisis in the Indian churches. NATA's purpose was "to strengthen Indian ministries through education, research, and advocacy," [17] primarily by developing inter-denominational programs that encouraged Native Americans to undertake seminary study. Though NATA's efforts included annual Native American awareness programs at several participating seminaries, and at least one important inter-religious conference on creation theologies, [18] the organization was much more occupied with facilitating pastoral education than it was with putting forth a Native American theology. NATA had "a concern for meaningful dialogue between the Christian and Native religious traditions by Indian peoples themselves," but preferred to allow this dialogue to be "conducted by individuals who participate in both traditions and, therefore, try to reconcile their belief in both traditions."

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17. Native American Theological Association brochure, 1979(?).

18. For the conference proceedings see Howard Anderson (ed.), Recalling, Reliving, Reviewing: Creation Theologies in the Dakota-Lakota, Judeo-Christian, Ojibwe and Winnebago Traditions (Minneapolis: Native American Theological Association, 1979).

[19] Charles Cook Theological School in Tempe, Arizona, has also addressed the need for church leadership development, particularly through its program of Theological Education by Extension, which allows Indian students to continue ministering in their communities while pursuing a seminary degree.

Though responding to the leadership crisis continues to consume time and energies that might otherwise be applied to theological scholarship, there are a few groups now that are addressing theological issues. Several Protestant denominations have Native American caucuses which function in an advisory capacity, not only to influence the direction of Indian ministries but also to inform the denominational constituency of Native American theological perspectives. For example, the Native American Lutheran Theology Project emerged out of the unified Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1988, building on the work of its predecessor, the National Indian Lutheran Board. The Native American Lutheran Theology Project is attempting to (1) encourage dialogue between traditionalists and Christians, (2) provide theological options for Native American Lutherans, (3) communicate with the church at large regarding the Native American perspective, and (4) consider the relevance of the

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19. John A. Grim, "Native American Religions and Interreligious Dialogue," Ecumenical Trends 14, no. 9 (October 1985), 133.

Lutheran confessions for Native Americans. [20] Another approach has been the series of Law and Theology symposia organized by the Native American Consulting Committee of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Based on the belief that behind public policy concerning Indians are problems that are theological in nature, the symposia have explored "the theological and jurisprudential foundations of the American Indian situation," and sought to "find within the theological tradition neglected insights that can help us look at old problems in new ways." [21]

Periodic meetings of Native American Christian leaders have also been a source of theological expression in recent years. Within Roman Catholic circles, the Tekakwitha Conference has been, since 1939, a support meeting for missionaries to the Indians. But beginning in the mid-1970's Native Americans have taken part as well, and they have made it clear that their spiritual heritage needs to be taken seriously. [22] On the Protestant side, the National

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20. George E. Tinker (ed.), "Native American Lutheran Theology Project Report," unpublished summary of meeting held September 1-2, 1988.

21. Cecil Corbett, "Theology, Law, and American Indians," Church and Society 75, no. 3 (January/February 1985), 8-9. Also see Vine Deloria, Jr., "Law and Theology III: the Theme," Church and Society 79, no. 1 (September/October 1988), 8-13.

22. For a report on the 1979 meeting at which Indian Christians finally broke the silence, see Pam Bauer, "Indians gently confront 'white church' failure," National Catholic Reporter 15, no. 38 (August 24, 1979), 1.

Fellowship of Indian Workers has served a similar purpose and undergone a similar shift in perspective. Encompassing all expressions of Christian faith as well as traditionalists and syncretistic movements is the Indian Ecumenical Conference, held each summer in Morley, Alberta, on the Stoney Indian Reserve. It is a gathering of Indians from all over North America who come together "to confirm that there is a creator, and that they have followed His way for thousands of years." [23] As Chief John Snow (Stoney), organizer of the conference and an ordained minister of the United Church of Canada, has said,

> because it is becoming more and more clear that the revival of the Indian people must come from within our own heritage, it seems to me that our religious revival must also go back to our roots. [24]

One last organization which deserves mention is the Native American Project of Theology in the Americas (also referred to at various times as the Land, Native Americans and Red Theology Project and as the Indigenous Project). This group was formed in order to represent the voices of Native Americans in the TIA spectrum of theological perspectives. Like other groups within TIA, the Native American Project emphasized social and historical analysis, producing little constructive theological material apart from a position paper prepared for the 1980 Detroit II conference.

