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Ask an Indigenous Theologian (Response)

Randy Woodley interview by Rachel Held Evans

“Last week, as part of our popular “Ask a...” series, I introduced you to Dr. Randy Woodley, a teacher, a writer, a missiologist, an activist, a poet, an historian, a former pastor, a Cherokee, a Christian, and a missionary.”

A legal descendent of the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians, Randy has been active in service among America’s indigenous communities since 1984. Randy and his wife Edith (E. Shoshone/Choctaw) lead a local Native American gathering at their home in Newberg, Oregon under the auspices of [*Eagle’s Wings Ministry*](#). They have four children and a small, semi-sustainable farm. The Woodleys have developed a uniquely holistic model of service among Native Americans called “Ministry in a Good Way” out of which grew in 2004, a 50 acre sustainable farm and Christian community called Elobeh Village for Indigenous Leadership and Ministry Development. At Elobeh, the Woodleys taught sustainability, eco-justice, microeconomics, leadership and mission. In 2008 they gave up their farm and were forced to disband the community due to continued violence and political pressure from local White Supremacists.

Currently, Randy serves as Distinguished Associate Professor of Faith and Culture and Director of Intercultural and Indigenous Studies at [*George Fox Seminary*](#) in Portland, Oregon. He has authored many articles and contributed chapters to several books, including the *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, *The Justice Project*, *The Global Dictionary of Theology*, and his first monograph, [*Living in Color: Embracing God’s Passion for Ethnic Diversity*](#). His new book, just released this summer from Eerdmans Press, is [*Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision*](#). He is a founding board member of NAIITS, the North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies and is active in ongoing concerns of emerging faith expressions, diversity, eco-justice, reconciliation, ecumenism, inter-faith dialogue, mission and indigenous peoples. His blog posts can be found on [*Ethnic Space and Faith*](#), [*Emergent Village Voice*](#) and [*God’s Politics*](#) (Sojourners).

You asked some fantastic questions last week, and Randy has responded in kind—with wisdom, insight, and grace. Enjoy!

From Travis: How has your ethnic heritage shaped the way you see the Gospel?

Travis, thanks for your question. At first it didn't. By that I mean the gospel I learned at age 19 told me to ignore my ethnic heritage because it was "of the flesh." This is often the case in instances where there is a dominant culture so closely associated with the gospel, especially under a colonial past. Because Euro-Americans contextualized the gospel so well, (see the "White Jesus" on the wall), Euro-Americans became confused over what is gospel and what is culture. To most mission-sending agencies, even today, they don't make the distinctions well, so everything that does not fit into Euro-American ideas of culture is suspect or even demonic. That confusion was passed on to our Indian people and we simply began to mimic the Euro-Americans with a poor imitation of a bad model.

Back in the mid-1980s I spent three years in seminary trying to find alternative models of presenting the gospel that would not be oppressive to our Native American people. Fortunately, in an historical society's archives, I came across twelve boxes of original journals and letters from a missionary named Evan Jones and his Cherokee co-worker, Jesse Bushyhead (1821-1871). I found in this team an understanding of how Jesus could be expressed through our Keetoowah Indian culture contextually. When I got out of seminary in 1989, I "hit the ground with my feet running" and I've been on that journey ever since. My feeling is that if Jesus cannot be expressed equally in and through every culture on earth, then we are not sharing the real Jesus, but rather some foreign religion.

From Rachel: What is the most common stereotype/assumption you encounter regarding indigenous people?

Well Rachel, first off I want to say thanks for the invitation to participate in this forum. What a great idea! Two questions I consistently get from Christians are: 1. How far can you go in contextualizing the gospel in Indian culture? And, 2. What do you think of Indian casinos? Other questions include wrong assumptions about free housing and education from the US Government. Working backwards on these:

3. Indians do not get free housing or free education from the US Government. (My wife and I will be glad to show you our mortgage and our school loans if needed). The real problem though, is the assumption that Indians always need to be helped. Don't let our incredible poverty, desperate statistics and sad history fool you in to thinking we are only needy people. Perhaps, we are really in a position, because of a foundationally non-western worldview, to help our non-Indian friends see their life and faith in much more meaningful ways. Remember, Jesus didn't have a Western, Enlightenment-bound worldview. Our spirituality and worldview is often much closer to how Jesus looked at things. That's why it takes all of us to see the bigger picture.

