

NATIVE AMERICANS, THEOLOGY, AND LIBERATION:
CHRISTIANITY AND TRADITIONALISM
IN THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

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PREFACE

This study was undertaken in an effort to investigate Native American theology and its relationship to the liberation theology movement. In the words of the original thesis proposal, it was to be a search for "a Christian theology of liberation originating within the Native American community, in light of and in response to various aspects of the North American experience." The motivation for this project resulted from the intersection of the author's (1) lifelong contact with the Native American community and enrollment in the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, and (2) recent exposure to Third World and racial ethnic theological developments in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and among the Black community in North America.

Although the initial focus of the study was rather broad and vague, the scarcity of books and articles by Native American theologians dictated that the scope of research be expanded to include any available Native American theological material. The first three chapters of the thesis were written in order to establish a context for the theological perspectives considered in the last chapter. The theological material was analyzed for its method and content, particularly with reference to the kinds of

concerns raised by Third World and racial ethnic theologians. There are many issues raised by Native American theologians that are only briefly mentioned here but which could and should be seriously considered. This paper represents a preliminary synopsis of some key elements of what might be called a Native American theology of liberation.

A word about terminology is in order. Though some of the issues discussed herein are applicable on a broader scale, this study is primarily concerned with considering the theological perspectives of the indigenous peoples of that part of North America currently occupied by the United States and Canada. Various terms have been applied to these peoples (apart from the tribal names that they use for themselves and that have been attached to them): Native, Native American, American Indian, Amerindian, etc. The terms "Indian" and "Native American" are both widely used; Stephen Cornell has summarized this phenomenon nicely:

In general, 'Indian' is more common on reservations and in urban Indian communities, while 'Native American' appears to be preferred in universities, among many intellectuals, and in some Indian organizations. [1]

Accordingly, these two terms will be used interchangeably throughout this study.

1. Stephen Cornell, The Return of the Native: American Indian Political Resurgence (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), vi.

The author wishes to acknowledge the role of his parents in providing the foundation, both personal and theological, which made this project possible and meaningful.

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