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23. Chief John Snow, <u>These Mountains Are Our Sacred Places</u> (Toronto: Samuel Stevens, 1977), 142.

24. Ibid., 144.

While the group endeavored to incorporate both Christian and traditional perspectives in their work, the Native American Project lacked accountability to a sizable constituency representing either camp.

THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

At an American Baptist theological conference in 1986, James West (Cheyenne) pointed out that theology as an intellectual discipline is a foreign concept to most Indians. Though Native Americans have a long, predominantly oral, tradition of "words about God," it is really quite different from the Western approach to theological formulation. West prefaced his talk by stating that

> what will be discussed today are certain aspects of the spiritual way-of-life of some Indian nations as well as comparisons between these ways-of-life and Christian theology. [25]

This distinction and the orientation it suggests are worth bearing in mind while attempting to understand Native American theological perspectives.

Perceptions of Space and Time

Native Americans have a profoundly religious connection to the land that non-Indians tend to either overlook or dismiss. Although some may discount the importance of the differences between Indian and non-Indian attitudes toward the land, "at stake are two very different theologies, two

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25. James L. West, "Indian Spirituality: Another Vision," American Baptist Quarterly 5, no. 4 (December 1986), 350.

very different ways of seeing the world, two very different ways of praying." [26] Native Americans' sense of being related to the land, and to all creation, results in a holistic view of life that celebrates the unity and harmony of creation and encourages respect for all living things.

The Western intellectual tradition, as it has developed over the last two millennia, has focussed on the interpretation and meaning of time, not space. As Deloria has suggested, this orientation is probably the result of a number of theological presuppositions, including the idea of monotheism, the nature of revelation, the teaching/preaching aspect of religious activity, the question of community ethics, and the meaning of religious symbols. [27] This is not to say that Western thought has ignored the significance of land or that Native Americans are unconcerned with history; it is a question of priority. "For American Indians, . . . the temporal is subordinate to the spatial." [28] The implications of this difference go beyond the fact that non-Indians are often unable to appreciate the importance of

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26. George E. Tinker, "Native Americans and the Land: 'The End of Living and the Beginning of Survival,'" Word and World 6, no. 1 (Winter 1986), 67.

27. See Chapter 5, "Thinking in Time and Space," in Vine Deloria, Jr., God is Red (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1973), 75-89.

28. George E. Tinker, "American Indians and the Arts of the Land: Spatial Metaphors and Contemporary Existence," in Arts of the Land, ed. John Charlot (Honolulu: East-West Center, in press), 2.

sacred sites, particularly when treaties and land claims are involved. At stake is the belief that being displaced from ancestral homelands may mean losing one's *place* in God's creation. Translating this understanding into the Christian categories used to describe salvation *history* may not be a straightforward task.

The Western view that time (and life) is linear also runs counter to the Native American understanding of the place of humanity in creation. Emphasizing the cyclical, circular nature of time, Native Americans view life and death in a way that reinforces their connection to the land. As George Tinker (Osage) has explained,

> All of life is marked by the relationship between the people and their land, but perhaps the relationship is most pronounced at the end of life--death. The burial of the community's ancestors in the land is a sacred act that completes the bond between people and land. The harmony and balance of the world depend on the cyclical flow of existence from life to death to life again. Death is seen as a natural part of the flow, as continuity and not as discontinuity. . . .
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> The continuity between past and present, life and death depends on the primary category of space, understood as land. [29]

This understanding places humanity in a significantly more humble position than it enjoys in the Christian cosmological framework. Native Americans bring "different socio-cultural presuppositions and categories of knowledge" [30] to the

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29. Tinker, "Native Americans and the Land," 73.

30. George E. Tinker, "Theological Education and Cross-Cultural Inclusiveness," unpublished manuscript, 1988.

theological task; these differences "are ultimately derivative from the concept of creation" [31] which they hold.

