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NATIVE PEOPLE AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN NORTH AMERICA

The Indian Ecumenical Conference[1]

In creating so much diversity in nature the Great Spirit revealed his love for diversity: the diversity of peoples, cultures, and languages, of animals large and small, birds of all colours, fish of all sizes, plant life so numerous, rocks as huge as the mountains and as small as the sands of the seas. Surely such a Creator would accept more than just one religion.

John Snow
Goodstoney Band Chief

We should have started something like this a long time ago. We have almost let all this religious squabbling smother our spiritual power and destroy us as a strong people.

Andrew Dreadfulwater
Cherokee religious leader

Grassroots religious leaders from native communities throughout Canada and the United States came together on the Crow Reservation during the summer of 1970 for the first Indian Ecumenical Conference, an intertribal and interreligious gathering which signified and expressed a new resolve for religious self-determination among native people. Ninety-three official delegates attended, along with about 150 other participants; they came representing at least

[1] This article is based on research conducted for my Ph.D. dissertation (Treat, 1993). Recent essays by native Christian leaders on themes related to those discussed in this article are featured in *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada* (Treat, 1996).

For the purposes of this article, I am using the compound noun 'native people' and the adjective 'native' as broad, generic signifiers that point to acts of intentional, coherent self-identification. These terms refer to all indigenous individuals and communities north of Mexico who are commonly called American Indians and Inuits, Native Americans and First Nations people, and who are also known by a variety of assumed and imposed tribal designations; these terms include both recognized and unrecognized communities and both 'full-blood' and 'mixed-blood' individuals.

forty-seven North American tribal communities including the Apache, Blood, Cherokee, Chippewa, Choctaw, Cree, Creek, Dogrib, Micmac, Mohawk, Nisga, Kwakiutl, Seminole, Shawnee, Suquamish, Stoney, Tlingit and Yuchi tribes. Medicine men 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 sessions during the daytime and informal socializing during the evenings in what one writer described as "an old-style grand council, but on a scale hitherto unknown" (Hodgson and Kothare, 1990, 96-97) These native leaders and elders represented diverse tribal communities and religious traditions, but they shared at least one thing: a deep concern about the social, cultural and religious crises that native people were experiencing. Bernard Second, an Apache leader, told his colleagues: "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." Andrew Dreadfulwater publicly agreed with him, as did Anglican priest Ernest Willie, a Kwakiutl from British Columbia: "We are basically a very spiritual and religious people and this is just the beginning of a more general religious movement. I feel a religious mood growing, especially among the young." (Hodgson and Kothare, 1990, 97) After the Conference ended, John Snow returned to his home on the Stoney Reserve "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." (Snow, 1977, 144) These and other Conference participants hoped to address the problems in their communities by healing religious divisions, reviving religious traditions, and affirming their shared religious heritage. By organizing the Indian Ecumenical Conference, they established and maintained an interreligious community of native people committed to mutual support through dialogue, cooperation and advocacy.

The Indian Ecumenical Conference

Bernard Second, Andrew Dreadfulwater, Ernest Willie and John Snow expressed the views of many native people in Canada and the United States who have an experiential awareness of the challenges their communities face as they struggle to survive the effects of colonial dispossession, competitive missionization, assimilative education, ghettoizing urbanization, and racist discrimination. The idea for holding an 'ecumenical' conference grew out of informal discussions among native leaders during the 1960s. Nine of them met at Winnipeg, Manitoba, in November of 1969; they decided to hold an Indian Ecumenical Conference during the following summer and formed a Steering Committee to organize the event. Members of the Steering Committee agreed that

the most critical problem facing native communities was the need for religious healing, revival and solidarity; they outlined their position on the need for an intertribal and interreligious gathering 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.
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> 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 community 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 ("A Proposal," 1969, 3-4).

Delegates at the 1970 Conference drafted a series of resolutions spelling out the need for religious freedom and tolerance, and they reached a strong consensus on the importance of religious harmony in native communities. They also agreed on a final report that summarized their views of the situation and that guided the 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. (Hodgson and Kothare 1990, 98)

John Snow invited his colleagues to hold the 1971 Conference at the Stoney Reserve in western Alberta, which eventually became its permanent home and where it was held as recently as 1992. The Indian Ecumenical Conference quickly became one of the most important annual events in Indian country, especially during the 1970s when thousands of native people traveled to the Stoney Reserve each summer for the week-long encampments.

