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A VIEW OF THE NATIVE NORTH AMERICAN CONTEXTUAL MOVEMENT and ITS UNDECIDED FUTURE

Randy Woodley

Background

The origin of what is being called the Native American Contextual Movement is founded on the Mission of the Triune God. The Creator situated First Man and First Woman in a garden and then began the contextualization process by revealing himself in their garden culture. The expectation of Creator in the original garden culture, and every culture since, has been to produce sincere intimate relationships built upon an understanding of who God is. This message is contextualized best to all cultures by understanding God's *shalom* kingdom.

Contextualization, in the context of this paper, means to present the good news of the *shalom* kingdom of Jesus Christ in a way that people can understand and relate to it within their own cultural context. My use of the concept goes beyond mere translation of Scripture. It includes the belief that God can be found at work in every culture of the world and expressed through any culture.

The incarnation of Christ is the prime example of and model for contextualization. Here the whole person of God (Colossians 1:19) is made manifest in one human being and in one human culture — the Creator becoming a human being in Jesus Christ contextualizing himself within the Hebrew culture. We can see the contextualization process clearly by following the logic in Philippians 2:5-11. Jesus empties himself of all his divine privileges. He comes under threat as a baby born in poverty. He must learn the language and develop an understanding of relationships and proper behavior in that culture. He must learn the family structure, eating habits, sexual habits, humor, everything about that culture. Jesus must learn to respond to authority — both human and divine — and submit to those authorities for thirty years before becoming a teacher.

In a broader sense, Christ is contextualized to all other human cultures as well, with the Hebrew culture being the most complete package from which we have to view the process. The good news of the *shalom* kingdom has been contextualized thereafter in particular cultures, making contextualization a universal process. No human culture is ineligible to be a receiver of the contextualized gospel.

The universal nature of God, a natural and appealing concept according to Romans 1:19ff, somehow offends people whose *cultus* perspective negates *Missio Externa* and in fact, becomes to them a questionable concept. Such was perhaps the case with the Jews present when St. Paul exclaimed “Now I go to the Gentiles.” The narrative in Acts 13:46-48 (NLT) indicates both the particularity of the gospel for the Jews and the universality for all other nations.

Then Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and declared, "It was necessary that this Good News from God be given first to you Jews. But since you have rejected it and judged yourselves unworthy of eternal life — well, we will offer it to Gentiles. For this is as the Lord commanded us when he said, 'I have made you a light to the Gentiles, to bring salvation to the farthest corners of the earth.'"

Luke makes note of two similar statements by Paul. The first statement is made in Corinth (Acts 18:6) and the second one in Rome, concluding the book of Acts (Acts 28:28). As shown by Paul's quote from the prophet Isaiah, this was not a new idea in Israel. The Hebrew Scriptures reveal the universality of the message as demonstrated by Yahweh himself in numerous passages such as Isaiah 65:1 where Yahweh states:

I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me;
I was found by those who did not seek me.
To a nation that did not call on my name,
I said, 'Here am I, here am I.' (NIV)

In Paul's mind, “going to the Gentiles” was fulfilling the trans-cultural mandate to reach out to those from other nations and

cultures. Paul's writings are replete with examples of his theological thinking and his methods of contextualization. Suffice it to say, Paul the great missionary carried a universal message of good news that demonstrated people don't need to change their culture in order to find Christ — and — Christ can be found and expressed equally in every culture of the world.

From the Apostle Paul until now there are numerous missionaries who, to one degree or another, embodied a message of contextualization. Patrick of Ireland, who brought the gospel to the Celts, was contextual in much of his approach. Methodius & Cyril in the ninth century contextualized the gospel to Eastern Europe, focusing on the questions & concerns of the local community. Mateo Ricci, Jesuit Missionary to China, allowed the context of Chinese culture to determine their form of Christianity. Bartholome de las Casas (1484-1566) must be given some credit, in trying to uphold the rights of indigenous people in the Caribbean by advocating the survival of their communities in the midst of genocide.

De las Casas was perhaps the first missionary in his era to confront the Church as an insider for the rights of those outside the Church. Unlike many Christians before him, and those today who set up charitable aid stations in order to relieve personal problems actually caused by the systemic powers, de las Casas spent his life bucking the evil system (the systemic demonic powers within the Church) pleading the rights of the powerless Indians. He did this during a time of many “justified” atrocities against Native Americans. For de las Casas, there was something in indigenous culture worth preserving. This recognition of “a culture worth preserving” is perhaps the first necessary step leading to contextualization. One must see value in another culture — even to a small degree — in order to deem it worthy of preservation.