Creation as the Starting Point of Theology

At the foundation of virtually every Native American tribe's self-understanding is the belief that the Creator placed them on the land and provided them with the necessities of life. As Snow has said, "my people believe that we were created for a purpose and were placed on this beautiful land." [32]

> Native peoples continue to demonstrate a deeply spiritual respect for the Creator, . . . [showing] their reverence in their conversations with one another, in their ceremonies, and in their attitudes toward all things. Even the prayers offered up in an Indian Christian congregation reflect such a reverence for life. . . . Indian peoples have experienced a wholeness, a oneness with creation, a peace with Creator. [33]

Notwithstanding the enormity of the mystery of creation, Native American theology must begin here, with the recognition of the Creator's goodness and glory. This is the same starting point assumed by the Nicene Creed and other Christian confessions, as well as the Hebrew Scriptures, and need not be perceived as a denial of the significance of Jesus.

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31. Vine Deloria, Jr., "Christianity and Indigenous Religion: Friends or Enemies? A Native American Perspective," in Creation and Culture: The Challenge of Indigenous Spirituality and Culture to Western Creation Thought, ed. David G. Burke (New York: Lutheran World Ministries, 1987), 42.

32. Snow, 144.

33. George E. Tinker, "Foreword: A Theological Introduction to Cross-Cultural Issues," in Burke, 5.

Unity and harmony are important concepts in understanding Native Americans' response to God's act of creation. The role of humanity is to participate in the maintenance of the balance of harmony in creation, and to do so as a community united in common purpose. Here we can detect the basis for an approach to stewardship which is different from the traditional Christian understanding. For Native Americans, stewardship is not an act of mastery over a fragmented, mechanistic universe, but rather a participation with the forces of nature already at work in an active, living creation. Deloria has described the situation well:

> The universe is a fabric, a symphony, a tapestry; everything is connected to everything else and everything is alive and responsible to its relationships in every way. The human being is not the crowning glory of creation and certainly not its master. We are but a small, but nevertheless vital, part of the universe and at least part of our task is to serve as a focus for some of the things that must be done for the universe really to prosper and fulfill itself. Because everything is alive and because we have responsibilities to all living things, we cannot force the rest of nature to do what we want. Indeed, we must respectfully approach the rest of nature and seek its permission to initiate a course of action. When we do this in a humble and respectful way, we find that other parts of the universe take joy in cooperating with us in the production of something new and important. Natural entities become our friends and we are able to do marvelous things together. [34]

To the Western mind this may appear to be a rather mystical, even pantheistic, view of the universe. It is actually a

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34. Deloria, "Christianity and Indigenous Religion," 33.

very functional understanding that is being echoed today by a growing number of environmentalists.

Thus, interaction with creation must proceed according to the dictates of natural law, though Native Americans don't understand this term in quite the same way that it is used in Christian theology. The natural law serves to remind humanity of its place in creation and before the Creator. A traditional prayer ceremony, in which the pipe is offered to the four winds, is one example of how the natural law is commemorated in a ceremonial act. "In this way man acknowledges, with humility, that his is only a part of the creation, that he is dependent, that he, too, must submit to the natural laws of the Creator." [35]

The most important difference between Native American and Christian understandings of creation has to do with the evaluation of the nature of the universe. As Deloria has shown, "the initial appraisal of the content of the universe, . . . is critically important for whatever will follow in our thinking and behavior." [36] The Judeo-Christian tradition assumes an initially good creation which becomes hostile toward humanity as a result of the latter's disobedience. Humanity comes to believe that it is both above all other forms of life and in conflict with them.

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35. Snow, 142.

36. Deloria, "Christianity and Indigenous Religion," 33.

> [Under the Christian understanding] we come to believe that our salvation redeems the other life forms simply because we are more important than they are. . . . Because the universe is evil and must eventually be destroyed, we have no real responsibility to it. We are pilgrims here and what we do may have some eternal significance in another arena, but much of what we do has no significance at all in the larger cosmic scheme of things. [37]

While Native Americans recognize the presence of evil in creation, the universe is an essentially good one which requires our involvement and respect.

