Contemporary Issues in Native American Religion

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Down the hall from my office are numerous pictures from the Schwemberger Collection.[1] Many of these portray Navajo children in school uniforms, or Navajo men in baseball outfits. But next to these are also images of the Navajo in traditional clothes or at work at customary looms. Although these photographs are a few generations old, the impression is that there is lasting harm and division continuing into the present. There remain disagreements about ways of life. Behind these are disagreements about more basic beliefs, worldview disputes. To get schoolchildren to dress in a specific way is not to get them to agree to a specific worldview. How can agreement be reached? The following will consider how religious traditions have come into conflict, and the concrete ways this has affected Native American religions and ways of life. This chapter will explore 20th-century religious responses by Native Americans as they seek to find an identity for their religions. This search sometimes includes a reliance on tradition (usually oral tradition) and stories from the past that have largely been shaped by colonialism. It also includes attempts to synthesize European religions with Native customs and understanding. After considering general trends, special attention will be given to the experience of the Hopi people in their contact with the United States. What we have is a picture of communities in the search for meaning while wrestling with external challenges that brought about changes that dislocated these communities from their past and therefore from each of their unique traditions.

The main argument presented in this chapter is that worldview differences about basic beliefs and how to interpret experiences are rarely brought clearly into focus. Conflicts tend to occur at the practical level of living in the world (e.g., negotiating economic and legal realities while not addressing belief differences), and solutions are pragmatically oriented to suppress the other or tolerate the other's differences. By way of contrast, much discussion about where exactly differences in belief are located, and then engagement in the work of coming to agreement, is rare. Indeed, there is reason to think that neither the West nor the Native Americans have the epistemic tools for such an enterprise. Each relies on an epistemology that makes an appeal to authorities that the other does not recognize as legitimate for solving the problems at hand, or which each side interprets differently. The West's secularization grew out

of religious wars and is an attempt to set religion into the private sphere with little public influence. By way of contrast, Native Americans did not have religious wars in the sense that their religions were identical with a people and conversion was not a goal. Appeals to tradition and special experiences as sources of authority can and have been made on both sides of this cultural conflict, which means that they are unhelpful. Furthermore, such appeals can and have been used to support clearly false conclusions, meaning that they are not conducive to sound arguments. The following will illustrate these problems and the need for much discussion.

Contemporary issues in Native American religion are primarily rooted in responses to challenges from the residual effects of the past five centuries of interactions with Europeans and then the United States. The political, economic, military, social/cultural, and even medical dimensions to this history make it a complex area of study. This chapter examines how the process of interaction brings to the forefront a lack of understanding and development of the worldviews that divide. Specifically, the focus is on how important problems arose, and continue to persist, in the area of religious beliefs and identity. Often, challenges arose as the United States sought to introduce changes to Native American religion and culture through cultural restrictions and civil laws. These problems are rooted in a history of not understanding the nature of religion and how it operates in Native American culture. Of particular interest is how basic questions are answered differently both among different groups of Native Americans, and between these groups of Native Americans and the United States. Because the idea of religion was defined primarily in terms of European concepts, the answers to basic questions were either overlooked or molded into Christian and materialist frameworks. This resulted in misunderstandings that sometimes had the effect of making aspects of Native American religion illegal. The mere reality of contact between two civilizations brings with it challenges due to different understandings of the world that translate into competing ways of being in the world.

There is always the danger of oversimplifying any religion when talking about it as a whole. This is especially true in the case of Native Americans, who are sometimes portrayed as holding a unified religion across the continent (Hopfe and Woodward 2012). Instead, there are varieties of religions that are mostly variations on the themes of connection with nature and particular animals, influence of events through rituals, and special insight through vision quests. While some groups do mention a High Spirit who is the creator, this same creator is distant and uninterested in human affairs. Rather, events are influenced by more proximate spirits and forces, and these forces can be appeased by humans through various rituals. I rely on an approach similar to what Lee Irwin outlines:

> What I offer are the religious explanations Native leaders themselves have given with regard to their goals, motives, and community ideals. I have avoided

> reliance on non-Native theories of prophetic religion as unsuitable to the complexity of actual Native history and interactions between Native communities. . . . The critical frame of this research involves an appreciation of Native visionary epistemologies, Native ways of thinking, and the relationship of that thinking to historical texts on prophetic individuals (Irwin 2008, 6).

