Anamnesis in the Lakota Language and Lakota Concepts of Time and Matter

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The English language was the most common language of the missionaries that brought Christianity to the First Nations of North America. This has meant that the Lakota understanding of Christianity has been limited by the English language, because Native Christians were not allowed to express their Christianity through their own culture and language. The Lakota people as well as the other First Nations that accepted Christianity did so with their own cultural and spiritual perspectives on the creator and creation. The problem developed when the missionaries insisted that they express their Christianity only in English. Even the Episcopal and Presbyterian Lakotas, who were allowed to create hymnals and prayer books in Dakota,[1] would send their children to boarding schools where they would be forbidden to speak their language outside of church. The language used in church was also different from the Lakota language that was used in day-to-day conversations, with theological words being invented by the missionaries, who tended to eschew already existing words, since they were not "Christian."

The journals and other writings of the earliest missionaries reveal that even though they had learned the language, they often misunderstood the theology of the people they served. The missionaries would cling to false assumptions that they had prior to meeting the Lakota people; this ensured that the theological words they invented often did not assist the Lakota adequately to understand that they in fact had a better grasp of theology than the missionaries who brought Christianity to them.

The Lakota language, like those of most First Nations, uses only the present tense, has no gender pronouns, and does not make a distinction between physical matter and spiritual matter, which makes

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[1] Dakota is a dialect slightly different from Lakota.

the Lakota ideally suited to understand many theological concepts that could greatly enrich the Christian tradition. The irony in all this is that because the Lakota People inherited English as their theological language, it can be difficult adequately to express what they understand in their language. Furthermore, many of our older medicine men even use a separate language for the sole purpose of discussing theology. If the early missionaries had allowed the Lakota people to inculturate Christianity *as Lakotas* without having also to convert to their culture and language, they may have been able to contribute greatly to larger discussions of Christian theology. One such discussion is how the Lakota concept of time can inform the eucharistic concept of *anamnesis*.

The word *anamnesis* used in the Christian eucharistic context comes from the part of the liturgy where the phrase "Do this in memory of me" is stated by the celebrant, but the eucharistic event of *anamnesis* is more than a memorial statement. Dom Gregory Dix, in *The Shape of the Liturgy,* says that the "doing" of the eucharist "recalls" or "re-presents"[2] the sacrifice of Christ in his death and resurrection. Previous generations of liturgical scholars struggled with this term, often getting stuck in arguments over whether or not *anamnesis* means that a re-sacrifice occurs every time the eucharist is celebrated. Some scholars would find such ideas repugnant since Christ was to make only *one* sacrifice for sin and would not have to continue to do it over and over. Dix was very careful to clearly state that *anamnesis* is not a re-sacrifice, but "as itself *presently operative* by its effects."[3]

When we participate in the Holy Eucharist, we do so as if we are *with* Jesus (and all other participants) as he celebrated his last supper. This is enabled not because of the actual meal, but rather by his one sacrifice in his death, resurrection, and ascension. This *anamnesis* is the connecting point for the body of Christ as both the actual presence of Jesus (his body) and the church (also his body.) Dix wrote that the body of Christ in the eucharistic elements could not occur unless the body of Christ of the church participated in that eucharist. Of course Western Christian traditions have considerable variations, high and low, in their approach to *anamnesis*, but contemporary

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[2] Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (Westminster, UK: Dacre Press, 1945), 162.

[3] Dix, *Shape of the Liturgy*, 245.

discussion of this concept is hampered by the limited scope and vocabulary of Western European cultures and languages, especially English. The Lakota people are uniquely suited to understand this concept because of their language, how they perceive spiritual matter, and how they understand time, but up until now the Lakota have not been widely exposed to discussions on this concept even though they are well suited to understand it.