The Significance of Jesus

The importance of creation for Native Americans leads to a tension with the idea of redemption so central to orthodox Christian theology. While the Judeo-Christian tradition may at one time have recognized the importance of creation (alongside, of course, law and covenant), "Christianity has long displaced creation from the center of theology in favor of a theology of redemption in Jesus Christ." [38] If creation is the starting point for Native American theology, questions arise about the significance of Jesus.

One of the remarkable things about Native Americans' reaction to Christianity is that even those who are faithful to the traditional beliefs, and who hold negative views of the missionary's faith, still have a nearly universal respect for Jesus as a spiritual leader. "The message [the

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37. Ibid., 32.

38. Tinker, "Native Americans and the Land," 68.

Europeans] brought was about the creator sending His Son Jesus to earth to give His creation hope, and it made sense to our elders, and they believed." [39] But despite the missionaries' desire to see comprehensive conversion, "for most Native Peoples this did not mean leaving one religion to embrace a new religion. At first it meant living with both sets of stories . . . ." [40] The fact that many Indians are still "living with both sets of stories" would seem to indicate that there may be significant similarities between the gospel message and traditional beliefs.

At the NATA conference on creation theologies, participants discussed the parallels between Hebrew tribal traditions and their own Native American heritage. The similarities involve cultural and social conventions as well as the importance of oral teachings in maintaining traditional "scriptures." Remembering tribal stories is an important part of maintaining identity and surviving hostile circumstances. [41] "Those tribes who worshipped one Creator already had in hand the basis for acceptance of

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39. Adam Cuthand, "A Native Anglican Indian Speaks," Interculture 15, no. 1 (January-May 1982), 38.

40. Paul N. Schultz and George E. Tinker, Rivers of Life: Native Spirituality for Native Churches (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House / Fortress Press, 1988), 23.

41. See Anderson, 6.

Jesus Christ and his teachings at the time of White contact." [42]

But accepting Jesus and his teachings--recognizing his spiritual authority and following his example of humility and service--may not fully answer the call for repentance and conversion which is central to the theology of redemption. As we have seen, the Native American conception of creation as a gracious gift of God plays a part in establishing the kind of role Jesus is expected to fill. The priority of the individual in Western thought, which leads to a particular understanding of sin, is also different from community-oriented Native American cultures. And the question of revelation comes up as we consider the spiritual experiences of traditionalists in light of the biblical record.

> Our religion, the religion of this Great Island, is not contradictory to the teaching of the great rabbis of the Hebrews, nor is it in conflict with the great Christian teachers. Didn't Jesus say to the Pharisees: "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice, and there shall be one fold and one Shepherd." (John 10:16) . . . Our religion professes faith in one Creator and acknowledges the unity and harmony of the Creation, the harmony of the whole environment--land, animals, birds, plant life, and men. [43]

The particularity and exclusivity of the Christ claim may be problematic for Native Americans, especially since 500 years

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42. Clydia Nahwooksy, "The Threads of Faith," American Baptist Quarterly 5, no. 4 (December 1986), 403.

43. Snow, 146.

of missionization has left the Christ virtually indistinguishable from the white Jesus. Christians may need to not only "seek the Spirit of Christ among us, but [also] to be open to the Spirit of God throughout the creation." [44] Nevertheless, the significance of Jesus and the question of salvation will continue to be limiting factors for interreligious cooperation. Authentic dialogue between Christians and traditionalists will hinge on the resolution of this theological dilemma.

Native Americans do not perceive the magnitude of this dilemma to be as great as white Christians do. While the call to conversion is certainly an integral part of the gospel message, Western Christianity has tended to overemphasize, at the expense of important dimensions of the gospel, the need for a choice between itself and other spiritual and cultural traditions. Native Americans focus more on the universality, not the exclusivity, of Christ.

> [For Western Christianity,] the "universality of Christ" has meant that the revelation of God by Jesus Christ can and should be applied to all of creation, which seems to reveal more about the nature of the Christian church than of [God]. [45]

Rather, one of the most important characteristics of God is the force of creativity, which includes God's creative approaches to revelation and redemption.

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44. West, 349.

