



Native Americans and the Land: “The End of Living, and the Beginning of Survival”

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Long ago a family lived in a clearing in the woods. The family was well fed and happy because of the father’s prowess as a hunter. But there came a time when game was scarce and the family began to go hungry. When it looked as if they would all starve to death, the woman said to her husband, “This is what you must do. You must kill me and then drag my body in a circle around the clearing.” The man refused for several days, though she continued to urge him to do as she had said, until starvation was upon them. Then in desperation he consented to his wife’s demand. That night corn grew up wherever the woman’s blood had soaked into the soil. By morning this new food had grown to maturity and was ready to eat. Ever since, people have eaten corn and remembered Corn Mother’s gift to them.

This abbreviation of one American Indian tribe’s telling of the Corn Mother story is a vivid expression of the intimate relationship between Indian people and the land. At one level, Corn Mother’s self-sacrifice emphasizes the sacredness of corn. At another level she symbolizes Mother Earth, the sacredness of the land. The earth is our Mother and gives birth to all things. The cycle of creation is completed in death and begins again with new life. Ancestors continue to live in the new life that is born of the land where they are buried, the homeland of the tribe.

I. SACRED LAND

This truth, the Indian sense of relatedness to the land, lies behind the contention over land between Indians and white society today. What it means is that the highly publicized disputes in the courts and in Congress over aboriginal land claims have a theological dimension which is generally not recognized.

As one after another Indian nation goes to court or to Congress attempting to win land claim cases, more and more voices are heard describing the motives

of those nations in derogatory terms.¹ The immigrants tend to suspect that Native Americans, having failed to understand the ethics of work, are simply out to get as much economic benefit with as little effort as possible. Two factors add fuel to the fires of derogation. In the first place, the Indians are winning often enough to pose a threat, emotional as well as economic, to the descendants of the immigrants who displaced Native peoples from the lands in question. In the second place, the connection between land claims of present day Native peoples and the injustice perpetrated against their ancestors is obscure to non-Indians, even to honorable non-Indians, because the values of the dominant culture are shaped by a religion of time and eternity. There is

a religious comprehension gap, at least on the side of non-Indians.

From the beginning it was evident to astute Indian observers that white society neither understood nor shared the indigenous people's respect for land. Seathl (called "Chief Seattle"), a spokesman for the Salish peoples, pointed this out in 1855:

The white man does not understand our ways. One portion of the land is the same to him as the next, for he is a stranger who comes in the night and takes from the land whatever he needs. The earth is not his brother, but his enemy, and when he has conquered it, he moves on. He leaves his fathers' graves, and his children's birthright is forgotten.²

The land is a profoundly religious issue for Seathl and for all Native American peoples; equally, for white society, the land is not central to religion. At stake are two very different theologies, two very different ways of seeing the world, two very different ways of praying.

The contrast in these ways appears at the beginning of theology: creation. Here is a portion of a Hopi creation story:

So Spider Woman gathered earth, this time of four colors, yellow, red, white, and black; mixed with *tuchvala*, the liquid of her mouth; molded them; and covered them with her white substance cape which was the creative wisdom itself....she sang over them the Creation Song, and when she uncovered them these forms were human beings in the Image of Sotuknang. Then she created four other beings after her own form. They were *wuti*, female partners, for the first four male beings....

So the First People kept multiplying and spreading over the face of the land and were happy. Although they were of different colors and spoke different languages, they felt as one and understood one another without talking. It was the same with the birds and animals. They all suckled at the breast of their Mother Earth, who gave them her milk of grass, seeds, fruit, and corn, and they all felt as one, people and animals....³

¹The process of aboriginal land claims can be followed in the Native American press, such as *Akwesasne Notes*. For an example of a specific case, see *A Song from Sacred Mountain*, ed. Anita Parlow (Lakota Nation: Oglala Lakota Legal Rights Fund, 1983).

²This is not from Seathl's famous speech but from a letter written the following year to President Franklin Pierce. See *Native American Testimony*, ed. Peter Nabokov (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) 107-8.

³Frank Waters and Oswald White Bear Fredericks, *The Book of the Hopi* (New York: Viking Press, 1963) 5, 12.

