

Current Issues in Native American Studies
American Studies 123G
Winter 1994
Wed 7:00-10:30 p.m., Oakes 102

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Native Americans and Christianity

You say that you are sent to instruct us how to worship the Great Spirit agreeably to his mind, and, if we do not take hold of the religion which you white people teach, we shall be unhappy hereafter. You say that you are right and we are lost. How do we know this to be true?

*Red Jacket
Seneca, 1805*

A wee child toddling in a wonder world, I prefer to their dogma my excursions into the natural gardens where the voice of the Great Spirit is heard in the twittering of birds, the rippling of mighty waters, and the sweet breathing of flowers. If this is Paganism, then at present, at least, I am a Pagan.

*Zitkala-Sa
(Gertrude Simmons Bonnin)
Sioux, 1902*

It is my personal belief, after thirty-five years' experience of it, that there is no such thing as "Christian civilization." I believe that Christianity and modern civilization are opposed and irreconcilable, and that the spirit of Christianity and of our ancient religion is essentially the same.

*Ohiyesa
(Charles Alexander Eastman, M.D.)
Santee Sioux, 1911*

Sometimes I despair of the white man's ever becoming a Christian. Sometimes the Holy Bible does not seem to teach people anything. And the Lord seems to have forsaken us. I go down to the cellar of my house when I feel that, where I have my drum, and I beat my drum quietly,. Quietly so the Lord will not hear me, so that the Lord will not be offended. Though I think the Lord would not mind the drum. I feel better then. I feel Indian.

*Rev. Vine Deloria, Sr.
Yankton Sioux, 1968*

Can I be Indian and Christian?

*Episcopal Indian Ministries
1993*

Course Rationale

Christianity has played an important role in the history of the Americas during the last five centuries. Christian ideas and practices influenced Europeans and others as they interacted with Native Americans beginning in 1492, and Native Americans have selectively appropriated many of these same traditions in their struggle to survive the European invasion. Religious attitudes and motivations have affected every area of life on both sides of this struggle, from family life and education to politics and economic relations. Understanding the relationship between Native Americans and Christianity is thus an important aspect of understanding the Native American experience. The relationship between Native Americans and Christianity is also one of the most divisive issues within Native American communities today, a situation that calls for critical and committed scholarship.

This is not a course on Christian missions. We will be reading a wide range of literature by and about Native Americans and discussing a variety of ways in which Native Americans have interacted with Christian individuals and communities, appropriated Christian ideas and practices, and expressed and maintained Christian identities.

Course Objectives

Students in this course will:

- (1) develop a basic understanding of Native American worldviews, religious traditions, and critical discourse;
- (2) learn about various ways in which Native Americans have interacted with Christian individuals and communities, appropriated Christian ideas and practices, and expressed and maintained Christian identities;
- (3) consider theoretical perspectives on important topics in the study of religion, including religious leadership, processes of religious change, pluralism and interreligious dialogue, religion and social analysis, and religious identity; and
- (4) refine skills in multidisciplinary textual criticism while reading a wide range of literatures by and about Native American Christians.

Course Requirements

Each student in this course will be required to:

- (1) complete the assigned readings, attend class regularly, and participate in class and small group discussions and exercises;
- (2) collaborate with other students in initiating the class discussion on a periodic basis;

- (3) submit weekly essays (1-2 pp.) articulating a critical response to the assigned readings; and
- (4) initiate and complete an original, substantive research project focusing on a Native American Christian group or individual.

Each student will be evaluated on the basis of her/his active class participation (preparation, attendance, discussion, collaboration), weekly response essays (submitted in a timely fashion), and completed research project.

Course Texts

Available at Bay Tree Bookstore and on reserve at McHenry Library:

Peggy V. Beck, Anna Lee Walters, and Nia Francisco, The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life (Tsaile, AZ: Navajo Community College, 1992).

Joseph B. Herring, Kenekuk, The Kickapoo Prophet (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1988).

Barry O'Connell (ed.), On Our Own Ground: The Complete Writings of William Apess, A Pequot (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts, 1992).

Raymond J. DeMallie and Douglas R. Parks (eds.), Sioux Indian Religion: Tradition and Innovation (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 1987).

Joseph Iron Eye Dudley, Choteau Creek: A Sioux Reminiscence (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 1992).

Vine Deloria, Jr., God Is Red: A Native View of Religion, 2nd ed. (Golden, CO: North American Press, 1992).

George E. Tinker, Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1993).

Course Reader

Available at the UCSC Copy Center:

West, James. "Indian Spirituality: Another Vision." American Baptist Quarterly 5/4 (December 1986), 348-56.

Baldrige, William E. "Toward a Native American Theology." American Baptist Quarterly 8/4 (December 1989), 227-38.

Jacobs, Adrian. "The Meeting of the Two Ways." Indian Life Magazine 13, no. 3 (June-July 1992): 8-11.

Maxey, Rosemary McCombs. "Who Can Sit at the Lord's Table? The Experience of Indigenous Peoples." In Theology and Identity: Traditions, Movements, and Polity in the United Church of Christ, 51-63. Edited by Daniel L. Johnson and Charles Hambrick-Stowe. New York, NY: Pilgrim Press, 1990.

Hascall, John S. "Native American Liturgy." Liturgy 7, no. 1 (1988): 35-39.

McKay, Stanley, J. "An Aboriginal Christian Perspective on the Integrity of Creation." Ecumenism 100 (December 1990), 15-17.

Tinker, George E. "Spirituality, Native American Personhood, Sovereignty and Solidarity." The Ecumenical Review 44 (July 1992), 312-24.

Warrior, Robert Allen. "Canaanites, cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, conquest, and liberation theology today." Christianity and Crisis, September 11, 1989, 261-65.

Charleston, Steve. "The Old Testament of Native America." In Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside, 49-61. Edited by Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engle. San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1990.

Mammedaty, Kim. "Remember the Sabbath Day." In And Blessed Is She: Sermons by Women, 196-202. Edited by David Albert Farmer and Edwina Hunter. San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1990.

Course Schedule

January 12 -- Course Introduction

January 19 -- Beck xiii-138, 188-206

January 26 -- Herring

February 2 -- O'Connell xiii-lxxxi, 99-161, 275-313

February 9 -- DeMallie

February 16 -- Dudley

February 23 -- Deloria

March 2 -- Tinker

March 9 -- Course Reader

March 16 -- Research Presentations