

Religion or Spirituality

As I have been taught, some 5,100 years ago, the man called Tlvdaji Uwegi (Panther's Child) was first to keep the Sacred Fire and attendant ceremonies for the Cherokee People and, therefore, the first member of the Ani-Kutani Priesthood. This is what the Ani-Kutani did; they kept the Sacred Fire and presided over the ceremonies, helping to keep the cosmic balance, helping to bring healing and maintain wholeness in the Land and peace among the people.

In each Cherokee town, the Uku or Peace Chief of the People was chosen from among the Ani-Kutani. Some so-called "ethnologists" put forth an idea in the 18th and 19th Centuries that an Uku was a "secular leader". However, this division between secular and sacred is an invention of the colonizers. There was no such division in the old days, even if it was customary for the Uku to simply sit and watch as major ceremonies were conducted.

But, returning to the subject of the Ani-Kutani, somewhere along the line, the Ani-Kutani began behaving as if they were not part of the people but rather a people apart, with offices of priesthood eventually being passed down along family lines as a hereditary privilege. Some say the Ani-Kutani formed themselves into a new clan. Some say the Ani-Kutani were the Great Bear Clan, but I have come to doubt this. I may be wrong, but I think the Great Bear Clan, represented in the Sacred Circle by a bench at the door upon which no human may sit, is a spirit clan honoring those who elected to take the form of bears in order to feed and clothe the Cherokee people. But, whether or not the Ani-Kutani formed themselves into a new and separate clan, their actions showed that they saw themselves as separate and special and above the laws or cultural norms by which Cherokees were expected to live. Now, I can't say that all the Ani-Kutani were bad. Maybe the trouble started with just a few bad apples, but the thing is, no one sorted out those bad apples. And, what happens where there are one or two bad apples in a basket and no one is willing to discard them? That's right; the whole basket of apples will rot. So, the Ani-Kutani were taking liberties, bullying and oppressing their own people, the very people they were meant to serve. And, if you were oppressed by the Ani-Kutani, maybe you had a close relative killed by a member of the Ani-Kutani, to whom could you turn? The only authority was the Ani-Kutani, and if you went with your grievance to the Ani-Kutani, they would say that you were mistaken; that what was done by one of their number must have been done for a good reason, and you are just a troublemaker. They would say that you had better watch yourself and mind what you say, or something bad may happen to you as well.

Finally, so it is said, some members of the Ani-Kutani raped a Cherokee woman. Maybe it wasn't the first time this had happened; maybe it had happened many times. Now, Cherokees being a matrilineal and matrilineal people, rape, especially in those old days, was unheard of, or had been unheard of, even unimaginable, a crime worse than murder. So, finally, the liberties and excesses of the Ani-Kutani had passed all limits of toleration. Enough was enough. Secretly, word was sent to all the towns throughout the Cherokee country, and on a given day, the Cherokee People rose up and slaughtered the Ani-Kutani: men, women and children. Since the time of

Chapter 6

the slaughter of the Ani-Kutani, Cherokees have been mistrustful of any sort of hereditary position. Traditional leaders are brought forward by the people and are servants of the people. Traditional leadership is not coercive or authoritarian but accomplished through example and patient and gentle persuasion working toward consensus.

So, when did the slaughter of the Ani-Kutani take place? One theory says it happened following European contact. Those putting forth this theory say the inability of the Ani-Kutani to effectively treat smallpox was their reason for falling out of favor with the people. This theory seems credible until a few factors are considered. First of all, there is never any mention of smallpox or inability to treat disease in the oral tradition concerning the Ani-Kutani. Secondly, recent scholarship has discredited the notion that Cherokee physicians were inept at treating smallpox. On the contrary, in his book *Cherokee Medicine, Colonial Germs*, Paul Kelton asserts that "Cherokees had an approach to deadly diseases such as smallpox that [was] no worse and may have in fact been better than those practiced by Europeans during the colonial era" (p. 91). Thirdly, the Ani-Kutani were a priesthood specifically entrusted with the keeping of the Sacred Fire and attendant ceremonies and with keeping the peace among the people. While some Ani-Kutani priests undoubtedly also served as physicians, certainly not all Cherokee physicians were of the Ani-Kutani priesthood. There are others who say the slaughter of the Ani-Kutani may never have actually happened at all, that this is simply a teaching story. My feeling is that, if this story does indeed have a historical basis, and I think that is likely, it is something that happened several hundred or even thousands of years ago.

