

BROTHERS AND OTHERS: CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS ON THE RESERVATION

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Many current resources look at the state of Native America and the place of religion both Christian and Native within the scope of modernity. Vine Deloria said "God is Red" and as such created a spiritual dichotomy along ethnic lines that emphasized structure versus praxis (1994). Other authors such as Lassiter (2001), MacNally (2000), and Vecsey (1999) have taken a synchronous approach that would say that the Christian message has been modified by native peoples to fit their situation and more particularly their worldview. Terms such as syncretism, dualism, resistance, acculturation, revitalization, and resurgence have been the stock and trade of ethnographers and social theorists for half a century or more. Another genre of writers have essayed forth with descriptions of "native religion" and such terms as "earth-centered ritual" almost as a seeming counter to the imposition of Western Christianity in the lives of Native Americans. Information, spiritual knowledge, gospel messages, and the epistles of colonization all blend together in what James Clifford would call a "Nexus of relations and transactions" that fly in the face of simple explanation and defy attempts to define appropriate cultural boundaries (1988).

Centered among this maelstrom of belief, myth, and ritual is one group of religious practitioners who have been constantly present since the moment of contact; the missionaries. Known as priests, preachers, pastors, ministers, brothers, sisters, and a plethora of other titles, missionaries have been a part of Western culture, a part of Native culture, and a tradition in their own right throughout the Americas. Originally thought to be the teachers and agents of change for the crowns they represented, later the civilizing agents of an expanding nation, these carriers of the gospel have represented the best and worst of acculturative influence. From Bartolome De La Casas of New Spain, to modern priests and preachers, they have alternately practiced a gospel of peace and justice or one of genocide and oppression. Many, for a fact, have been a party to the latter and authors, such as Deloria (1992), Mohawk (1992), and Tinker (1994), have been quick to point out many of these abuses. Others have been accepted as tradition among the people they serve and have contributed significantly to the empowerment of Indigenous peoples.

Clyde Ellis illuminates the life of Isabel Crawford, an early missionary to the Kiowa, who was an important agent in the building of a native theology (1998). Christopher Vecsey, in "The Paths of Keter's Kin" looks at several such examples of people who in the search for spirit and knowledge have crossed back and forth between cultures in a process one might call "cultural shapeshifting." I would like to suggest that in many instances people who come to miss ionize become dual citizens in both Western and Native cultures and the keepers of sacred knowledge for both worlds. These are individuals for whom cultural boundaries have become permeable.

Originally, this paper set out to answer the following question: Can Christianity see its own boundaries, and do those boundaries keep its practitioners from understanding the scope of non-western spirituality? Through the process of a limited ethnography, I attempted to get at this question by inquiring to what extent non-native Christian missionaries, living on the reservation, participated in native rituals that have ties to a non-Christian spirituality. The problem quickly became one of definition. The missionaries interviewed were hesitant to classify

ritual of any sort as "non-Christian." One way for those interviewed to deal with the Christian content or lack thereof in ritual practices on the reservation became a rationalization process which, when stated in interviews, seemed to say that "whatever I deem as prayerful can be a part of a genuine spirituality." This thought process when stated by priests or other authoritative voices then could be interpreted to speak for the larger congregation. The only consensus reached in these interviews was that there was no consensus about the meanings and symbolism of indigenous ritual.

Another tactic taken by modern religions on the reservation is to insert indigenous ritual directly into Christian ritual in order to create synchronous systems of meaning. These practices may indeed have a twofold outcome: they may incorporate Christianity into the local worldview, which is probably their intended purpose; and they may incorporate the missionary into a system of community meaning. This, in turn, would suggest that a symbolism of belonging might be an important part of being a missionary in a foreign culture. It is indeed ironic to be White and Christian and totally immersed in a foreign culture within your native country. Many of these people may be able to maintain a sense of difference and aloofness as the representatives of what they consider a superior system; others, instead of thinking themselves into difference, may conversely think themselves into conformity through a process of combining ritual and symbol across boundaries (Cohen 1986:17).

The fact that many of these men and women have managed to negotiate boundaries in meaningful ways, and, more importantly, in so doing have created a spirituality of accommodation, is often an overlooked facet of the religious phenomena. Lassiter, Ellis, and Kotay, in the "Jesus Road," discuss the effectiveness of Isabel Crawford on the Kiowa and Magdelna Becker with the Commanche, but the emphasis is focused on the missionized, not the missionary (2002:60). These women and others impacted their respective mission groups by becoming a part of the larger social group. This process of belonging, though acknowledged, is often not given further notice. Vecsey discusses at length the Jesuit Father Patrick Twohy on the Swinomish reservation (1997:338-351). Father Twohy is quoted as saying, "When a Jesuit comes to live with Indian people . . . it is better if he comes to listen and learn" (Vecsey 1997:339).

This is a major break from the conventional wisdom of the missionary who comes to draw lines in the sand and then compel or coerce as many native peoples as possible to cross to the Christian side of that boundary. Traditional missionary worldview has symbolized religions as distinctly separate belief systems with conventional boundaries delineated by ritual practice. MacNally says, "religions are systems of belief – coherent self-referential wholes that offer exclusive orientation in the world because they offer singular, mutually exclusive frameworks of meaning" (846).

Interviews for "Brothers and Others" included mainstream missionaries on the Navajo Reservation in Northern Arizona, some of who categorized themselves as a part of the Native Community, and others who classified themselves as distinctly separate. Also several Native participants, from both Catholic and Protestant denominations, were interviewed concerning their ideas of the aforementioned missionaries place in the community. The information was taken from informal open-ended interviews that took place over a six month period. Both groups of missionaries may impact the community equally in different ways; there is no way to assess that here. Determination of identification and belonging may also not be as simple as having allegiance to a church, a community, a people, or some specific ideology. Complex interactions of a cultural nature may play out in inter-generational processes of acculturation and

assimilation.

