Contemporary Native Religious Identity: The Indian Ecumenical Conference[1]

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Radical native activists and Western anthropologists do not see eye to eye on a lot of things, but if there is one thing they do agree on, it is the proposition that Christianity is "the white man's religion" and that native contact with Christianity has been one of the most harmful and destructive aspects of the invasion and ongoing colonization of the Americas. Conventional interpretations of post-Columbian native religious history typically rely on a simplistic phenomenological binary (indigenous vs. non-indigenous) and an evolutionary model of religious development (primitive vs. world religions) that lock native and immigrant traditions in an inescapable assimilative opposition. Under this paradigm of historical narration, diverse native religious experiences are understood to be "authentic" and are generalized with labels such as primitive, primal, animist, and tribal, while diverse expressions of missionizing Christianity are read as an insidious form of cultural contamination. For example, Ruth Underhill lamented the lack of "material" on Iroquois beliefs "straight from the fountainhead of ancient myth," and then described seventeenth century conversations between Iroquois religious leaders and Jesuit missionaries as one-sided encounters: "The Indians often professed to find their own theology sufficient, but one wonders how many changes of attitude crept in undetected."[2] Ake Hultkrantz shared Underhill's negative assessment of native

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1. For the purposes of this paper, I am using the collective noun *native people* and the adjective *native* as generic signifiers. These terms refer to all aboriginal, indigenous people north of Mexico, also commonly called American Indians and Eskimos, Native Canadians and Native Americans, and known by a variety of assumed and imposed tribal designations. These terms include both acknowledged and unacknowledged communities and both "full-blood" and "mixed-blood" individuals, and they encompass Canada and the United States.

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2. Ruth M. Underhill, *Red Man's Religion: Beliefs and Practices of the Indians North of Mexico* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1965), p. 174; also see her (brief) assessment of post-Columbian religious change in the final chapter, "Modern Religions," pp. 254-69.

religious agency in his survey of native religions: "Through missions, commercial connections, and colonial endeavours indigenous religions were gradually tainted by Christian propagation and, to some extent, by European values."[3] Activists and anthropologists alike are certainly justified in identifying the many ways in which white Christian institutions have afflicted native communities, and in encouraging native people to reject the individualism, materialism, progressivism, and secularism of the dominant culture. But the colonialist interpretation inevitably leads to a rather limited and oversimplified view of the situation. As is so often the case in our social negotiations, there is an annoying disarticulation between rhetoric and reality, between discursive reflection and lived experience; the situation at ground level is almost always more complex, more subtle, than our reconstructions and representations of that situation, allow.

The native encounter with Christianity has been a profound and enduring experience of religious colonialism, but there is more to the story of Christian traditions among native people than is described by a history of Christian missions to native people. Native communities, like all human communities, were not culturally isolated or socially static until the Gregorian year 1492, but have always experienced varying degrees of both continuity and change. Sam Gill recognized that "we introduce inaccuracies when we investigate Native American religions without taking their histories into account .... [E]very form of expression and religious act is part of a history."[4] Robert Brightman's survey of recent scholarship on native religious history chronicled what may be an emerging post-colonial consensus in the field. There is nothing "non-Indian," wrote Brightman, "in the *event* of religious change, although the circumstances of white-Indian interaction provide contexts in which adherence to different religions both creates and reflects different cultural orientations."[5] Recently published writings by native Christian ministers Homer Noley (Choctaw), William Apess (Pequot), Joseph Iron Eye Dudley (Yankton Sioux), George Tinker (Osage/Cherokee), and Stan McKay (Cree) demonstrate the interpretive grace of a more sophisticated approach to understanding native religious identity.[6] Colonialism is oppressive and colonization ravages both oppressed and

3. Ake Hultkrantz, *The Religions of the American Indians*, translated by Monica Setterwal (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1967), p. 150.

4. Sam D. Gill, *Native American Religions: An Introduction* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1982), p. 141.

5. Robert A. Brightman, "Toward a History of Indian Religion: Religious Changes in Native Societies," in *New Directions in American Indian History*, edited by Colin G. Calloway (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 1988) p. 240.