Those who help today with the keeping of the Sacred Fire and attendant ceremonies are members of medicine societies. Yes, these or I /we, since I am a medicine society member, still carry on the ancient traditions of the Ani-Kutani Priesthood. Medicine society members and others also carry on various other and complementary medicine ways, some of which tend to be passed down through families or clans, but in all of this, priests and practitioners are pulled forward by the people according to their own observable merits or qualities, not simply through inheritance. They/we are of the people and live to serve the people, being careful not to give way to pretensions nor letting some supposed or presumed "authority" go to our heads, thereby separating us from the Real People. The tragic story of the Ani-Kutani is a reminder of what happens when we do not remember these things.

The Ani-Kutani story is also a warning about empire and empire building. There were empires that did originate in what are now called the Americas. There were empires in Meso-America, empires in South America and empires in North America, centered along the Mississippi River. In school, I was taught that the Maya, Aztec and Inca empires represented the epitome of pre-Columbian civilization in the Americas. European and European-American scholars agonize over what happened to the Maya. Why did they stop being an empire? Or, why was Cahokia along with other cities along the Mississippi finally abandoned? The simple answer is, empires are unsustainable. They are showy and flashy; they develop material culture to a wonderful degree, at least for the privileged classes, but they are

Chapter 6

unsustainable. And so, empires always, always fall. At the time of the European invasion, the most advanced civilizations of the Americas were not the empires. The peoples who were still building and attempting to maintain empires were rather, I think, the least advanced peoples of these continents. Most of the peoples of what would come to be called "the Americas" had already advanced beyond the stage of empire building before encountering Europeans. Really, I think the European-American notion that empire building is the epitome of civilization is akin to a 12-year-old boy imagining he is as mature as he will ever be. So-called "Western Civilization" is still in that immature, uncivilized or pre-civilized empire building phase. This too shall pass. The Ani-Kutani setting themselves apart from and above the rest of the Cherokee people was a step in the direction of empire building, but the Cherokees elected to abruptly change direction. I am not saying a mass slaughter was a good thing, neither was the Ani-Kutani setting themselves above the laws and cultural norms of the Cherokees a good thing. Both are inexcusable. This chapter in Cherokee history was horrible and tragic, but the people learned from it. At the time of first contact with Europeans, Cherokees had no caste system, no cultural elite, no centralized government. Each town was autonomous. Each person had a voice in the governance of the town, in other words, there was true democracy. Land was held communally. There were no rich and no poor. Each person was free. And, the English were at a loss as to how they might conquer and control such a people. I will have more to say about this in the chapter entitled Leadership and Governance.

The degeneration or devolution of the Ani-Kutani Priesthood into a controlling and exploitative elite caste may be understood as an example of co-optation of indigenous spirituality by empire, or in this case, by those seeking to build an empire. Over the past 5,000 years or so, many indigenous or semi-indigenous spiritualities or religions have been co-opted by empires. Most notable has been the co-optation of Christianity, the teachings of Jesus and even Jesus himself by the Roman Empire and by other empires seeing themselves, to one extent or another, as descendants of or inheritors of Roman imperial order. Christianity is a spirituality or religion centered on a man who set himself *against* empire and was killed by an empire. How does it happen, then, that Christianity could be co-opted by empires and used as a tool for empire building, maintenance and expansion? Careful reading of early Christian writings, both biblical and non-biblical, reveals diversity of thought and practice as a hallmark of early Christianity. The same careful reading will also reveal a trend among some influential early Christian writers to blend Christianity with practices and thinking from other religions already co-opted by empire: most importantly Mithraism (the dominant religion of the Roman military) and the Dionysian rites or mysteries. This early mixing of the ways may have derived from a motive of impressing imperial authorities, or perhaps, these early Christian writers were simply speaking from their own eclectic spiritual experiences. However it happened, it is from this blending that most of what the majority of Christians would eventually consider the essential beliefs of Christianity seem to have emerged. Ironically, from a diversity of spiritual practices, Christianity was morphing into a set of

