

Themes in Contemporary Native Theological Education

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A Brief History

Governmental policies and decisions of the past 300 years influence nearly every aspect of contemporary Aboriginal life. Theological education in Aboriginal communities is the result of past national policies as well. In some regions of the United States, the federal policy of the Quaker Plan of the 1870–1890 era defined with which denomination a First Nation would be affiliated. The Quaker Plan assigned the Lakota Nation, called Sioux by the government, to the Episcopal Church; and today half of all the Episcopal Church's Native ministry is among the Lakota people. Historical circumstances came into play in western Canada, affecting which denominations are active in contemporary coastal communities. Along the coast of British Columbia today, the United Church of Canada and Anglican churches predominate in most Aboriginal communities. The British Columbia interior First Nations are Roman Catholic. Educational and governmental decisions as well as European-based cultural biases influenced the social understanding of Christianity and its introduction to Native North American peoples.

Education is suspect with First Nations people because of its history. North Americans in power typically saw education as a tool to bring Native people into American or Canadian society. These efforts of inclusion by education were often well-meant, even though they did not have the desired effect. The Canadian government in the Indian Act of 1925 saw schooling as the means to “educate and civilize”

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Native people. The residential school experience has had a profound effect on the social and cultural disarray of Canadian Aboriginal individuals and communities. The legal ramifications of the residential school experience for the Christian church and for Canadian society are still a matter of litigation, disputation, and governmental redress.

Theological Education in the Recent Past

The Anglican Church baptized Aboriginal people in the 1500s but did not ordain any Native persons for nearly four hundred years. The men ordained at the end of the 1800s were spiritual and social leaders in their communities and typically had some theological education in the form of individual tutoring before being ordained. In the twentieth century, reading for orders became the common form of theological education for Aboriginal candidates for ordination. After World War II, candidates for ordination attended seminaries, a program generally not successful except for a few examples. In the 1990s the Episcopal Diocese of South Dakota took part in the Kelly Inn Conference in Minnesota. Research concluded the diocese had sent nearly thirty candidates to seminary and none had completed their programs. While the predominant reasons for leaving seminary appeared to be personal, the real reason seemed to be cultural stress.

The Vancouver School of Theology (VST) has a vigorous Native Ministries Program which grants a master of divinity degree by extension. This allows a student to complete half the program in a home reserve community. The student takes the other half of the courses at VST, but does so during the Native Ministries summer school when many lay and ordained Aboriginal people are taking courses in church leadership. Not only is the theological student supported culturally; VST also integrates Native culture in the dimensions of the school. This is accomplished essentially by seeing First Nation culture and spiritual practices as the "Old Testament" of Native North America. This philosophical position brings together the issues of Christianity with Aboriginal identity and culture, one of the most pressing contemporary conflicts in "Indian country."

Ten Themes in Contemporary Native Theological Education

Aboriginal communities face a myriad of issues. Selecting the most prominent considerations may seem arbitrary. Among the major influencing factors at the present are long-term poverty, cultural

disenfranchisement, and a profoundly rapid birth rate in cities and particularly on the prairies.

1. First and foremost, all education is for the future, and this is particularly true of education for ministry. In Western culture, theological education has been primarily for an authoritative leadership role in a community. Traditional First Nations leadership is by moral example and includes no innate authority. As one elder remarked, "We want you to teach them to be a high *simoogit*," that is, a high chief. This type of education is more than the knowledge professors of theology are prepared to teach. Even the concept of knowledge must be redefined. The 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples of Canada referred to "the Intellectual Tradition of North America." Universities and schools may think this refers to their curricula, but the commission meant the knowledge and wisdom of Aboriginal peoples gathered by the elders and societies of First Nations. If this is the original intellectual tradition of North America, Western knowledge must be acknowledged as the foreign and imported learning that it is.