"Indian time" is how the Lakota most often refer to their concept of time. There is not a word for time in the Lakota language, because this concept is so deeply engrained in the culture. In "Indian country" (anywhere Natives live, especially on or near their reservations), "Indian time" can be used teasingly almost as a joke, meaning if someone is running on Indian time, they will likely be late. Many Wasicus (non-Lakotas) often misunderstand this term and can even support racist and ignorant views of Lakotas by equating Indian time with laziness or at least chronic lateness. In South Dakota, several of our reservations are split by time zone borders (Mountain Standard and Central Standard), which are a source of amusement for Lakotas. Lakotas often smile when they refer to the different time zones as "slow time" and "fast time," especially when they have to keep an appointment that is made with a Wasicu. Some Lakotas have tried to explain Indian time as being circular or even cyclical, but the idea of time being a large wheel rolling along is still linear and does not quite capture the true meaning. If a Lakota is *late* or *early* it is only because that person believed it was the appropriate moment to arrive; to arrive at any other moment would be inappropriate.

We can find other anthropological clues to the meaning of Indian time from the experiences and practices of the Lakota people. Growing up among practitioners of Lakota Pipe Religion, I have learned that certain sacred places exist, and there are ceremonies that can enable one to transcend time. It is not unknown for a Lakota to have a dream or a vision of a past or future event in great detail. When they speak of these events, they speak of them as if they were actually present, and given the amount of detail that they cite, one wonders if they actually were. This is not surprising when one understands that the Lakota language uses only the present tense, but for those who have had these experiences, they believe they were actually there. Another clue can be seen in the deep and profound reverence for our elders, but this even applies to our ancestors who have died. It is unthinkable

for a proper Lakota person to behave in a manner that would offend their elder relatives, but when that relative dies, we are still obligated to honor that elder's wishes. Anthropologically this is a very effective method for preserving our culture, but it also speaks of our concept of time since the deceased elder *still exists* (albeit somewhere else) and is still quite capable of communicating his or her pleasure or displeasure of our behavior.

It is tempting to suggest that time as a concept does not even exist among the Lakota, but its existence is fluid and transient, making it difficult to predict or even mark. If we understand this, one can see why the Western obsession with clocks can be hard for Lakota people to make sense of. Fluent Lakota-speakers have no trouble at all discussing Indian time, but when the language switches to English the conversation can get bogged down because of the absence of adequate English words to use in the discourse. English was my first language and even though my thinking about time tends to correspond with the Lakota culture, expressing my thoughts can still be difficult for me. My thoughts on *anamnesis* have enabled me to find a new venue to express Indian time as it connects to the eucharistic event.

Lately my thoughts about time may best be expressed as a series of connected moments or dimensions where certain phenomena (places, people, creatures, and events) transcend these connected moments. All of matter is a unified collection of these connected moments that when viewed as a whole might be visualized as an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scan. A patient is passed through a large machine that is able to see the magnetic waves that are passed through the patient's body. The result is a series of images that appear to be slices or cross-sections of that patient's body. A doctor can then see the patent's internal organs as well as any hidden illnesses. Our perception of the present is like one of those MRI images. In the same way as that image presents only a small section of the body, so our perception of present time is only a slice of a greater whole. The contents of that slice transcend or pass through any number of slices; thus if we exist within many slices of the whole of existence, it is conceivable that we may be able to move between these "slices."

This image makes sense to me, as nearly every Lakota person I know has experienced a spirit of a deceased loved one visiting them. These are not "ghosts" in that they often have physical bodies with audible voices and can communicate freely. Lakota people understand ghosts to be lost spirits/souls that, for various reasons, have not

fully crossed over to the afterlife. I have personally experienced both ghosts and visits from deceased loved ones and can see a sharp difference between the two, but my point is that such events could not happen if it were not possible for time as a whole to be transcended, suspended, or at least the limits momentarily erased. This is of course a simile that is too simple to adequately express a very complex phenomenon, but it will suffice for my purpose of expressing my view of Indian time and *anamnesis*. There are other contributing factors, not the least of which is how the Lakota are unable to make a distinction between physical matter and spiritual matter.