6. Homer Noley, *First White Frost: Native Americans and United Methodism* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1991); Barry O'Connell (ed.), *On Our Own Ground: The Complete Writings of William Apess, a Pequot* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts, 1992); Joseph Iron Eye Dudley, *Choteau Creek: A Sioux Reminiscence* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 1992); George E. Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993); Joyce Carlson, *Journey from Fisher River: A Celebration of the Spirituality of a People Through the life of Stan McKay* (Toronto, ON: United Church Publishing House, 1994).

oppressor, but colonized people never completely surrender their personal autonomy, their intellectual freedom, their spiritual creativity, at least not as long as they are still breathing and conscious. The discursive domination that is part of any colonization process can obscure the presence of this patient and subversive resistance, but that does not render the resistance any less real or efficacious.

Today, religious life in native communities in Canada and the United States is characterized by unusual forms of religious diversity, involving a variety of tribal traditions, intertribal groups, and denominational churches. Many of these communities are also the battlegrounds for intense religious contestation and conflict. What kind of religious identity is appropriate for native people today? Is it possible to be both native and Christian? Where should native people look for a sense of ethnic or racial unity in the midst of this confusing religious diversity? The survival or eventual demise of "the white man's religion" notwithstanding, there will probably always be a wide range of answers to these questions. One of the more novel and influential solutions to the problem of religious diversity among native people was articulated during the 1970s by the native religious leaders who organized and participated in the Indian Ecumenical Conference. They asserted that religious diversity must be acknowledged and affirmed, and that religious innovation is a valid and ongoing possibility. They believed that the best way to insure the survival of native people is to engage in interreligious dialogue, cooperation, and advocacy in order to promote religious healing, revival, and solidarity. These leaders organized an intertribal and interreligious community of contemporary native people where they formulated a conception of native religious identity that is inclusive, rather than exclusive. In doing so, they pioneered a pragmatic, egalitarian solution to the problem of religious diversity, and their approach has important theoretical implications for religious leaders and scholars who are concerned about facilitating religious harmony in our world of religious antagonism and warfare.

The idea for holding an "ecumenical" meeting of native people emerged from informal discussions among native religious leaders during the 1960s. Cherokee anthropologist, Robert Thomas, gathered nine of them at Winnipeg, Manitoba, in November of 1969, where they decided to organize an "Indian Ecumenical Conference" for the following summer. Members of the newly formed Steering Committee – medicine persons, ceremonial leaders, community activists, and ordained ministers – understood the challenges their communities were facing as they struggled to survive the effects of colonial dispossession, competitive missionization, assimilative education, ghettoizing urbanization, and racist discrimination. But they also agreed among themselves that the most critical problem facing native communities was the need for religious healing, revival, and solidarity. They outlined the situation in this way:

> Religious strife and turmoil is rampant in Indian communities. The Church, in modern times, is a neutral agent in Indian communities

at its best. At its worst, it is socially destructive. A conference of native Indian religious leaders both aboriginal and Christian, is possibly the *only* vehicle which could give the necessary guidance in order that the Churches themselves along with their Indian congregations begin to solve this difficult and urgent dilemma.

Indians, as a people, face an even more serious problem in this situation. Religious strife, or loss of faith in religion, in an Indian tribe literally tears the social fabric of such a small group of kinsmen. The individual and the whole group are immobilized in this destructive process .... Native Indian religionists, of all Christian and aboriginal sects must assemble and start the painful process of conceptually sewing together their fragmented sacred world, so Indians can once again take steps to act for their own future welfare.[7]

Grassroot religious leaders from native communities throughout Canada and the United States came together on the Crow Reservation in August of 1970 for the first Indian Ecumenical Conference, where they renewed their commitment to religious self-determination among native people. Ninety-three official delegates attended, along with about 150 other participants, representing at least forty-seven North American tribal communities. Medicine persons were responsible for selecting and consecrating the Conference site and for conducting sunrise ceremonies each morning of the four-day gathering. Daily activities included formal presentations and discussions during the daytime and informal socializing during the evenings. The native leaders and elders who attended the Conference came from very different tribal communities and religious traditions, but they all had at least one thing in common: they shared a deep concern about the social, cultural, and religious crises that native people were experiencing. Andrew Dreadfulwater, a Cherokee ceremonial leader from Oklahoma, told his colleagues: "We have almost let all this religious squabbling smother our spiritual power and destroy us as a strong people." Bernard Second, a Mescalero Apache from New Mexico, agreed: "This may be our last chance. We will have to save our communities and revitalize them. We are, by nature, a people who look to our religious traditions to guide us."[8]

Conference delegates reached a strong consensus on the importance of religious harmony in native communities, and they demonstrated their growing intertribal and interreligious solidarity by drafting a series of resolutions spelling out the need for religious freedom and tolerance. These resolutions addressed

7. Institute for Indian Studies, "A Proposal for an Indian Ecumenical Conference," 9 pp. unpublished manuscript, 1969. Emphasis in the original.

