Manitoukaewin

Contemporary spirituality among Native North Americans

Carl F. Starkloff

Introduction

READERS WILL, I HOPE, INDULGE ME an opening comment on verbal grammar, since in this case the grammar serves double duty as a spiritual grammar. As Arapaho elder Ernest Sun Rhodes once observed during a discussion on word usage in the midst of a theological conversation, 'Our language *is* our theology!' For my remarks here, however, I choose the context of the distant linguistic cousins of the Arapahos, the Ojibways, employing a word dramatically weighted with meaning, both religious and historical. Historically, the verb *manitouké* has been a source of painful interreligious contention, ever since early missionaries took it to signify either witchcraft or idolatry, rooted as it is in *manitou*, the word for spirit.

The term can also enlighten us about a pair of clichés commonly heard in some conversations and even read in the pages of books in religious studies. Some writers, transient observers of native cultures, have remarked that native languages do not contain 'abstract nouns', thinking somehow to pay these cultures a compliment. Others extend this dubious compliment by remarking that native tribes have no word for 'religion', but simply consider daily life their religion.

A reflection on *manitoukaewin* explodes both of these assertions, as well as facile theories about witchcraft or idolatry. To begin with, there is a process in Ojibway, and probably in all languages of the Algonkian family, both for 'nominalizing' a verb and 'verbalizing' a noun. In many cases, when certain verbs are nominalized, they become abstract and substantive nouns, as in the case of *manitouké*, 'to seek, or seeking, spirit guidance'. To nominalize the verb, one adds the suffix -win to its stem, thus creating a substantive noun such as *manitoukaewin*, which may mean either religion or spirituality. Rather obviously, the process is analogous to the practice of con-

verting the Latin infinitive *religere* (to 'rebind', probably) into the substantive *religio.*

This little word study is not an idle curiosity. It seems to me that the prevalence of substantive or 'abstract' nouns in a language indicates the activity of the imagination, one of the most powerful instruments of the spirit. Thus, when a substantive noun is used, the imagination fastens upon all the activities that relate people to the world of spirit, and further, it creates an atmosphere or feeling that we can call 'spirituality'. It is this atmosphere or spirituality that I propose to discuss, in the 'context' of sacred space – the 'strong, significant space' of Mircea Eliade.[1]

A space full of symbols

A person walking into my office enters a space surrounded with many symbols from several cultures – North America, Central America, Africa and Australia, but for this article my visitor will be examining only those representing native North Americans. To the right is a framed print of a modern Ojibway painting, entitled *Crow Dream*, showing a person metamorphosing into a crow – a common way of depicting the traditional intimacy between humans and animals. On the wall directly facing the one entering is a small yellow and russet Navaho rug, with geometric patterns symbolizing the kind of symmetry sought in healing rituals. Looking to the left, the visitor will see a small oil original by Ojibway artist Leland Bell, entitled *The Juggler*, portraying a medicine man on one knee calling forth from the hills the Seven Teachings of the Grandparents, in the form of seven perfect circles with dark centres. These represent the 'abstract' concepts of love, truth, kindness, loyalty, courage, respect and honesty, but they are abstractions only if the power of memory and imagination is lost.

To the left of the painting is an Arapaho beaded belt, a superbly crafted piece of black and white beadwork with not a single bead out of place, an ordination gift from the late Inez Warren over thirty years ago. The designs are the classic Arapaho rectangular designs, featuring crosses of four different kinds, relating both to the traditional four-directional symbolism of aboriginal tradition, and to the central sign of the tribe's adopted Christianity. Alongside the belt hangs a soft doeskin pipe bag, containing a small pipe with a wooden stem and a bowl of red catlinite stone, given to me by my adoptive mother, Marguerite Spoonhunter, who has now passed on to The Good Place. To its left is a beaded medallion in white, sky

blue, yellow and orange beadwork, depicting a star, probably *Nakox*, Morning Star.