Chapter 6

non-negotiable beliefs. In 313 CE, the Roman Emperor Constantine, noted for his use in battle of the Christian symbol Chi-Rho, issued the Edict of Milan which effectively legitimized Christianity (Gonzalez p. 107). In 325 CE, Constantine called for an assembly of Christian bishops. This First Ecumenical Council of Nicea was for the purpose of developing an official Christian theology, friendly and supportive of empire (ibid pp. 123, 124). It was in the reign of Emperor Theodosius (379-395 CE) that the Roman Empire became officially Christian; those whose faith was different, whether non-Christian or even Christians considered officially heretical were no longer protected by the law (ibid p. 192). For many Romans and citizens of subsequent empires, Jesus and empire became/becomes impossible to separate, as these words from "Free Fallin'," recorded by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers illustrates.

She's a good girl, loves her mama
Loves Jesus and America too

Could the same thing happen with American Indian spiritualities? Could empire co-opt what is most sacred to us? This is one of my greatest concerns. And, to an extent, this has already happened. As stated in "120 Questions":

Actually, various departments of corrections around the country have put together what might be practically termed "Indian Bibles". After the pattern set by the Roman Empire in calling the Council of Nicea, departments of corrections have brought together hand-picked Indians and "Indian experts" who, working within department of corrections parameters, have patched together generic/eclectic Native American or Pan-Indian spiritual programs. Once written down, such programs become approved or orthodox practice for prisons and woe to any who attempt to go against the sacred writ (p.30).

This is not confined to prisons. As organized Christianity wanes, the next big imperialistic/colonizing religion could be a blend of Pan-Indianism and New Age Eclecticism. Some of my concern comes from wondering whether Mid American Indian Fellowships could actually play a role in this sort of scenario. Mid American Indian Fellowships developed as a bridge linking typically colonized and Christianized American Indian people with our indigenous cultures. Some cross the bridge and stay, becoming fully traditional in their tribal spiritualities. Some cross back and forth across the bridge, living out traditional tribal spirituality while also living out Christianity as well as elements of other religions, i.e. Buddhism, Hinduism or what-not. However, what if there will be some who decide to just stay on the bridge, bringing some of what they want from both sides and blocking the way for those who truly want to cross that bridge and decolonize, in essence, developing a new religion. This concerns me. Indigenous spiritual people or helpers tend to be pluralistic in outlook but at the same time will sound warnings against mixing the ways.

Chapter 6

This is not to say our traditional ways developed in a vacuum or are strictly or purely of one tribal origin or another; they are not. However, if we indiscriminately mix and blend the ways, diversity is sacrificed. And, as I look around, I see, that for sure, Creator must truly love diversity. Also, as we look at the history of religion, we see that those mixed and blended ways, those that have already lost their distinctive flavor, are more easily co-opted by empire.

To reiterate the disclaimer made in the introduction to this extended essay, Please keep in mind that I speak from the perspective of an observer somewhere in the middle between colonized and indigenous thinking. Although I like to think that I have been about the process of decolonization for many years and fancy that I am moving in the direction of indigenous thought and action, I can, in no wise say, with any honesty, that I am not a colonized person. Colonization has infected, I think, to one extent or another, every human being and every human group and system in the Earth. When I hear someone make a claim that they or a group or system to which they belong is not colonized or is fully indigenous, my first thought is that this person has yet to begin the process of decolonization, a process that starts with an awakened awareness of ones own colonization and desperate need for decolonization and re-indigenation.

Levon

Levon wears his war wound like a crown
He calls his child Jesus 'cause he likes the name
And he sends him to the finest school in town

Levon, Levon likes his money
He makes a lot they say
Spends his days counting
In a garage by the motorway

He was born a pauper
To a pawn on a Christmas day
When the New York Times
Said God is dead and the war's begun
Alvin Tostig has a son today

And he shall be Levon
And he shall be a good man
And he shall be Levon
In tradition with the family plan
And he shall be Levon
And he shall be a good man
He shall be Levon

Levon sells cartoon balloons in town
His family business thrives
Jesus blows up balloons all day

Chapter 6

Sits on the porch swing watching them fly
And Jesus, he wants to go to Venus
Leave Levon far behind
Take a balloon and go sailing,
While Levon, Levon slowly dies