There is, of course, something similar in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the account of Genesis 2 humanity is created out of the earth.⁴ Many Indian creation stories have this same thrust, namely, that humanity is made out of, emerges out of, is closely related to, the earth or land. But Christian Europeans in general, and in particular those who emigrated to America, and their descendants, have almost no sense of the earth as brother or mother. Perhaps the real distinction here is that Native Americans still live out of their theology of creation, while

immigrant Christianity has long displaced creation from the center of theology in favor of a theology of redemption in Jesus Christ.

The Native peoples have retained at the core of their self-understanding the sense of having been created in kinship with the land. The Taos Indians steadfastly refused from 1906 until 1970 to accept a cash settlement for a piece of land that included Blue Lake, a ceremonial site they held most sacred. It had been taken away from them by the federal government, without recourse to treaty or negotiation, and was turned into a national forest. It was the heart and soul of much of their religious ceremony. Hence, they refused offers of ridiculously large sums of compensatory dollars and would not accept the promise that they would always have access to that land, when indeed that promise would be only as good as the intentions of whoever is Secretary of Agriculture or head of the U.S. Forest Service. Through their perseverance the Taos Indians finally won Blue Lake back from the U.S. Government and put the continent on notice that the sacred was not for sale.

Land for the Indians is indeed sacred in a sense that it is not in immigrant society, however much that society may prize land as property.⁵ The sacredness of the land shows itself in all of Native American life, but especially in tribal religions. For most tribes, their spiritual ceremonies are intimately related to the land on which they live, and their religion no longer works when the land is no longer there for them. Richard Two Dogs, a contemporary Oglala Lakota medicine man, puts this relationship into perspective:

The religion is rooted to the land. And you can't have the religion by itself, without the land....We can't practice without the sacred land or the sacred places because this is where we draw our religion from.⁶

II. SPACE AND TIME

Of course immigrant culture also values the land. Land was one of the reasons immigrants came to this country; they came because there was plenty of it. And as they swept across the country, clearing land and building farms, it should be obvious that they placed a high value, and still place a high value, on the land. But the land is not sacred to these people. Instead its value is measured only in

⁴The *adam* (human being) is created out of the *adamah* (earth) in Genesis 2, but this rather striking word play is only treated in passing by most commentators as merely obvious.

⁵See, for example, the collection of theological statements about the land published by the American Lutheran Church: *The Land: Statements and Actions of the American Lutheran Church* (1978-1982) which deals with the land and those who tend it (available through Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis).

⁶*A Song from Sacred Mountain*, 3.

terms of usefulness and profit. In truth we are dealing here with a deep, almost non-conscious, cultural issue in both groups. That distinction is the distinction between a culture that builds its worldview out of a notion of space and one that builds its worldview out of a notion of time.

There is some truth to the caricature of "Indian time." Native Americans have a less "precise" sense of time than does the European immigrant society. When classes are listed at a German university as starting at 8 o'clock C. T., the fact they start at 8:15 is very precise because

that's what the C. T., *cum tempore*, has come to mean in European academic culture. When one has an interview in this country at 8:20, one shows up at 8:18. And if one arrives late, profuse apologies are expected. The point is not that Indians have no sense of time, or that immigrant cultures have no sense of space; all cultures have both time and space consciousness. The question here is which of these has priority, which one is fundamental to a culture's understanding of the world, and which one is subject to the other. Is time a category such that space is subsumed under time, or is space a category under which time is subsumed? I want to argue that for Native peoples, space is primary; for immigrant cultures, time is primary. No matter how valuable immigrant society holds the land that they have, their culture, as is evident to most Indians, is a time-based culture.⁷

It may be objected that American immigrant society prizes space above all else, indeed has been determined by space rather than time. For instance, Sydney Mead set up his thesis by arguing as follows.

From time immemorial the peoples of the Orient, of the Near East, and of Europe have been a people hemmed in, confined within the spatial boundaries set by geography.... Within such boundaries and impressed by the regular passing of one generation after another within the confines of familiar places, they tended to find what freedom they could for the human mind and spirit within the context of time—time as duration, as the endless flow and flux of events which might be abstractly conceived in terms of great cyclic revolutions endlessly repeating, or, in Christian times and lands, in terms of a beginning in creation, a center in Jesus the Christ, and an end in judgement.