In a real sense, all true theology and ministry is contextual, considering the culture of the people as important and believing the Creator's desire is to be expressed through other cultures. If any theology or mission does not take into account the importance of the culture of each particular people, then it does not appear to follow Christ's example of contextualization.

God sent Jesus into the world of human beings as a human being, because those God wished to reach are human beings. Beyond that, God sent Jesus as a human being to a particular culture — a first century rural Jewish culture. From within that particular culture the Creator planned to reach the Jews. Yet, it was not Creator's plan to reach just Jews with the message of the kingdom, and so he designed the gospel to be contextual, that is, transferable. Acts 17:25-27 and Revelation 7:9, along with other Scriptures, confirm that God does not prefer one culture over another. All are acceptable and important to Him.

Although the Scriptures themselves were written to a number of particular ancient cultures, they were intended to be translated and contextualized beyond those cultures. In Jesus' own method of disciple making, while he taught particular disciples, he also intentionally taught those who lived beyond the life of his disciples. If we do a good job of applying Christ's teachings, we will always find ourselves contextualizing them from his first century Jewish culture to our own twenty-first century culture.

Invariably, it has been the case in history that weak Christianity follows weak contextualization. When the gospel first reached America's shores a contextual approach to mission among Native Americans was rarely practiced. Since those earliest days in Native American missions, the results have only become more abysmal. Until recently, most of the methodology of the missionaries has changed very little. The core principles and attitudes towards contextualization among most denominations have wrought little innovation. The lack of contextualization in Native North American missions has not been the only problem, but this missing element, coupled with hegemony, has perhaps had the most severe consequences.

Historically, missionaries and mission sending agencies participated to various degrees with Government agencies and their policies by attempting to alleviate what has officially been dubbed the "Indian Problem". These policies, claiming civilization as their objective, have included many programs intended to assimilate Natives into white society. The practical reality is that most of the Government and mission policies lead

to the eventual goal of cultural genocide of all indigenous Americans.¹ Cherokee/Osage theologian George Tinker expresses this march towards genocide by stating,

Cultural genocide can be defined as the effective destruction of a people by systematically or systemically (intentionally or unintentionally in order to achieve other goals) destroying, eroding, or undermining the integrity of the culture and system of values that defines a people and gives them life. First of all, it involves the destruction of those cultural structures of existence that give a people a sense of holistic and communal integrity. It does this by limiting a people's freedom to practice their culture and to live out their lives in culturally appropriate patterns. It effectively destroys a people by eroding both their self-esteem and the interrelationships that bind them together as a community. In North American mission history, cultural genocide almost always involved an attack on the spiritual foundations of a people's by denying the existing ceremonial and mythological sense of community in relationship to the Sacred Other. Finally, it erodes a people's self-image as a whole people by attacking or belittling every aspect of native culture.²

Mission activity in North America customarily began from a place of superior political power. To this day, most mission agencies still do not deviate far from the principles that allowed such policies to occur. As a result of the failure to be contextual within Native American cultures, the Church of Jesus Christ is,

¹ Col John Chivington, Methodist minister and commander of the grotesque massacre of over one hundred and fifty old men, women and children at Sand Creek in Colorado, in some ways represents the convergence of American political and American Christian intention in both his actions and his statement "nits make lice". Both interests had white civilization as the goal. Although the missionaries by and large rejected direct violence as a means of carrying out this goal, their methods of "civilization" of the Indian had then, and have today the same results — that is — attempted cultural genocide.

² George Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 6.

by and large, still seen in Indian country as the “white man’s religion”. This scenario is ineffectual for Natives but works well for the white and affluent in a society built upon a foundation of “white privilege” which is, as my friend Jim Wallis likes to point out, a polite way of saying “white supremacy”.

In spite of the lack of overall contextualization, my personal experience bears out that there are actually many more followers of *the Jesus Way* in Indian country than may be realized. It never surprises me to find those elders in Indian country who clandestinely follow Jesus Christ, choosing to read their Bibles and pray at home. This surreptitious posture is maintained primarily because the Church will not allow these believers to be indigenous Christians from within their own culture. These stalwart believers are “not allowed” by the present system to be whom God has created them to be. This is one of many indicators pointing to hegemony and to the fact that many missionaries are still confused about how Jesus Christ can be contextualized from within Native American cultures.

Much of the confusion still comes from the long held belief that European culture is far superior to Native American culture. Missionaries have difficulty finding godly value in North American indigenous cultures.

Historically, it is understandable why missionaries find little if any value in Native North American cultures. Several theories of Indian inferiority had come and gone by the nineteenth century that even included a debate over the existence of the presence of an “Indian soul”. The words of Henry Clay, U.S. Secretary of State in 1825, make this claim of superiority evident.

