

# Theological Education for or from Native Americans? My Anthropological Journey

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## Abstract

Living right here in our own back yard in the United States is one often-overlooked “majority culture”: the large variety of Native American nations and communities. As a dominant culture, American, Christian anthropologist, I set out to discover how theological education might look for our local tribes residing near Spokane, Washington. Although the scope of my research was limited to the local Interior Salish groups, there may be some elements which could be more widely applicable to other First Nations groups across the U.S., and perhaps as well for indigenous peoples elsewhere.

The deeper I got into my research, the more I realized that by “theological education” I actually meant “*Western* theological education.” While my original focus was upon what theological contributions we could share with them, I realized that many Native American Christians have rich theological understandings that can also inform us and widen our understanding of Creator.

In this article, I trace my journey toward understanding this complex issue and reflect on what I have learned along the way.

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## Introduction

I begin this article with a caveat. Each culture is uniquely beautiful. *And* many related cultures share similarity. As a cultural anthropologist I recognize that huge cultural diversity exists today among and between North America’s First Nations peoples, particularly in the area of values and spiritualities, even among Native American believers. I certainly would not advocate for one approach to reach the entirety of First Nations people, but perhaps some level of a created “*pan-Indian*” experience (whether due to genetic similarities, linguistic similarities or patterns created by similar histories of hegemonic oppression) would provide an approach for those who share the most affinity?

With that caveat stated, let me move on to share with you my journey. When the Evangelical Missiological Society (EMS) announced its annual theme for 2018, *Engaging Theology, Theologians, and Theological Education in (or from) Majority World Contexts*, I realized the potential of addressing this issue with a majority world culture right in my own backyard. As a professor of Intercultural Studies at Great Northern University (formerly Moody Bible Institute) in Spokane, Washington, my interest in this question developed from both my friendships with local Native American Christians and from a course, titled *Contemporary Native American Cultural Issues*, that I developed at our campus. I was interested in exploring what theological education for local Native American Christians could and should look like. I am still a novice in this exploration, but I am far better educated in the matter now than when I began. Furthermore, I am currently in a far different place than I would have ever imagined.

## **Initial assumptions, futile attempts and Indian pedagogies: The Catholic and Christian conundrums**

First, I set out to contact those who I thought might be doing theological education amongst the local tribes in our region. Given the strong influence of the Catholics on local reservations, I decided to contact a colleague at a local Catholic university specializing in Native American Studies. Herself a member of a local tribe, she reminded me that, due to the variety of values, priorities and spiritualities extant in Native American communities, there cannot be one single way of approaching theological education to Native Americans and that to assume one could do so would seem to doom the approach to limited success. She also warned that my question seemed to take for granted that Native communities view themselves as Christian communities, when in fact their identity likely varies from community to community.<sup>1</sup>

Heeding this wisdom, I next decided to limit my question to Native American Christians. I approached my Native American Christian friends with the question, “What should/could theological education among Native Americans look like?” They looked at me confused. I quickly realized that, while they had been raised for a good portion of their lives in a reservation setting, they were my friends because we attended the same standard American Evangelical church. Both in their Christianity and in their education, they felt they had been fully assimilated into the wider cultural systems and were comfortable with that. Their theological education, therefore (and the classroom and pedagogy in which it is delivered), should be the same as mine.

Next, following up on a lead from my Catholic colleague, I attempted to contact three Jesuit priests working amongst local tribes. Only one responded (see below). A little more research revealed that a recent abuse scandal among the Catholics had brought their work to a relative halt (and bankrupted the diocese). The research also revealed that, if theological training was being done at all, it was likely the standard Catholic catechism (not modified much for the culture in any way) being presented through normal Western teaching pedagogies. Again, the wider religious hegemony seemed to be stamping its image upon the Native American churches. So, I concluded, there would likely be little to learn there. Further, to emulate anything the Catholics were doing might likely associate it with the recent negative images of the church, so I quickly abandoned that endeavor.<sup>2</sup>

Since I seemed to be getting nowhere in determining differences in approaches to theological education, I next decided to investigate whether the mode of education delivery, or pedagogy, might be a productive arena for investigation. My assumption was that, since Native American culture differs from the wider dominant culture in several significant ways, a different pedagogy (the container) might be required for the delivery of theological education in this context. Native American and wider U.S.-dominant cultural differences include collectivist vs. individualist, relational vs. task oriented, and indirect vs. direct communication, to name a few. I now realize that these are over-generalizations that cannot be applied widely and can even differ between individuals within a Native American community.

