

Introduction

Tolerance is a social rather than a religious virtue. A broad-minded view of the private belief of others undoubtedly makes for the happiness of society; but it is an attitude impossible for those whose personal religion is strong. For if we know that we have found the key and guiding principle of Life, we cannot allow our friends to flounder blindly in the darkness. . . . Opinions may vary as to the nature of the help that should be given, whether peaceful persuasion and a shining example, or the sword and the *auto da fé*. But no really religious man can pass the unbeliever by and do nothing.

Steven Runciman, *The Medieval Manichee*

Rituals are often mistakenly perceived as permanent and unchangeable, usually by those who are looking for stability in their own lives through contact with an essential aspect of humanity. The emotionally charged atmosphere of almost any native ceremony is often enough to convince amateur enthusiasts of a timeless quality, fulfilling a need for contact with an archaic, simple form of human spirituality. But the wider social context of ritual is rarely given the same attention, probably because this shift in perception makes the sense of timelessness vanish. The social forces behind spiritual change are much more complex—and much more violent—than is often assumed. Hidden from view in today's sweat lodge ceremonies or in the drumming and dancing of powwows are histories of religiously motivated massacres and atrocities, Christian proselytizing, state policies of assimilation, and, among Indian peoples themselves, forgetting, reinvention, and renewal. The appeal of ritual to the senses and imagination gives a false impression of permanence that belies tumultuous histories of suppression, defiance, and religious creativity.

Some native spiritual leaders, responding to the pace of change and the intrusion of non-native enthusiasts, have turned inward, closing off

ceremonies to outsiders. But secrecy only reinforces the sense of permanence. If the protected ceremonies did not have a major point of contact with ancestral powers, what would be the point in closing them off to strangers?

Others see religious change as tacitly consensual and having few social consequences outside of reconfigured belief systems and ritual practices. Indian religion can be manipulated by evangelical persuasion, made obsolete by a rapidly changing lifestyle, even suppressed by the powers of the state, and it will find its way through, altered but unscathed, giving a new form to the human search for meaning.

On the surface, there appears to be some validity to the view that stresses spiritual resilience. Missionaries have filled churches and trained native religious leaders, facilitating the willing conversion of new Christians. Sacred places have been mined, logged, or submerged by hydroelectric reservoirs to apparently temporary grief, while the essence of native spirituality survives elsewhere. In both the United States and Canada in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth, native leaders were fined or arrested and imprisoned for conducting ceremonies deemed by the state to be destructive of soul and character. In response to many such pressures, practices were taken underground and were cautiously renewed when prohibitions and sanctions were lifted. The willing conversion to various denominations of Christianity by many native people throughout North America has coexisted with a variety of surprisingly resilient forms of traditional spirituality, despite concerted efforts at suppression and cultural assimilation.

While miracles of continuity among Native American practices are common, it is important to also be attentive to changes in the meaning and context of renewed traditions. An elder who lived long enough to experience periods of both suppression and revival might see similarities of style in "neotraditional" ritual and recognize the words to some of the songs. The social context of the performance, however, would in most cases have been transformed completely, the needs and perceptions of the participants would not be the same, and often, in order to maintain a connection to social reality, the ritual itself would have been creatively adapted. Ironically, it is in the revival of traditions that we find the clearest evidence of ritual transformation.

But, as in all human societies, so long as spiritual practices continue to exist their outward appearances will usually be characterized by stability, consensus, and sincerity. Only in moments of conflict as a result of missionary zeal, the enthusiasm of millenarian expectation, or the

appearance of a new prophecy does the world turn upside down, revealing the true tensions in people's lives, the real obstacles in their search for meaning, and the main rivals for their control of spiritual power.

Under normal circumstances, the tensions associated with religious change are hidden from view. This makes it easy for an outside observer to come away with an incomplete picture, especially given the natural tendency of human beings to "totalize" from an experience that is always, to some degree, restricted. Elders, the usual source of information on all aspects of "tradition," are likely to have a fund of knowledge and experience that is very different from that of young people, whose course in life is undecided. Catechists in a Christian church will offer views on native spirituality that are different from those of a "Road Man" who leads sweat lodge or peyote ceremonies. Female elders may have perceptions and sympathies different from those of male elders. Most experienced researchers are aware of such differences, yet the lure of totalization persists. The narratives and opinions of "expert informants" often take precedence, obscuring barriers to communication that may exist between generations or between local religious leaders, politicians, and administrators and the people they serve.