There is a common theme in American religiosity, and it is seen in the contemporary Native American religious experience, and is summarized by Irwin as "Relying on rejection of Enlightenment rationalism, appeal to direct visionary experience, and individual conscience, prominent in First Great Awakening" (Irwin 2008, 125).

Scholar John D. Loftin discusses the methodological problem facing the study of Native American religions. His special area of study is Hopi religion.

> The lack of a systematic study of Hopi religion stems in part from the fact that the Hopi have been investigated mostly by anthropologists, who have tended to interpret the Hopi religious orientation as it relates to social structure and material culture. That is to say, most studies of Hopi religion have dealt with social and material dimensions rather than with religion itself (Loftin 2003, xx)

In this case, the tendency of those studying a culture and its religion is to begin with the assumption that the beliefs involved are false and must therefore be due to material causes of some kind. These include Marxist interpretations that reduce religion to economics, Freudian interpretations that reduce religion to unconscious needs, or Darwinian interpretations that reduce religion to survival mechanisms related to the specifics of a geography. In each case, those studied are dismissed and therefore this kind of study is itself a challenge to their belief system. In the following section, I will avoid these mistakes by considering the basic beliefs of each group in the encounter, whether they are Christian or secularist on the one hand, or Native American on the other.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

Individuals and groups change as they encounter and respond to challenges. These can be internal or external, personal or nonpersonal. An internal personal challenge could be the divisions between subgroups about the identity of the group and the meaning of life. An external challenge to a group is one that comes from another group, and although it is often felt most at the political and economic levels, it is most basically aimed at the ideas about how the group finds meaning in life and interprets their experiences. Some external challenges come in the form of environmental disasters that afflict food sources or other necessary commodities as well as health concerns that can become epidemic, as in the case of smallpox.

The problems facing Native American religious identity often prohibit practices central to the religious tradition as will be discussed below. Sometimes the perpetrators are missionaries with the intention of changing the Native American religion and culture. Other times the perpetrators are from the U.S. government coming in the guise of knowing what is best for the Native American populace. This includes banning substances such as peyote, which are used in religious rituals. There have been different kinds of responses by Native Americans, including resistance, accommodation, and modification of the traditions to look more "Western."

The contemporary challenges facing Native Americans with respect to religion revolve around how to understand tradition and modernity. Explaining the teachings and practices of the traditional Native American religion is a valuable job for another place. Here we can briefly note that Native American religion has been categorized as shamanism because it emphasizes the role of a trained specialist who aids others in their religious experiences (see Mircea Eliade's 1964 work on shamanism). Although there is talk about a Great Spirit or Elder Brother, such a being is part of nature (perhaps a powerful part, perhaps forming some of nature), but not the creator of the world. Nature contains a continuum of powerful beings, from animal to humans to spirits and others forces. Animals and nature spirits can serve as guides. Life is cyclical and keeping this cycle is important to keep the world from collapsing.

John D. Loftin notes of Native American religion in general that there is ample evidence to support the idea of an almost universal belief in a Supreme Being before contact with the West (2003, 112). However, in the case of the Hopi, this is also held in connection with the belief in an eternal return of all things (2003,112). Interestingly, the Hopi rely on prophesy to tell what might happen given certain contingencies, while also believing that all things that could possibly happen have already happened in the eternal unfolding of histories. This belief informs their self-understanding, and the role that rituals play for them in religious ceremonies. It affects how they hear the Christian or materialist message promulgated by those they contact from Western civilization. The very fact of contact creates this challenge, which often remains consciously at the economic or political level but is an indication of deeper divisions concerning beliefs about the world and its nature.

Because there were important similarities between this shamanism and the pre-Christian European shamanism practiced by groups like the druids, contact between Europeans and Native Americans was a conflict between worldviews with differing ways of interpreting life and human experience. The Europeans had experience with shamanism, but the Native Americans had not experienced theism (belief in God the Creator). The effect of these differing interpretations is that talking about challenges will depend on whether one is talking about those in the

Native American community who continue to be shamanists and interpret their lives through that worldview, and those that are theists (often Christian, either Protestant or Roman Catholic).