To answer my question about pedagogy, I contacted the director of a local tribal after-school program operating just outside the reservation near Spokane. I discovered that tutoring is happening in all subjects, mainly in English, and the pedagogy and curriculum is fairly Western; academic subjects are compartmentalized. The more “cultural content” is communicated in environmental and outdoor education classes, held mainly during the summer months. These summer programs are more “community and culturally oriented,” but the main aim of the regular

after-school program is to prepare students for academic success within the wider culture. There is a dream to develop a full-immersion curricular program in Salish (including Salish math games) that would reflect more of the Salish cultural values even in the teaching pedagogy, but at present this program is in its infancy stage, only existing at the K-2 level. I could sense the desire for continued development in this direction; this possibility might be something that could be revisited in the future. In talking to the director of the school I learned that other tribal schools in the region (e.g. Couer d'Alene Tribal School, Spokane Indian College, Indian University) follow a similar format, so this area of investigation did not prove as significant as I might have imagined before starting the research. Nonetheless, this line of inquiry led to secondary realizations that 1) there might be potential differences between reservation and non-reservation Indians<sup>3</sup> (which would need to be investigated further) and 2) Western educational hegemony has molded Indian education into its image, so that many see Western pedagogy as the only appropriate container for subjects not traditionally considered "cultural." Therefore, I conjectured that theology would likely fit into this same Western pedagogical category.

### **The role of ritual and liturgy?**

Although it seems I had little success in connecting with many Catholics working among local tribes, in the domain of education I was able to meet with one Catholic priest with vast experience among other Salish tribes. In my initial attempt to contact him on the reservation, I reached a recorded message that told of the Lent season events and "Stations of the Cross" schedule at various parishes across the region. This message got me thinking about the possibility of teaching theology through ritual. Just as early pre-literate, oral societies were taught history and morals by traveling bards and wandering minstrels, and pre-literate oral congregations were taught doctrine through stained glass windows and rote liturgies, could not ritual itself be a good container for delivering content (theology) to other current oral-preferred tradition societies such as many Native American tribes? I thought back to a recent graveside wake I attended on one of the reservations: Could this and other such religious rituals be used to teach theology? Or if, as Bell (2007) suggests, the meaning of ritual lies in the doing, might we risk the destruction of the meaning through the very deconstruction of the doing? This question of whether or not analysis of ritual can constructively serve pedagogical purposes is an important perspective to consider. If the answer is yes, then the process itself might be, as Bell claims, "theologically problematic."<sup>4</sup> Yet rituals certainly contain (or can contain) theology. Bass and Dykstra contend that "theology certainly appears in rituals through verbal scripts and the larger beliefs to which they refer" and that "theology is found in the shared actions that comprise rites and the overall patterns that lend them the structure." In their words, ritual actions, therefore, can "enact theology" (Bass and Dykstra 2008:162).

In the same vein, another Catholic scholar (Heekin 2006) has suggested that "Christian liturgy had always carried the responsibility for telling God's story to succeeding generations in word and action" (1). Further, she suggests that what we do through liturgy is "participate in a ritual retelling of the Christian story where the beliefs of the faith are embodied in signs, symbols, movement and gestures, and by such participation people enter into the life of Christianity" (1). Citing Hofinger's classic, *The Art of Teaching Doctrine* (1957), she contends that "liturgy educates through [a] pedagogy of 'doing' and the experiential dimension of ritual action" and that "the abstract truths of our religion become visible in the liturgy" (8). If this is true, Christian ritual might prove fertile ground for "forming, informing and transforming the Christian life" (10) for Native peoples still following oral traditions.