2. Most Indian tribes do not have casinos. Most of those who do were living in two-thirds world poverty only decades ago. Some tribes with casinos do very well at taking care of their tribal members, regaining their lost cultural values, educating their young people, and creating businesses from the casino profits. Other tribes don't. Many, though, do not even make a profit. Because materialism is not an Indian value, I don't like the idea of casinos, but I'm not going to begrudge them an income stream where there are no others available.

1. The question about how far we can go in contextualizing the gospel to our culture is really up to those on the inside of the culture to decide. I don't look at it as a line to cross but rather a process or discussion among the relevant communities. I say go all the way, as long as Jesus is at the center.

From HQ: How do you view or balance the idea of evangelization or otherwise spreading the Good News with the colonial/imperialist history that has accompanied such efforts in the past and is still an influence today? My parents come from a country that was colonized until recently by the French, and I'm therefore always uncomfortable when "missionary work" or bringing the Gospel to our "brothers & sisters in the dark" are mentioned in the context of church communities working abroad. I'm interested in how you approach this dialectic.

HQ, I don't think of evangelism the same way now that I used to when I was a "flaming evangelist." I like St. Francis' quote, "Preach the gospel at all times and when necessary, use words." I think the foundational problem here is the dualism of the Western gospel. Western folk are graph-o-centric, in that they believe the gospel is the Bible, or keeping doctrines, or creeds, or covenants or the use of some other outside arbiter. For Westerners it is all about orthodoxy.

Jesus told a story about a son who said he wouldn't go work in the field and he went anyway and a son who said he'd go and never went. It does not matter what one says they believe—only what one does. In my new book (shameless plug) *Shalom and the Community of Creation*, I deconstruct the Western worldview including charts and lists of the differences between indigenous and Western faith systems, etc—the bottom-line being that Westerners have a totally different definition of what it means to believe than Jesus and most indigenous people. Colonialism is about power and conformity to a set of beliefs. Gospel is about love and giving away power. The Spirit affirms our uniqueness and giftings. Empire conforms us into a particular image.

As far as evangelizing those "in the dark" goes, I think that's often the language of White supremacy or as Kipling wrote, "the White man's burden." Everyone, but especially White people because of the colonial past, must earn the right to share the story of Jesus with others. When I teach missiology (the study of mission), I have some assumptions that are now being referenced by my students as "Professor Woodley's Missiological Imperatives." Here they are:

There is no-where we can go where Jesus is not already present and active.

2. Since Jesus is active everywhere, our first responsibility in any culture is to discover what Jesus is doing.
3. God expects two conversions out of every encounter, our conversion to the truth in their culture, and their conversion to the truth we bring to the encounter.
4. Conversion is both instantaneous and a process.
5. Our humility should naturally lead us to convert first.
6. Our process of conversion may take years.
7. When and if they allow us to share the message that describes the gospel they have noticed us living all this time, then the process formally known as cultural contextualization of the gospel can occur.
8. Their process of conversion may take years.

So, in one sense, HQ, we are all “in the dark,” but that’s okay. I’ve noticed that God likes to hang out in dark places.

From Kate: Do other ingenious people see your faith as "selling out?"

Yes, Kate, some do, and actually, I can’t blame them. If most Americans really understood the depths of degradation that our Native people have gone through, and continue to go through, at the hands of the US Government and the Church-they would be in disbelief of how any Indian could ever become a Christian. But on the other hand, Indians are pretty forgiving people and many Native folks really like Jesus in spite of Christianity.

The old people I knew years ago were real traditional elders. They were tolerant and very kind to everyone. They knew there was only one God-the Creator, call him what you will-and that Creator God is the only one to hear our prayers. They were by and large, much better Christians without formal Christian beliefs than the Christians who tried to convert them. Today, we have what I call “neo-traditionalist.” They don’t like Christians

much and I've been called out for my faith in Jesus a few times. Unfortunately, it was actually the Indian Christian evangelical/fundamentalists who we have received the most persecution from over the years. They were, and many still are, 100% against the use of Native American culture.