Responses are shaped by the extent to which a person is conscious of the challenge and their own worldview, and the consistency with which that worldview is held. We can consider three kinds of responses each of which contain varying degrees of admixture, such as affirming God the Creator while also believing in lesser spirits that inhabit nature and who are in direct contact with humans. The first consists of those who have converted to Christianity or some other theistic religion; the second consists of those who have attempted to retain shamanism and adapt it to meets modern challenges; and the third involves mixing the two into a hybrid.

With respect to ongoing challenges facing the Hopi, Loftin says:

> Internal and unforced external changes continue to take place in the twenty-first century, but a new type, forced change based on political power, has been added. Though the Spanish overpowered the Hopi for 140 years (from 1540 to 1680), they had no significant influence. They did introduce sheepherding and peach orchards, but the Hopi never used the horse much, and the Spanish seem to have had little effect on Hopi religious practices. The Hopi were finally able to free themselves from Spanish rule owing to their conservative nature and their geographical isolation. With the coming of white Americans, however, the Hopi faced an adversary who would not be turned back, and Hopi consciousness clearly differentiates the episodic character of the limited Spanish rule and the dominance by white Americans whose numbers and strength seem insurmountable. The Hopi have had disputes with various Native American peoples over the centuries, but these conflicts were different from the problems posed by white Americans. Even the Navajo, a fierce and longtime enemy of the Hopi, have not denied the Hopi a sense of humanity or religious authenticity (Loftin 2003, 64).

This describes the approach of politician and scholar alike. The latter has looked down on Native American religious traditions as simple, uneducated, and examples of humanity in its most primitive state. This can be expressed as either an aspersion on the ability of Native Americans to develop a well-thought out worldview, or carry the implicit negative stereotype in the image of a noble savage untouched by civilization. Either way, the assumption is that the Hopi and others live without civilization, and are on the early end of a continuum of human evolution whereas the scholar stands further along in that process. Nevertheless, the scholar often has equally unquestioned assumptions as indicated by Loftin about the nature of religious belief, and is often unconscious of his/her own reductionist worldview.

Hopi snake priest with a snake in his mouth during the Hopi Snake dance in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1899. (Library of Congress)

TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY ISSUES

A few case studies will help highlight these themes. One problem that continues to be a vexing issue afflicting Native North America at the beginning of the 21st century is the question of what it means to be a Native American, and how this identity is established. Relying on the idea of identity and citizenship made common during modernity, self-definition and self-identity are held as central values that resist external imposition of values and worldview. Individual identity is particularly valued in the modern world in the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. Applying this to religion raises the question of what exactly Native American religion consists of in the contemporary world. There are, of course, Native American adherents in many religious traditions, not least of which are the Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches. However, there are also some distinctive movements worth noting.

This focus on identity is important. Individual and group self-understanding (or self-identity) can be understood as the individual's or group's worldview, their way of explaining who they are and the world they live in. Understanding a worldview requires considering how persons answer questions about identity, meaning, and authority, as well as what exists and what is good. Many Native American religions trace identity to preservation of community (as opposed to considerations of converting to another community). Highest authority is placed on the prophetic experiences of one who then becomes a religious leader. These experiences, and the interpretation given by the prophet, become the source of beliefs about how reality is shaped, how history will unfold, and what should be done in response. This is particularly true where either traditional religions or hybrids are concerned (Hopfe and Woodward 2011).

Many of these traditions, such as the Native American Church, blend Christian teachings with Native American prophetic movements. "Native American prophecy has continued to inform many Native communities in the present. . . . The enduring stability of the Longhouse tradition among the Six Nations has deep roots in a creative synthesis of traditional Native values with Christian evangelical beliefs" (Irwin 2008, 357). The Longhouse tradition involved a democratic meeting of representatives from the included tribes to solve problems and address challenges facing their groups. Religious experiences were especially important and authoritative in this context. This prophetic context overlaps with American Protestantism in its emphasis on special experiences by religious leaders that guide the community, and religious experiences by individuals that confirm their commitment and give a sense of purpose.