8. Janet Hodgson and Jay Kothare, *Vision Quest: Native Spirituality and the Church in Canada* (Toronto, ON: Anglican Book Centre, 1990), p. 97.

denominational bodies and governmental agencies on a wide range of issues. For example, Conference delegates asked denominational authorities to put an end to the competitive missionization still going on in native communities, and to "extend their respect and assistance" to the Native American Church by regarding it to be a "Small Christian denomination." They also stressed the importance of allowing native religious leaders to participate in public educational and health care systems, and they opposed the commodification of native religious traditions by "commercial" opportunists, the desecration of native religious sites and burial grounds, and "all other mockeries of our ancient traditions."[9] Conference leaders issued a final report that summarized their views on the situation and that has guided the Indian Ecumenical Conference into the 1990s:

> Everyone agreed that modern Indian religious life must be a furthering of the historic continuity of time-honoured Indian values and philosophical concerns; that both modern Indian ceremonies and Indian Christianity must be part of that continuity; and that both native ceremonials and Indian Christianity can be mutually supportive or parallel and co-operative or integrated according to the desire of the particular tribe involved. Most felt that the work of future Conferences would be to evolve a way of implementing this process.[10]

Goodstoney Band Chief John Snow invited his colleagues to meet again a year later at the Stoney Reserve in western Alberta, and they accepted. Snow later wrote that he returned home from the Conference "with a feeling of encouragement and realization that there were many Indian leaders who were concerned with the revival of our cultural, spiritual and religious heritage."[11]

The Indian Ecumenical Conference met again in 1971 and every summer thereafter for more than a decade, and quickly became one of the most important annual events among native people in Canada and the United States. Conference organizers had originally envisioned it as a gathering of native religious leaders that would be held in a different location each year, but the Conference settled at the Stoney Reserve and attracted large numbers of native people from all walks of life, especially young people who were living in urban areas and had little opportunity to participate in the religious life of their home communities. By the mid-seventies, the Indian Ecumenical Conference was being hailed by one prominent native newspaper as " 'the' place to go" in Indian country during the summer; it attracted hundreds of religious leaders and thousands of other participants for week-long encampments focused on affirming and strengthening native identity, especially

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9. The resolutions were abstracted by John A. Price in *Native Studies: American and Canadian Indians* (Toronto, ON: McGraw Hill Ryerson, 1978), pp. 109-110.

10. Hodgson and Kothare, 98.

11. Chief John Snow, *These Mountains Are Our Sacred Places: The Story of the Stoney Indians* (Toronto, ON: Samuel-Stevens, 1977), p. 144.

native religious identity. Attendance peaked in 1976, when somewhere between six and ten thousand people travelled to the Stoney Reserve from as far away as Nova Scotia, Florida, California, Alaska, and the Northwest Territories for a week of religious discussions, ceremonies, storytelling, cultural instruction, traditional feasts, socializing, and relaxation. Annual attendance declined during the late-seventies, largely because the Conference declined during the late-seventies, largely because the Conference had succeeded in fostering cultural and religious revival in native communities throughout Canada and the United States, many of which organized their own local or regional "youth and elders" gatherings patterned after the Indian Ecumenical Conference. The Conference met sporadically during the 1980s and was held as recently as July of 1992, when many of the original organizers who are still living returned to the Stoney Reserve for a four-day gathering.

Conference leaders and participants worked together to secure a future for native people; they believed that the best way to insure the survival of native identity was to affirm and to facilitate religious innovation, which can occur at different levels and in a variety of ways. They began by formulating an inclusive understanding of contemporary native religious identity, welcoming all tribal communities and religious traditions to participate in the Conference. Sam Stanley, the official historian for the Conference, described the first gathering this way:

> The basic Indian tolerance for others' religious experiences became the spirit of the meeting. Christian Indians acknowledged that being Christian did not negate the older truths by which their ancestors had lived. Traditionalists could tolerate Christianity as an adjunct to their own religion. Peyote was seen as another form of spiritual medicine suitable for its Indian practitioners.[12]