Finally, as the visitor makes a complete turn back toward the door, there hangs a large 'dream catcher', currently a very chic symbol among white North Americans, but no less valuable for that reason. The dream catcher is a perfect circle made of wood or bone, encircling a web woven of, in former times, animal gut, now often cord or plastic, with a small hole at the centre. Hanging from the circle are feathers, ideally but not always eagle feathers. The fundamental meaning of the symbol is that of a web that catches dreams, holding fast the bad ones and allowing the good ones to make their way to the hole and thus into the mind and heart – perhaps into what we now call the unconscious.

But sacred space is not just physical space, and so extends from my office to my private room over a mile away. There, a visitor will see, to the right, another medallion of black and white beadwork, bearing the sign of the turtle, a sacred animal to many aboriginal traditions, usually symbolizing creation. Among the Arapaho, the little turtle is the person who finally succeeds in bringing up from the deep the mud needed by the mysterious creator figure in order to spread out dry land for The People to live on. For the Ojibways and others, the creator spreads out the mud on the turtle's back to make The People's dwelling, Turtle Island. My vow crucifix now hangs within the ellipse formed by the medallion's beaded chain.

On the wall above my bed there hangs a Medicine Wheel – a symbol employed by many if not all tribes in various forms. This one was made by a ministry student in my class, Margaret Toulouse, who employs it as her fundamental symbol for interpreting her culture and catechizing the young. The wooden circle is covered over with bright cloth: white for the cold of the north, yellow for the sunrise of the east, red for the warmth of the south, and black for the darkness of the west. Centred within the wheel is a cross, in this case upright, although some aboriginal persons will cast it in the form of a Greek *chi*, especially if they wish to emphasize that they are not Christian but traditional. In either case, the Medicine Wheel, as is illustrated by a locally printed handbook, interprets every aspect of Ojibway life and culture.

At the foot of my bed is another dream catcher, the function of which I trust is self-evident, while off to my right hangs another pipe bag, not of animal skin but of simple calico, containing another pipe, also simpler than the other, with a bowl of black stone. This

was given to me by my Arapaho spiritual mentor, the late Vincent Redman, whom I best remember from his unforgettable words of discernment to anyone completing a religious vow: 'When "they" [meaning bad spirits] come around, if they trouble you, just repeat your vow and tell them why you came here'. I seldom enough stop to appreciate these symbols, since the 'space' I am in, especially at the office, is so often a task-driven, harried space. But at graced moments when I look at the second pipe especially, Vincent's words return to me as a renewed embodiment of grace.

Sacred space: a contemporary interpretation

There follows now my own personal interpretation of the symbolism above as it lives in the spirituality of contemporary native people who have been my students, parishioners, friends, acquaintances, teachers and, in a few cases, adversaries. For the purpose of the present article, I intend to present this space as it seems to me to characterize the world-views of present-day aboriginal persons with whom I have often been in conversation.[2] The spiritual wisdom of these people is, as I suppose is true for all of us who have acquired any wisdom, that which might be called 'syncretistic'. But I leave discussion of that neuralgic word for other venues.

Over the years, I have reached the point, when trying to grasp how native people perceive reality, especially the reality of interacting and sometimes conflicting symbols, where I resort to the image of 'sacred space'. We western persons, especially intellectuals, forgetting the paradoxes of our own Christian mysteries, have long puzzled over how so many aboriginal persons seem to live with what we see to be anitithetical realities, logical inconsistencies and rational conundrums. Indeed many native persons have felt much the same about themselves, conditioned as they are by centuries of both secular and church teachings to accept a conflictual mode of consciousness. Hence the tearful plea I have heard from so many, 'How can I ever be a Christian and an Indian?'

When I suggest space as an aboriginal image, I picture a person whose consciousness is especially aware of the space in which he or she 'dwells', with all the objects of perception present to them there. Such a person attends to such objects as touch him or her at a particular moment of heightened consciousness, without intentionally rejecting others that may be of value at another moment. Linear progression in the sense of traditional Aristotelian logic is not this person's epistemology. Not that he or she is a 'prelogical' person, as

once suggested by the philosopher Lucien Levy Bruhl: everyone does in fact have a logic, but the foreign observer must often struggle to grasp it. In the case I am suggesting, the logic is that of interconnectedness of powerful symbolic experiences.