The Native American Church is an example of this syncretism. Although they do not have an officially authorized body of doctrine, "They usually equate God with the Great Spirit, a power widely reverenced as the ultimate source of being.

Jesus often replaces Native culture heroes or guardian spirits to intercede between God and humanity, and He is sometimes identified with Peyote Woman in the cultus [religion]" (Bowden 1985, 211). The role of peyote has been questioned from legal and health perspectives; however, it fits into the religious context because of the emphasis on special experiences as a source of authority for this church. Interestingly, this is shared with many American Protestant groups as is evidenced in the emphasis placed on special experiences in the many religious awakenings beginning with the first Great Awakening in the 18th century.

A less clear example is the Sun Dance. Some observers have argued that Christian symbols have been grafted into the Sun Dance or have affected its performance (Bowden 1981, 217). "They fail to see that the fundamental attitudes do not rely on any important Christian feature" (Bowden 1985, 217). Rather, as is consistent with other religious practices aimed at religious experiences, the focus is on a strenuous dancing ritual in which physical activity, and lack of food and water, often leads to special experiences. These experiences are meant to give guidance or confirm commitment and purpose.

Arguing that Christianity has influenced these religions does nothing to solve the identity problems or explain what counts as Native American. The issue of identity is one that is nested within the framework of one's worldview. The emphasis on religious experience does not take into account the role of how experiences are interpreted in relation to basic beliefs. The basic beliefs of a worldview answer questions about authority, origins, and value in a way that shapes how experiences are understood. Thus, as noted above, one worldview allows Jesus to be likened to the Peyote Woman, while another would not. One worldview would interpret an experience to mean the individual is like an animal, whereas another would affirm a distinction between humans and animals. Getting back to these basic differences in belief will help make clear differences about identity and how to work toward unity and agreement. This is the kind of study undertaken in natural theology (i.e., the study of religious questions by reason alone, rather than by appeal to scripture or tradition).

The Hopi

The Hopi Resistance Movement is dated from a meeting in 1948 at Shongopavi to discuss the use of nuclear weapons (Irwin 2008, 345). A prophetic dream gave the image of a gourd full of ashes, which was thought to represent the incinerated earth. This sign connected with the Hopi belief that this world is the Fourth World, the others having gone through cycles of purification and this one nearing that same end. Clan leaders discussed histories, prophecies, and religious duties, and choose four interpreters to speak for the villages (Irwin 2008, 345). This produced the Traditionalist Movement in the 1950s as part of a pan-Indian movement

that sought to connect with non-Natives for support. The Hopis believed that their prophecies had application to humanity at large and sought for ways to disseminate this message.

The U.S. government became involved in regulating what it considered harmful religious practices among Native Americans. In 1921, President Warren Harding appointed Albert Fall to be the secretary of the interior. Fall's desire to exploit Native Americans unmercifully through his commissioner of Indian affairs, Charles Burke, aroused the anger of many American citizens who were sympathetic to the Native American plight. Fall immediately enacted a regulation prohibiting the Plains Indians from participating in the Sun Dance. He soon concluded that "all similar dances and so-called religious ceremonies, shall be considered 'Indian offences'" punishable by "incarceration in the agency prison for a period not exceeding thirty days" (Loftin 2003).

In 1924, all Native Americans were granted U.S. citizenship, which in theory gave them the protection of the Bill of Rights including freedom of religion. However, problems continued as the government had a difficult time defining "religion" in an inclusive manner. The government expected Native American tribes to form leadership councils that would interact with government officials. Such councils did not represent traditional forms of authority in all cases and led to internal challenges. For the Hopi, this included the earlier split at their leading town, Oraibi, in 1906. Internal disagreement had led to the ending of religious ceremonies at the town, which called into question the very nature of Hopi life. Nevertheless, it was a Hopi prophesy that suggested this end would usher in a renewal of the Hopi heart. This is an example of how the Hopi responded to significant external challenges through their own religious terms and incorporated changes into their religious beliefs.