And he shall be Levon
And he shall be a good man
And he shall be Levon
In tradition with the family plan
And he shall be Levon
And he shall be a good man
He shall be Levon

- written by Bernie Taupin and recorded by Elton John

As colonized thinking would have it, there is separation between physical and spiritual, sacred and “secular”. In realms of religion, exclusive ownership of absolute truth is assumed or presumed. In other words, empire builders and colonizers operate with and are motivated by the thought that truth is revealed by deity only to certain people, namely to them (the empire builders and colonizers) and to their religious fore-bearers. The colonizing “logic” of absolute truth claims calculates that since X is held to be absolutely true, it follows that Y, Z, A, B, C, D, E, etc. are false. Exclusively held absolute truth claims are foundational to colonized thinking. These form the basis of the infamous Doctrine of Christian Discovery (Newcomb) which continues to be used by colonizers as a point of law and tool of oppression of indigenous peoples. In short, exclusively held absolute truth claims have been and continue to be used to justify every atrocity imaginable, and many that are virtually unimaginable. In his book *American Holocaust*, David E. Stannard explains that the “European adventurers and colonists” coming to the Americas in 1492 and following,

....were representatives of a religious culture that was as theologically arrogant and violence-justifying as any the world has ever seen. Nourished by a moral history that despised the self and that regarded the body and things sensual as evil, repulsive, and bestial, it was a culture whose holiest exemplars not only sought out pain and degradation as the foundation of their faith, but who simultaneously both feared and pursued what they regarded as the dark terrors of the wilderness - the wilderness in the world outside as well as the wilderness of the soul within. It was a faith that considered all humanity in its natural state to be “sick, suffering, and helpless” because its earliest mythical progenitors - who for a time had been the unclothed inhabitants of an innocent Earthly Paradise - had succumbed to a sensual temptation that was prohibited by a jealous and angry god, thereby committing an “original sin”

Chapter 6

that thenceforth polluted the very essence of every infant who had the poor luck to be born. Ghastly and disgusting as the things of this world - including their own persons - were to these people, they were certain of at least one thing: that their beliefs were absolute truth, and that those who persisted in believing otherwise could not be tolerated. For to tolerate evil was to encourage evil, and no sin was greater than that. Moreover, if the flame of intolerance that these Christian saints lit to purge humanity of those who persisted down a path of error became a sacred conflagration in the form of a crusade or holy war - that was only so much the better. Such holocausts themselves were part of God's divine plan, after all, and perhaps even were harbingers of his Son's imminent Second Coming (p.242).

Sacred or deified writings and ecclesiastical authority are the measure of all religious experience as colonized thinking would have it. While there may be much talk of "faith, hope and love," colonized and colonizing religion focuses on control and domination, using fear as the primary tool for maintaining and advancing dominion. As Taiaiake Alfred puts it,

"The Christian Bible has brought fear into the hearts of our people. This is our main weakness. I say it is fear because the combination of an authoritarian reading of the Bible, the lack of experience with contention, and the threat of retribution and violence are terrifying. This fear has paralyzed our communities, preventing any form of effective resistance to the colonial church-state agenda" (p. 145).

Colonized and colonizing religion primarily motivates with fear, while holding out just a little bit of hope, primarily for the next life. If religious adherents faithfully maintain "right belief" and do nothing to challenge imperial advancement or the status-quo of imperial power structure in this life, maybe they will not burn forever in hell; maybe they will enjoy a heavenly reward. Any thoughts of real democracy, real equality, real community sovereignty or self-determination, any thoughts of real cooperation and peaceful co-existence between peoples or any real connections with the land and Creator are ridiculed as utopian dreams, as such ideas challenge the status-quo of a top-down, hierarchical power structure with the rich enslaving the poor and colonizers cannibalizing the indigenous while raping and destroying the Earth. To preserve the imperial order, fear must be kept foremost, with just a little hope offered, a carrot on a stick.

