

## Native Spiritually

The study guide, *We That Way - Christian Encounters With Native Spirituality*, written for the Native Education Awareness Raising (NEAR) program of the Council of Christian Reformed Churches in Canada, says that NEAR was founded to build bridges of understanding between native people and nonnative people. The purpose is to learn about native spiritual traditions to deepen their understanding of their faith and who they are before God.

Last year the Synodical Committee on Race Relations of the Christian Reformed Church sponsored an "All Nations Heritage Week," recognizing the unique contribution made by Aboriginal Canadians to our "All Nations" family of God. In light of the emphasis on Canadian aboriginals, a reader of *Christian Renewal* wrote to ask how the church should spread the Gospel to Canadian native Indians. He was also wondering about the way Indian culture and traditions can be used by Christians. How should Christians relate to native spirituality? The reader raised important questions about the meaning of spirituality, culture, and our approach to missions.

Currently there is a real interest in spirituality. On the one hand we can welcome this trend as it is preferred over the crass materialism which governs the lives of so many. On the other hand, we should be cautious as it covers all kinds of phenomena Christians of an earlier generation would call "paganism", "heresy", or "error." In the past Reformed spirituality has been associated with godliness, the devotional life and serving God in every area of life.

Not every form of spirituality is valid. If spirituality becomes detached from the norms of Biblical revelation, then the pursuit of spirituality becomes nothing more than the pursuit of certain kinds of experiences. Only those who have saving faith in Christ Jesus have the Holy Spirit of God (Rom. 8:9) and are "spiritual" (1 Cor. 2:14-15). Our spiritual experiences should always be controlled by the Word of God and corrected by it. During the last two decades interest in Native spirituality and practice of ancient traditional ceremonies has been growing. Larry Krotz commented in the *United Church Observer* that there is a growing feeling among white Christians that there is something to be learned from native spirituality, that our ancestors were racist and hasty in their dismissal of the inherent value of the native way of looking at the world. The Rev. Stanley McKay, a Cree from Koostatak, Manitoba, national consultant for Native ministries for the United Church and its former moderator, says that people should be willing to take on orientations that release them from thought patterns and theological dogmas they hold sacred. He also believes that the worth of the individual's spiritual concepts and experiences, dreams and visions and sense of calling by the Great Spirit are as valid as any of those we have read, learned and memorized. McKay's acceptance of the native view of reality should not surprise anyone who has been following theological developments within the United Church. For example, Pauline Webb confessed in the *Observer* that Jesus Christ is the only way for her, but that does not mean "that all who do not name the name of Jesus have lost the way, have no passport to heaven. Rather, I find that as I share with them the precious name I know,

and they share with me the many precious names of their faiths, we are mutually enriched."

Why are so many attracted to native spirituality? In seeking to repair the fragmentation of our society, and in reaction to the crass materialism of our times, many people turn to the traditions of the Orient, of Africa and of native spirituality as a guideline for living. They have given up on Christianity. The ecological crisis has also led many to turn to native values concerning life, nature and destiny of man.

The aboriginals are neither well tanned white people nor just another ethnic minority. They were here before everyone else descended upon them. Today many look back to the past, longing to recover something of the old beliefs and practices. Their world view and values are different from the white culture. Native Canadians have gone through dramatic cultural changes within a very short time span.

Everyone lives within a culture. Culture, a difficult term to describe, has been defined as a design for living, a way of thinking, believing, feeling, the patterned way in which people do things together. The values and practices of a culture are not selected arbitrarily. They invariably reflect an underlying belief system. The Dutch mission statesman H. Kraemer noted that in tribal cultures the dominant interest of life is to preserve and perpetuate social harmony, stability and welfare. He commented that religious tribal practices have this purpose in view. Social and religious matters cannot be separated. All of life is religious. At the heart of native culture, therefore, is a world view. In discussing native culture, we must remember that the religious beliefs and practices are not the same for the Micmacs of the Maritimes as for the Haida of the Queen Charlotte islands off the B.C. coast. According to Hank Spent, translation consultant with the United Bible Societies, there are 56 Indian languages and five Inuit languages in Canada. Native people have no written traditions, no sacred books. Their tradition is oral. All available accounts of Indian religious practices are products of missionaries, explorers, anthropologists, and historians.

Much has been written in recent years on the Christian approach to native religions. Views range all the way from the belief that Christianity is radically opposed to all other faiths to the view that it is the fulfillment of other faiths. Does God reveal Himself to different people in different ways? Are native religions a response to God's revelations?

Sister Eva Solomon, Roman Catholic Ojibway, calls the history of the native her "Old Testament." She says of Christ, "He came to fulfil our ways. Our traditional ways were ways that God gave us. And Jesus has come to fulfil them." This position sees native religions as a partial, fragmentary apprehension of God, requiring the revelation of Christ for their fulfillment. They are considered as a preparation for the Gospel. The implication here is that Christians engaged in missions must not rigorously displace native religions, but to crown them with the fullness of the Gospel of Christ. This view is not new. It was prominent among the Alexandrian theologians of the second and third centuries and was a subject of discussion at the International Missionary Council at Jerusalem in 1928.

Many tribal religions believe in a single god above all other powers. Sometimes he is recognized as the supreme creator, one the white people have labeled the "Great Spirit." Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux, observed that "all things are the works of the Great Spirit. We should know that He is within all things... We should understand that He is above all these things and peoples." Missionaries have found that by beginning with teaching on the Creator and creation that native Americans are responsive.

Since culture is not neutral may Christians adopt traditional native practices as their own? What of "smudging", a ritual to purify worshippers in a healing circle? Is it the same as the burning of incense in a church? What of the use of sweet grass? The burning of sweet grass is a religious ritual. The Sioux pray, "We shall burn the sweet grass as an offering to Wakan-Tanka (the Great Spirit), and the fragrance of this will spread throughout heaven and earth." Even sitting in a circle has religious significance. Since the great spirit has caused everything to be round, mankind should look upon it as sacred. It is also the symbol of all things in nature except stone, as well as the symbol of all time. For these reasons native Indians sit in a circle in all ceremonies.

In ancient days when the social and religious were not compartmentalized, drums had religious meaning. Some Christian native groups want to use drums in worship. Art and Dorothy Everett, directors of the Institute of Native American Studies in Pasadena, California, note that if these drums have been used in spirit worship or in a way that would compromise their being used in Christian worship, native Christians are encouraged to build new drums dedicated to Christ.

An often overlooked factor in native religions is the power of the demonic. Pierre Duchaussois (1878-1940) drew attention to the fear of evil spirits which stifled "a true piety towards the true God." Barney Lacendre wrote in his autobiographic book *The Bushman and the Spirits*, "The North American Indians have learned to use the power of evil spirits to a very great and frightening degree."

As I have shown, neither native culture nor native religious practices are neutral. If this is so, how then should we approach them? We must distinguish between Gospel and culture. If we do not, we are in danger of making our culture the message. As Mr. Murthi, an evangelist from India stated, "Do not bring us the Gospel as a potted plant. Bring us the seed of the Gospel and plant it in our soil." To put the matter into focus, native religions must be exposed to the light of the Gospel which is the power of God unto salvation. We know the Father through the Son, who came in the fullness of time in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies (Gal. 4:4); it is through Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension that we, who were alienated from God, have been reconciled to our Creator. When a native prays to the Great Spirit, he is not addressing the same God Christians address. We can come to God only through Jesus Christ (John 14:6).

Johan D. Tangelder  
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