I suggest here two sets of symbolic experiences, at this point, note, deliberately over-simplified and exclusive, because the results of aboriginal–church encounter have so often tended to exclusivity. The first set is a basic, rather generalized description of two world-views at odds with each other following the conflict between the aboriginal culture and European invaders, whether ecclesiastical or secular. The second interpretation, for which I must take responsibility, describes some possibilities of post-Vatican II dialogue for a conversation between cultures, and for an inculturational dialogue between the gospel and native cultures.

SPACE NUMBER ONE: BALANCING CONFLICTING SYMBOLS

Some scholars would call the scheme given below an example of 'compartmentalization', by which native persons and whole cultures simply agree implicitly to live with two separate world-views side by side. Others would call it a 'dual systems' approach. In any case, some native cultures, still reflecting the conflictual atmosphere of the period of conquest, continue to live this way today. Thus I offer below a sequence of categories familiar to aboriginal societies, along with the antithetical relationship generally experienced with European categories.

Power

In aboriginal religious experience, the primary object of the religious quest is Power, and that Power should be somehow perceptible.[3] Power in itself is morally neutral, but, being manageable by those 'in the know', can be employed for either good or evil. This has led some scholars to argue that primitive religion, or perhaps primitive magic, is actually also primitive science, but I believe that is to oversimplify. Power is deeply mysterious, and aboriginal people do not, I believe, think that their efforts can ever master it 'scientifically'. All the same, tribal practitioners do seek power in its many manifestations, and aboriginal religion desires ever deeper participation in power. The quest for this is also a quest for wisdom. The various objects used in religious practices thus take on a certain

'fetish' quality, possessing a dynamism and thus an awesomeness in themselves, and this requires wise discernment.

Juxtaposed over against this experience of Power in European religious experience is an anti-idolatry viewpoint that places all power in the possession of God alone. Protestantism has always tended to emphasize this point more than Catholicism, which leaves much more room for dynamism and animistic experiences in sacramental life and in subordinate symbols such as relics, holy water, incense and the like. Complicating the European viewpoint, of course, is post-Enlightenment 'modernity' which seeks to separate religion from science and to put all spirituality to the test of reason. Thus, added to the always confrontational nature of Christianity is the modern need to reduce power either to the realm of science or to agnosticism. Power is therefore 'supernatural' and imperceptible in nature, or purely 'eschatological' and beyond human reach in the present life. This tends to make western religion generally a matter of 'either/or'. Power is theologically reduced to either grace or sin, and symbols either point to God or become superstitious, while native traditions recognize various powerful and moral realities in their 'space'.

Relationship

The classic verbal expression of this category is 'All my relations', as uttered during many aboriginal rituals. That is, not only are persons related to us, but also all creatures, animal, vegetable and mineral. The goal of religious activity is to maintain or restore harmony, or connectedness, among all these beings, and to deliver the rules hidden in nature that endure this harmony.

According to the aboriginal world-view, the prized category of western society, the individual, is subordinate to society or community, even though some tribes, especially of warriors and hunters, do have certain highly individualistic practices. Relationships are cemented by power, and power may often be employed against others who offend against relationships through what European languages call witchcraft or sorcery. In such cases, religious adepts may themselves employ methods of sorcery to combat and turn back such anti-social powers.

Modern European world-views, on the other hand, accept and encourage adversarial situations as long as they submit to 'rational' analysis. The tendency is thus to explain supernatural experiences in a rational way, as, for example, the Catholic Church's practice of

seeking out 'natural' explanations for apparently miraculous phenomena. It is amusing to listen to a conversation between a European and an aboriginal spiritual leader, in which the westerner seeks explanations and the native simply gives descriptions!

All in all, for Europeans, reality tends to be divided up into manageable parts, and this includes, in Christianity, an ordered set of dogmas and precepts. The most dramatically influential of these, for aboriginal peoples the world over, is probably the famous rallying cry of Cyprian, 'No salvation outside the Church'. There is, interestingly, an analogy with the tribal way of thinking: in one sense, there is no health of body or spirit for aboriginal persons outside the community, outside 'the People'. But the analogy stops there, since there is no equivalent in aboriginal thought for eternal damnation.