However, at least within the United States, at present the primary seat of empire and center of colonization and colonized thinking, the seemingly dominant Christian religion, in most of its forms, is subservient to the civil religion: the fervent worship of the nation-state. Evidence for this assertion includes the following: In most churches in the United States, one will see a U.S. Flag and a Christian Flag on display, with the U.S. Flag on the dominant right side, as dictated by so-called "flag etiquette or protocol". Children in

Chapter 6

Bible School are led to pledge allegiance to the U.S. Flag first, before allegiance is pledged to the Christian Flag and Bible. When patriotic songs of the civil religion are sung in church, the entire congregation stands and the people sing more loudly and more enthusiastically than when singing other songs.

The civil religion of the United States is based in a concocted mythology of manifest destiny in which robbery and murder are glossed over or seen as ordained by God along with consumer capitalism which is basically a glorified system of enslaving the many for the benefit of the few. A blind belief in the superiority and essential and unique goodness of the United States is tenaciously held along with a related belief that the manifest destiny of the United States is now extended to its policing and dominating all nations of Earth economically and militarily. As pointed out by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz in her book *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, "The U.S. Constitution, the Mayflower Compact, the Declaration of Independence, the writings of the 'Founding Fathers,' Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, the Pledge of Allegiance, and even Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' speech are all bundled into the covenant as sacred documents" (p. 50). These are the sacred writ of the civil religion of the United States of America. The pantheon of human deities of this civil religion include Christopher Columbus, John Smith, William Bradford and the other "Pilgrim Fathers" along with several past United States Presidents including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan.

The civil religion of the United States has its own holidays which include Presidents Day, Memorial Day, Flag Day, Independence Day, Patriot Day, Columbus Day, Veterans Day and Thanksgiving Day. In all honesty, Christmas, recognized as a national holiday by the U.S. Nation-State, has also become a civil religious holiday, the primary purpose of which seems to be the celebration of and shoring up of consumer capitalism. In recent decades, Super-Bowl Sunday has become a major non-official civil-religious holiday.

Although most churches in the United States bow to, actively participate in and promote the civil religion, and although the civil religion has insinuated itself into all sorts of meetings and activities in the United States including Indian powwows, schools are the true temples of the civil religion. In an interview included in the book *New World of Indigenous Resistance*, Noam Chomsky identifies schools as "the institutions responsible for 'the indoctrination of the young'" (p. 71). He goes on to say that the rich and powerful of American society, liberals as well as conservatives, have long complained that, in this task of indoctrination, the schools are not doing a good enough job. "They have to introduce more obedience, control, subordination, not having these kids running around thinking for themselves" (Ibid). In his essay entitled "The Complex Decolonization of the School" included in the same book, Raul Zibechi writes, "The school deforms [rather than educates] with the goal of creating citizens intended for the market and the state, not human beings" (Ibid p. 316). It is interesting that at a time when the leadership of the United States was focused on urbanizing and industrializing a largely rural population, schools were designed to resemble factories. Now that the majority of Americans are urbanized but with industrialization on the

Chapter 6

wane, schools have come to resemble prisons, complete with cyclone fences and armed guards.

By teaching history in such a way as to make heroes of and essentially deify genocidal and exploitative explorers, founding fathers and other colonizers, while ignoring, minimizing or disparaging indigenous peoples, the schools create generation after generation of contentedly ignorant and worshipful adherents to the civil religion, willing to continue in the destructive practices of the deified heroes.

Trust in Western Science is another aspect of the civil religion in the United States. Please don't misread this as an indictment of science. Science is good, so long as it remains scientific, holding true to the scientific method. Mix in blind belief, and science is no longer scientific, no longer true to itself. For example I wonder how many Americans believe in fingerprinting as a foolproof method for identifying criminals. My guess is that most do. Countless jurors have voted for conviction based on the supposed scientific infallibility of fingerprint experts. And yet, since fingerprint examiners lack objective standards for evaluating whether two prints "match," fingerprinting, as practiced for the past 100+ years, is anything but scientific (Mnookin). Now we have a great many people putting blind faith in DNA analysis. I will be discussing this in the chapter entitled "Identity". Nowhere is religious trust in Western Science more apparent than in the faith placed by Americans in Western Medicine. The authoritative advice of medical doctors is often given more credence than the authority of the clergy. And, pharmaceutical companies, reminiscent of television evangelists seeking to bypass the local church, have taken to the airwaves to more directly promote their salvific remedies, while quickly and cheerfully listing "possible" side effects. There is little wonder that medical malpractice is the third leading cause of death in America (Villines). Real science is mindful of the limits of its knowledge and makes no claim to absolute truth. Science and blind belief are a dangerous mix.