2. Aboriginal theological education is healing. There are influential social, psychological, and spiritual issues that are the result of the past. When Aboriginal people are able to heal from these issues, the legacy of military defeat, racism, and prejudice will be eradicated. It is widely said that education is the search for the truth. Where is this more important than in theological education? When true learning replaces an imagined history, Aboriginal learners as well as all others will come to the healing truth.

3. In our time, Anglicans see that the church is not the kingdom of God. Were one to think that theological education is an entry to work in the church and that church life would be harmonious, one would be surprised soon enough. Theological education in our time is against the backdrop of conflict in the church and a period of social humiliation of the church. In this reality, theological education must emphasize the dynamics of forgiveness, reconciliation, and peacemaking. Without these skills, the religious leader will be hindered in building community. It has always been the case that Aboriginal leaders know how to solve conflict. But those techniques were in cohesive communities committed to working together for survival. The relative anonymity of contemporary Native life and the impact of Western individualism, particularly in the cities, make reconciliation more complex for an Aboriginal public leader.

4. Native communities function on the basis of tradition. Pacific coastal people think of ancestral law as their divine rules for living well. On the prairies, Lakotas refer to the *Lakol wicoh'an*, the Lakota way of life, as the customary for living and making choices. While tradition is always a renegotiation of the present with the past, the past has a cohesive form in Native thought. This cohesion is now under rapid change and so a religious leader must be educated in flexible thinking when approaching the unknown. Forms are emerging that had not existed previously. For example, an urban group of Aboriginal men use a health club steam room as a substitute for their traditional sweat lodge. Traditionally gathered plants such as sage and sweetgrass can now be planted as crops to preserve natural stands and to satisfy the increasing need for these supplies. If theological education prepares a leader to live only with tradition or only in the past, the leader cannot face the changing community.

5. The contemporary world allows communication and travel that previous generations could only imagine. These conditions permit a flow of information and relationships between indigenous populations from many places in the world. Around the Pacific Ocean, Native people from North America, Hawaii, New Zealand, and Australia meet and communicate regularly. Theological education takes account of the interaction of these populations, and an effective leader can move with ease at this level of international Native solidarity. The dynamics of being social minorities in their homelands give many indigenous populations a mutual understanding far beyond what they would know in isolation.

6. Theological education must take place in a context where Aboriginal ways are the norm. The enterprise of education is heavily westernized in structure, procedure, and conceptualization. Reading and writing form the foundational educational activities in theological education, reflecting the physical-spiritual dichotomy of Western academia. A human being is understood by Aboriginal people to be a functioning whole and not an association of parts. So the Western approach should be replaced with Native concepts and activities. The holistic united reality in which the physical and the spiritual are amalgamated should be the normal concept for understanding experiences, ceremony, and the Christian faith. In such circumstances, colonial models from the Enlightenment fade alongside the centuries-old concepts that guaranteed the survival of Aboriginal peoples.

7. In this holistic realm, theological education as preparation for religious leadership must be deeply spiritual. The school of theology must provide the religious and psychic equivalent of a sun dance, a vision quest, or a potlatch. Professors of theology must have a deeply intensive spiritual practice that attracts students. The enterprise of theological education must be experiential, holistic, and understood in the essence of one's being. It cannot be an enterprise of thinking only. Aboriginal communities understand real learning to come from experience and not primarily from reading or talking. Age and life experience become crucial credentials in Native theological learning; elders themselves make up an entire library.

8. Aboriginal theological education draws together the best current theologizing on Native culture and history. In previous times, many Native people believed that their ceremonies and sacred mythology were pagan or even evil. In the theology of contemporary Native people, those ancestral ways are the history of that nation's relationship with God. The Hebrew Scriptures contain the history of Israel's relationship with the creator of the cosmos, just as Aboriginal traditions document the relationship of that people with God. In most Native traditions, the concern is not with the good-evil dichotomy prominent in Christianity. A Native spiritual focus is one of being in right relationship to all things, similar to the Hebrew concept of *tzaddika*, righteousness or justice. Within that ethic of relationship, the importance is not what one knows but with whom and what one has successful relationships.