But when the first white man from Europe set foot on the new continent with the intention to remain as settlers, this relative significance of time and space was reversed.... Gone was the traditional sense of confinement in space, for space relative to people that mattered was practically unlimited. Thus the first emigrants experienced a new birth of freedom—the possibility of unconfined movement in space—while concurrently the time ties were tattered or broken by the breaking of the continuity of the regular passing of one generation after another in one place....

It is not too much to say that in America space has played the part that time has played in the older cultures of the world....

Americans during their formative years were a people in movement through space—a people exploring the obvious highways and the many un-

⁷This distinction between temporal and spatial in Native American and immigrant cultures has been insightfully addressed by Vine DeLoria, Jr., in *God is Red* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1973).

explored and devious byways of practically unlimited geographical and social space. The quality of their minds and hearts and spirits was formed in that great crucible—and in a very short time.⁸

It is important to note here that Mead is not dealing with any notion of the sacredness of the land! In fact, space in the sense that Mead uses it does not mean land at all except in an

oblique way. But it means “room,” room to move about in, “elbow room,” *Lebensraum*. That may mark a significant expansion of, or a shift in, the European conception of time, and that may be what Mead has isolated. However, I would argue that space to move around in is still fundamentally temporal. Space as it has been understood by the children of Europe in America has tended to mean room to expand, to grow, or to move around in: these are temporal processes. As such, then, “Manifest Destiny” is quintessentially a temporal doctrine even as it consumed the space of this continent.

Space *as such*, space in which one simply exists, has been taken for granted rather than held sacred. Indeed, space as such became rather expendable for the immigrants swarming across the continent. New generations abandoned the already cleared, settled, civilized regions in favor of the raw frontier. The adhesive between white Americans and the place where they were born, the space in which their ancestors lived, the land of their childhood, was and is fairly weak. People in America move a great deal, often moving clear across the continent from friends and family and then moving again in a few years. This was already apparent to Native American observers a century and a half ago, as Seathl bears witness: “To us the ashes of our ancestors are sacred and their resting place is hallowed ground. You wander far from the graves of your ancestors and seemingly without regret.”⁹

What European-Americans adhere to most tenaciously, now as in pioneer days, is time. Mead himself points this out. As the immigrants followed their collision course with Native Americans, Mead says,

living out the inexorable myth of “manifest destiny,” there was no time at all. For the Indian, no time to adapt—but even more tragically, for the white man no time for remorse, but only time for the labor in the cold and in the heat and in the vast places....Americans have never had time to spare.¹⁰

The difference between time and space culture reveals itself in the way the sacred is defined in Native American and in immigrant culture. The sacred is defined by space in Native American culture. In immigrant culture the sacred is defined by time, while space is relatively unimportant. An example of that is that immigrant religions (churches) are portable phenomena. It doesn't matter where a congregation builds its church as long as the building occupies a good location on a major street corner. When a congregation outgrows its building, it may knock the building down and build something else, or sell it to a housing

⁸Sydney Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 5-7.

⁹This is from the famous speech delivered at the signing of the Treaty of Medicine Creek, 1854. For the text, see *I Have Spoken: American History through the Voices of the Indians*, ed. Virginia I. Armstrong (Chicago: Swallow, 1971) 89ff.

¹⁰S. Mead, *The Lively Experiment*, 5.

developer and move to a larger piece of property. Another example of the unimportance of space in the immigrant sense of the sacred: in the early and Medieval church, the geographical orientation of the building was important in that the altar had to be in the east, but even that has

fallen into disuse in the modern age. In a high church situation one *may* have some memory of the old way of doing things, so that the altar is called liturgical east, even when in reality it may be geographically north by northwest.

Yet time is sacred for Christians. That is not so portable: witness the immutability of the appointed hour on Sunday morning when Christian people come together to pay homage to their God. Some find Saturday evening an acceptable alternative for fulfilling the Sunday obligation, especially during the summer months. It is also possible to push the Sunday service into Sunday evening. But rarely will a midweek service satisfy many people. Sunday is the time that things get done for Christians.