Organized sports are ceremonies of the civil religion in the United States, especially the team sports: football, baseball and basketball. Mascots are man-made and projected talismans, good-luck spirits or deities. Schools and professional teams hold tenaciously to their mascots even when those mascots and behaviors associated with those mascots such as the tomahawk chop, dressing in war bonnets and face paint and utterance of stereotypical Indian-sounding chants are pointed out as clearly racist, insulting and demeaning to millions of human beings. It is religion. People hold tenaciously to their religion and to each and every God or idol of their religion. A major tenet of the civil religion of the United States is hatred of indigenous people. In his novel *The Confidence-Man*, published in 1857, Herman Melville includes a lengthy discussion on what he terms "the metaphysics of Indian hating" (pp. 172-186). "Indian hating still exists," he writes, "and will continue to exist, so long as Indians do" (Ibid p. 172). Melville identifies Indian hating as a "devout sentiment" (Ibid p. 186) and includes an observation that when an Indian is truly converted to Christianity, he too becomes an Indian hater (Ibid p. 176). Indian hating is foundational to the way America thinks of

Chapter 6

itself: past and present. Is there any wonder that indigenous peoples and cultures in the United States are constantly mocked? Is there any wonder that indigenous issues are routinely ignored by main-stream media? Is there any wonder that of all ethnicities in America, it is American Indians who are most apt to be assaulted, most apt to be murdered and most apt to be killed by police? (Lakota Law Project). To be honest, we must admit that hatred of African Americans is also foundational to American thinking. Even if Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. along with his "I Have a Dream" speech have been co-opted by the empire, the dream is far from realized. The American empire was built on stolen land and with the labor of stolen people. To give up Indian hating and African-American hating will necessitate a total redefining process for the United States of America. The United States will have to renounce the Doctrine of Christian Discovery in deed as well as in word and take seriously the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations). The so-called "dominant culture" will have to give up being dominant; no more white privilege! No longer "one nation under God," America will have to admit to being many nations, a plurality of nations sharing one great land. This would be a major step in the direction of peaceful co-existence. But I digress; I was talking about organized sports.

In the book, *New World of Indigenous Resistance*, Noam Chomsky comments that "there is something about the way that sports, say, are conducted which is highly conducive to arousing dangerous passions. And that starts with children. Children's sports are organized not to have fun, but to win" (pp. 358-359). Boys are pressured into playing football in elementary school, junior high and high school. Girls and boys who can't play the game are pressured into being fans, to root for the team, to show "school spirit". The boys playing the game are encouraged with the hope of college scholarships. Those few who do win scholarships are encouraged with the hope of playing professionally. Never mind that most of those who play the sport will suffer brain trauma along with other injuries that will plague them the rest of their lives and likely shorten their lives. Playing for the team and rooting for the team while demeaning other teams is essential exercise for a civil religion which requires its adherents to mindlessly root for the home team while demeaning the other side in each and every war in which the nation-state involves itself - always for freedom, right? Right. Most often for the freedom to wage total war, for the freedom to colonize, for the freedom of the few to accumulate butt-loads of money at the expense of the many. And so, this civil religion involves an awful lot of human sacrifice, from children permanently brain-damaged playing football, to young men and women, usually from poor families, dying in war or more often coming home from war seriously damaged in body, mind and spirit, to children blown apart or slowly poisoned by low-level radiation from bunker-busting bombs. On your computer, go to Google Images and type in the search words "shock and awe Iraq". You will see a tiny bit of the human sacrifice. But, the human sacrifice required by the civil religion of the United States of America began when the nation-state began.

With the colonial focus on the individual, as colonized thinking would have it, individual salvation is often the single most important thing in life. One may trust in the church or the theology of ones church for eternal salvation, to

Chapter 6

medical science and the military/police might of the nation-state for temporal salvation and to the local football team to save from boredom along the way.