Anthropology teaches us that enculturation happens through ritual; much is actually *taught* and *learned* through the practice of ritual. While not necessarily intentional, theological training through the Native American pedagogy of ritual performance might allow for theology to be passively (or latently) learned. Perhaps there is something to be learned here and applied by us Protestants as well. Perhaps contextualized Native American rituals could be a good container for passing along Protestant Evangelical theology in a Native American context. And if so, Bell's (2007) anthropological analysis of ritual might be a helpful guide for theologians attempting to use ritual as a container to teach theology. This is an idea I will revisit later in this article.

Following my logic in this article thus far, however, one would likely be left asking a couple of very important questions. First, if only 3-5% of Native Americans are Evangelical Christians today, how much "market" is there for such a product? How efficient (e.g. cost effective) would it be to develop materials and media to deliver these curricula to such a small number of people? Second, if most of those Native Evangelical Christians are bi-cultural enough to use current theological educational structures (and/or prefer to do so), then how many Native American Christians would actually make use of such an approach? My findings to this point might leave one wondering if my research was a complete bust. However, I see an even more interesting conclusion left to explore.

### **The *REAL* discovery**

So, was the research a waste? Once I exhausted the quest to draft a new plan to best deliver our theology to our Native neighbors (and I now realize we must guard against theology as a new Western hegemonic project), I turned to the other half of the equation: theology FROM the majority world (which was part of the original conference theme). In his posthumously published tome, "Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys" (2015), Native American theologian and missiologist Richard Twiss proposes the development of an "indigenous style of theological education" (235) that uses living systems theory to frame theological understanding. He suggests that, just as the early Christian reformers formulated a new expression of Christian faith from the sustenance of what had come before them, modern Western Christianity can be the sustenance from which "new adaptations of Christian faith— inspired by indigenous worldview perspectives—" (236) can likewise emerge and inform us. This is much akin to the well-used missiological metaphor of the gospel being a common seed but resulting in different looking plants emerging under the influence of different soils in which it is planted (i.e. different cultural contexts). I think what Twiss is alluding to is that slightly different Christian theologies can (and should) emerge from the same sustenance, and we can all be richer for it. He suggests that Western theology (one historical emergent form from this sustenance under the influence of European thought) has long been condescending toward Christian theologies developed elsewhere and that "there cannot be legitimate theologies developed without the collaboration of east/west, north/south and modern/postmodern or from the absence of the views originating within the indigenous world" (236). He would suggest that ALL theologies are culture bound (even if emerging from the same sustenance) and that we would do well to "continue reforming" our theologies to include these diverse perspectives.

By way of example, he compared the need for Western theology (under the influence of modernity and dualism) to develop a rigid systemization of theology as science, while indigenous Christian theology operating outside the confines of Western thought have not found it necessary to arrive at the same "absolutes." Twiss concludes that an indigenous systematic

theology, based on a non-Western worldview, functions “as organic, relational, living systems—shared bodies of knowledge held in community” (237). He closes his treatise on the matter by stating, “We begin to rescue Western theology from rational enterprise and hegemony and set into motion free-form, organic conversation between Creator and human and non-human creation.” (237) This invitation to dialogue frees us from the perceived need to protect God from the assault of heresy, and therefore become defenders of “truth” on “God’s side” against those whose theology threatens Western control. I believe that Twiss would believe that historical Christian orthodoxy could serve as the basis (sustenance) from which these varieties of Christian theologies (including what he terms neocolonial Western theology) emerge. Each variety hints at the truths of God from within their own cultural framework. Here I feel the need to stress that Twiss is talking about the SAME seed. This might be defined as the historic creeds of the early church.

As this discussion relates to missiology, in an earlier book Twiss concludes that “Native people have much to contribute to the life and the growth of the Body of Christ. As the host people of the land, our cultural distinctives can add a rich and valuable perspective to the approach and practice of spreading God’s Word among non-Native believers.” (2000:137)

All of this sits well with me as an anthropologist. We appropriate our faith (and theology) through our culture. The beauty then would derive from a cross cultural comparison of these forms, searching for universals of truth. But these universals are not likely to be found in common forms. Ed Stetzer has said, “A faithful, biblical church that proclaims the gospel will look different in Singapore than it does in Senegal, different in Seattle, Washington than it does in Selma, Alabama.” (I would add that the gospel will look different among the Kalispel in Spokane than it does among the Kalispel in Montana.) He concludes that this is a hard realization for “some seemingly theological minded people” (Stetzer 2012:128). We have so much to learn from each other.