Again for Native Americans the day of the week is not nearly so significant. They may decide to do things on a weekend simply because of the modern work schedule; those are the days people have off. Otherwise they might just as readily have a ceremony in the middle of the week. What is important is where the ceremony is done: on a sacred hill or mountain; at a sacred beach or lake. The space becomes primary. Medicine men and women out on the plains are very clear that their power, their authority, and their validity as medicine people derives from the land on which they stand, where they live, where their people dance and where they hold their ceremonies, and from the herbs and medicines that grow on that land as well. None of that is portable. The ceremonial fire pit of the Hoopa Nation has been in one place, the center of the universe, since the beginning of the people's memory. Anthropological authorities have used carbon-14 dating procedures to date ash residue in the pit to about 7000 B.C.E. Few medicine people of any tribe spend prolonged time today in cities. They must live on the land that is the source of their power, of the spiritual existence in which they are rooted.

III. SACRED SYMBOLS OF SPATIALITY

The sacred importance of the land shows up in the symbols that tribes use in the course of their religions. Across the plains and indeed across the continent, the symbol of the four directions is of utmost importance for Native American ceremonies. The direction in which the sun rises, and that in which it sets, are all-important for Indian people. In prayers on the prairie, Native people pray, turning as they pray in each of those directions. The Siouxan peoples start with the west and rotate sunwise to the north, to the east, and then to the west. Algonquin peoples turn sunwise but start at the east, turn south, west, north, then back to the east. The importance of this is that it is not a temporal symbol but rather an earthly symbol: it symbolizes space. On the plains too in a pipe ceremony, after praying in each of those four directions, the spiritual leader will then pray toward the sky, up, and then pray downward toward the earth, so that there are actually six directions, totally defining three-dimensional space within the context of a prayer.

Among the Navajo the Four Directions becomes even more clearly spatial because they define the limits of their territory by four mountains. These lie at the limits of Navajo territory in the four directions. Indeed these are the limits of Navajo existence. The mountains are so sacred that if people visit them, they may come back with a lump of earth, packaged up, to keep in their home.

Directionality is even the image used in Plains ethics—to the extent that we can talk about ethics at all among Native American people. Ethics certainly could not be done in the way

that Western intellectual philosophy discusses ethics and morality, because a propositional ethic is not at stake here but rather the way people live. Whether you call that ethics, or religion, or whatever, Indian people would simply say that “this is the way we live.” Out on the Plains the Siouxan people talking of living life as a choice between two roads, the blue road and the red road. One has to choose whether one will walk on one or the other. The Red Road is the road of life. It’s the road of corporate wholeness for the community. The Blue Road is the road of difficulty, struggle, trouble—of the individual, of selfishness at the expense of community life. The ideal is to be on the Red Road, the road that builds up the whole of the community.

The Blue Road is what has happened to Indian communities quite often since the immigrant invasion: the breakdown of a community’s structure. But the Blue Road has always been there in a slightly different sense; it has always been possible for people to do wrong. What makes this different from Christian moral development in immigrant society is that for the Indian one never finally moves out of that intersection; one always stands in a place of having to make a choice. This is no ethic of achievement which catalogues an individual’s moral growth in some list of accomplishments. One can never look back and say, “I’ve walked the good road, the Red Road, all these years; there’s no chance of my straying now! I’ve lived a good life, I’ve helped my people, it’s over.” Black Elk, at the end of his life, as an old man, stood on Harny Peak praying and confessed that he still stood at the crossroads and still had to make the decision to walk the good road. The importance of this is the spatialness of that image—of the whole of Indian life. A vital point is that personal transformation is *not* the goal of Native ethics/religion; one feels called not to transcend one’s natural humanity, but to live it, and to live it in the context of a particular community and that community’s particular geography.