Be it known to you now that it is impossible to civilize Indians. There was never a full-blooded Indian that ever took to civilization. It is not in their nature. They are a race destined for extinction and I do not think that they are worth preserving. They are inferior to the Anglo-Saxon race which is now quickly replacing them on this continent. They are not an improvable breed, and their disappearance from the human family will be no great loss to the world. In point of fact, they are rapidly disappearing and if

government should take proper action, in fifty years from this time there will not be any of them left.³

A 1987 standard high school history book, *American History: A Survey*, concerning pre-Columbus America, stated the land was “...empty of mankind and its works”. The story of Europeans in the New World, the book explained, is the story of the creation of a civilization where none existed.”⁴ Despite the missionaries’ and missionary sending agencies’ stated preference towards meekness, the predisposition was and is to embrace a position reflecting an attitude of Social Darwinism. Jerry Mander uncovers this attitude when he admits, “Our assumption of superiority does not come to us by accident. We have been trained in it. It is soaked into the fabric of Western religion, economic systems and technology. They reek of their greater virtues and capabilities.”⁵

So when we speak of contextualization, both then and now, we must understand the difficulties at the outset that Euro-Americans have held in the formation and preservation of hundreds of years of lies, justifying the position that their culture is more godly than our own native cultures. I believe this hegemony to be *the* most significant cultural impasse even today, for most white missionaries. Although some white missionaries have over the years, served indigenous people in many wonderful ways, there are arguably few who have crossed over the wall of superiority in believing their own culture, (whether theologically, economically, intellectually, socially, or spiritually) to be more godly. Because hegemony cannot produce true contextualization, I have chosen to focus this overview of the contextual movement only on Native Americans who

³ Henry Clay as quoted in William McGloughlin, *Champions of the Cherokees: Evan and John B. Jones* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), Preface.

⁴ *American History: A Survey* available at www.theatlantic.com/issues/2002/03/mann.htm

⁵ Jerry Mander, *The Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology & the Survival of the Indian Nations* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1991), 209.

themselves, have spent considerable time and energy contextualizing the good news among their own cultures.

Native North American Contextualization Efforts

Perhaps the beginnings of the Native North American Contextual Movement can be traced back to those persecuted Indians who, in order to follow Christ, first refused to exchange their own imperfect culture for an imperfect European culture. Instead, they hid away like their early predecessors in the Roman catacombs and prayed to Jesus secretly for fear of retribution. Although accounts are few, there must have been those in early Native American missions among the praying towns of New England and others in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, able to see the remarkable similarities between Native American spirituality and what the Bible purports as true spirituality. At the turn of the nineteenth century the most well known native Christian in this regard was Black Elk, the Lakota Holy Man.

In *Black Elk: Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism*, Damien Costello's postmodern interpretation of Black Elk is a great addition to Black Elk scholarship.⁶ Using Lamén Sannah's work to strengthen his position, Costello shows that early Catholic missionaries on the Native field were naturally changed, at least to a position of cultural ambivalence. But, in my opinion, the unfortunate overall results of the missionary position, with few exceptions, still reflected the goals and intentions of the imperialistic colonial political powers.

This is not to say in any way that certain missionaries did not see some good in Native American culture and values, but rather that they invariably did not see themselves and their own culture as equal to those to whom they were serving. Regardless of the denomination or method, the results of colonial mission programs show that the missionary endeavor invariably produced missionaries who approached Native American people from a position of strength and superiority rather than equality

⁶ Damien Costello, *Black Elk: Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005). Editor's note: See Costello's paper, *Black Elk Speaks*, in this journal.

— not with cultural or epistemological humility. In contrast, we learn from the life and teachings of Jesus, the Master of contextualization, giving up one's power is *a priori* to the missionary task.

As Costello rightly points out, Black Elk can be credited for negotiating both worlds as Christian Evangelist and as Lakota Holy Man. I believe that Black Elk's ability to navigate the two worlds came from the strength, power and truth found in both systems — but primarily from the ethic of tolerance found in his Lakota value system. While commending those early missionaries, who on occasion did great things among us, we should not forget that Black Elk and all other Lakota believers were restricted in developing a truly Lakota Christianity. The freedom to develop such a public framework simply did not exist at that time. And, I would ask anyone who understands our traditional indigenous values to consider: can freedom in Christ truly be indigenous, if the cultural expression of that freedom must be minimized or made clandestine?