Animism and vitalism

I use these terms here in a purely descriptive sense, being aware that they have often been used judgementally. Animism is a belief in the indwelling of souls or spirits within material reality; vitalism is a closely related belief that many objects are permeated with powerful 'life', though not perhaps by an individual spirit. Souls or spirits have a certain freedom of movement outside the body, and are not confined to life in the body. This leads in some cultures to a non-dogmatized belief in reincarnation, as well as to the belief that many ills and sicknesses are caused in persons by the loss of souls. Out of this belief come practices referred to as 'shamanistic' (originally a Siberian word). By these practices ritual adepts can travel outside their own bodies in order to rescue and lead back lost souls and thus to heal persons. Such practices are now designated by the modern European word 'medicines', but in tribal languages medicine stands for spiritual as well as physical power. Vitalism and animism are applied to all beings, so that not only humans, animals and plants have life, but also other objects under certain circumstances – rocks, clouds, soil, water, fire.

Any person of European descent who is aware of his or her own aboriginal background will recognize all the above elements in their own traditions. However, the evolution of thought and religion (if indeed it is evolution!) is towards anthropocentrism and individualism. Thus, in the 'hierarchy of being' developed under Scholasticism, only humans have 'rational' souls, and these are one-time goal-directed: 'You only go around once'. No less a scholar than Augustine, of course, ventured to recognize certain life-elements

in non-animate creation, and in our own time Pierre Teilhard de Chardin speculated on such a chain of life within evolving creation. But these speculations, at least those of Teilhard, met staunch resistance within the Church. The standard missionary reaction to such ideas in primal cultures was generally to categorize them as 'superstition'.

Powerful words and gestures

Related to all of the above is the use of ritual formulae and symbols for ordering reality and rendering it favourable to humans. Words, spoken, and even more, sung, have awesome power to connect people with the supernatural. It is important even today for many aboriginal societies that each person have his or her own 'song', which may be sung at certain rituals. Musical instruments, especially drums, are seen to contain immense power and require careful handling. Likewise, ritual objects, especially ceremonial pipes, are guarded by very special rites, and in some cases are hedged with strict 'taboos'. One of the great strengths in aboriginal societies (rapidly changing today) is the fact that all these practices and formulae are kept in the collective memory of oral tradition rather than in writing, so that there is always a certain creativity between generations, leading to a gradual and almost imperceptible alteration in practices over generations. Thus, oral tradition, relying on such memorized formulae, is basically conservative and eschews rapid change.

Juxtaposed against such viewpoints as these are analogous European viewpoints, but the juxtaposition has almost always been confrontational, and lacking in a sense of analogy. For instance, Christians certainly value the Word, Protestants in preaching and Catholics more in ceremonial, even to the point of attributing a certain magical quality to the written, preached or ceremonial word. But Christians have generally considered the words and gestures of their traditions as antithetical to the values of aboriginal traditions. Further, the churches have insisted on a catechesis and generally a liturgy that rely on the written word. The frequent complaint of aboriginal persons that 'whites pray from books, Indians from their hearts' is an oversimplification, but easily understandable.

SPACE NUMBER TWO: A 'UTOPIAN' SYNTHESIS

As I have noted, my above discussion covers only some of the major sources of conflict between the Church and aboriginal cultures, as they have occurred since the time of expansion and into the present. What follows now is an ideal depiction, a certain 'Utopian' projection of a hoped-for synthesis of world-views. Utopian thinking grants that the object of its quest is, literally, 'no place', that is, we can only hope for its achievement and seek for it through the creative imagination. This I take to be the deepest meaning of 'inculturation', or the mutual interaction of gospel and culture toward final transformation of creation. What I now offer, then, is my own Utopia, the fruit of my own imagination and hopes based on my years of encounter with native peoples. It will be obvious that I do not hold with some theories of the 'incommensurability' between cultures: I believe that humankind constantly interacts in history and that cultures do influence each other, for good and for ill, by means of diffusion. Below I dwell on the positive hope for mutual influence, in which all cultures hold equal right of place.

