

THE MEDICINE WHEEL: NATIVE AMERICANS AND THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

This workshop focused on how one central feature of Native American religion among tribes north of the Rio Grande River could help to illuminate the convention theme of the providence of God. Michael Galvan, a Native American priest in the Diocese of Oakland, presented the topic and led the discussion.

Galvan began by making explicit five presuppositions or assumptions of Native American religion. *First*: Unity of life. Human beings are religious everywhere and in every dimension of their lives, not just in churches. The modern Western distinction between sacred and secular is not applicable. *Second*: Spoken words are living beings. Written words are suspect because they are separated from the speaker, the natural place of the living word. Moreover, living words express a relationship between people more than between people and things. *Third*: Works produced by craftspeople are living also; they are the person him/herself in another way. Their crafts are not viewed as disposable products as in modern Western society. *Fourth*: Time is cyclic and compenetrating. Events of a century ago are as present today as today's events. Death is ultimately good because it shows we are a part of the cycle of nature. *Fifth*: A person's identity is to be found in relationships: within family-tribe-nation; among living beings (including animals and rocks); emerging from the land (we grow out of the world; where one is born is where one lives). These presuppositions provide a context for understanding the *Medicine Wheel*, which represents a circle of human beings in harmony with all the dimensions and directions of life.

Prayer must follow this path of life. Through the medicine wheel a person places himself in appropriate relationships to all that is. In this sense it is comparable to the Western understanding of surrender to divine providence. Personal security is found in being part of the harmonious movement around the circle. The movement of people around the circle takes place in silence but with each being aware of the different meanings attached to the four directions of the circle.

In the course of the presentation the eighteen members of the workshop interspersed comments and questions. One person noted how deeply Native Americans had suffered from the ignorance and lack of respect on the part of Europeans who came to North America. Many of their rituals were lost to them and to the church because they were negatively viewed as simply pagan, with no effort being made to see the positive dimension of this religious experience. Another person suggested, and the presenter concurred, that Native American approaches, among some tribes, need to be corrected and supplemented especially regarding the role accorded to women and regarding the value attached to compassion and forgiveness. Still another person suggested that there could be fruitful comparisons between these Native American rituals and Hindu practices. Finally the presenter,

responding to a question as to how Native Americans might handle the justice issues raised by liberation theology, indicated that they would not be inclined to think about justice in terms of individual rights but in terms of promoting collective harmony.

	NORTH	
	1. Fire	
	2. Human	
	3. White	
	4. Ancestors	
	5. Mental	
	6. Wholeness	
	7. Respect	
	8. Hope	
	9. Winter	
	MEDICINE	
	WHEEL	
	SOUTH	
	1. Air	
	2. Mineral	
	3. Yellow	
	4. Women	
	5. Emotional	
	6. Nourishment	
	7. Kindness	
	8. Love	
	9. Summer	
WEST		EAST
1. Water		1. Earth
2. Animal		2. Plant
3. Black		3. Red
4. Elders		4. Youth
5. Physical		5. Spiritual
6. Growth		6. Protection
7. Sharing		7. Honesty
8. Wisdom		8. Faith
9. Fall		9. Spring

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