Outside researchers are not the only ones who often miss the significance of spiritual dispossession and conflict. Those actively attempting to improve Indian lives—whether volunteers or employees serving in charitable organizations, administrators in government agencies, or members of local band councils—are often without an explanation for the self-destruction of native communities through addiction, violence, and suicide, and are even more perplexed by the negative outcomes of their efforts. Or, if they have explanations, these take the form of clichés, such as the supposed genetic predisposition of Indians to alcohol dependency¹ or supposed inability to deal with sudden "affluence" following a change in their economic fortune.

The spiritual history of a community is often overlooked or misread by those trying to understand the causes of "social pathology." The spiritual legacy is often embedded in the distant past, sometimes changing only through slow accretions—nothing that would help explain a social disaster. It is far easier and more logical to look at events in the imme-

1. Mancall (1995, 6–7) provides a summary of theories and evidence concerning Indian alcohol abuse, and finds that "genetics alone does not determine how or why individual Indians choose to drink. . . . American Indians' sensitivity to alcohol resembles that of the general American population" (*ibid.*, 7), and there is wide variation in native peoples' responses to alcohol, in which we can see that "many Indians do not drink and not all who do suffer as a result" (*ibid.*, 6).

diated past: the destruction of a habitat, relocation of a village, a sudden economic reversal; but even these events cannot be adequately understood without considering their impact upon spiritual relationships. For those who once lived on the land (and may continue to do so), spirituality is all-pervasive. In hunting societies, the relationship between humans and hunted animals is mediated by spirits, while the living animals themselves have knowledge of human attitudes and intentions. In the agricultural societies of the Southwest the seasonal cycles of sowing, caring for crops, and harvesting, and the climatic conditions that make it all possible, are governed by spiritual agencies. Ecological destruction, the social consequences of formal education, the movement to reservations and greater participation in a formal economy—all the major transitions in native communities that are considered to explain current social problems also have important implications for the continuity of spiritual practices. The historical background of “social pathology” in native communities often reveals radical instability in the human relationship with the spirit world; and there is an enduring relevance to this history, not just a reason to grieve at grievances foregone.

It is easy to assume that missionaries, those who consider themselves in possession of the guiding principles of life and able to use this knowledge to transform the lives of others, are the sole culprits behind the loss or radical transformation of native spiritual traditions. Evangelical enterprises, after all, were usually forthright in their rejection of a wide range of cultural practices and beliefs and ingenious in their efforts to eradicate them; their practitioners usually saw these efforts as a struggle of good against evil. Missionary propagandists told their supporters that the Indians had been lost or neglected and had given themselves over to evil. It was a Christian duty to rid them of their flagrant satanism and bring them closer to the truth and salvation. To their credit, missionaries usually saw Indians as human and worth the effort of improvement; others in competition with Indians for resources and sovereignty would sooner have settled the “Indian problem” with tracking dogs and rifles—and sometimes did.

Evangelical persuasion, however, is by no means the only source of spiritual disjuncture in Native American societies. The missions themselves, despite a deep commitment to religious transformation, were not the only purveyors of new ideas, nor the only source of change in patterns of ritual observance. It is important to also consider the relationships between indigenous traditions and non-native institutions and belief systems not often considered exclusively “religious”: formal edu-

cation, biomedicine, and social research, each supported in various ways by legislation and other forms of political intervention.

Residential schools were a significant and direct attempt at cultural transformation, intended to assimilate Indians or, as Richard Pratt, founder of Indian residential schools in the United States, put it, to “kill the Indian in him, and save the man” (Prucha 1973, 260–61), to eliminate the differences seen as standing in the way of settlement, administration, and progress. Schools, especially off-reservation boarding schools, have been one of the most powerful tools for the resocialization of native children. Rules forbidding use of native languages or contact with family were the starting point for rigorous programs of relearning intended to make “useful citizens” of Indian children. In many instances, especially in Canada, residential schools were run by the Christian missions and had a broad mandate to implement programs of religious instruction. This included instilling a disregard for values and traditions considered “sinful” while instructing children in the habits, beliefs, and even occupational preferences of their teachers and supervisors.