To God

We hope you don't mind but we would
Like to talk to you there are some
Things we need to straighten out it's
About these Christians they claim to
Be from your nation but man you
Should see the things they do all the
Time blaming it on you

Manifest Destiny genocide maximized
Profit sterilization raping the
Earth lying taking more than they
Need in all the forms of the greed
We ask them why they say it's gods
Will damn god they make it so hard
Remember Jesus would you send him
Back to them tell them not to kill
Him rather they should listen
Stop abusing his name and yours

We do not mean to be disrespectful
But you know how it is our people
Have their own ways we never even
Heard of you until not long ago your
Representatives spoke magnificent things
Of you which we were willing to believe
But from the way they acted
We know you and we were being deceived

We do not mean you or your Christian
Children any bad but you all came to
Take all we had we have not seen you
But we have heard so much it is time
For you to decide what life is worth
We already remember

But maybe you forgot

- John Trudell in *Lines from a Mined Mind*

Indigenous thinking makes no sacred/"secular" division. Everything is sacred even if there may be various levels of the sacred. Also, holding A to be true does not necessarily negate the truth of B, C, D, etc., as truth claims are not seen as complete and mutually exclusive but rather as, in all probability, pointing to greater truths that may not be readily seen from the point of view of

Chapter 6

human beings. In her book, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*, Leanne Simpson explains that the Nishnaabemowin (Ojibwe) word generally translated as "truth" actually means the sound of a person's heart. This points to a "plurality of truth," as the sound of each heart, while perhaps similar in sound to others, is also unique to itself (p. 59).

As earlier discussed under the topic "Culture, the spirit of an indigenous people is that people's language, as it is in the language that the people's understanding of the universe and the people's place in the universal order is expressed. Through oral tradition an indigenous culture is taught, learned and passed from one generation to the next. The oral nature of the tradition ensures that it will remain dynamic, living in each new generation, rather than devolving into dead dogmatics. Even among indigenous peoples who have very old systems of writing, it is understood that the written word is easily controlled and manipulated by the few, while oral tradition is truly the collective memory of a people. The ceremonies of an indigenous people are physical acts of prayer through which relationship/partnership with the land and with Creator/Creation is maintained. Indigenous agriculture includes every aspect of farming, as well as hunting and gathering and the raising and collecting of medicinal herbs. It is the way that the people procure food and medicine, connect and interact, giving to and receiving new life from the land. All these four: language, oral tradition, ceremonies and agriculture - these are the bases of indigenous spirituality or culture as these connect the people together as a people, with the land in which they live and with all that is or, in other words, with Creator/Creation. I guess what I am expressing here is that spirituality and culture are basically one and the same thing for indigenous people.

For indigenous people, spirituality is experiential rather than confessional. Indigenous spirituality is a way of life or the way a people does things rather than a system of belief. So, there is no "orthodoxy" or "right belief" in indigenous spirituality. Of a truth, there is no "orthopraxy" or "right practice" either, as diversity of practice, or diversity in the way people do things, is expected and even celebrated, although there are certain values which are considered universally good. When two people from different indigenous cultures come together, it is highly unlikely that either will ask questions of the other concerning belief. It is also unlikely that either will question the other about practice. Rather, one or the other is likely to begin by saying something like, "This is how we do things...." This, in turn, opens the way for the other to share. Both will be interested but in no way judgmental concerning the other's spiritual or cultural practice.

For indigenous people, theology is more privately held and comes through one's experience of life and the meaning drawn from the oral tradition and ceremonies as these interact with one's own life. Direct contact and dialogue with spirits is lived in the present, not just read about in books. The focus of indigenous spirituality is not on domination or the building of dominion but rather on relatedness and the building of community.

From the standpoint of the indigenous mindset, any thought of individual salvation takes a back seat to the hope of acquiring spiritual power or assistance for the good of the people in the here and now. Nothing can be

Chapter 6

accomplished without this. With this, anything is possible. An understanding of immanent justice is derived from observation of the law of reciprocity, evident in the Earth and the Universe: Creation seeks balance. What goes around comes around. Therefore, there is evident and sure hope that the present imperialistic or colonized system will one day be but a dim memory as all peoples or all *remaining* peoples re-indigenize. In the meantime, it is important to remember a time before colonization, a time before empires and nation-states and just as important to imagine and foresee a new time when we will have once again advanced beyond the empire-building, nation-state phase, a time of peaceful co-existence of diverse peoples, a time of true civilization. We have to imagine it, before it can be.