

## B. PROVIDENCE AND RESPONSIBILITY: A NATIVE AMERICAN APPRECIATION

A question which I have often been asked is how I can be a Roman Catholic priest and a Native American. Since I completed my doctoral studies, the added wrinkle of how can I be a Catholic theologian has been included. This question is usually posed in light of the European colonization and evangelization of the Americas. In fact, I am Ohlone, the people who lived and live on the California coast between San Francisco and Monterey. We had six of the Spanish Franciscan missions in our tribal lands.

The acknowledgment of the tension between evangelization and colonization is not new to the twentieth century. As it so well chronicled in the *The Church and Racism: Toward a More Fraternal Society*, the church has called for a separation between the the civil authority and the spread of the gospel. As the document states,

The first great wave of European colonization was, in fact, accompanied by a massive destruction of pre-Columbian civilizations and a brutal enslavement of their peoples. If the great navigators of the fifteenth and sixteenth century were free from racial prejudices, the soldiers and traders did not have the same respect for others; they killed in order to take possession of the land, reduced first the "Indians" and then the Blacks to slavery in order to exploit their work.<sup>1</sup>

The question becomes focused as to how the Native Americans were able to reconcile their acceptance of the Christian gospel and the reality of contact with Europeans.

First, though, we must attend to the great cultural diversity of Native Americans north of the Rio Grande. There exist fourteen distinct cultural areas in the United States and Canada. Moreover, these cultural areas break down even further along tribal lines. Amidst these different peoples, we have a variety of experiences of Christian missionization.

Furthermore, the caution must be exercised not to equate the actions and attitudes of each individual missionary to the collective experience of European contact. For there are examples of courageous individuals who argued for the dignity and integrity of Native American civilizations.

For an answer, we need to reflect on the Native American approach to spirituality. It would be helpful here to understand the basic approach, the basic worldview of Native Americans, to reality. Joseph Epes Brown helps us here in outlining five primary elements which can be found in a Native Spirituality. First, in the majority of Native American languages, there are no such words as "religion" and "spirituality." For some, who labor under an evolutionary concept of culture and language such as James Walker, this absence reflects a stage of cultural development.<sup>2</sup> It would be more appropriate to appreciate this absence as one of the critical insights of Native American religious traditions: the unity of life and there-

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<sup>1</sup>Pontifical Commission *Justitia et Pax*, *The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society*, no. 3.

<sup>2</sup>James Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, ed. Raymond J. DeMallie and Elaine A. Jahner (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982) 22.

fore the absence of such categories as sacred and secular. As a result, we are speaking of religious traditions which rise out of a people's everyday experience. In writing of this experience among the Lakota, Paul Steinmetz writes,

Lakota Spirituality relates one both to the world of visible creation and to the world of spirits. It forms in us a personal relationship to the Earth so that we treat her with her respect and reverence. It is a centering of ourselves in creation through a relationship to the four directions, the foundations of the universe and the place where spirits dwell. Through this spirituality we learn to live in harmony with all creatures. It also puts us at ease with the spirits through accepting their presence and through the offering of spiritual food.<sup>3</sup>

Such an attitude is continually re-enacted in the Prayer to the Four Directions. For in this prayer, the individual or the group prepare themselves for the sacred by placing themselves in the appropriate relationship with creation.

Second, in Native Communities the source of life is breath. Since all words are made of breath, they are living and, therefore, need to be treated with reverence. The words a person speak are sacred since they convey his or her life. Words carry a power with them. I can still vividly recall how my Grandmother used very few words in her conversation. She stated that an overabundance took away their power. Moreover, she held the written word in some distrust. She felt the words might convey less truth since they were separated from the speaker. As a result, she did not want us to write down our tribal myths. If they were important to us, we would learn them.

Third, in a parallel fashion, the works of a craftperson convey an expression of their creator's life.

Fourth, time is not to be regarded as linear: marching relentlessly forward to some predestined goal. Rather, time is cyclical (not in a fatalistic sense). This understanding is reflected in the understanding of the four ages of a person, the four seasons of the year. As the world goes through the seasons of new life to death, so does the human person. A movement from infancy to old age and death is not tragic but rather manifests how the human person is part of the created universe. Furthermore, we need to recall that for Native Americans the circle is regarded as sacred. Time is seen in terms of the sacred circle which contains, which preserves. This is explained by Raymond DeMallie in his analysis of the "hopelessness" which can be found in *Black Elk Speaks*.

The sense of irreversible tragedy that pervades *Black Elk Speaks* reflects Neihardt's interpretation. Lakota culture does not emphasize the irreversible, but rather the opposite: what once was is likely to be again. This was the hope that Black Elk voiced again and again in talking with Neihardt, that together they could "make the tree bloom."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Paul Steinmetz, *Meditations with Native Americans—Lakota Spirituality* (Santa Fe NM: Bear and Company, Inc., 1984) 12.

<sup>4</sup>Raymond J. DeMallie, ed. *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1984) 56.

Fifth, there is a special and unique quality and intensity of the relationships between living beings and their natural environment.<sup>5</sup>

If we were to utilize such an approach, we could begin to discern how Native Americans reconcile colonization and evangelization. The actions of individuals or a group fit into the greater scheme of life. The providence of God, moreover, is not contained in a specific action or collection of actions but rather in the entire context. It is the responsibility of the community to focus us continually on placing ourselves in the appropriate relationships within creation.

We must be careful, however, not to allow for an interpretation of passive acceptance of events. Native Peoples have a deep appreciation for the reality of evil, of sin, in our lives. By means such as the Prayer to the Four Directions, we are able to see God's providence conquering evil, conquering sin. Sin does not dominate the universe. God's providence dominates the world. To live our lives as reflective of the Creator's care, calls us to live lives of purification and harmony. If one were to pray with a group of Native People, the depth of the desire to be purified so as to walk in harmony with God would be quite evident.

I recall the Vision Statement which was passed by the Annual Tekakwitha Conference in August of 1988. The Tekakwitha Conference is an organization of Native Peoples and missionaries who seek to deepen the life of the church among Native Peoples. The statement says,

A greater sense of hospitality will help in healing past wounds, inviting our youth into the Church, and in reaching out to the alienated and inactive.<sup>6</sup>

The providence of God is seen in the life the Creator gives us here on Mother Earth. The tragedy of the overidentification of European colonization and Christian evangelization does not contradict the care of our Creator. Rather the triumph of the gospel can be seen in the faith of Native People and the renewed life of our communities. A certain time period must not dominate the great cycle of life. For in the span of five centuries, we Native Peoples have experienced great destruction and are now experiencing great hope of Resurrection. Such actions manifest that we are part of creation, as the sun moves from new life to death to new life, as the seasons move from Spring to Winter to Spring.

For many Native Americans who are Christian, the ability to reconcile the colonization and evangelization processes is grounded deeply in who we are. The acceptance of Christianity does not mean the acceptance of the colonization process. For we suffered greatly as a result of European contact. Moreover, we will always stand against any such similar process. Rather our Native and Christian Spirituality places its hope in God's providence—that the harmony of life will be maintained.

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<sup>5</sup>Joseph Epes Brown, *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 2-4.

<sup>6</sup>Tekakwitha Conference. *Vision Statement*, 1988.