The "religious strife and turmoil" affecting native people reflects the religious divisions increasingly present in their communities. Of course, North America was home to a great variety of religious traditions long before Christian missionaries arrived; complex religious diversity is not a recent development in American history. The long process of invasion and dispossession has created social, cultural and religious crises in every native community, and opportun-

istic Christian missionaries have often exacerbated these problems by engaging in aggressive proselytization and denominational competition for native converts. Some ancient religious traditions have been lost, but many others have survived and have been joined by a variety of Christian churches and innovative religious groups such as the Native American Church. Native people today live in some of the most religiously diverse communities in North America.

The religious leaders who participated in the Indian Ecumenical Conference accepted some degree of religious diversity as an inescapable dimension of contemporary native life. They believed, however, that the survival of their communities depended on finding ways to allow this diversity to be "mutually supportive" rather than destructively divisive. The Steering Committee met in 1972 and discussed the goals of the Conference, which included: addressing the "mutual problems" facing native people; attaining "some form of harmony among the followers of both the Indian and Christian religions;" and reviving "cultural pride in the younger generation of Native people." ("Indian Day," 1972, 6) Conference leaders wanted to address the social problems in their communities, and they believed that these problems were the symptoms of a deeper crisis of identity. As Ernest Tootoosis, a well-known Cree religious leader, put it,

> The whole movement is to revive the 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. ("Native Revival," 1974, 5).

In response to the challenges facing native people, Conference leaders organized an interreligious community of native people in order to promote religious healing, revival and solidarity. They engaged in interreligious dialogue, cooperation and advocacy both formally, at annual gatherings, and informally, through personal interactions throughout the year and all over Canada and the United States.

Tribal Religions and Interreligious Dialogue

Almost all of the scholarly literature on interreligious dialogue has focussed on relationships among the so-called 'world' religions; Western scholars have virtually ignored the dialogical significance of the religious traditions of tribal communities. African scholars and religious leaders, and some Christian missionaries in Africa have begun to explore the subject in the aftermath of the African independence movement. Many of these studies by African Christians

and Western missionaries maintain an exclusivist or inclusivist stance (Panikkar, 1978; Race, 1982) toward African tribal religions, making them essentially, if not always explicitly, missiological (see Williamson, 1965; Dickson and Ellingworth, 1969; Sarpong, 1979; Twesigye, 1987; and Kirwen, 1987).

Some scholars, however, have attempted to make an unbiased appraisal of the potential for interreligious dialogue with tribal religions. John Taylor convened a World Council of Churches consultation in Nigeria in 1973, "envisaged as a first step in seeking to identify the genuine issues at stake and the right methods of approach for dialogue."

> [Tribal people], and the contribution the primal traditions and cultures have made to the rest of mankind, have too often been ignored, or regarded as worthy of serious attention only as possible subjects for conversion. Christians have seldom turned to listen to them, and if possible to learn from them, much less to acknowledge the existence of primal forces within themselves.

Taylor noted that the "partners in dialogue" would come from several different religious backgrounds: African independent churches, "neo-primal" movements, and African traditional religions. He referred to the Indian Ecumenical Conference, without naming it, as a model for how this process might work:

> An example combining all three levels of involvement exists in the annual meetings of the religious leaders of the North American Indian peoples, including medicine men, representatives of some of their religious movements and American Indian Christian ministers of many denominations. These meetings began in 1970 ....

Taylor emphasized the importance of locating "the most authentic representatives of living religious systems, those who are publicly accepted by their own members as responsible leaders." He also observed that the most promising opportunities for interreligious cooperation would arise as "primal and Christian religious leaders confront the new problems facing their members through the great social upheavals across much of Africa and the rest of the world."

> It may well be that dialogue with the adherents of living primal religious systems will be most authentic when their spokesmen stand alongside Christians amid urgent human problems of international, interracial and intertribal peace, of family security and of the individual's freedom of conscience. Neither tradition can claim an immediate or obvious solution to such problems (Taylor, 1976, 1-7; also see Taylor, 1963).