The spatialness of spirituality is also defined by the circle, a figure sacred to all Indian people. Prayers are always offered in a circle. People rarely sit in a room in rows, in an oblong structure, the way Western Christians do. Indian ceremonies are done in the shape of a circle, and that circle is self-defining; it defines the limits of the people, the nation. Black Elk and Sioux people call it the sacred hoop of the nation. More than that, it is the sacred hoop of the whole world, the universe or cosmos, that is at stake and is symbolized in the prayers that these people offer, as well as in symbols that Native people draw on their tipis, paint on themselves or their horses, embroider on their clothes, and otherwise incorporate into the artifacts which they create. The circle and the four directions are often brought together in what’s called a medicine wheel. The shape of a circle defines the outside of the wheel. What looks like a symmetrical cross, embedded in the circle and circumscribed by it, is in actuality not the Christian symbol but the symbol of the four directions.

IV. CONCLUSION

So Corn Mother’s death is only the beginning for understanding the sacred character of the land for Native American peoples. All of life is marked by the relationship between the people and their land, but perhaps the relationship is most pronounced in the end of life—death. The burial of the community’s ancestors in the land is a sacred act that completes the bond between people and land. The harmony and balance of the world depend on the cyclical flow of existence from life to death to life again. Death is seen as a natural part of the flow, as continuity and not as discontinuity. Corn Mother’s death results in life and sustenance for her children and

for all people. Likewise, the lives of ancestors continue to sustain life for those who dwell in the ancestral land.

Knowing this truth gave one Crow chief, Curley, the strength to reject the U.S. government's insistence that his tribe make yet another land cession. In his words,

The soil you see is not ordinary soil—it is the dust of the blood, the flesh and the bones of our ancestors. We fought and bled and died to keep other Indians from taking it, and we fought and bled and died helping the Whites. You will have to dig down through the surface before you can find nature's earth, as the upper portion is Crow....The land as it is, is my blood and my dead; it is consecrated; and I do not want to give up any portion of it.¹¹

The continuity between past and present, life and death depends on the primary category of space, understood as land. A leader of another tribe, the Nez Perce, spoke these words to his son, Chief Joseph, as he lay dying;

My son, my body is returning to my mother earth, and my spirit is going very soon to see the Great Spirit Chief. When I am gone, think of your country. You are the chief of these people. They look to you to guide them. Always remember that your father never sold his country.

You must stop your ears whenever you are asked to sign a treaty selling your home. A few more years and the white men will be all around you. They have their eyes on this land. My son, never forget my dying words. This country holds your father's body. Never sell the bones of your father and your mother.¹²

These sentiments continue to live on today, even in urban Indian communities where Native people have been “relocated” in carload lots, in accordance with federal Indian policy (1954-1970). When an Indian person dies in the city, no matter what the person's status in the community and no matter how far the city is from his or her reservation, the whole community will not rest until it has raised funds from among its members to send the body “home” to be buried at the center of the universe.

Meanwhile, back on the reservation, the conflict between Native peoples and the immigrant nation continues even as we draw closer to the 500th year since its beginning. Thousands of Hopi and Navajo people are being removed

¹¹Ernest Thompson Seton, *The Gospel of the Red Man: An Indian Bible* (Los Angeles: Willig, 1948) 66.

¹²Quoted from *I Have Spoken*, ed. V. Armstrong, 110.

from their ancestral lands in the Joint Use Area and are being relocated in city communities. This action is ostensibly for their own good and only incidentally opens the area up for lucrative mining efforts. Alaskan Natives sadly watch the slow erosion of their land base and the despoliation of all of their traditional lands. Indian people in Wisconsin, Oregon, and Washington are fighting legal battles to preserve their promised rights to fish and hunt on their traditional lands. The Washoes, Lakotas, and countless other nations are struggling to establish

just legal claims to lands unfairly taken from them. And all the while, Native people are watching with curious amazement as small farmers are relocated, by circumstance if not by policy, to the towns and cities of America, while corporate conglomerates swallow up the last family farms. Native people remember the words of Indian prophets, prophets like Seathl:

The whites, too, shall pass—perhaps sooner than other tribes. Continue to contaminate your bed, and you will one night suffocate in your own waste. When the buffalo are all slaughtered, the wild horses all tamed, the secret corners of the forest heavy with the scent of many men, and the view of the ripe hills blotted by talking wires, where is the thicket? Gone. Where is the eagle? Gone. And what is it to say goodbye to the swift and the hunt, the end of living and the beginning of survival?¹³

America, too, would do well to hear the words of the indigenous prophets of this land.