The ability for the Lakota and all Native North American converts to cope with this lack of public expression was drawn not only from a deep Native ethic of religious tolerance, but also from their ability to have continuity in the realm of the sacred, even when restricted to select Native gatherings and to their own private lives. In Native North American worldviews all of life is sacred. To keep one's faith in Christ culturally relevant but hidden could be done, but transcending this reality to the next generation would prove more difficult. The forced concealment of such cultural/spiritual practices would eventually have direct negative consequences on the contextualization of Christianity among Native believers. Let me explain.

During Black Elk's time (the transition from a fully native cultural existence to forced assimilation), Native converts understood their cultural identity. Even though families and clans might have actually been separated, the memories of "the tribe" were still a strong source of their identity. Therefore, adopting white man's culture was often inconvenient, but it generally affected the first generation Native convert's self-

image very little. Black Elk was such a person, as were many others. These people spoke their language, knew their ceremonies, remembered the stories and lived according to those values with little trouble — as Christians. Such a person if necessary, could even cut their hair, stop speaking their language in public, attend the white man's church and still have singular identity as an Indian.

As the realities of tribal life increasingly faded, a new kind of Indian was born and resultantly, a new kind of Indian Christian was made. This new Indian had little foothold in either world. Negotiating these two worlds was in some ways more difficult for the modern Christian Indian than for those who had lived during the former tribal era. Pressures stemming from Government and missionary policies, and the need to survive, often prevented this new era Native American from "returning to the blanket". The dominant society continually forced its culture upon Natives, making assimilation real and inevitable.

Naturally, those in the second and latter generations had a crisis of identity. By this time the "half-breed" phenomenon was not only a cultural dilemma, but also a physical reality through intermarriage or other reproductive results, forcing them to look at themselves in a whole new way. With a natural respect for their elders, later generation converts adhered to the outward forms of Christianity that they had observed, making some of the dominant culture's expressions the hallmarks of their own faith. Those who wished to hold on to "the blanket" were often forced to find other stealthier ways of expressing their faith and culture. This forced dualism is still ever present throughout most of Native North America.

I will mention one example. When we first opened a contextual Native American church in Tulsa Oklahoma, I remember the speech of a traditional Kiowa elder addressing this same issue. The elder woman said her father had predicted this day when the Christian Indians and the traditional Indians would come back together to worship the Creator and his Son. She addressed one particular comment to another Kiowa present. This man came from an old Kiowa Christian family who had long since shed the external vestiges of their Native American spirituality,

such as the drum and eagle feathers. The elder called this man out, whose father was among the first appointed deacons of the Kiowas, and said, "I remember when you and your brothers and sisters would go to sleep. Your dad would sneak over to our place and sometimes sing all night on the drum, getting back at sunrise before anyone saw him. Once in awhile though, the missionaries would find out and make things rough on him. It's good that no one has to hide their beliefs anymore."

Today, many Kiowa, whom I love dearly and consider my relatives, may typify the dualistic results of the missionary influence and their penchant towards a colonized form of Christianity. Very few Kiowa Christians in the churches are able to express themselves spiritually with congruence. Instead, their faith has most often been expressed in one of three ways:

1. They have abandoned most of the religious and spiritual symbols of their Indian culture altogether and have in most ways, with the exception of singing hymns in the Kiowa language (but with piano accompaniment) adopted the cultural faith expressions of the whites taught them by missionaries.
2. They express their faith in the culture of the dominant society at church meetings and then express their Kiowa cultural ways outside the church in ceremonies. For example, in church an eagle feather and cedar smoke would be disallowed, but outside the church one might use it in a ceremonial way.
3. Their faith is expressed generally the same as those white Christians around them until a deeper faith is needed, such as during a crisis of faith such as the need for healing a sick family member. They then revert to their Indian symbols and ceremonies for faith expression.

None of these alternatives offers much congruence of faith and culture. As a result, a weak faith is oftentimes produced. Often testimony times in these churches are filled with sacred remembrances of those first Kiowa Christians and their strong faith. The strong faith of those early Native American Christians, I believe, is more likely attributed to their security in their own

Native identity, coupled with their love for Christ. In my own experience I believe this to be the reality of not just the Kiowa, but of all Native North Americans where a non-contextualized mission approach has had a strong influence.

The transition into the twentieth century in Native North America (the time of lowest Native population) produced native Christians who were systematically forced to adopt the culture of the dominant society or else pay a heavy price of social malignment, physical punishment or even death. This was often the case in the government funded/mission administrated Residential Boarding School system.⁷ Perhaps more than at any time, missions were administered from a position of power and superiority to the “unlearned savage” rather than in humility and weakness.