Wande Abimbola, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ife, Nigeria, and a Yoruba priest, more recently argued for "the need for constant dialogue among leaders of the world's religions." Religious intolerance is "at the center" of

global conflict; interreligious dialogue should emphasize our common moral attitudes and values, not our philosophical differences, in order to promote world peace. Abimbola condemned aggressive proselytization for its socially destructive effects:

> Leaders of the two most propagated world religions—Christianity and Islam— have gone out of their way and out of the teachings of Jesus and Muhammad to propagate doctrines of destruction, genocide, war, hatred, and civil strife by emphasizing doctrines which undermine the existence of the other religions of the world. Nowhere has this doctrine of hatred, rather than love, been more prevalent than in black Africa where hundreds of Christians and Islamic missionaries spend millions of dollars every year threatening the ordinary folk of that continent with hell fire, stealing their icons, destroying their temples, and waging a relentless physical and psychological warfare against their priests and their adherents. Such evangelism must be put to rest in the name of the Creator of this earth and the universe. (Abimbola 1989, 177-78)

There has also been little written on the subject of dialogue between Christianity and native religions. This lack of scholarly interest is reflected in the Library of Congress classification system; under the subject heading "Christianity and other religions" are thirty-two subheadings including "African," "Druidism," and "Norse," but no subheading for native religions in North America (Library of Congress, 1991, 829). Vine Deloria, Jr., raised the question of the potential for dialogue between Christianity and native religions in his classic work *God is Red*, placing theological differences in a broad social and historical context (Deloria, 1973). Benjamin Reist was apparently the only Christian theologian to respond to Deloria's challenge in a direct and substantive way; he outlined a contextual, dialogical model for theological reflection in a multiracial society (Reist, 1975). Several Catholic theologians have engaged in theological reflection on the significance of native religions for Christianity; most of them maintain a missiological stance (see Starkloff, 1974, 1989; Twohy, 1983; Gualtieri, 1984; Stolzman, 1986).

A couple of brief articles on interreligious dialogue between native religions and Christianity have appeared in recent years. John Grim described the emergence of an "indigenous" model of "internal" dialogue, "in which active participation of native peoples in all aspects of the dialogue is taking place." Grim pointed to the rise of two ecclesiastical organizations, the Native American Theological Association among Protestants and the National Tekakwitha Conference among Catholics, but also suggested that the emerging model varies according to "local needs."

> This dialogue is largely conducted by individuals who participate in both traditions and, therefore, try to reconcile their belief in both traditions. ... What is occurring in the contemporary interreligious milieu of many Christian Native Americans is an attempt

to recover their primal religious relatedness to self, society, and cosmos .... (Grim, 1985, 133-34).

Stan McKay, a Cree leader in the United Church of Canada, expressed his hesitancy to engage in interreligious dialogue "by writing words. Some of our elders say that when you put thoughts into written form, they lose life."
Added to the basic concern about the suitability of the written word to communicate our deep feeling for the creation is the ever present need to address the marginalization of our indigenous peoples around the globe. In other words, is it faithful to enter conversations about spirituality when the basic issues concern injustice in a materialistic age?

McKay drew some comparisons between native worldviews and Christian teachings, then closed with a summary of his approach to interreligious dialogue:

The image of living on the earth in harmony with the creation, and therefore the Creator, is a helpful image for me. It means that 'faithful' living in the earth will be moving in the rhythm of the creation. It will mean vibrating to the pulse of life in a natural way without having to 'own' the source of the music. It allows the Creator to reveal truth to the creation and all may share in it. We have ceremonies and symbols of what may be true for us. We have developed myths and rituals which remind us of the centrality of the Earth in our experience of truth about the Creator. We seek to integrate life so that there will not be boundaries between the secular and religious. For us, The Great Spirit is in the daily earthly concerns about faithful living. Each day we are given is for thanksgiving for the Earth. We are to enjoy it and share it in service of others. This is the way to grow in unity and harmony. There is a word that is central to the movement into harmony with other communities and that is respect. It allows for diversity within the unity of the Creator. The dialogue can then take place in ecumenical community which does not develop defensive arguments to protect some truth. The situation will be one of sharing stories instead of dogmatic statements and involves listening as well as talking. (McKay, 1987, 108-10)