I want to close this section of my article by sharing some deep theological observations from One Hot Mama, a teen powwow dancer commenting at a powwow website.

*It’s strange how the Bible gets associated with white folks when the people who originally received Creator’s Word were Middle Eastern Jews...most definitely NOT white, and with a worldview that is nothing like Europeans or Euro-Americans. Hebrews, or Jews, have a circular view of time in which all things are connected, and their spirituality IS their culture, not a part to be acted upon when convenient and put away when other views are more profitable. Jesus is not the white man’s god, as they do not own Him. Heck, they live like they don’t even know Him most of the time.*

*Jesus probably way yonder more like us than those blond-haired, blue-eyed paintings of Him. He was dark-complected, with dark eyes and long thick dark hair. He went on a 40-day vision quest before beginning His ministry, didn’t lie, cheat, steal, or do any other dishonorable things, treated women with great respect, refused to sell out for fame and fortune, and walked with His Father in all things. He has kept His promises without fail. Does that sound like a white man to anyone?*

*There is but 1 Creator, who is Creator for us all. Creator-Son is the Word of the Creator which spoke all things into being, made flesh so that Creator could reach us in a way we*

*could understand because we cannot reach or understand Him, nor can we look upon Him in His true form. Many have lost the ability to hear His voice, so He became a 2-legged so He could talk to us face-to-face with plain words. He told stories to teach people the truth and the differences between Creator's way and the way of evil. He gave up His life so all could live, and loved even those who betrayed Him.*

*Jesus does not replace the messengers Creator sent to our peoples, He completes the messages they brought. He does not take away the ceremonies, He restores and strengthens them. His path is not that of assimilation, nor of destruction, but of peace, healing, restoration, and walking humbly with the Creator as the people He made us to be. I am in no way bound or oppressed by following Jesus, but free to follow Him on the Red Road, and take my place dancing before the Sacred Fire.*

*In all honesty, I don't get much out of "church", as their format for worship doesn't get it for me. If they are satisfied with how they do things, I'm happy for them. I worship as a Cherokee, and feel not just His presence but those of my ancestors, and all of creation as well. Sometimes there are not words which can describe what wells up within me at times...not just when praying but sometimes even when I am out in the field working and my eyes are opened to something He has placed in my path for me that day. Or when I am looking out the window in wonder as a storm rages in all it's [sic?] beautiful fury, knowing that even as it destroys many things in its path it also brings renewal to Mother Earth.*

*He speaks to us all in so many ways. All creation speaks of Him, of His beauty and glory, of His love and compassion, of His absolute power and truth, of His holiness, which deep in our spirits we want to follow. In everything His heart yearns for us to be reconciled with Him, each other, and the rest of creation. Everything He has given us has been for that purpose (One Hot Mama 2006).*

We have much to learn from our Indian Christian neighbors!

### **A “Pan-Indian” experience: A missiological connection?**

I want to return for a moment to the idea that some things learned during this study (mainly derived from contact with local Salish groups) may have wider application to other Native American groups and ultimately even to theology and mission *from* Native Americans *to* other indigenous peoples of the world. Multiple contemporary Native American authors make reference to a growing “pan-Indian phenomena” today.<sup>5</sup> In regards to the development of this recent trend, Richard Twiss (2006:89) cites the termination policy for creating mass numbers of “urban Indians” that, maybe for the first time, provided a nascent sense of a “pan-Indian identity.” Likewise, he credits the Inter-Tribal powwows, mainly held in urban centers, for further reinforcing this identity.<sup>6</sup> Leuthold (1999:208-209) attributes the further growth of a “pan-tribal community” identity to the “Native media.” Speaking in the present tense, he contends, “As Native directors and producers [*who are from a variety of distinct tribes-* my addition] continue to gather at national forums and as young talent [*again, from a variety of tribal backgrounds*] emerges through centralized [tribal] training centers, thematic and stylistic commonalities probably will continue to emerge” (208). And “these common factors may well shape pan-tribal Native American identity in the future” (208).<sup>7</sup> Further, Leuthold comments that