World War I and especially World War II offered Native Americans a chance to see the rest of the world. Indians often traveled to places such as Europe where they (ironically) were held in high esteem, even though it was sometimes as an item of novelty. In these far away lands, Native American soldiers were allowed privileges not afforded them in the socially restrictive climate of North America. When they returned home they began to push their former restrictions. By the 1950s things were already beginning to change as noted by the sympathetic (yet continued paternalistic) tone from a 1952 handbook.⁸

The assumption of cultural assimilation into the dominant culture was still present as noted by the latter, “Do not spend too much time trying to learn the language.... [If] the Indians among whom you are to work do not speak English, they will soon do so”.⁹ Yet, there are hints that a desire for understanding the

⁷ In Ward Churchill’s *Kill The Indian, Save The Man: The Genocidal Impact of American Indian Residential Schools* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2004), xxiv. Churchill shows the correlation of genocide with the boarding school system. He claims, among other statements, that the death rate of Indian boarding school children was in some cases higher than those of the Jews held in Nazi concentration camps.

⁸ Lindquist, *New Trails for Old: A Handbook for Missionary Workers Among the American Indian*, 1952), 51.

plight of the Native was developing. Perhaps these were the first steps toward seeing value in the culture. He continues, “Show a lively interest in all things Indian, without condescension. A genuine love for people is a must for a missionary....”¹⁰ Unfortunately, the next paragraph re-introduces the paternalistic patterns from the past.

The fact that Indians have been generally wronged, cheated, divested of initiative, belittled, subject to constant oversight and direction, is not ample reason to be over sentimental about them, or to make sentimentalism a philosophy of service in solving the resulting problems. The wounds are deep and the scars easily opened, and with some Indian people they are dripping with blood, full of hatred and bitterness. It is both a psychological and a physiological as well as a genuine spiritual problem. Indian people, especially Indian young people need high hopes, high inspiration, high ideals, high resolves, in full measure and pressed down, to acquire and possess permanently the personal discipline so necessary in performing enlarged services.¹¹

There is no doubt in my mind from whose culture the author intended to draw for these high hopes, high inspirations, high ideals and high resolve. Certainly he did not mean they would be drawn from the indigenous culture.

By the 1960s the fabric of a socially constructed white North American society began to show severe wear, and as a result, more freedom of expression from marginalized groups was tolerated. Included among these groups was the continued Native American desire to receive many of the same rights of expression as other members of society. The late 1960s and early 1970s in particular was a time when, as we often hear people say, “it was okay to be Indian again.”

⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

This opportunity for public self-expression of indigenaity also influenced Native American Christian thinkers and theologians. As First Nations Christians examined the Scriptures through renewed cultural lenses, they were more easily able to observe God as the one who was “no respecter of persons” nor culture. Some of these Native Christian thinkers were provoked towards finding new paradigms of faith expression after reading books such as Vine Deloria Jr.’s *God is Red* and *Custer Died for Your Sins*. For brevity’s sake I will not reflect on Deloria’s writings but the impact of these two books on the contextual movement should not be understated. At the same time many missionaries (both white and Indian), on the “Indian field” fought the expression of Indian culture related to Christian faith all the more.

It was during this changing social climate, in November 1969 that a meeting occurred in Winnipeg between several Native Christian leaders that sparked the first Indian Ecumenical Conference to be held in the summer of 1970. Cherokee leader Andrew Dreadfulwater, a committee member, remarked, “We have almost let all this religious squabbling smother our spiritual power and destroy us as a strong people.”¹² The renewal of spiritual power as drawn from Native traditions and the rise of Native American nationalism would be hallmarks of the Indian Ecumenical Conference in the upcoming years.

About the same time efforts were underway to develop a Native studies program to be incorporated into the *avant-garde* Rochdale College near Toronto. The institute held a series of annual Cross Cultural Workshops that had significant influence in both Canada and the U.S. Another convergence during this time was the ecumenical interest of various Native segments in North America. Cherokee anthropologist Bob Thomas was one of those people instrumental in both the resulting *Institute* and the *Ecumenical Conference*. Thomas considered himself a “Nighthawk Keetoowah” (traditional Cherokee) and a Christian. In the book *A Good Cherokee, A Good Anthropologist: Papers in*

¹² James Treat, *Around the Sacred Fire: Native Religious Activism in the Red Power Era* (2003), 9.