From Genevieve: Randy, I am a descendant of several tribes in the Midwest - although most of my Native blood is from the Mississippi/Pembina band Ojibwe. Most of my family practices either a mix of Native/Catholic faith or straight Native faith, although my extended family, from my grandmother down, adopted a Christian evangelical faith. My extended family is very anti-Native faith because they see Spiritism as inherently satanic. I would like my children to have an awareness and even participate, as they grow up in some Native ceremonies, such as pow-wow and other gatherings and to teach them some of the ancient stories. Do you have any recommendations for Christian parents regarding resources or ways in which they can teach Native oral traditions and ceremonies without sacrificing Christian values or endangering their children by putting them in the path of dangerous satanic ritual? My "gut" tells me that my many relatives who practice Native faith are NOT satanic - they are loving people who speak frequently about a God who greatly resembles my own. But I know almost nothing about Native religion or theology, having been completely cut off from it by my own family since it was seen as something evil and dangerous. I'd love to hear your thoughts.

Genevieve, short answer to a long question. Go with your gut. The missionaries did a real number on us by trying to make us White instead of allowing Jesus to love us through our own cultures. I feel that about 95% of our ceremonies reflect Jesus or point to him somehow. Those who condemn our cultures are simply teaching us to hate ourselves and really, to hate God for making us Indian. Go with your gut, and do like we all have to do in every culture, separate the good and less good. Strengthen the things that remain.

From Terry: Randy, what would you say to Christians who refuse to see the way indigenous people are treated in the United States as a problem?

I'd say "where's your heart?" Among other things, I teach American Church History. Once people know the familiar story of history it is much easier to spot injustice as it happens today. The real reason people don't want to recognize it though, is that they don't want to be reminded that they are still living on stolen land. How do you make an honest theology of the land from that? How do you justify a church that has purchased stolen property? How do you face a people who have had everything taken from them and who are still willing to love you, feel sorry for you, and even help you in spite of all the suffering they have gone through? It's a tough thing for Americans to face with integrity.

From Erin: Hi Randy, I live in Lac La Biche, Alberta, Canada...highly populated region of First Nations (mainly Cree and Dene) and Metis people... What do you see the role being for the white settlers now? We cannot be helpers/healers as this is still proving too oppressive (I work at a Native Friendship Centre). While residential schools might have been closed (that last one in Canada in 1996), the Sixties Scoop pattern still has lingering effects: aboriginal children are still by over-apprehended by Children Services and placed in white foster homes. This is just an example of the kind of systemic evil we are all facing, but how can non-native people support indigenous people best?

Erin, it sounds like you really "get" how messed up everything is in Indian country. The whole system laid on us is pretty evil. The thing is, Native people won't likely heal until White people listen to the pain, repent (action, not words...enough words), give up power and make restitution. I hope it is Christians who start this process. We all need healing and lots of it needs to happen together. Because White folks are responsible for much of the pain, it takes White people with humility and courage to step up and be willing to be Jesus (for real this time).

You can still do a lot of good, don't give up so soon. The best is yet to come (even if it comes with lots of pain, I know...). Simple things also mean a lot. Rides to the dialysis clinic. Being a safe house for kids on the reservation. Closing down nearby liquor stores. Checking diabetic's sugar and blood pressure. Cutting wood for elders. Eating at the Sr.

Center. Listening over coffee. Running an AA or spouse abuse program. Providing teen mom's parent training. And, all these and more can be done by empowering Native folks to do them as you make a slow exit.

From Rachel: Since you're something of an expert on multiculturalism, what books would you recommend as primers for folks exploring this topic for the first time?

Top 3 From a Christian Perspective: If I could only choose three, these win:

- OK, shameless plug number two: My book, *Living in Color: Embracing God's Passion for Ethnic Diversity* is actually really good at laying down a theology of diversity and it is the first to take the discussion out of the Black/White binary.
- The book, *Divided By Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* by Michael Emerson and Christian Smith is really the classic.
- My friend Soong-Chan Rah has written two great books, but *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Captivity* really has a lot to say to us today.

Top 3 Not Specifically Christian: I've used all three of these in my courses but there are so many good ones out there...

- *White Privilege* by Paula S. Rothenberg
- *The Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism and White Privilege* by Robert Jensen
- "*Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*": *A Psychologist Explains the Development of Racial Identity* by Beverly Daniel Tatum

(I also like anything by Tim Wise)