Conference leaders embraced religious diversity, and they even allowed for diverse positions on the question of where present-day religious diversity should lead to in the future. Andrew Ahenakew, a Cree elder and lifelong Anglican priest, confessed: "Christianity is now just as much a part of Indian religious identity as tribal religion. I'd like to go back 100 per cent, but I just can't .... The two must live in harmony."[13] Ernest Tootoosis, another Cree elder and a former Christian minister, saw things differently: "We must go back to the way our forefathers worshipped. We must pray to the Great Spirit the way he wanted us to." "It just isn't right for Indians to be Christian – God never intended it that way."[14]

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12. Sam Stanley, "American Indian Power and Powerlessness," in *The Anthropology of Power: Ethnographic Studies from Asia, Oceania, and the New World*, edited by Raymond D. Fogelson and Richard N. Adams (New York, NY Academic Press, 1977), pp. 237-38.

13. Edward B. Fiske, "Indians reviving religious heritage," *New York Times*, August 23, 1972, p. 43.

14. Fiske; Gillian Lindgren, "Daybreak service honors 'Grandfather.'" *Calgary Herald*, August 4, 1973, p. 12.

While Ahenakew and Tootoosis disagreed on some points, they both believed that some type of religious innovation was appropriate and desirable for native people. They and other Conference leaders called for a widespread religious revival, but one that would combine a return to traditional ways with a recognition of the value of new insights on the contemporary situation. They believed that many native people live in a "fragmented sacred world," but that religious revival is still possible because of the "historic continuity of time-honoured Indian values and philosophical concerns." This process of religious innovation can take place because, as John Snow put it, "a few dedicated native religious leaders and medicine men and women from many reserves and communities have kept our sacred fire going," and because, as Tootoosis said, "many of us are now getting important messages – God is telling the Indian people what they should be doing and how they should be conducting their lives."[15]

Conference leaders advocated an approach to native religious identity that might best be described as personal religious pluralism; they encouraged each individual participant to draw on the traditions and perspectives that were appropriate given his or her particular background and circumstances. They also believed that religious visions and insights should be shared with others; as the 1973 Conference announcement put it "we know that all Native people in [the] Americas have contributions [to make] in relation to their personal experiences."[16] Andrew Ahenakew described his unexpected role as a medicine man shortly before his death in 1976. After a long career as an Anglican priest during which he had little contact with Cree traditions, Ahenakew had a vision one night in 1973 in which he was taught to make traditional medicine and to conduct healing ceremonies. Archdeacon Ahenakew healed hundreds of people in a *tipi* next to his home during the next three years. At the 1975 Conference he told those assembled:

> I spent all my life working for my people and serving my Lord Jesus Christ. I worked hard for the Anglican Church. I still believe all that. I am still a priest. But about 10 years ago I began to realize as my life grew closer to its end that something was missing. I didn't know what.
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> Five years ago I came to Morley. Three years ago I knew for sure what was missing. I didn't really know what it meant to be an Indian. Now I know. I am retired and now I can be an Indian and be a Christian, too, and I'm proud to be an Indian.[17]

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15. Snow, pp. 143-44; Lindgren.

16. "Alberta's Stoney Reserve to host Fourth Indian Ecumenical Conference," *The Indian News* (Ottawa) 16, no. 2 (June 1973), p. 11.

17. Hugh McCullum, "Indian Ecumenical Conference - Morely, Alberta, 1975," 4 pp. manuscript, 1975(?), archives of the *Anglican Journal*.

John Hascall, an Ojibwa from Wisconsin and a Roman Catholic priest, had worked for years to incorporate tribal traditions into his Christian faith and practice because he "saw no contradiction between Christian and Indian spirituality." "I know both religions," he told an interviewer in 1973, "and I see nothing incompatible," but his local bishop had opposed Hascall's efforts at innovations such as celebrating the mass outdoors and using his own tribal language.[18]

Conference leaders also wanted to see religious innovation take place within Christian institutions and in mainstream society. One of the resolutions adopted in 1970 called for religious tolerance in native Christian churches:

> We petition denominational authorities to permit those who work among Indian groups the freedom to use Native languages, traditions, dances, legends, and their own ancient religions as instruments of expression of the Christian life.[19]

By 1973 Conference leaders were also emphasizing the role native people had to play in cultivating environmental consciousness and responsibility among non-native people. John Snow observed that non-native people "are starting to come around to a way of thinking about ecology and nature that we have been practising for a long time."[20] He continued:

> Unless Indian philosophy is listened to, we are going to destroy ourselves on this earth at the rate modern society is going ... Unless we try to protect the evnironment, unless we respect the creation of God, unless we respect people, as well as animals, we are doomed – the very hell that Christianity talks about will become a reality.[21]

