

Deloria's Critique

Vine Deloria Jr. was one of the seminal native intellectuals of the postwar period, and metaphysics may well have been his greatest passion. How might Latin American liberation theology benefit from a sympathetic encounter with indigenous religious traditions? How will a shift of focus from social class to indigenous peoplehood affect our understanding of liberation? How have social scientists responded to Deloria's persistent criticisms? How should Western science be informed by tribal oral narratives? How are religious traditions grounded in physical places, and how can native people illuminate this dynamic in the land that has come to be known as America? How did Deloria's writings articulate moral authority and anticipate spiritual revival?

I first read Custer Died for Your Sins in the summer of 1986, during the year I spent working for an evangelical organization in Los Angeles. Deloria's impious manifesto must have reinforced my growing frustration with conservative Christianity, though I do not recall any specific provocation. Two years later I returned to his writings while studying Latin American liberation theology; he was among the first North Americans to mount a sustained critique of the movement, and one of the very few to challenge it from the left. "A Critical Appraisal of Liberation Theology" thematizes his analysis of the intellectual, cultural, and religious issues at stake and assembles a dialogue with leading Latin American theologians of the period. A revised

version of this essay found its way into my MA thesis, reflecting Deloria's pivotal role in the emergence of a native Christian theology of liberation.

His perspective on Christianity, and on what it would take to redeem this wayward faith, shaped my own engagement with Latin American liberation theology. I sought a middle way between praise and condemnation, working to appreciate the significance of the liberationist movement within its Christian context while also looking outside Christendom for broader conceptions of religious praxis. The two sections of "Liberation and the [Indigenous] Poor" illustrate this dialectical orientation. The irruption of the poor is a revolutionary development for Christian theology, as Gustavo Gutiérrez has shown, but poverty is not the only social fact relevant to liberation struggles in a pluralistic world; many Third World peasants are indigenous people who favor their own religious traditions. I had the opportunity to explore these questions firsthand with Jose Miguez Bonino, the pioneering Protestant liberationist, who was a houseguest in Berkeley for a couple of weeks. My work in this area also benefited from the support of Benjamin Reist, my first-year advisor in the doctoral program, whose 1975 book Theology in Red, White, and Black offered the first systematic response to the theological implications of Deloria's early writings.

God Is Red remains one of Deloria's most influential books, and many regard it as his definitive statement on religion. After unearthing dozens of occasional essays he wrote for various theological and denominational audiences, I became convinced that these other writings on religion in America deserved wider circulation, and Deloria eventually agreed. We envisioned a volume of collected works that would help people

think critically about contemporary religious affairs and, if read as a sequel to God Is Red, also complicate their understanding of his views on religion. I worked on this project while teaching at the University of New Mexico; in the meantime, I reviewed a couple of new books detailing Deloria's criticisms of the social and natural sciences. A scholarly anthology on the troublesome relationship between native people and anthropologists ends with his rejoinder challenging the social sciences to be more than "The Hobbies of the Affluent Class." His book Red Earth, White Lies deconstructs archaeological theories and reconstructs native mythologies in pursuit of an alternative to the reigning scientific orthodoxy, "A Strange Kind of Dark Ages."

The edited collection For This Land was published in 1999. Having selected and arranged the essays, I contributed section headnotes and a biographical introduction tracing Deloria's intellectual development and highlighting his religious activities and interests. His tribal background and his leadership in Indian affairs are self-evident; positioning this body of work as "An American Critique of Religion" lays claim to a considerably wider intellectual and geopolitical territory. I wanted to recover Deloria's standing as religious critic, beyond that granted a token spokesperson, and to reclaim native peoples' precedence as originary Americans, rather than just another compound demographic: American Indian, Native American. Some issues transcend the binary logic of oppositional politics, as any mystic will tell you, and Deloria of America was one who theorized religion throughout his legendary career.

I returned to his first book for guidance while researching my monograph on native religious activism in the Red Power era. Custer Died for Your Sins was published in October 1969, just a few weeks before urban militants occupied Alcatraz Island. Deloria had foreseen the resurgence of tribal consciousness and the rise of a new, vigorous critique of the Christian presence in native communities. These and other spiritual tensions had long troubled Indian country, and I wrote "All This Religious Squabbling" to set the stage for a narrative map of the Indian Ecumenical Conference. Like the native leaders who gave birth to this influential movement, Deloria appreciated the relationship between prophetic impulses and mystical instincts. Deconstruction may be common enough as a symptom of difference, but polemics informed by metaphysics is always after something better than separation.