An Indigenous Theory of Interreligious Dialogue

Stan McKay outlined a theory of interreligious dialogue which many of the native people who participated in the Indian Ecumenical Conference would have endorsed: (1) respect for creation and the Creator leads to (2) humble appreciation for one's own traditions and (3) respect for the traditions of others, so that (4) dialogue can unfold as a process of sharing personal experiences. The Indian Ecumenical Conference pioneered an important new approach to contemporary interreligious interaction, including dialogue across religious boundaries as well as what John Grim described as an emerging "indigenous" model

of "internal" dialogue. Conference leaders developed this theory of interreligious dialogue in order to address the need for religious healing, revival and solidarity in their religiously diverse—and divided—communities.

John Snow approached the problem of religious pluralism by pointing out, as Paul Knitter did later (see Knitter, 1985, 6) the importance of diversity in the natural world:

The Great Spirit, the Creator, in his wisdom has given to each climate its unique plant life and its unique animal life and its men and women, and He has given them a religion which is fitting to their needs ....

My grandfather, Walking Buffalo, a Stoney philosopher who passed away some years ago, would draw examples for all men to understand the lessons of harmony from the Great Spirit's creation.

He told me one day that I must look at the beautiful forest where the trees and shrubs and tiny plants grow in a harmony of variety. He pointed out to me how some trees grow tall and straight and shelter the small trees and the misshapen ones; how the delicate flowers nestle among the grass at the foot of the trees catching the sunlight, as though the trees lean away to allow its rays to give them life. He spoke of the red trees and the white trees and the black trees, each forming a part of a beautiful pattern in their diversity. He showed me how each stands proud and upright in its own way to honour the Maker, the Great Spirit. The diversity of plants and trees makes a beautiful forest. Why is the forest beautiful? Because it grows according to the plan of the Creator. If mankind too could stand humbly at the Creator's feet, mankind too could share in the harmony which is the Creation (Snow, 1977, 146-47).

Conference leaders also prefigured later theorists (Lubbe, 1989; Dornberg, 1989; Swidler, 1990; Mathew, 1990) when they repeatedly emphasized the importance of social context for interreligious interaction. Concern over the breakdown of native community life was a prominent theme throughout the history of the Conference. John Hascall, an Ojibwa Roman Catholic priest from Michigan who had been working for some years to incorporate Ojibwa traditions into his ministry, evaluated the situation this way:

We had a very religious people before the whiteman came. Now our children are disobeying their parents; they are committing suicide; they are doing all kinds of evil things which they never did before when we had our own religion. (Steiger, 1974, 73).

Religious confusion and division are the root causes of social crises, and so religious healing, revival and solidarity form the basis for effective social change. Ernest Willie expressed the conviction of all Conference participants when he suggested in 1974 that one of the "only ways to salvage the Indian

people is to reintroduce a sizable portion of their spiritual legacy." (Blak-Andersen, 1974, 14) A year later, Ernest Tootoosis argued that social change must grow out of religious revival: "any liberation movement must be totally rooted in religion and culture" (McCullum, 1975).

Many Conference leaders approached interreligious interaction by emphasizing their shared religious heritage as native people; they focused on the similarities between various religious traditions rather than their differences. Hascall "saw no contradiction between Christian and Indian spirituality," though his bishop had opposed his efforts at innovations such as outdoor mass and the use of the Ojibwa language (Fiske, 1972, 43). Snow wrote in 1977: "Our religion, the religion of this Great Island, is not contradictory to the teaching of the great rabbis of the Hebrews, nor is it in conflict with the great Christian teachers." (Snow, 1977, 146)

> If one understands the native religion of my people, it is not difficult to understand why so many of us embraced the gospel of Christianity. There was simply not that much difference between what we already believed and what the missionaries preached to us. What differences there were did not seem very important. ...
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> We were aware of the diversity of forms of worship among the various tribes, and the Supreme Being was the Great Spirit. We had been taught not to question various forms or ways of worshipping the Creator. Who were we to question? It was up to the Great Spirit and the tribe or individual who was given a vision on the mountain top or other sacred ground. We were not there when the religious experience happened to the individual or group. Therefore, we felt we were not qualified to question or dispute (Snow, 1977, 17).