45. Ibid., 353.

Schultz and Tinker assert that "the different cultural experiences that each of us brings to the spiritual encounter is another of the important gifts that have been bestowed upon us by the Holy Spirit." [46] It is the Spirit that brings together Christians from a variety of backgrounds, the Spirit that takes the lead in the celebration of diversity. The experience of the *vision*, common to many Indian tribes and encountered in a variety of ways, constitutes communication with God through the initiative of the Spirit. The vision quest of the Cheyenne is one example of a spiritual communication which may contribute to the theological understanding of an individual Indian Christian. What is more, "certain visions have developed as revelations . . . for a given tribe or nation. . . . Visions are an ongoing spiritual potential." [47] "There is an awareness that the Spirit moves through all of life." [48]

This recognition of the plurality of experiences has very practical consequences for the Native American community; consigning one's ancestors to hell is the first step on the way to self-hatred. "Since our people have always worshipped the Creator, the question is not whether we will

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46. Schultz and Tinker, 16.

47. West, 352.

48. Stanley J. McKay, "Native North American Spirituality and Inter-Faith Dialogue," Ecumenical Trends 16, no. 6 (June 1987), 109.

or will not, but how we will do it." [49] Because Christianity has been unable or unwilling to recognize the creativity of the Spirit in times past, opportunities for creativity have often turned destructive. Accordingly, West contends that

> We must strive to redefine the mission of the Christian church in a world where God has been revealed to many people in many ways; where salvation is possible in many ways. [50]

Pluralism and Unity

The pressing needs and the spiritual and cultural realities facing Indian communities suggest that both Christian and traditional beliefs must be affirmed and together held in tension.

> The needs of the community come before the needs of the individual, even spiritual needs. If the doctrine of justification is to speak to the greatest number of Native Peoples, it must speak not only to those who have become so acculturated that they have learned to feel individual guilt, and learned that they must atone for their individual sins, but it must also speak to those Natives who still identify themselves first with their tribe as a community whole. [51]

The priority of community among Native Americans means that the quality and value of life are judged more on the basis of community welfare than on that of the individual. "And

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49. Schultz and Tinker, 40.

50. West, 355.

51. Schultz and Tinker, 29.

still today we honor and respect the structure of the whole community above the accomplishments of individuals." [52]

The priority of community also requires that religious expression be both inter-denominational and inter-religious. The long history of competitive missionization has had a divisive effect among Indian communities, and has led to uncertainty about the apparent conflict between traditional beliefs and "the white man's way" as well as confusion over the various forms of Christianity put forth. The pressing need now is for spiritual unity. "We must join together spiritually. It is in spiritual unity that our future lies." [53] The only viable future for Native American religious identity is to be ecumenical as well as inter-faith.

Although spiritual unity is a seemingly unattainable goal in much of the world, Native Americans' attitude toward religious beliefs can form the basis for an attitude of tolerance and affirmation. "This attitude is based upon a recognition of our own limitations and an acceptance that many things cannot be explained under any conditions that satisfy us." [54] Traditionalists have always upheld the integrity of their own beliefs while acknowledging the

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52. Ibid.

53. Anderson, 21.

54. Deloria, "Christianity and Indigenous Religion," 41.

possibility that other forms of worship may be appropriate, even legitimate. The key to spiritual unity is for Christians to practice a similar degree of respect.

> We must try to understand each other's ways! The Creator is understood differently, and called different names. But there is one Creator, and we all worship this Creator. We must respect each other. [55]

Authentic respect will lead to a religious freedom characterized by interfaith dialogue, in which spiritual truths can inform and challenge each other.

> We must begin to share our faith, not as a tool of conversion, but as a means of mutual spiritual growth in which learning becomes as important as teaching. We must begin to share in spiritual understandings, spiritual expressions, and even spiritual beliefs, not to convert, but to grow in understanding. We are compelled to do this not only out of self interest (to strengthen our faith) but that in this sharing we, along with others, may grow in our understanding of God's purpose for creation. [56]

CASE STUDIES IN THEOLOGICAL METHOD

It is apparent from our review of theological perspectives that Native American theology is emerging from the ongoing process of reflecting on what it means to be both Indian and Christian. In this regard Native American theologians have much in common with their colleagues from Third World and racial ethnic communities, as the contextual nature of their theological efforts is obvious. We can ask more specific questions, though, which will help us under-

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55. Anderson, 20.