Honor of Robert K. Thomas,¹³ Terence R. Anderson points to the problem of modernity’s influence upon Christianity which produced the inability to recognize the sacred universe. Although recognizing there are significant differences that must be addressed by Native American theologians, Anderson reports,

I am convinced that many of the purported differences between Christianity and Native traditional religions which have set barriers between them, actually have little to do with the Bible or the main strands of Christian tradition. Rather, these differences have become barriers because they create difficulties for *modern* Christians who have problems with a sacred universe. It is modern thought and its sensibilities that they scandalize, not traditional Christian views. The numerous Native elders who claim that generally the Christian gospel and Native sacred traditions are compatible, and the many differences are more complimentary than antithetical to each other, in my view are correct.¹⁴

I pause, simply to say that my own experiences with traditional Native elders have on numerous occasions supported Anderson’s claim. He goes on to say,

The degree of Christianity’s captivity by modernity, has a direct bearing on the relation of Christianity to traditional Indian religions and in turn, on the survival of Native peoples. A working hypothesis has emerged for me out of these discussions with Bob: Christianity becomes alien and destructive rather than enriching to Native traditions and peoples in direct proportion to the degree that it has been captured by modernity or has become a carrier of it, either intentionally or unintentionally.¹⁵

In the 1980s a number of writers started to surface in addition to a few earlier innovators and practitioners (some who had been

¹³ Terence R. Anderson in Steve Pavlik’s *A Good Cherokee, A Good Anthropologist: Papers in Honor of Robert K. Thomas* (1998).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 207.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 207f.

practicing in private for many years). Among these were George Tinker, Steve Charleston, Steve Cheremie Rising Son, Bill Baldrige, Leverne Jacobs, John & Gerri GrosVenor, Lawrence Hart, Spencer Cody, Jim McKinney, Reeves & Clydia Nahwooks and Adrian Jacobs. Since it was not popular to talk in denominational circles of such things, these people were not often well received by those in the Church. Still, the word about contextualizing the Gospel to Native Americans was getting out.

We owe a great debt to James Treat who has documented the early days of the Ecumenical Council in a work entitled *Around the Sacred Fire: Native Religious Activism in the Red Power Era*, published in 2003. Treat also edited the premier volume of this subject in 1996 called *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada*. This work was a series of essays by Native writers from various perspectives including: James L. West; Rosemary McCombs Maxey; Stan McKay; Paul Schultz; George Tinker; Steve Charleston; William Baldrige; Jace Weaver; Robert Allen Warrior; Vine Deloria, Jr.; Marie Therese Arrchambault; Kim Mammedaty, Alberta Pualani Hopkins, Kateri Mitchell, John S. Hascall; Adrian Jacobs; Emerson Spider, Sr; Juanita Little; Karol Parker; Klem Bear Chief; Tweedy Sombrero; and Levern Jacobs. To these early thinkers who expressed their thoughts in writing, we owe a great debt.

The impetus of the movement that began in the late 1960s was waning in the mid-eighties but a spark still continued and it began to be fanned into a flame over the next decade. It was in the mid 1980s when I fully came on board within the Native American contextual framework — yet, no one thought of it as a movement until recent years. My own experience of cultural revelation came after I had spent two years in Alaska among Inuit and Aleutians as what I now call a “missionary oppressor”. After great conflict of values and soul I vowed I would never again participate in the oppression of my own people.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s Edith, my wife, and I were running a Sweat Lodge for Jesus, sponsoring Native American Youth Culture Camps, holding Native language classes and hosting Pow Wows to name just a few activities. At that time I

only knew of a few other ministry leaders in my small denominational circles using their own culture as worship expressions to God. These included Bill Thompson; Newton and Amelia Old Crow; John David White Eagle, Jr.; Herschell Daney and Kim Mammedaty. Others that I later heard of who began moving out contextually during that decade included Robert Francis, Richard Twiss, Suquina, Terry LeBlanc, Fern Cloud, Spencer Cody, Robert Soto, Casey Church, Richard Nunez and likely numerous others. I obviously can't list everyone who deserves to be mentioned as an early innovator from the mid-eighties to mid-nineties because of my own limited knowledge. My apologies to those whom I have missed.

It was in the early to mid 1990s when this “new batch” of native leaders began meeting together on a national level to expressly discuss Native culture and Christianity. In 1991 Edith and I hosted a conference called “Christ & Culture: Missionary Influence on the Plains Tribes”. It was at that conference where we learned that there would often be stiff opposition from Native brothers and sisters in Christ who vehemently disagreed with our methods and theology. Most everyone in Native contextual ministry has gone through something similar.

It was also during this period, through the organizational efforts of key leaders like Richard Twiss and Terry LeBlanc that we began to find each other and allow God to use the contextual theme as a unifier to promote the kingdom and the contextual gospel in a public way. Perhaps the greatest influence took place in 1996 with the “Inaugural World Christian Gathering of Indigenous People” in New Zealand. Among those native leaders who attended were Twiss, LeBlanc, John Sandford and Garland Brunoe. The Maori people especially had a great impact upon the Native Americans.