Medicine is not usually thought of as an institutional appendage to missionary programs. Nevertheless, it is associated with selective intolerance of indigenous healing practices, and it complemented the goals of Christian evangelism. In some ways biomedicine acts as a rival belief system when compared to native practices, much as Christianity is, but one that is able to build upon the advantages of a powerful technology. Medicine, like Christianity, tolerates few obstacles to its influence. In pursuing its basic goal of improving and extending human life it often overlooks, or strives to eliminate, local rivals. Its influence, also like that of Christianity, is often highly valued, inadequate only in the sense that its services are not fully developed. There is at the same time a growing recognition that biomedicine’s competition with indigenous practices, especially in the treatment of mental illness, does not always lead to the desired results. Loss of local medical knowledge and counseling strategies can lead to loss of autonomy, often with important consequences for the ability to heal.

It is useful to consider the campaigns against native spiritual practices as having developed not only from evangelical ambitions but also from, and at the same time as, territorial and ideological ambitions of the state. The use of the term “nation building” in the title of this book could in some ways be misleading. It does not correspond with a specific historical period, although Benedict Anderson (1991, 46) points to the period from 1776 to 1838 (without including Canadian confederation in 1867)

as the time when self-consciously national political entities sprang up in the Western Hemisphere. It is not possible, however, to pin a date on the consciousness of national identity, which can be a powerful force in a new nation well before a constitution is drawn up and sometimes before blood is shed. Nor does the nation-building urge entirely disappear after the creation of independent states; it pushes on to conquer new frontiers long after states are established as secure entities.

The first perceptions of Native American religion occurred in the context of a large-scale ethnic conflict in which a dominant society's ambitions for territory and nation building were obstructed by visibly different, virtually ungovernable groups of people with justifiable claims to sovereignty, land, and maintenance of cultural differences. In the drive to eliminate these differences, the new national governments of North America favored programs of cultural assimilation; or, as McGarry and O'Leary put it, "If one community's language, culture, religion, and national myths are given precedence then we are not talking of assimilation or integration but of annexation" (1993, 19).

Cultural annexation involved legal prohibition of practices deemed especially harmful to Indian morality, temperament, and social progress. Under various administrations, the Potlatch, Sun Dance, and Peyote religions were all subject to official prohibition, and most legal freedoms of their adherents were not reinstated until as late as the 1950s. More recently there have been lobbying efforts on behalf of imprisoned Native Americans, whose religious freedom, despite the high proportion of incarcerated Indians, remains incomplete in comparison with rights granted to adherents of major denominations.

Even those agencies usually considered the strongest supporters of indigenous spirituality engaged in cultural annexation. At the same time that some government agencies took steps to alter native cultures, others supported efforts to preserve them. This was not the kind of preservation that involves support of cultural continuity, but a collector's preservation that sees an evanescent phenomenon on the verge of disappearance and, in a race against time, attempts to capture everything about it on camera and in notes, drawings, and artifacts. But these early anthropologists sometimes obstructed ritual practice, either by their intrusive presence as "observers" or by collecting the paraphernalia used in ceremonies and storing it in museums. Some archaeologists desecrated native burial sites by removing human remains for osteological research, an action that is now the focus of repatriation initiatives and controversies between native leaders and bioarchaeologists.

It is often assumed that tribal governments will inevitably act in support of local or “pan-Indian” traditions, but this is not always the case. It is useful to recognize in this context that there have existed not one but two ages of nation building in North America: the commonly recognized congruence of nationalist consciousness with strivings toward statehood, and the more fragile “belated nation building” of indigenous peoples. The indigenous nation building that has gained strength in recent decades usually aspires to recognition of self-determination and implementation of regional autonomy within existing states. But the connections between spiritual and political reemergence are often less well-defined; and the process of redefining indigenous spiritual traditions in the context of this most recent process of tribal nation building is an increasingly common source of conflict within indigenous communities.