56. West, 356.

stand whether Native Americans are employing the methodology common to theologies of liberation.

1. How are they employing *social and historical analysis* in understanding the proper context and orientation of theology?

2. In what way are they using *the Bible and the gospel message* as a mandate for liberating praxis?

3. To what extent are they affirming the value of *cultural and spiritual traditions* in establishing the nature of Christian identity?

Native American Project, Theology in the Americas

"A Theology for the Survival of Native Peoples" was the title of a conference held at the Cook Christian Training School (now Charles Cook Theological School) in 1979. The conference was convened by the Native American Project, which had begun a year earlier with the objectives of (1) creating an ecumenical planning committee, (2) encouraging dialogue between Christians and traditionalists, (3) examining the issues facing Native Americans, and (4) developing a unified analysis and response strategy. The Position Paper resulted as a synthesis of discussions held at the week-long conference, and served as a statement by the Native American Project to delegates at the TIA Detroit II Conference in 1980.

The Position Paper focuses on social and historical analysis; it begins with the common Native American affirmation that "we have always been an integral part of this

half of the world; we did not come from anywhere else." [57] This statement is important in establishing continuity with traditional beliefs and histories, which have often been distorted by the immigrant culture as a way of denigrating Native Americans' claims to ancestral homelands. The document also points out that the general term "Indian" actually describes the citizens of several hundred distinct nations, who share a common understanding of the natural world despite their unique cultural identities. A lengthy historical analysis of "Christianity perceived through Native eyes" [58] follows, examining theological justifications for the mistreatment of Native Americans. The document closes with a review of some of the issues facing Native Americans in the twentieth century.

The Position Paper does not address the significance of the gospel message for the liberation struggle, apart from the following passage:

> With the introduction of Christianity, many of our peoples achieved an understanding of the teachings of Jesus Christ, and were impressed by its similarities to many of our teachings about how a full life could be achieved. Many of our ancestors accepted this message without giving up their understandings of their place in the Universe as taught in traditional instructions prior to Western influence. [59]

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57. Theology in the Americas Native American Project, Position Paper (Detroit II) (New York: Theology in the Americas, 1980), 2.

58. Ibid., 4.

59. Ibid.

The affirmation of Native American cultural and spiritual traditions is accomplished primarily by comparing the Indian way of life to the historically destructive effect of Western civilization. And though the document cites the need to "begin to evolve toward a theology that is owned by the Native peoples and [that is] genuine to their experience," [60] it does not suggest what this process of evolution will mean with respect to both Christians and traditionalists in the Indian community.

Native American Lutheran Theology Project

Rivers of Life is a much more comprehensive, measured statement of Native American theological perspectives. Subtitled Native Spirituality for Native Churches, the short book is intended to "provide Native American People with a possible articulation of Christian theology from a Native perspective," as well as to affirm Native American cultures, to bridge the gap between Native American and white cultures, and to generate dialogue with traditionalists. [61] The authors, Paul Schultz (Chippewa) and Tinker, are both members of the Native American Lutheran Theology Project, and they articulate the same ideas found in that group's statements.

The book begins with two chapters devoted to (1) historical and (2) social/cultural analysis. The primary

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60. Ibid., 15.

61. Schultz and Tinker, 6.

intent of the historical overview is not to critique early missionaries but to understand why "many [Native Americans] are still unable to take the risk involved to explore spiritual options." [62] The authors' contention--and overriding concern--is that sixty percent of Native Americans do not identify with either the Christian or the traditional form of spiritual expression. The chapter on social/cultural analysis seeks to clarify some of the cultural misconceptions that have kept whites and Indians apart and created "Native American pain."

> The pain which too many Native Persons still live with today emanates from intentional and unintentional messages from the white culture's powerful institutions of church and government. . . . [It] is reflected in chemical dependency, family dysfunction, a sense of hopelessness, and suicide. [63]

The solution to this situation is to begin by affirming the validity of Native American cultural and spiritual insights, including "biblical interpretation and reading, theological reflection, and intellectual stimulation in general." [64] Subsequent chapters discuss creation, Jesus, the doctrine of justification, land, morality, and worship, all from a Native American theological perspective. The authors make use of biblical illustrations to demonstrate similarities between Native American and Christian per-

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62. Ibid., 12.