Resultantly, in 1998 the 2nd “World Christian Gathering of Indigenous People” was hosted by Native Americans in Rapid City under the guidance of Richard Twiss and Terry LeBlanc. Some other key leaders who were brought to the forefront at that time and who have yet to be mentioned, were Lynda Prince, Mary Glacier, Fern Noble, Dean Shinngoose, Ray Aldred, Dan LaPlante, Jonathon Maracle, Rita Bear-Gray, Phil Duran, and

Art and Ralene Begaye. A few of the elders in cooperation with this movement about that time were Jerry Yellowhawk, Marles Moore and Vincent Yellow Old Woman.

Twiss' and LeBlanc's efforts with the World Christian Gathering in Rapid City could be characterized as the catalyst for bringing hundreds (perhaps thousands) of likeminded people together for the first time to declare publicly that the gospel can and will be contextualized among Native North Americans.

Perhaps the greatest lasting impact from this event was the realization by isolated individuals experiencing loneliness and persecution that they were no longer alone in their struggle. Indeed, it was finally realized that God was sovereignly raising up Native North American ministry leaders from all across the U.S. and Canada, desiring to proclaim freedom in Christ found in a culturally contextualized gospel. Only a few books were available at that time to help instruct those who wanted to share with others a written testimony of this phenomenon.

The late 1990s forward saw the publication of several books on indigenous Christianity. Included are:

- Adrian Jacobs' two books, *Aboriginal Christianity: The Way it Was Meant To Be* and *Pagan Prophets and Heathen Believers: Native American Believers in the God of the Bible*;
- Richard Twiss had a manuscript at various times under several titles that ended up being published by Regal and called *One Church Many Tribes: Following Jesus the Way God Made You*;
- Dr. Suqqiina released *Can You Feel the Mountains Tremble? A Healing the Land Handbook*;
- My work called *Mixed Blood Not Mixed Up: Finding God-given Identity in a Multi-cultural World*. Soon afterwards, I was able to have another manuscript published by Baker, and later InterVarsity Press, called *Living in Color: Embracing God's Passion for Ethnic Diversity*.
- In the past several years, largely through the publishing efforts of Tony Laidig, various publications have been produced by Native authors with a contextual bent.

Included in these are works by dozens of good authors such as Robert Francis and Phil Duran. The writings, like the movement, continue to expand.

In 1999 Richard Twiss sponsored the first "Many Nations One Voice" conference held in Kansas City. The Many Nations conferences were a natural follow up to the World Christian Gathering and they took the contextual theological issues to the level of public apologetics. These conferences (currently in a transitioning phase) are still hosted under the efforts of Twiss' Wiconi International Ministries. They serve as a gathering place to help the non-Native community understand these important issues as well as to inspire Native Americans towards a healthier and more Biblical view of God and themselves.

Native American Christian networking continues to expand. There are several Internet networks which connect Native believers, many of which are devoted to a contextual approach to ministry. A few of these include Ray & Liz LeVesque's "Round Dance" and Jeny Covell's "First Nation's Monday" and her other sites. The North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies (NAIITS) is certainly burgeoning as a promising opportunity to gather Native Christian thinkers from all walks, along with non-Natives, to discuss current issues and topics that concern Native people and mission.

Moving Forward

There are probably thousands of people who see their ministry as part and parcel of this movement, or who feel a call to this approach. Unfortunately, no stable school or training center exists where a person can go for instruction in Native American contextual theology and practice. This void of a place to gather such ideas and work them out feeds the ever-present dangers associated with isolation in a movement.

Several years ago the Wesleyans, under the guidance of Adrian Jacobs and Phil Duran, attempted such a school but through no fault of their own, it failed. Several other attempts have failed. It is the vision of Eagle's Wings Ministry (our own ministry) in cooperation with NAIITS, to begin a place dedicated to this purpose and to serve as a proto-type for regional training

centers around the continent. We had begun such a school but recently have been ousted from our current location due to pressure from white supremacists.

Numerous seminaries and professors have invited dialogue and have publicly come forward to commend the theology of the “Native American Contextual Movement”. In the words of Darrell Whiteman, former Director of the E. Stanley Jones School of World Missions at Asbury Seminary — words directed towards myself, Ray Aldred and Terry LeBlanc — “We believe that you guys are doing some of the best missiology in the world....” Other globally known theologians and missiologists have made similar supportive comments including: Ralph Winter, The Center for World Missions; Larry Shelton, George Fox University; Charles Kraft, Fuller Theological Seminary; Doug Hayward, Biola; Douglas Pennyor, Biola; and the list could go on. It should also be noted that Asbury Seminary has granted several Native Americans, myself included, scholarships in doctoral degrees and they continue to show interest in our approach to mission.