The Indian Ecumenical Conference modelled a constructive approach to religious innovation that was the product of a characteristically native understanding of religious authority and orthodoxy. Western religions commonly profess belief in the theoretical potential for supernatural revelation and human freedom, but on a practical level tend to identify themselves by recourse to codified texts and bureaucratic institutions. Native religious communities, which even today typically depend on intergenerational relationships and oral traditions for their survival, often organize themselves around the fragile religious insights that are mediated by ceremony and story. Conference leaders, therefore, understood native identity

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18. Hodgson and Kothare, 70; Brad Steiger, *Medicine Power: The American Indian's Revival of his Spiritual Heritage and its Relevance for Modern Man* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), pp. 72-75.

19. Price.

20. Gillian Lindgren, "Indians gather at Morely to celebrate 'old ways,' " *Calgary Herald*, August 1, 1973.

21. "The Fifth Indian Ecumenical Conference," *Stoney Country*, Summer 1974.

to be less a function of cultural phenomena described through social scientific methodologies, and more a product of shared interests and perceptions, networks of relationship, the ability to empathize, and an intriguing combination of mutual respect and self-effacing humour. They knew they faced incredible challenges in the attempt to save their communities and to preserve the integrity of native identity in the modern world, but they believed that their unpredictable religious experiment was their only hope. Conference leaders planned to address the problems in their communities by first healing religious divisions, reviving religious traditions, and affirming their shared religious heritage as native people. Ernest Tootoosis was adamant about the strategic indispensability of native religious identity: "Any [Indian] liberation movement must be totally rooted in religion and culture."[22] Conference leaders were particularly concerned about the crisis of identity affecting so many young native people in urban areas. As Tootoosis put it,

> The whole movement is to revive Indian culture and spiritual life. Young Indian people won't get to know the way of life from the white society. There's an exterior darkness in the way of life between the two societies and that's why the younger people are behaving the way they are. They have lost their sense of identity.[23]

Susan Supernault, a young Creek woman from Chicago, described her experience at the 1975 Conference this way: "I expected little and found very much .... I have yet to meet an Indian who would not agree with me that we are all one. They said it up there [at the arbor] and it was beautiful."[24]

Native elders and academic scholars alike have contrasted native and Western worldviews by describing the latter as fragmented, chronological, linear and the former as holistic, spatial, circular. Of course, one important aspect of this dilemma is the fact that different worldviews also have different ways of identifying and interpreting worldview differences. Where academic scholars may see inescapable discontinuity and conflict, native elders often find undeniable continuity and complementary. As Sioux Scholar, Vine Deloria, Jr., has written,

> More than we would like to admit, our understanding of reality depends upon what we want to believer is true... Human societies have traditionally made either nature or history determinative of reality,

22. McCullum.

23. "Native Revival Plotted: Ecumencial Conference." *The Native People* 7, No. 32 (August 9, 1974), 5.

24. *The New Indians*. Film, 59 minutes. Produced by Terry Sanders and Freida Lee Mock. National Geographic Society, 1976.

> and that is the point of debate in seeking an understanding .... The proper approach to interpreting reality is most probably a combination of nature and history that recognizes the value in the ongoing processes and life-forms of nature while making a serious effort to derive meaning from the passage of time directed in an irreversible forward sequence.[25]

Theoretical insight is not the exclusive property of a privileged few; native religious identity is not the tragic victim of a colonial encounter. Surely it is one of the more fascinating dimensions of human existence that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Wilfred Pelletier, an Ojibwa community activist and one of the original organizers of the Conference, may have best captured the spirit of the movement in his 1973 autobiography ***No Foreign Land***. He wrote:

> Last summer in the Alberta foothills, there was an Indian Ecumenical Conference. It took a lot of effort and money for that to happen, but there they were, 130-odd Indian religious leaders from every part of North America. Medicine men and some Indian clergy. After nearly five hundred years of persecution, the old way-of -life religions were still very much alive.
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> For me, that conference meant many things. But there was one thing about it that was very personal: I had the feeling that I had come full circle and had finally made it. It felt like at last I was back home.[26]

25. Vine Deloria, Jr., *The Metaphisics of Modern Existence* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. 19, 22, 30.

26. Wilfred Pelletier and Ted Poole, *No Foreign Land: The Biography of a North American Indian* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1973), p. 56.