Theological and ceremonial differences should be respected since pluralism is an irreducible dimension of reality and since there is no objective basis for making value judgments about religious truth and efficacy. Cree religious leader Joe Mackinaw said that while white Christians called native people "pagans" and "savages" in their churches, "this is not the way of Indian life. The Indian has no books or bible, it's what's in the heart that counts." He refused to criticize Christianity despite its oppressive presence among native people, and even attended some Christian services, "since they are still praying to the one God, Manitou." (Fiske, 1972) The Indian Ecumenical Conference even made room for diverse opinions on the very question of religious diversity. Cree Anglican priest Andrew Ahenakew took the position that "Christianity is now just as much a part of Indian religious identity as tribal religion," he commented, "I'd like to go back 100 per cent, but I just can't. ... The two must live in harmony." Tootoosis, meanwhile, argued that the disastrous effects of white Christian missionaries on native communities point to another conclusion: "We were in a Garden of Eden when the white man came in 1492,

but now we have been destroyed. We must go back to the way our forefathers worshipped. We must pray to the Great Spirit the way he wanted us to" (Fiske, 1972). The Conference participants recognized, as have many scholars (see Mojzes, 1990, 1-8), that religious traditions are subject to diverse interpretations and that diversity exists in all religious communities and even within some individuals.

The Conference organizers and leaders developed several guidelines for interreligious interaction which helped make their annual gatherings worthwhile experiences for all participants. The initial proposal for the Conference emphasized the importance of recruiting "native Indian religionists," those grassroots religious leaders who live and work in native communities, just as John Taylor suggested was crucial for successful interreligious dialogue in Africa. Conference announcements, which appeared annually in various native periodicals, regularly invited "all American Indian religious leaders of all religious faiths to attend the Conference," and encouraged native communities to support their leaders by raising travel money through "individual contributions, pie suppers, give-aways, raffles, etc. ... every North American Indian community has a right and a duty to be represented at this Conference" ("Morley Reserve," 1971, 5). Delegates to the 1971 Conference "were even more widely representative than before and embodied the grassroots religious leadership which had both the social responsibility and the power to effect radical change" (Hodgson and Kothare 1990, 100). One of the primary goals of the Conference was to bring together native religious leaders, but these leaders were egalitarian in their attitude toward interreligious interaction. The 1973 Conference announcement invited all native people to attend, since "in our experience we know that all Native people in [the] Americas have contributions [to make] in relation to their personal experiences" ("Morley to Host," 1973, 1).

The Conference leaders also believed that interreligious interaction involves dialogue as well as cooperation and advocacy; reflection and action belong together. The cognitive dimension of dialogue is not the most important part of the process, and liberating praxis should not precede theory. Rather, social action and spiritual awareness must be kept in balance. Conferences were primarily experiential, as participants were encouraged to share with and learn from each other. Delegates to the 1971 Conference were more comfortable sharing their religious traditions with one another after having established cooperative relationships the year before. Ceremonies were held throughout each Conference, many of them on an interreligious basis: sunrise ceremonies, healing ceremonies, grounds blessing and sacred fire ceremonies, Native American Church ceremonies, and Christian worship services. One observer at the 1974 Conference wrote, "Most of the people came to share religious

experiences, make contacts and learn ceremonial traditions from religious leaders" ("Oneness with Nature," 1974, 26). Efforts at religious revival focused especially on the youth, who were admonished to "return to their native traditions" and instructed on "history, language, culture, and spirituality, prophecies, healing rituals, and traditional native ceremonies" (Hodgson and Kothare, 1990, 100). Yet Conference leaders were reluctant to engage in the rationalistic theological discussions often preferred by scholars.[2]