9. Contemporary attitudes among and about Native people are such that Westerners are often unable to see Aboriginal Christians. It has always been puzzling to non-Native people how Aboriginal people are able to take part fully in both Christian and traditional ceremonies. This attitude is acutely intense in our times. Even in photographs and documentaries, Native Christian thought is hidden. This was as true of John Neihardt's spiritual biography *Black Elk Speaks*¹ in the 1930s as it is of contemporary publications. In this attitudinal context a Native Christian must know how to function in an underground way. Some

¹ Black Elk, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* as told to John G. Neihardt (Flaming Rainbow), illustrated by Standing Bear (New York: Morrow, 1932; New York: MJF Books, 1972).

Westerners think that no “real Indian” is Christian. Most Aboriginal Christians have had the experience of being disregarded immediately upon identifying themselves to those who are not familiar with real Aboriginal life. In fact, there are many aspects of traditional Native theology presented that are directly or indirectly Christian, if one is familiar with the traditions of Native communities. Christian theological education takes place within this context, and a thoughtful Native Christian knows how to communicate and function within a context that does not even recognize Native Christianity, let alone see how Native Christianity is related to Native traditional ways today.

10. The Canadian government reports that 70 percent of Aboriginal people live in cities, while the US Bureau of Indian Affairs estimates 85 percent of Native Americans live in urban areas. The relationship to land has historically formed the identity, culture, and spirituality of indigenous people. How is this connection to be enculturated to the next generation who live in the cities? This cultural foundation is the platform for all theological enterprises. As such, effective theological education must foster a lifelong learning experience for Native people with their own nation. This learning cannot take place through contact with an intertribal community, the more usual urban experience. Only through a long-term relationship with one’s own nation will a generation learn from immersion the attitude and emotion, the spiritual relationship that defines a Native Christian identity. Given the abstraction of learning in Western-style education, the relationship to the land may not be a priority in Western Christian identity and may not even appear to be a significant aspect of learning. But without grasping this fundamental cornerstone of Aboriginal identity, no other aspect of theological learning has grounding.

The European religious press reported on September 7, 2007, that the President of the European Union, José Manuel Barroso, “praised the role Christianity played in promoting European unification and called on all religions to support the values at the centre of European life.”² Christianity is the cultural foundation of European

² Matthew Cresswell, “Religion is essential says EU President,” *Religious Intelligence* (September 7, 2007), <http://www.religiousintelligence.co.uk/news/?NewsID=972> (accessed January 1, 2008).

unity. Informal interviews with Korean graduate students and professors verify that Korean Christians are more accepting of Western culture than non-Christians. Can it be that Christianity is so intertwined with Western culture that one cannot be practiced without the other? In earlier ages it was clear that to be Christian was to be assimilated to Western society, culture, and politics. This still seems to be the case among Aboriginal people. Many younger Aboriginal people see Christianity as incompatible with Native identity. Given the Christian churches' complicity with the Canadian government in the era of residential schools, wounded Aboriginal people have additional reasons to avoid any involvement with Christianity. Can the enterprise of theological education help Native people see history and the reality of Christianity beyond these perspectives?

Native people have survived on the North American continent from the beginning of time. For thousands of years Aboriginal people have built successful lives in the face of all odds. Like the nation of Israel, First Nations have survived destruction, genocide, war, and epidemics. The national Aboriginal Bishop of Canada, Mark MacDonald, told the VST Native Ministries summer school in July 2006 that the greatest sign of God's power is the continued survival of Aboriginal people. We are still here. Theological education, to be realistic and relevant, must be founded on the experience, thought-world, and identity of Native people. If God is incarnate to Aboriginal people, theological education must be no less than incarnate in a Native world. Few schools of theology can even approach this position. The days of theological education that produced "gentlemen theologians" in the English mode are long gone. It remains to be seen how theological education can prepare Aboriginal public leaders who can live and love as fully as God has intended.