More recently, practitioners of “New Age” religion have attracted the notice and censure of native activists who see the misinterpretation, decontextualization, and popularization of native ceremonies as the source of serious disruptions in local practice. Some “traditionalists” see such popularization as breaking the chain of knowledge, replacing personal relationships between elders and initiates with simplified and impersonal literature, and replacing long and sometimes arduous preparation for visionary revelation with “weekend retreats.” A few argue further that those who engage in destructive popularization are aware of what they are doing and are motivated by profit. The defense of religious freedom claimed by New Age popularizers is seen by their opponents as a guise for the plundering of ritual knowledge that is “owned” and passed on through careful instruction and initiation. The New Age movement, in this view, becomes one more form of spiritual intrusion, one more process of ritual desecration, of self-conscious appropriation and alteration of the spiritual lives of native peoples.

Social researchers and legal scholars use several terms to describe acts that involve intentionally altering the ways of life of distinct peoples. The mildest, in terms of moral resonance, is *acculturation*, used in a general sense to refer to the process of change in a people’s way of life as they encounter another, usually dominant, society. An element of intention may be involved in the acculturative process—a law or policy, for example, directed at indigenous fostering or marriage practices—but changes can as well be incidental to the cultural encounter, as in the pervasive influence of television and other popular media. Sometimes “reverse acculturation” occurs, when ideas, technology, or practices of a distinct people are taken up with enthusiasm by a dominant society. Accul-

turation is therefore not always overwhelming but can refer to the piecemeal changes that occur through cultural exchange.

Assimilation is somewhat less benign, though it is sometimes presented by governments as a solution to the “Indian problem” or masked as a process of cultural awareness and “improvement.” Often it is used in conjunction with the word “policy,” linking it much more firmly with formal efforts to alter the ways of life of distinct peoples. It is almost unlimited in the scope of changes that are intended. An assimilationist policy is one that attempts to integrate a distinct people into a mainstream society, to make them disappear—not through massacre but a bloodless process of education and “development,” often couched in terms of “equal rights” for all citizens.

There is but a small step between assimilation and *ethnocide* or *cultural genocide*. Generally, these two terms refer to the same thing, but the latter has the additional sting of associating intentional destruction of a people’s way of life with the more immediately destructive acts of mass killings. The term *ethnocide* came into common use in discussions of cultural destruction in Central and South America in the 1970s and 1980s, such as resulted from Brazil’s policy of Indian “emancipation,” which pressured educated Indians to sign papers eliminating their Indian status and, by extension, their protection as Indians under Brazilian law; and from Mexico’s policies of *indigenismo*, which sought through economic development and education to divest the “unprivileged” members of the indigenous population of their “backward” ways and to include them in the mainstream society. In an example that blurs the boundary between cultural destruction and actual mass killing, the term *ethnocide* has also been used in the context of the strategic apathy of the Brazilian government during the 1980s gold rush in the Amazon rain forest, with its devastating consequences for the ten thousand Yanomami living in the region (Maybury-Lewis 1997, 22–25). More recently the term found its way into article seven of the UN’s draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, in which the “collective and individual right not to be subjected to ethnocide and cultural genocide” immediately follows the allocation of rights “to full guarantees against genocide or any other act of violence” (United Nations 1995).

The parameters of ethnocide cannot be fully understood without recognizing that the actual mass killing of native peoples in North America has achieved genocidal proportions. Russell Thornton, in his authoritative overview of Native American demographic history, finds that for the region of the United States alone, the Indian population “decreased