63. Ibid., 15.

64. Ibid., 16.

spectives on faith. Insofar as they believe the primary liberation struggle facing Native Americans to be a cultural and spiritual one, the authors are clearly challenging both Indian and non-Indian Christians to consider the potentially liberating, inclusive dimension of the gospel message.

The book closes with a challenge to the (Lutheran) Church to deal more effectively with the issues facing Native Americans. This is possible through social advocacy, the support of Native American ministries, and the "elimination of spiritual bigotry." The authors' final statement, though, is for Native American Christians who want to rebuild the spiritual life of their communities:

> What is the responsibility that we must then carry in attempting to assure that more and more members of our communities can benefit from the spiritual transformation we have all so longed for? The answer is basically quite simple. We must continue to do all that we can to realize new and individual spiritual growth while at the same time praying for the kind of openness with one another which allows the Creator to become the central focus for other Native American persons and communities. In order to do this we must maintain our awareness that too many of our brothers and sisters have been judged and categorically denied any sense of spiritual worth by many different churches over the years.
>
> Through the process of unpacking inappropriate theological and biblical interpretation, which was only meant to exclude rather than include human differences, we find ourselves in a position to understand better and experience the healing power of God's love for all persons--past, present, and future. Interpretation which maintains theological and biblical integrity can also be focuses inclusively in a way which allows and encourages a healthy and dynamic encounter with the Holy Spirit. *At last, all of us will be free!* (emphasis mine) [65]

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65. Ibid., 47-8.

CONCLUSIONS

Native American theologians are espousing a theology of liberation in the sense that the social and historical realities experienced by their people form a determinative context for the theological task. Their allegiance to the Christian faith despite their ancestors' experience with its early representatives suggests a deep understanding of the liberating aspects of the gospel message. But the role of traditionalism in constituting the basis for activism--and for society in general--suggests another, deeper, dimension to the meaning of liberation for Native Americans.

Thus, Native American theology is critical reflection on praxis when it goes beyond the very real concerns for political and economic freedom and addresses the pressing need for spiritual unity. The kind of unity that is needed will result, not from the injudicious blending of religious traditions, but from upholding and respecting the spiritual integrity of both Christianity and traditionalism. This combination of religious pluralism and spiritual unity can be described as biculturalism, an approach to Native American identity which challenges the ideology of assimilation.

In his book <u>These Mountains Are Our Sacred Places</u>, Snow has recorded the history of his people's political, cultural, and spiritual struggle with white society. He describes the process by which self-government finally

returned to the Stoneys in 1969, and explains how tribal leaders responded to the opportunity for rebirth:

> The basic problem, we realized, was to rebuild the shattered Stoney tribal society. It was a must to rebuild our once proud society if we were to be successful in the new venture.
>
> Part of the solution to this was that the harsh realities of the twentieth century had to be faced squarely by our people. . . .
>
> But, although we had to accept the dominant economy, technology, and legal system surrounding us, we did not have to accept all its cultural assumptions. The Stoney Indians, culture, language, and religion have been threatened ever since the white man arrived on this Great Island. With his excessive dependence on technology, restrictive legislation, greedy individualism, and smug certainty that he knows all the answers--even in religion--he has been a real and constant threat to our cooperative communal outlook, our respect for nature, and our value system. With the coming of self-government and a measure of self-determination, we did not have to accept this.
>
> In other words, we came to understand that it was not an either/or choice: acculturation to the dominant society or clinging to our old ways in a world where they could no longer offer us and our children a good life. We came to understand that there was a third way--the way of *biculturalism*. We came to understand that we could still follow Stoney tribal custom but, at the same time, adjust to a technological age on our own terms. Our hope was (and still is) to retain the best in the Stoney culture and to take the best in the dominant culture. [66]

It would seem that "a Christian theology of liberation originating within the Native American community" will necessarily look beyond the walls of the churches and into the kivas and longhouses and sweat lodges of North America.

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66. Snow, 123.