

'The Canaanite Problem'

By JAMES TREAT

One important theme in the story of the Americas has been what some have called "the Indian Problem." From the perspective of the European immigrant society, "the Indian Problem" refers to the moral dilemma created by the very existence of Native Americans, a dilemma which has social, political, ethical and theological dimensions.

Life might have been simpler for America's immigrants if, as one popular myth goes, this continent had been a vast and empty wilderness waiting to be settled, or if Native Americans had finally succumbed to centuries of warfare and disease.

Yet Native Americans were living here long before 1492, and we have survived down to the present day. This suppressed but undeniable reality creates quite a problem for those who would like to celebrate Christopher Columbus as the patron saint of the New World.

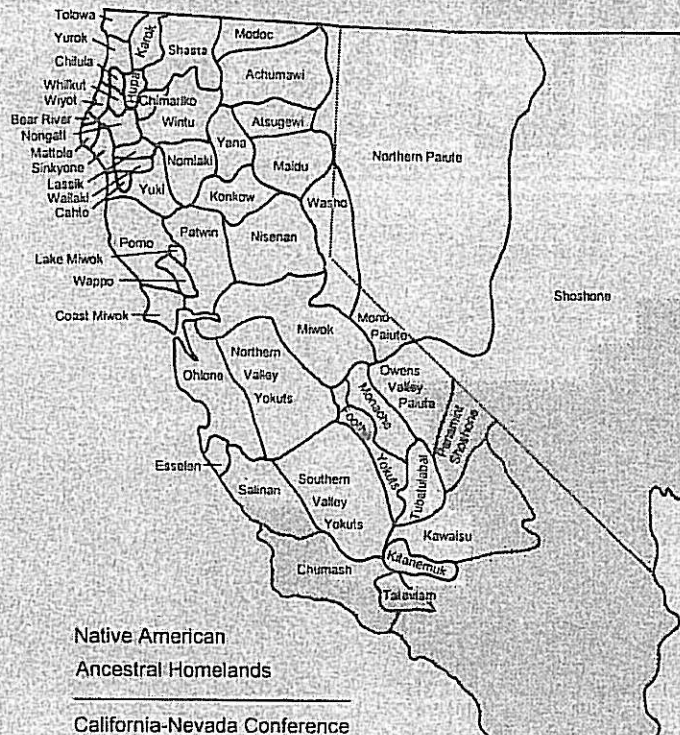
Interestingly enough, it was Columbus himself who suggested the first official solution to the Indian Problem, and he did so on the very day that he and his crew were discovered on a Caribbean beach. On Oct. 12, 1492, Columbus wrote in his log that the gracious people who welcomed him to their island "ought to make good and skilled servants." Five hundred years later, the Columbus Quincentenary marks an important turning point in the history of the Americas. In 1992, you and I are learning to reject the Eurocentric perspective and to develop a more inclusive, a more compassionate, a more honest understanding of our world, one which respects the multicultural reality of American history and society.

I believe that we can learn something about how to do this by realizing that Jesus, in his own place and time, had a *Canaanite Problem*. As a Jew living in Palestine 2000 years ago, he viewed Canaanites in much the same way that non-Indians today view Native Americans.

But before we look more closely at the story in Matthew, we need to consider some events that took place long before Jesus was born. Our Old Testament reading is Judges 1:22-32. As you know, in the five books of the Pentateuch we can find the account of the Exodus, the liberation of the people of Israel, and in Joshua we can read about the conquest of Canaan, the Promised Land. In the first chapter of Judges, we get an update on where things stand, a kind of "state of the union" report.

Of course, we can read the Old Testament from a variety of perspectives; if we want to, we can accept Israel's version of history and speak in terms of covenant, exodus and conquest. But what we're learning to do in these times is to reread the text from new perspectives, to look at the Bible through new eyes. What we find when we read the Old Testament from the underside of history is that words like invasion, dispossession and slavery might be more accurate to describe what happened to the Canaanites who were already living in Palestine...

When we look at chapters 14 and 15 in the Gospel of Matthew, we find that



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it's been a remarkable period in Jesus's life. To say that Jesus had a rough week is putting mildly. First he learns that John the Baptist has been beheaded, and when he tries to find some privacy, 5,000 people follow him and he's forced to feed them. Still looking for some peace and quiet, he resorts to walking across the sea of Galilee, only to have his lifestyle challenged by some Scribes and Pharisees on the other side. Finally, he and his disciples leave for the Mediterranean coast, in the region of Tyre and Sidon.

When Jesus arrives he's confronted by a Canaanite woman from that area, who asks Jesus to perform an act of spiritual healing for her demon-possessed daughter. Three times she pleads with him for mercy; three times Jesus rejects her request.