from 5+ million in 1492 to about 250,000 in the decade from 1890 to 1900. . . . Such a population decline implies not only that some 5 million American Indians died during the 400 years but that, in fact, many times the approximate figure of 5 million died, as new but ever numerically smaller generations of American Indians were born, lived, and died" (1987, 43). Thornton reports a proportionately similar population decline in Canada, from roughly 2 million in 1492 to 125,000 at the close of the nineteenth century. Since then, native populations have steadily recovered, to about 1.3 million in Canada and 2 million in the United States, but still 3.7 million fewer than in Thornton's estimate of the population five centuries ago.² Only a small portion of this disaster is directly attributable to organized mass killing—epidemics, resulting from pathogens of European origin to which indigenous peoples of the New World had no natural immunity, were the main killer—but so-called Indian wars, more correctly described as wars of extermination, were waged by the Spanish expeditions of Francisco Vázquez de Coronado in the Southwest in 1540–41 and Hernando de Soto in the Southeast in 1540–42; by the British, most notably the "Pequot War" of 1637; and by the Americans in the era of the United States' westward expansion, in which hundreds of massacres accompanied directives for the "complete extermination" of Indians who resisted displacement from lands and subordination to federal authority (Stiffarm and Lane 1992, 34). These bloody episodes came to an end in 1890 with the massacre in Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in which over three hundred Lakotas were killed (an event discussed further in chapter 5). It was the implementation of alternative means of "pacification" through the more outwardly peaceful guises of spiritual conquest that hastened the end of the "Indian wars" of the nineteenth century, an approach that, as Lyman Legters writes, "brought outright massacre to an end, but otherwise signified only that less bloodthirsty means were at hand for destroying what was left of the basis for Indian existence" (1992, 107). The peaceful termination of indigenous peoples had long been a part, sometimes a pivotal part, of colonial enterprises in the New World, often taking the form of missionary efforts struggling for human souls in the midst of the chaotic destruction of human lives. But at the close of the nineteenth cen-

2. Such estimates of population decline are widely variable. Thornton's estimates are conservative in comparison with Stiffarm and Lane's (1992, 44) estimate of at least 7 million original inhabitants of today's continental United States in 1492, and exaggerated relative to Ubelaker's (1988, 291) very conservative estimate of decrease in all of North America from 1,894,350 at contact to 1,051,688 in 1800.

tury, bloodshed became largely superfluous. Philanthropic eradication of the last vestiges of “savagery” through Christianization and “civilization” became the strategy of choice for the construction of culturally uniform nations.

Such associations between ethnocide and organized campaigns of killing raise an important question: what are the consequences for people’s lives (in both the dominant and dominated societies) of the intentional elimination of human cultures? The semantic connection with actual mass killing can be extended to imply that cultural genocide truly does have consequences for the well-being and survival of individuals, and that attachment to a stable identity is a human need that cannot be denied without causing suffering.

Simone Weil once observed, “All oppression creates a famine in regard to the need of honour, for the noble traditions possessed by those suffering oppression go unrecognized, through lack of social prestige” ([1949] 1996, 19). Under the circumstances in which indigenous peoples were colonized, traditions were not merely unrecognized; they were acknowledged only as targets of derision, as dangerous for the soul, or as fragile reminders of disappearing ways of life. What are the consequences of active repression of tradition for the human sense of honor? When oppression takes the form of actions intended to destroy traditions, does the crisis of honor become all the more acute?

At the same time it should be recognized that evangelical doctrines and new educational regimes were not always imposed upon aboriginal peoples by force. Native North Americans, in their relationships with dominant societies, cannot always be portrayed as victims of ethnocide; one must also take into account frequent examples of partnership and cultural exchange. Christianity and ideas of “progress” also came to native peoples at times of loss and hardship, with new isolation on reservations, and along with racism and dependency in relations with neighboring white communities. Under these conditions many sought a new understanding of the reasons for their suffering and had a new expectation of moral justice in prophetic movements that combined elements of Christianity with Indian visionary traditions. For others the answers lay in a more uncompromising acceptance of what was being offered by outsiders—formal religion, education, “civilization”—in the hope that even if it did not improve their lives, it might at least provide their children with a better chance in a world of hostile change.

Understanding native North American religions, therefore, includes much more than interpreting ritual symbolism or receiving the wisdom

of elders. All local practices have complex, usually undocumented, histories of influence from (and upon) other native traditions; and most have been subject in one way or another to the pressures of Christian evangelism, political control, biomedical exclusivism, and mass popularization. This is not to say that connections with the ancestral past do not exist or that these are unimportant, but that even the essential aspects of indigenous spirituality are reflected upon, defined, and chosen. Maintaining a practice or belief in the face of opposition implies an arranging of priorities, a definition of what is vital to one's integrity, and sometimes a shift in perception that makes communion with spirits simultaneously an act of defiance.