Religious healing and revival among native people was their primary goal, but Conference leaders also engaged in interreligious interaction with the Christian denominations and with the dominant society. The 1970 resolutions addressed churches and governments on specific issues of religious freedom and tolerance, and Conference leaders advocated other causes as well (Price, 1978, 109-10). Most importantly, they asked the denominations to recognize the validity and importance of native religious traditions, both inside and outside of native congregations. Resolution 4 petitioned "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." Resolution 9 called for them to "extend their respect and assistance" to the Native American Church by treating it like a "small Christian denomination." Conference leaders also asked the Anglican Church of Canada at their 1971 General Synod "to recognize medicine men as religious and spiritual leaders of Indian communities" ("Indians ask," 1970) When Anglicans and other Canadian Christians observed the na-

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[2] Native Christian writers James West and William Baldridge have also pressed this point:

Theo-logos or words about Maheo (God) as a discipline is a non-Indian concept. Indian people have a long tradition of words about Maheo. But, theology as an intellectual discipline, sometimes very separated from the every day life of people, is a very foreign concept to most Indian tribal experience. Therefore, what will be discussed today are certain aspects of the spiritual way-of-life of some Indian nations as well as comparisons between these ways-of-life and Christian theology. (West, 1986, 350)

Doing theology, thinking theologically, is a decidedly non-Indian thing to do. When I talk about Native American theology to many of my Indian friends, most of them just smile and act as if I hadn't said anything. So, as we start this adventure I want to make the observation that theology is not a natural nor a normal product of Native American cultures. I know that some things are reduced, not increased by too much thinking, too much analyzing and many American Indians share my attitude and conviction regarding the relative worth of entering into experience versus thinking about experience (Baldridge, 1989, 228).

tional "Indian Day of Prayer," beginning in 1971, it served as a symbolic affirmation of native religious traditions ("Indian prayer," 1971).

Conference leaders asked the denominations to support native communities in more mundane ways as well. Resolution 5 stressed the importance of conducting mission work on an interdenominational basis "so as not to encourage excessive competition among sects in Indian communities." The Steering Committee raised funds for the Conferences from several denominations and attempted to convince other Canadian and American denominations to support them financially. Ecclesiastical provincialism led several denominations to develop their own programs in place of the Conference, but observer Harold Turner argued that this was a mistake, both for native communities and for the denominations: "When Indian spirituality in any form has found itself and can speak with confidence, then a new dialogue can commence with the white Christian community" (Hodgson and Kothare, 1990, 99-100). Willie pointed out that the denominations need to adopt a listening stance toward dialogue with native people. "Right now if [Christianity] is to have a place here [at the Conference], it must be one of learning, a posture of soul-searching. It would need to be a re-examination of the whole church" (McCullum, 1975, 4). Anglican Primate Ted Scott was one denominational leader who heeded this advice; when he was presented with a pipe and asked to speak at the 1973 Conference, he responded by saying, "I am not here to speak to you—I am here to listen" ("Indian Ecumenical," 1974, 18)

The Conference leaders also had a message for the dominant society regarding several issues involving religious and cultural freedom, native legal rights, and environmental awareness. Resolutions 7 and 8 expressed the importance of allowing native religious leaders to participate in the educational and health care systems, in order to accommodate native cultural traditions:

7. We encourage the teaching of Indian culture and language in schools. Non-essential educational standards should be waived so that Native religionists can be utilized in such programs.
8. We recommend that it be the policy of all public health agencies to work in cooperation with Indian medicine men.

Resolutions 3 and 10 opposed the commodification of native religious traditions by exploitative non-native groups and the desecration of native religious sites and burial grounds:

3. We express the strongest disapproval of the perversion of Indian sacred dances for commercial purposes by unauthorized groups, the taking of the Peyote sacrament by non-Indians in a secular context, and all other mockeries of our ancient traditions.

10. We oppose the indiscriminate desecration of our historic and religious monuments, burial grounds, and pictographs by universities, park services, the Army Corps of Engineers, Highway Department, and so forth. Indian religious leaders of the tribes involved should be consulted before any excavations of these sacred places take place. The sacred relics which are now in museums, and which were collected by quasi-legal and immoral methods, should be returned on request to the tribe involved.