One way the message of change through the government was presented to non-Natives was through a letter to President Truman in 1949. This letter was signed by 24 elders said to represent the "Hopi Indian Empire" (Irwin 2008, 345). They believed that the prophecies of the past were to be interpreted as for the common good of all mankind. The Day of Purification, Judgment Day, was near and people were advised to put their house in order. Meetings continued to be held, stressing the Day of Judgment. This day of purification began to look like the Christian Day of Judgment in which all persons would be judged. The Hopi prophecy said that three great wars would occur, and only those Hopis with strong faith would pass the judgment.

In 1961, Thomas Banancya wrote a letter summarizing the Hopi prophetic teachings, relying on messianic language. He outlined the stages of life, and spoke about the Great Spirit who is all powerful and had appeared as a man to the Hopi ancestors to give them stone tablets representing power and authority over all life (Irwin 2008, 347). When the "Elder Brother" returns, the Day of Purification will

occur and all evildoers will be destroyed. Throughout the 1960s these kinds of prophecies were universalized to apply to the world at large.

The religion of the Traditionalists came into conflict with the tribal council and the majority of the Hopis. While the Traditionalists emphasized the end of all things, the council was emphasizing economic improvement and self-development. One way this came to pointed tension was through the Hopi and Navajo councils' leasing land to mining companies, which was strongly opposed by the Traditionalists.

Another path this took was connection with UFO stories. Some Traditionalists became involved with a teaching that UFO contact would validate Hopi prophecies. This teaching included the belief in a messianic figure from Venus who would arrive on earth, and that the UFOs were inhabited by the 10 lost tribes of Israel who were human but had greater powers (Irwin 2008, 350). This resembles Mormon beliefs about the lost tribes of Israel, and it is notable that Mormon missionaries had presented themselves to the Hopi as the prophesied white man who would return with a word from God.

Tension continued with Traditionalists and the majority of Hopi who believed that this small segment was distorting actual Hopi teaching. Non-Native followers, referring to themselves as the Rainbow Tribe, emphasized the universality of this prophetic movement but were viewed by many Hopi as disrupting and undermining Hopi life. This tension continued through the 1990s. During that time Dan Evehema, over a hundred years old, told the story of the conflict to the Lutheran minister Thomas Mails, who published his prophetic interpretations (Irwin 2008, 351). These letters were polemical in defense of the Traditionalists, and emphasized the universality of the message and the need to return to a simple way of life that was not materialistic (Irwin 2008, 351).

In the 1980s the Hopi Health Department held a meeting on the status of Hopi mental health and argued for the importance of Hopi prophecies and their influence on positive value. However, such prophecy could also be used as a way to avoid personal responsibility and embrace helplessness (Irwin 2008, 352). The report diagrammed the Hopi belief in three previous worlds, and the negative projection for this world. This included overpopulation, conquest of the United States by a foreign power, earthquakes, catastrophic changes in weather, increased starvation and diseases, ecological exploitation, the discovery of life on other planets, and the dominance of women in political affairs (Irwin 2008, 353). A further difficulty lies in health reports indicating that the Hopi are benefiting from increased secularization in their health system. The issue is one of making comparisons. If a comparison is made to times in the past two centuries when the Hopi dealt with Western diseases like smallpox then there is undoubtedly increased health now. However, a comparison of health with times before contact with the West would be hard to make.

In the 1990s, Thomas Banacya presented himself as the spokesman for the Hopi high religious leaders. He gave a Traditionalist interpretation of Hopi prophecy that emphasized the lack of harmony of modern culture, its spiritual bankruptcy, and the need to return to a connectedness with Mother Earth (Irwin 2008, 353). In 1992, he spoke to the United Nations, declaring it was his last message and would bring the fulfillment of prophecy. In 1993, Martin Gashweseoma gave another talk at the UN: "This conference marks a significant gathering of Native representatives, all offering prophetic warnings. The conference was called 'Cry of the Earth: The Legacy of the First Nations,' . . . Prophetic traditions similar to those of the Hopis were articulated by leaders from each nation" (Irwin 2008, 354).

This case illustrates all of the themes confronting contemporary Native American religion. Internal challenges are about how to understand the religious tradition and apply it to the contemporary world. External challenges come from nonpersonal factors such as economics, political changes, illnesses, and the environment. External challenges from personal sources come particularly in the form of competing worldviews and interpretations.