What are we to make of this situation, where our lord and savior acts more like... one of us? If you look in the various Bible commentaries, you'll find different rationalizations for Jesus's seemingly callous behavior. I suppose there are several possible explanations. Maybe Jesus was tired, and he was just having an off day. Or maybe he was occupied by something else, and had some more important issue on his mind. But maybe he really was unconcerned about this woman, and didn't care about her problems. Maybe he saw her as an insignificant

person who didn't deserve his attention. Maybe he thought of himself as a God-fearing Jew, and wanted nothing to do with some filthy Canaanite pagan. Maybe Jesus was just a plain old-fashioned racist.

I think it would be foolish to form an opinion about Jesus's character on the basis of this one brief story. But it does seem clear to me that in this story we find Jesus struggling with the Canaanite problem.

I want to suggest that this passage in Matthew is a foundational text for understanding how to make the next 500 years better than the last five hundred have been.

This is the only place in the New Testament where you'll find the Canaanites mentioned. If it weren't for this story, we might very well believe, at least on the basis of the Biblical record, that the Canaanites had disappeared by the time of Jesus. But that's not the case, and now we, like Jesus, must grapple with their presence, just as non-Indians today must acknowledge the Canaanites of North America. This story is also foundational for those of us who are struggling to understand what it means to be both Native American and Christian, because in it Jesus affirms three very important things about Canaanites: Canaanite survival, Canaanite humanity, and Canaanite faith.

Let me give you a little background so you'll understand how our Old Testament and New Testament readings fit together. As you know, there were 12 tribes of Israel, and one of them was the tribe of Asher. In Joshua 19 we read that the people of Asher received an allotment of land on the Mediterranean coast, what is today southern Lebanon. It's in this region that we find the cities of Tyre and Sidon, and it's where Jesus encountered the Canaanite woman.

In Judges Chapter One we read that Asher, like the other tribes of Israel, invaded the Canaanites' homeland and subjected them to murder and slavery. Fifteen hundred years later, the appearance of a Canaanite person in the Gospel of Matthew shows us that, in spite of these threats to their very existence, God chose to spare some of the Canaanites, and they survived down to Jesus's time. And so this story affirms Canaanite survival simply by the very mention of the Canaanite woman. The New Testament is silent about first-century Canaanites but for this passage.

But there's silence on another level that we have to deal with, and there's another way in which this text is unique in the New Testament. I haven't been able to find any other gospel passage where Jesus's initial response to someone who approaches him is silence.

Lots of people ask Jesus for the kind of help the Canaanite woman wants when she cries out "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession." But this is the only instance where it can be said, "Jesus did not answer a word." Jesus finds himself face to face with the Canaanite problem, and he has no response. He won't even acknowledge her existence.

His disciples know how to handle it, though, and they rally to his defense. I can almost hear them whining: "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us." Jesus hears his disciples' complaint and so he provides them with a theological rationale for ignoring her request: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel," he says. Yes, I can see that the Canaanite woman exists, but she's excluded from my ministry. There's no room for her in my view of things.

But this is all the encouragement the Canaanite woman needs to press her case further. She kneels before Jesus and says "Lord, help me!" His next response is one of the cruelest things we have ever heard Jesus say: "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." In other words, yes, you exist, perhaps you're not excluded, but you most certainly are inferior to God's children, God's favorites, God's chosen people.

The Canaanite woman's persistence in this situation makes us realize that she's not satisfied with mere existence, and so this story goes beyond affirming Canaanite survival. The Canaanite woman discovers that she must also defend her humanity, her dignity as a human being.

As we look at Jesus's three responses to her persistent request, we see him develop a growing appreciation for the

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"Several Native American writers have directed my attention to the Canaanite experience," says Treat, "particularly Robert Allen Warrior ('Canaanites, Cowboys and Indians,' *Christianity and Crisis*, Sept. 11, 1989) and William E. Baldrige (response to Warrior in the same magazine, May 28, 1990)."

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Native American dancers at conference worship.

(Cont'd from page 2.)

Canaanite presence. In his eyes, the Canaanite woman moves from a situation of non-existence, through a state of exclusion, to a position of inferiority. Fortunately, she isn't finished with Jesus yet. "Yes, Lord," she says, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Jesus's final response seems to indicate that he's finally seen the light. "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." By addressing her as "Woman," Jesus acknowledges that she deserves the respect afforded to every other human being. And the Canaanite woman's persistence forces Jesus to go beyond acknowledging her survival and her humanity. She leads him to consider the reality of Canaanite faith.