“as general identification with Indianness has grown, *local* indigenous culture has declined” (209) and that “Pan-Indianism may have led to a more general ethnic identification that eclipses a specific ethnic identification” (209). In this sense, there seems to be a growing common identity among various Native groups as being indigenous peoples (and viewing this as a conceptual category) in addition to one’s specific tribal membership. The former primarily creates and reinforces this common Native identity as the indigenous peoples of North America.

At a higher level, Twiss contends that today’s global phenomenon known as the “Indigenous Peoples Movement” is a continuation of the same phenomena. He describes how indigenous peoples from around the world are being drawn together by their common experience as indigenous peoples.<sup>8</sup> Twiss suggests that this might provide ministry opportunities (a point of common connection) for indigenous Christians to minister where Christians perceived to be from colonizing cultures would have heavy cultural baggage to contend with. Referencing Billy Graham’s identification of Native Americans as “a sleeping giant,”<sup>9</sup> Twiss contends, “When it comes to modern missions, I believe no other people group is so uniquely positioned for world evangelization today as are First Nations people” (2000:19).

Building on this premise, Twiss (2000) suggests that “at this time in history, almighty God has raised up First Nations people as a new wave of ambassadors for the gospel of Jesus Christ” (20). He believes it will be “teams of indigenous people who will break through into the Islamic nations of the world” (20). Likewise, he suggests that because of perceived genetic and/or cultural affinity (or perhaps as a common “other,” standing against the impact of colonialism), Native Americans may have ministry opportunities (where others may not) among indigenous peoples in Mongolia, Israel, New Zealand and Fiji. Native Americans may also have opportunities among those who express a fascination with “Indians,” such as populations of former communist bloc countries, Chinese, New Agers and people in Hollywood.<sup>10</sup> These breakthrough ministries can only happen if, as Twiss suggests, we “stop viewing Native people solely as a mission field” (2000:20) and begin viewing them as essential mission partners. He suggests that “Native people have much to contribute to the life and the growth of the Body of Christ” and that “as the host people of the land, [their] cultural distinctive can add a rich and valuable perspective to the approach and practice of spreading God’s Word among non-native believers” (137). Again, this can only happen when we make “efforts to genuinely come along side and partner with our Native brethren” (136). Twiss suggests that the question facing the church today is “whether or not the Body of Christ will recognize this divine opportunity and be willing to partner with and follow the lead of their First Nations brethren” (212). He asserts that the time has come for Native Christians “to move from being the *recipients* of missions to that of being *participants in missions*” (213). AMEN!

In this indigenous to indigenous evangelism, Christian theology based on a Native American world view (not Western theology) would be the sustenance of the message. And I am left again questioning the role that Western theology has to play in the process, if any.

## Conclusion

Let me return to where I began. In this article, I set out to describe my journey to understand how theological education might look among a majority world culture right here in my own backyard. Along the way, I sought input from my Indian Christian friends, from Catholics working with Indians, and from those working in Indian education. I might be able to suggest pedagogical approaches to facilitate better cultural transmission of content (i.e. using ritual to teach theology),

but the numbers who could benefit from such an approach would likely be small and overall efficacy would likely be limited at best. While there is value in pondering how we might better provide theological education TO Native Americans, there is much greater value in considering what we might learn FROM Native Christians that can enrich *our* understanding of Creator. I believe that through this process, I grew in my understanding of the key role that Native American Christians can play in reaching other indigenous people (and others who can relate to them culturally). My assumptions were challenged at every turn and I certainly ended my journey at a much different place than I had anticipated.