Transformative interaction regarding power

Here I speak as a Roman Catholic missionary who has received many ritual and spiritual gifts from aboriginal spirituality. Thus, I see the Church as benefiting ritually from its contact with the ceremonial power and vibrancy of aboriginal symbolism. I do not recommend that non-natives become 'wannabees' and practise exotic rites artificially; they may or may not benefit from such as these when they are performed by competent native practitioners. Primarily, however, I am concerned that the sector of the Church that is composed of modern native Christians should benefit by the gifts of their own rituals, whether in the form of their own ceremonies, or – a more delicate matter – through discerning syntheses of aboriginal and western Christian symbols in the liturgy. Aboriginal symbolism, in addition to rendering Christian ceremony less mechanistic, can also help us to overcome the post-Enlightenment dichotomy between natural and supernatural, after the example of Karl Rahner, Henri de Lubac and others who have worked within traditional European theology.

The gospel brings a deeply significant gift to aboriginal spirituality as well. It is the peril of any power-based religiosity that it may be used to 'make medicine' against and control others. These prob-

lems have not disappeared in the contemporary world, and have even been exacerbated by conditions of social strain. I have had to deal often with grave problems of sorcery being practised between feuding families, leading frequently to violent and tragic consequences. It is no less significant that a recent seminar on mission planning that I attended in Nigeria had as one of its working groups a seminar to deal with witchcraft – a phenomenon analogous to though not identical with sorcery. Out of that seminar came no solutions other than a resolution that the Church must dialogue with traditional religions and seek to change the destructive social conditions that often drag people into damaging magical practices.[4]

Transforming relationships and connectedness

Here my imagination moves me to turn and look again toward the Medicine Wheel on the wall behind me, as a symbol of healthy relationships among 'all my relations'. The immense benefit to the Church from aboriginal spirituality and symbol lies in a renewed sense of the communion, not simply of the saints, but of all creation. Christian native persons who have been able to practise their traditional ceremonies have time and again testified to a renewed experience of 'powerful' prayer that truly changes their hearts and minds.

As a response from the European traditions, there is a Christian personalism that can help to heal some of the ills in native life, even those which the Church and western society have not caused. Within tribal life, as has been observed by most if not all ethnologists, and testified to by many aboriginal persons, the power-filled sense of relationship and connectedness can be extremely manipulative and controlling. Many once functional aspects of tribal pressure such as ridicule or ostracism today are often destructive of personality and lead even to suicide and other anti-social behaviour. The Christian anthropocentrism, to be found in the theologies of the Body of Christ and of communion, stands as a corrective to exploitation of persons, and may encourage an ethic of responsibility that is congenial to native cultures.

Animism, vitalism and medicine

It is helpful here to recall that the foundational doctrine of the incarnation, the Word made flesh, is in a certain sense analogous to animism. So too is Karl Rahner's theology of 'spirit in the world'. Native spirituality in its closeness to creation contributes a dynamic mysticism to incarnational theology. Sin is thus not simply a break with God and one's fellow humans, but, as eco-theologians proclaim

today, with all of creation. As one studies traditional spirituality among aboriginal peoples, one remarkable insight is that, far from being an 'altruistic' or 'romantic' view of ecological responsibility, this viewpoint is very pragmatic: be truly connected participants in creation, or destroy it!

One of the sad losses lamented by Christian liturgists today is the failure to develop adequate sacramental rites that more powerfully equip persons, especially young persons, for life in an increasingly difficult world. For native persons, their traditional rites of passage, being more demanding than church processes and more connected to the traditional social structure, have the potential to enrich their Christian sacramental life. At the same time, since so many native societies are so deeply damaged, the traditional rites may need the assistance of the Church. Again, this might occur either through the retention of separate rites or some careful collaboration around synthesis of rituals. A deep Christian contribution to this entire process is a mysticism focused on Jesus Christ as 'The Human One', or 'Son of Man', in whom God is at the very material centre of sacramental life. In this way, God 'acts as one who labours', in the words of Ignatius of Loyola.