Now what does it mean to say that this woman has "great faith?" First of all, we need to avoid a *Christian* reading of this particular story. Keep in mind that the New Testament tells us nothing about the Canaanite woman either before or after her encounter with Jesus. Perhaps she had been a devoted follower of Jesus for some time,

or perhaps she had just heard about him when he travelled to her community. Perhaps she liked Jesus's teachings but was skeptical about his ability to heal, and she wanted to test him. Perhaps she was just the desperate mother of a disturbed child, an opportunist who had no interest in Jesus, no interest in Judaism, no interest in the Creator of the world, but who *did* have a daughter in need and who was willing to take a shot, any shot, that might bring healing. So we don't know where this woman stood, from devotion to desperation, and we don't know where she went after this encounter.

But we do know this: the Canaanite woman believed that her daughter had a problem which was spiritual in nature, she believed that spiritual healing is possible, and she believed that Jesus *might* be a spiritual person, a healing person, a medicine person, who could speak words of power in a critical situation.

And what I find most striking about this story is that Jesus acknowledged her faith on its own terms. He didn't ask the Canaanite woman to recite a prayer, to change her lifestyle, to join a church, to make a contribution, or even to follow him. He acknowledged her great faith, he granted her request, and Matthew tells us that "her daughter was healed from that very hour."

The Canaanite woman was one of the most important individuals Jesus encountered during his life, and her story helps us understand how we should respond to the issues facing us in the year of the Columbus Quincentenary.

Her very presence forced Jesus to acknowledge the survival of the Canaanites despite his own ancestors' claims of divine sanction for their genocide. The Canaanite woman asserted her dignity as a human being and challenged Jesus to move beyond an ethnocentric view of his world. And she prompted Jesus to recognize the validity and authenticity of her unique faith experience, even though at first it seemed strange, inferior, or even non-existent.

The Canaanite woman asked for many things from Jesus, and in 1992 Native American women and men are asking for many of the same things from Jesus's followers. Will you stand with us?

Will you help us tell the whole story, the true story of the Americas, so that children don't have to grow up thinking that Columbus was a hero and Crazy Horse a villain?

Will you help us hold the federal



Hickey Murray, Honored Elder of the Maidu.



Marilyn M. Hofstra



James Treat

government accountable to respect the treaties and to honor the federal trust relationship, so that our children will have a good education, quality health care, and enough food to eat?

Will you help us eliminate the racist mascots still being used by professional, college and high school sports teams throughout this country, so that our children will see that other people respect their human dignity?

Will you help us end the desecration of sacred burial sites and seek the release of dead Indians who are already held in this nation's museums, so that our children will know they aren't just future laboratory specimens?

Will you help us heal the religious divisions in our communities by acknowledging the faith experiences which have existed since long before 1492, so that our children will realize that God loved their ancestors too?

You and I are living in a perplexing and dangerous time. It may take a miracle to heal the wounds that divide us. I invite you to follow the example of the Canaanite woman, and of countless Native Americans, in believing that miraculous healing is indeed possible. Let this be our hope and our prayer.

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The California-Nevada UM Connection

Target 2000

One of United Methodism's leading experts in worship and liturgy will be coming to California-Nevada this Fall to help guide clergy and laity through the denomination's new Book of Worship.

Hoyt L. Hickman, Worship Services Editor for the new book, will be a featured speaker at Target 2000, scheduled now for St. Mark's UMC, Sacramento, Oct. 9-10.

Target 2000 is a series of conference-wide gatherings to help local churches with their worship needs. Pamela Abbey, chair of the conference Committee on Worship and Devotional Life, said the focus of this year's sessions would be on liturgy — with a special emphasis on the new Book of Worship.

Among the proposed workshops are training for lay persons in leading devotions and public reading of scripture, healing services, and use of communion music, psalter and responses.

Jubilee

More than 1400 are now registered for Jubilee '92, co-chair Bill Faught has announced. The workshops and workshops of the event will begin on the campus of Humboldt State University in Arcata, Aug. 8.

On campus housing is still available, he said. "Subject to continuing availability, registrations and requests for

on-campus housing must be received by Registrar Orrinda Stockton by Aug. 3."

Registrations for persons staying off campus may be received through the opening of Jubilee '92, he said. Individual meals may be purchased, if space is available in the dining halls.

Camp Celebration

Camp Celebration is offering two \$100 scholarships for the Aug. 9-15 sessions at Camp Silver Spur, according to director Gary Pope-Sears. One scholarship is for the church which "not having sent youth to Camp Celebration for the past three years, sends the greatest number of youth." The other scholarship is for the church

which "having sent youth last year, shows the greatest increase in the number attending."

Camp Celebration is for youth entering Grades 9-13. Featured this year is Mary Ann Swenson, who will share about "HERoes and SHEroes of the Bible," based on her soon-to-be-published book.

Colliver Lectures

Edicio de la Torres is a poet, artist, teacher, theologian and sociologist, and national chaplain to the Federation of Free Farmers and the Kih Rho ng Philipinas, a Catholic youth organization. He is also the speaker at the annual Colliver lectures, scheduled at the University of the Pacific for Oct. 18-20.