For Lakota people, all physical matter has a spiritual component and all spiritual matter has a physical component. If one were to portray the differences within the Lakota views of physical and spiritual components of matter, it might look more like a spectrum, with some matter seeming to be more spiritual or supernatural, and further across the spectrum other matter being more physical. The scientific method may seem like an ideal way of exploring God's creation because of its insistence on proving and testing hypotheses, but it can only function in a physical world. Like Western theology, science has been cursed by Hellenism in that great care in discussing such things is taken to separate physical matter and spiritual matter and in the case of science to totally dismiss the spiritual. Western theological discussions within systematic theology are especially guilty of this and even though some contemporary theologians claim to reject systematic theologies, they are still cursed with the language of those theologies and so still struggle with finding a way to express ideas outside of those Western traditions.

The Lakota spectrum of matter enables one to see the physical and spiritual shades of matter in much the same way we see the spectrum of the rainbow colors that can be split by a prism. The colors meld one into the other until the spectrum continues past our ability to see them. Matter on the extreme spiritual end of the spectrum is almost impossible to detect by mortals, proceeding until it connects to Wakaŋtaŋka (God, or literally the "Greatest Mystery"). This is why the Lakota need ceremonies to enable them to see past their current physical place in the spectrum to communicate with Wakaŋtaŋka on the opposite end. Ceremonies are used to transcend the spectrum in order to communicate with Wakaŋtaŋka and those spiritual beings that serve Wakaŋtaŋka. This Lakota spectrum of matter informs our Christianity, in that Lakota Christians tend to have a rather

high sacramental theology since they are able to see great spiritual power in liturgical/ceremonial actions as means to connect with God (Wakaŋtaŋka) and his son, Jesus Christ.

The Lakota language and our concepts of time and matter can all be seen in the ways they engage *anamnesis* within the funeral rites of the Lakota people. Our funeral rites begin the moment a person dies, since the Lakota believe that the deceased's spirit/soul will remain with the family for three to four days after death. During this time the deceased may serve as a connection to God and so they work to behave appropriately, thus not impeding the deceased's communication with God. A wake is frequently held lasting up to three days, with prayers, ceremonies, and singing being conducted for nearly the entire time. Meals are shared with special "Spirit plates" of food being placed outside the building as a form of honoring and remembering any spirits that may come to their event. Christian liturgies and the older traditional ceremonies are conducted one after the other, since the common belief is that the theologies of the two religions are compatible. It should be noted, though, that the two expressions are never blended since that could adversely alter both religions (syncretism).

The funeral begins the morning that the wake ends, with the community coming to join the mourners as they prepare to commend their loved one to Wakaŋtaŋka. They believe that their deceased relative is now transcending the spectrums of matter and time, and that journey will be complete with the culmination of the liturgy. Holy Eucharist, which is considered to be spiritually powerful, is almost always celebrated and after the postcommunion prayer and the commendation, the casket is taken to the cemetery for the committal by the priest, sometimes accompanied by a ceremony by a medicine man that sends forth the deceased on their journey to the afterlife.

In the past few years, my funeral sermons have begun to teach about *anamnesis*, reminding the people that just as their deceased loved ones may transcend time and matter by coming to visit them, so Jesus does within the ceremony of the eucharist. This teaching allows them to see that as they kneel at the altar rail to receive the sacred elements, Jesus and all of their deceased relatives also participate with them, thus making the Holy Eucharist an ideal way to reconnect not only with their relatives, but also with the person of Jesus Christ. These sermons have had the effect of Lakota people being able to hear the word *anamnesis* for the first time, to talk about it and use it as a means to transcend the supposed constraints of time, matter,

and language. *Anamnesis* is how we as the body of Christ within the church enable the eucharistic event to become a vehicle for Jesus' re-present-ing his body, both within the church and in the eucharistic elements. Dom Gregory Dix may not have seen *anamnesis* exactly as a Lakota, but his words about *anamnesis* have given permission to Lakota Christians to express what they know as truth in a new way. Hopefully their use of the concept of *anamnesis* will allow them to further enculturate their expressions of Christian theology without feeling they have to give up being Lakota.

Hecetuyelo.[4]

[4] Roughly translated: "I have spoken."