Certainly indigenous leadership is a key to the future. The challenges of the Native North American Contextual Movement are daunting. Negotiating the path of forgiveness of past wrongs is a major obstacle, along with shedding the vestiges of modernity through decolonization, developing indigenous theologies and indigenous expressions of worship. Addressing the superficial nature of much of the current contextualization being done is yet another issue. Facing those components of our past and our traditions that do not honor the Creator — are yet another set of tasks we as Native Christians are called to embrace.

How these tasks are approached will be as important as the tasks themselves. Modernism’s techniques, fully embraced by the American church, have all but consumed us. Our indigenous identities have been forsaken for a post-colonial portage that, on a systemic level, we can’t seem to shake. Our first approach is often taken from an individualistic, materialistic, expedient position like that of our colonial forebears. Rather, we require a more experiential and relational approach that stems from our

own Native heritage. We, at least in our own minds, feel trapped into submission, boxed in by the categories of “aboriginalism” handed us by colonialism. We often see ourselves as the image that colonialism has tried to make us into, rather than those whom the Creator has intended us to be. The questions concerning tolerance, unity, de-colonization and what will be a truly indigenous theology and an indigenous church are therefore, still nebulous.

Adversaries to an indigenous contextual theology and ministry tell us that we can not go back in time. Our opponents are partly right in their criticism. We are not today the people who we once were. Compared to our ancestors, we are weak physically and spiritually. Even if we wanted to return to their level of spirituality we could not likely bear it. We have a crisis of identity. We have a leadership crisis. We have a cultural crisis and now we are experiencing a crisis of worldview. We are a weakened and dispirited people. Ours is predominantly a spiritual crisis and plight. And history has shown us that we will not find the answers needed for ourselves, nor for the future generations of indigenous Americans, by assimilating into the empire of white America.

Concluding Remarks

If the contextualization movement has taught us anything, it has taught us that returning to a colonial ordered theology is to cooperate with the intended cultural genocide. So we will never retreat. Like the Dog Soldier warrior societies of the past, we have placed our lance in the ground and we only await a fellow member of our society to lift the stake so we can advance further. Like the first Dog Soldier — Jesus Christ — we have made our stand for a *shalom* kingdom that has been waiting for the First Nations of North America. To live it to its fullest we must discover what was in our culture and in Christ from the beginning. We stand on the shoulders of many Native American brothers and sisters, grandfathers and grandmothers, who have awaited such an opportunity as we now have. It is to their honor, and to the honor of an honest Christ, that we must make our stand. I close with the words of Laverne Jacobs,

I listened to the stories of others whose ways are different, but in whose stories I have found the Christ of the Christian gospel. I learned to put aside my fears and step out in faith; and in that step of faith experienced the vastness of God, the Creator. I hear the sounds of many voices, each with a tenor and beauty of its own, but which together sing the praises of God the Creator and Jesus the son in one great symphony of creation. In the midst of that glorious sound rings the phrase "*This is you—both Native and Christian.*" The meaning of that phrase will be a life-long dialogue with self. Each new experience and each year will uncover different aspects of that reality like the many facets of a precious gem. This dialogue is a dialogue shared by many First Nations people and which must continue in the midst of a changing world.¹⁶

Wa-do! (Thank you!)

A HISTORY of SLAUGHTER: Embracing our Martrydom on the Margins of Encounter¹

Adrian Jacobs

God's Message: *Because of the three great sins of Israel — make that four — I'm not putting up with them any longer. They buy and sell upstanding people. People for them are only things — ways of making money. They'd sell a poor man for a pair of shoes. They'd sell their own grandmother!*²

Introduction: First Person History

I want to tell you a story of recent history. This symposium is on the history of contextualization in Native ministry. Someone called "official" history the fictional recollection of the dominant society. My story is one of a first person participant. I understand that memory is not simply the objective recording of factual reality as it happened. The images, voices, and sequences of experience are all intertwined with our interpretation of what happened and our emotive response, that sometimes stem from large pools of emotional residue from previous experience. I will do my best to sort through everything and accurately tell what I observed along with my emotive response.

First person witness is the foundation for any further interpretation and evaluation of history and so I submit my experience to this symposium. The rest of this paper is my interpretation of my experience followed by an evaluation of what appears, from my study of history, to be a similar repeating experience in Native ministry.

Death of a Dream

It was March of 2000. And 109 years after the pain of Wounded Knee I was to experience Lakota angst and agony once again, not with death by government troops, but betrayal by the Church

¹⁶Leverne Jacobs as quoted in Treat, *Native and Christian*, 240.

¹ Copyright June 2006, Adrian Jacobs.

² Amos 2:6, *The Message*, translated by Eugene Peterson.