Resolutions 1, 2 and 6 called for legal protection of native hunting rights, religious freedom, and treaty rights:

1. We oppose all interference in the natural and sacred relation between the Indian people and the animals and birds which the Creator placed on this island for our physical and spiritual sustenance.
2. We recommend that the governments of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah cease harassing members of the Native American Church.
6. We point out to the governments of the United States and Canada that our treaties with them are not secular contracts to us but sacred covenants, ordained and sanctioned by God, which guarantee our existence as people and which establish a sacred reciprocity among the Indian, God, the natural world, and our recent European brothers.

Concern over growing environmental destruction prompted Conference leaders to address this issue as well. A Hopi religious leader said, "Unless we help our White brothers, they are going to kill themselves and the earth with them." In 1974 Snow extended an open invitation to non-native people who wanted to attend the Conference in order to develop a new way of thinking about the environment. "Unless we try to protect the environment, 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" ("The Fifth Indian," 1974).

Native People and Interreligious Dialogue

The Indian Ecumenical Conference modeled an inclusive, egalitarian solution to the problem of religious pluralism which also has important theoretical implications for religious leaders and scholars who recognize the central importance of interreligious dialogue in our world of religious antagonism and conflict. Organizers of the Conference used the term 'ecumenical' at a time when many Christian denominations were also engaged in ecumenical activities. Conference leaders, however, attached a very different meaning to the term. The modern Christian ecumenical movement, which began after World War II and was spurred by the founding of the World Council of Churches and the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, has led to a virtual redefinition of

'ecumenical' to mean Christian interdenominational cooperation.[3] Conference leaders, however, understood the term in its original sense, meaning universal and inclusive. This choice of terminology reflects the fact that the Indian Ecumenical Conference pioneered an important new approach to contemporary interreligious interaction. Western religious leaders and scholars commonly view interreligious dialogue as a theoretical problem which is addressed when elite representatives of distinct religious communities discuss their perceived theological differences. The native religious leaders who participated in the Indian Ecumenical Conference understood interreligious dialogue to be a practical problem which requires mutual support through cooperation and advocacy and which involves all people who participate in their religiously diverse communities.

The religious leaders and other native people who organized and participated in the Indian Ecumenical Conference established an interreligious community, a "base human community" in the terminology of Paul Knitter (Swidler *et al.*, 1990, 35). Delegates to the 1970 Conference discovered "a community of interest" and were encouraged by "a sense of renewed hope, rising from the act of communion and communal worship" (Campbell 1970). During the next two decades they were joined by many other native people as they worked at healing religious divisions, reviving religious traditions, and affirming their shared religious heritage. Turner was impressed most by "the shared depth of concern for the spiritual renewal of the Indian peoples as having priority over

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[3] It is worth pointing out that in all of my primary research on the Indian Ecumenical Conference I have not uncovered a single instance of a writer making a thematic or structural connection between the Indian Ecumenical Conference and the modern Christian ecumenical movement. For example, I reviewed the Anglican monthly *Canadian Churchman* for the years 1969-78, a period of time when the Anglican Church of Canada was engaged in church union negotiations with several other Canadian denominations. The *Canadian Churchman* regularly reported on both the ecumenical movement and the Indian Ecumenical Conference, but (apparently) never connected these two very different forms of ecumenism being practiced by some of their church leaders and members.

Most scholars have also failed to relate the Indian Ecumenical Conference to contemporary religious interaction. John Berthong surveyed interreligious dialogue in Canada and even began his article with a description of historic religious interactions between native people and Christian missionaries, but he did not mention the Conference (Berthong 1985, 462-70). Hans Mol studied religious pluralism in Canada and included a chapter on native people, but also did not mention the Conference (Mol 1985).

all other approaches to the solution of their problems" (Hodgson and Kothare, 1990, 100). Andrew Dreadfulwater summed it up well when he began his talk under the sacred arbor by saying, "This is the fourth year talking about Indians surviving ..." (Dreadfulwater, 1984, 22-24). Conference participants engaged in interreligious dialogue, cooperation and advocacy in order to bridge the artificial religious boundaries dividing their communities. They offered and received mutual support in this interreligious community, where they worked to secure a future for native people.

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