People interviewed were asked about their participation in three specific rituals: pipe ceremonies particularly in the context of Christian worship, the sweatlodge, and the Native American Church, also known as "The Peyote Way." Considerable written material and analysis are available for these three rites. William Stolzman, a Jesuit, has written about the Pipe and Christ, Raymond Bucko, also a Jesuit priest, has written about the Lakota sweat lodge, and a variety of scholars have written on the subject of the Peyote Way. These rituals may indicate some degree of boundedness based on meaning and frequency of use. The pipe ceremony is incorporated in Christian ritual including Catholic mass. Of the missionaries interviewed, only one said it had no place in Christian praxis. The sweat lodge also is commonly accepted, if not in, at least next to Christian worship.

There was, however, more reticence on the part of those interviewed concerning the religious significance of this ceremony. The least accepted of the three cultural practices is the Peyote sing, also known as the Native American Church (NAC). Only one of the interviewed persons admitted to any involvement with this ritual. How these rituals are viewed by the missionaries and Natives and their frequency of use might indicate an acculturative scale that we could use to estimate the presence and strength of boundaries and individuals acceptance across those boundaries. It might also say something about how the native group does or does not accept the outsider. In this case though, the acculturation and movement of boundaries comes on the part of the missionaries as opposed to the minority culture involved.

The most common ritual to be co-opted here is that of the pipe ceremony. This may come in large part because of Father Stolzman's book "The Pipe and Christ." The ceremonies associated with the pipe find acceptance with a large audience including Diocesan ceremonies within Catholic practice. These rituals may, in fact, be viewed as the same sort of accommodation that the Roman Catholic Church gave in the change to vernacular language in the mid 1960's. As previously stated, only one missionary had a stated resistance to the use of the pipe and that took the form of a total denial of any form of cultural accommodation. Surprisingly though, two native people who were interviewed openly opposed the pipe being used in church. In both instances, they indicated that they felt it demeaned the sacred nature of the pipe to use it there.

The sweat lodge is second in terms of acceptance. Only one person said it had no place in Native Christian practice (this person being the same one who had dismissed the pipe ceremony), but others were ambivalent about the place and function of the sweat and said that it probably had more validity as a secular or social ritual and might not have a place as sacred ritual. The last of the three "The Peyote Sing" generated solid answers against the use of it as a Christian rite with some of the missionary respondents, and ambivalent replies from two, one of whom was a participant in those rituals. One of those replies was from a Catholic priest who stated that he thought the Peyote Way was alright for Native nuns because they had grown up that way and that it was a "legitimate prayer service," then turned around 20 minutes later and said that Catholics shouldn't participate in it because it was a "different religion" (anonymous interview, Window Rock, Az. 2001). This last answer opened the door for other questions, but the subject wouldn't clarify whether or not he felt that he was trying to say that there was a different standard for Native Christian religious as opposed to all others.

It is interesting to note here that the Catholic Church, particularly the Franciscan order, has historically had a bias concerning Native religious practitioners that has boiled down to a model of "real nuns" versus "native nuns" (Vecsey 1999:269). One thing about Peyote, not

mentioned by the subjects, is that those sings require an insider invitation, you cannot invite yourself. This says something about the degree of inclusion of the one interviewee who did attend Peyote Sings and, also, about the relative strength of that rite as a symbol of boundedness. There may be two other points of resistance here, also. Several people noted that control of Peyote ceremonies is strictly in the hands of the "roadman," a specific native practitioner. One such roadman was interviewed in the course of collecting material for this paper. The other aspect that might be a consideration is that there may be a high level of cultural resistance toward the use of mind-altering drugs, both in mainstream and Navajo culture at this point in history. The other two rituals are negotiable by members from both cultures, even though the relative symbolism may be different for each group.

Interviewing on this topic with Western religious practitioners has been difficult, and the answers have not been forthcoming. I believe this is in part because the boundaries of religious ideology are at the far extremes of cultural thought and may actually constitute a conversational taboo. Two Indiana Catholic parish priests who were consulted regarding these interviews agreed with this last analysis, one of them even stated that he could tell me what was acceptable by the Church but he couldn't really define what might fall outside of it (Anonymous interviews. Muncie, IN. 2001). Much of the ritual discussed in this paper and some not specifically addressed, may *be* syncretism with a Western bias and missionary control. The real basis of resistance to the *NAC* by the missionaries probably has to do with the fact that control is solely in native hands, specifically the Roadman. The Catholic Church has long been accused of learning and defining Native tradition and practice to develop a means of supercession as opposed to syncretism. This may come through the appropriation of Native ritual into an expanded Christian rite for purposes of consolidating religious values and practice into the dominant fold.

Determining the cultural place of missionaries then may be more than just locating the placement of a boundary between locals and incomers. Meaning may have to be analyzed in the context of religious ritual in an effort to determine intent. Belonging or not belonging may be about the ability to make room for the practice of alternative values on both the missionaries' and the natives' part. Very few mainstream missionaries have the ability, in the words of Christopher Vecsey, to "adapt a stance in a spiritual netherworld between Christianity and the Pipe" (1999:307). Although a few of the people interviewed for this paper consider Christianity to be a well bounded system, the majority thought the boundaries quite nebulous. I would suggest that as in the case of the boundaries themselves that the inclusion or exclusion of missionaries within the native cultural system is, in fact, a matter of thought. Anthony Cohen would say that while some would think themselves into difference and thus exclusion, others may think themselves into conformity and belonging (1986).

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