The power of the Word

As I write, I am mindful of a current project under way at Anishinabe Spiritual Centre in northern Ontario. A group of some fifteen native persons has been engaged for two years in an experience of 'Eighteenth Annotation' or 'Nineteenth Annotation' processes of the Ignatian Exercises. The group has come to an agreement to collaborate in composing a small manual of meditations that might contribute a meaningful experience of the Exercises to their own people. The results so far have been both encouraging and challenging: the generosity of the people and their dedication manifest a deep desire to practise inculturation. However, there have also been problems around the Word, since some of the older participants, formed in the oral tradition rather than the written, and in some cases lacking adequate grammar school training in writing, have found it problematic to express themselves on paper. It is a hopeful sign that in this case technology comes to the rescue. Now those who so desire are invited, at the close of reflections on composition, to speak their insights into tape recorders, with the intention that these will then be transcribed. In this way, the power of the written word for some is united with the power of the spoken word.

In the case of all, the power of story in native tradition is united to the central story of God's entry into the human dwelling.

Conclusion

There is a deep need for healing among aboriginal Christians. They often suffer from the many dysfunctions introduced by the invaders, and their temptation is to become deeply fatalistic about the failure of their traditional sources of power. Thus, suffering, a traditional mode of asceticism for native people, now frequently takes the form of mere passive resignation. However, if, as liberation theologians have argued, Christ came to empower the powerless, he came also to fulfil their traditions by rendering these effective within contemporary life. The universalism of Christian theology attests to the power of Christ for all generations throughout history.

Many native Christians are now finding ways to synthesize this incarnational value with traditional practices. We witness this in the amalgamation of such rites as the Medicine Wheel and healing sweat lodge with the Twelve-Step Programme of Alcoholics Anonymous, as carried on today by Deacon Peter Manitowabi. Many of these spiritual leaders, now also professionally trained in health and social science, have found ways to incorporate native healing circles with workshops on grieving, family dysfunction and diabetes. One such person is Rosella Kinoshameg, a licensed registered nurse further trained in many subsidiary skills and an accomplished herbalist, who is now working to develop meditations on the Ignatian Principle and Foundation as symbolized by the physical, psychic and spiritual balance taught by the Medicine Wheel.

I conclude where I began, in sacred space. It is my hope that, in a context still fraught with many tensions and conflicts, the healthily pragmatic way of native spirituality might profoundly enflesh the incarnation for aboriginal people. If these elements do indeed come together into the Utopian ideal I have imagined here, then the universal religion that is Christianity will be deeply enriched with the *Manitoukaewin* of local tribal traditions.

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NOTES

1 Mircea Eliade, *The sacred and the profane: the nature of religion*, trans Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p 20.

2 Readers who may wish to examine some additional, more complex, material touching the topic of this article can consult several essays of mine elsewhere: 'Aboriginal Cultures and the Christ', *Theological Studies* vol 53, no 2 (June 1992), pp 288–312; 'Attention versus Distraction: Beyond the Quincentennial of Columbus', *Theology Digest* vol 40, no 2 (Summer 1993), pp 119-131; 'Dialogue, Evangelization and Church Growth among Aboriginal North Americans', *Studia Missionalia* (Rome: Gregorian University) vol 43 (1994), pp 279–294; " 'Good Fences Make Good Neighbours' or 'The Meeting of the Rivers'? Dialogue and Inculturation among Native North Americans", *Studia Missionalia* vol 45 (1995). These articles all contain more extensive bibliographical reference pertaining to the dialogue of symbolism.

3 Readers who desire to deepen their knowledge of this very elusive concept can find one of the best treatments of it in the modern classic of Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in essence and manifestation*, trans J. E. Turner (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), chs 1–4, and *passim*.

4 In my article, 'Good Fences Make Good Neighbours', referred to in note 2 above, I have discussed how harmful fetishism on all sides might be transformed into creative symbolism.