Probably the most significant part of the journey for me was being stretched to see my theology as *Western* as opposed to universal. This is a very intriguing idea with potentially far-reaching consequences. We must certainly guard against theology as a new Western hegemonic project. And we must ask if there is a theological limit to our acceptance of ethno-theologizing? Commenting on the idea of the cultural universality of the gospel, at a conference of Christian anthropologists, a colleague once noted that while Christ is universal, Christianity is appropriated and practiced *through* our particular cultures. While Christ is not culture bound, we Christians are. While the message of Christ is universal at one level, our form of Christianity is culturally specific at another level.

Such thinking certainly explains and supports the emergence of a variety of culturally specific Insider Movements. What is the canon (measuring rod) by which we evaluate such movements? Is it the Canon (e.g. the Apostle's Creed and other similar early common Christian creeds)? Or is it this PLUS later theological developments within historical Protestant theology (e.g. Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, eschatology)? OR is it these historical Protestant theological ideas PLUS later denominationally specific (within historical Protestant theology) theologies?

What is the "measuring rod" for evaluating these new ethno-theologies? Where does culturally specific Biblical interpretation end and where does heresy begin? I must admit I struggle to arrive at a satisfactory answer between these two poles. The conversation among Christian brothers and sisters of various cultures must continue! And the journey so far certainly has been intriguing!

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<sup>1</sup> Twiss (2006:82) comments that "Today only three to five percent of First Nations people have a vibrant born-again relationship with Jesus Christ despite more than four-hundred years of being tiny islands surrounded by the 'Sea of Christianity'."

<sup>2</sup> Donald Smith (1992:203) has commented on potential limited Native American receptivity of white missionaries (based on past mistreatment). I felt a similar hesitancy as people discovered I was from Moody Bible Institute and was asking about theology among Native Americans. Anyone attempting to address this issue certainly must account for historical baggage that comes with the messenger. Smith suggests that involvement of a Native American Christian worker might improve initial acceptability of the message (1992:203). I would concur and suggest that such a person be the face of such work to the community.

<sup>3</sup> I recognize that the term Indian is considered a pejorative (particularly when used by an outsider) in some places. I mean no disrespect by its use here. Rather, this is the term the two tribes that I researched use to refer to themselves, therefore I use this term at various places throughout this article.

<sup>4</sup> This quotation along with the reference made above to Bell (2007) are culled from the abstract for the book found at: <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195176452.001.0001/acprof-9780195176452>.

<sup>5</sup> See Twiss (2006:89) and Leuthold (1999) for a deeper explanation of the possible motivation for the "pan-Indian phenomena."

<sup>6</sup> I wonder if the created identity of being "Indian" (rather than distinct tribal members) is, in part, the result of a reaction to our objectification of them as simply "other." Is this newly emergent community viewing itself as one distinct clear island of "other" within the larger sea of "us?"

<sup>7</sup> While both of these authors address this issue among mainly urban and contemporary Indian communities, one must wonder about the possible early similar effects of bringing formerly distinct tribes together on "confederated" tribal reservations? Could it be that under the influence of colonial hegemony (and its long-continuing [reverberating] effects), a "pan-Indian" identity had first been conceived of there? Did this contribute to igniting a sense of a "pan-Indian" experience that was then fanned into flame in the urban centers during the termination policy era, and then further engulfed into the present era, under the influence of modern Native media?

<sup>8</sup> In this context, he is referring to indigenous peoples with a common experience of "heartache and loss from colonization, cultural oppression and the loss of identity in the name of Christianization"(2000:195). I have a Native friend who tells me that wherever he goes, other minorities are drawn to him. He calls this "brown skin affinity." It would seem that the only commonality (he was telling me about some Japanese girls in America who sought him out for advice) is that they are all clearly the "other" in reference to the dominant culture "us."

<sup>9</sup> Twiss (2000:24) cites Graham as saying "the greatest moments of native history may lie ahead for us if a great spiritual renewal and awakening should take place. The Native American has been a sleeping giant. He is awakening. The original Americans could become the evangelists who will help win America for Christ! Remember these forgotten people." This should have obvious implications for our theology *to* and *from* Native Americans.

<sup>10</sup> All of these insights are gleaned from Twiss (2000) Chapter 10.