In the particular case of the Hopi, the resiliency of a belief system and way of life is demonstrated in the face of challenges from the American government and Western worldviews. Even so, what is brought to the forefront is the reality of very different beliefs that cannot be reduced away to political, economic, or psychological factors. Whether it is Christianity or Western materialism (of Marx, Freud, and Darwin) on the one hand, or the belief in an eternal cycle and return of all things, these beliefs are logically opposed. A resolution at the practical level of tolerating the other while we attempt to live peacefully is not the same as an actual coming to understand the true nature of reality. The skeptical attitude of Western scholars about the human ability to do this is rooted in materialist philosophy that often goes unnoticed. This skepticism itself is part of the challenge. The Hopi do not accept the premise that humans cannot know (nor do the Christians). Thus, what we are left with are competing knowledge claims that will continue to be points of division until they are worked out into common agreement.

CONCLUSION

The history of interaction between Native Americans and Europeans has been one of differing worldviews interacting. These have competing answers to basic questions about authority, reality, and value. Concluding requires asking questions that require further reflection: Are humans able to come to agreement in the answers they give to these questions, and How can this happen? Although there are many ways that differences can be tolerated as we work to live together, it is also certain that competing answers to these kinds of questions will inevitably lead to division (which is different

than diversity). The above study has highlighted various 20th-century religious practices of Native Americans, both those who seek to ground their religion in tradition and those who look for synthesis with what were originally religions imported from Europe. The extent to which these competing answers are recognized and clearly stated will be the extent to which progress on agreement can start.

These questions highlight my conclusion, which is that at root what is needed is much discussion about basic beliefs that divide people. It cannot be argued that this was tried without success, indeed it seems never to have been tried in this history and continues to be ignored. Furthermore, it is a necessary approach if the humanity of all participants as rational, belief-forming beings is to be upheld. To reduce the interaction to power politics, geography, or economics is to reduce the human element of thinking and believing. To attempt unity in beliefs apart from much discussion is to fail to understand the complexity of worldviews and worldview differences, and the need to ask and answer questions that take time to think through. The time or energy needed for this kind of discussion is less than that devoted to the mechanisms of war, so it is not outside the scope of what humans have the strength to do.

This brings to mind again the Schwemberger Collection of photos mentioned at the beginning. Taken by a Franciscan, these pictures show both traditional life and Native Americans in then contemporary garb. What they do not, and cannot, show are beliefs behind these varying ways of living. If such pictures evoke concern or sadness then this can be a motivation toward working on what continues to divide.

◀ FURTHER INVESTIGATIONS ▶

The above discussion asks, but leaves unanswered, some of the most basic questions that can be asked by humans. The formal similarities between any religions, or in this case Christianity and Native American religions, such as rituals, sacred objects, holy days, moral rules, and social structures, are not helpful in telling us about the meaning attributed to these activities. Indeed, it is because religion is reduced to such activities that some persons claim to be nonreligious. However, if we wish to understand the meaning of these activities we are quickly forced to consider how these activities relate to answers given to basic questions. Rather than superficially defining religion as these external realities, once we consider the meaning sought for in answering basic questions we can begin to understand that a) all persons answer these questions with some degree of consciousness and b) divisions between religious groups are not first and foremost about external behavior but about how basic questions are answered.

Attempting to find ways to live together while also essentially ignoring how basic questions are answered is called pragmatism. This approach describes

much of the history of interaction between the United States and Native American tribes. Ongoing challenges remain because pragmatism cannot help in bringing agreement about meaning, and humans are characteristically searching for meaning.

The remaining conflicts between the United States and Native American tribes, or between religious groups like Christians and Native Americans, can be understood as at root being about differing answers about the purpose of human life, what it means to be a human, and how we understand ultimate reality. The idea that all humans simply want happiness in this life, and that happiness is attained through consumerism, is just another competitor in the mix of how these questions are answered.

Answering these basic questions is not simply a philosophical luxury; it is related to the very meaning with which individuals invest their life. Indeed, there is an inverse relation between lack of meaning and living the examined life. This is as true in the conflicts studied in this chapter as sit in for any other area of human life and history.

Note

1. Pictures taken on the Navajo reservation between the years 1902 and 1908 by a Franciscan brother.

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