

American Indian Spirituality

There are hundreds of American Indian languages and not one of them has a word for religion. They can teach us a lot.

If you study the history of the human race, it seems that the earliest cultures believed in God or gods, a spiritual realm beyond this one. This anthropological finding ties in with the Christian Bible. In the Bible we are taught that God made the human race and that human beings related to Him. Humanity did not invent God. God made us and we alienated ourselves from Him through rebellion. The Bible tells how God won back His people from their self-imposed alienation. We are privileged in that we have God's revelation of Himself in the Law and the Prophets of the Hebrew Bible and, above all, in Jesus Christ, God's Word made flesh. Nevertheless I believe that we Western Christians can learn a lot from the peoples who were once disrespectfully called "redskins". There are hundreds of American Indian languages and not one of them has a word for religion.

The American Indians did not need a word for religion, because religion, the realm of the spirit, permeated the whole of their life and culture. Every animal, every bird, every flower, every rock, even, partook of the nature of the divine. Human beings and human culture were caught up in the reality of the Great Spirit Who creates everything, fulfils everything and is above everything. Communion with ultimate reality, the spiritual reality which fills the cosmic, was the essence of life for the American Indian. They can teach us a lot, but we should have known it already. We don't read our Bibles enough. We don't read them with an open mind. We don't know enough of the history of our Church. If we did read our Bibles and the Christian tradition we would know that we are descended from people for whom God was everything.

It is not that we do not have a religion in the sense of a system of values which defines our existence and underpins the values of our culture. We do have such a religion and its name is materialism. Our gods are silver and gold. In our society, spiritual values have been banished to the reservation. We should revisit the reservation and rediscover our own authentic spirituality. Remember what the psalmist says of people who have lost contact with the living God and sold themselves to idols:

As for the images of the heathen, they are but silver and gold: the work of men's hands. They have mouths, and speak not: eyes have they, but they see not. They have ears, and yet they hear not: neither is there any breath in their mouths. They that make them are like them: and so are all they that put their trust in them. (Ps 136 vv 15-19).

Let's start with words. The Indians had no word for religion, because they didn't need one, but words are very important in Indian culture. Words are powerful. Our voices require our breath. As in the Bible, breath is conceived of as bound up with life and spirit. Words should be used sparingly and reverently. In western culture we are in danger of seeing words as nothing more than a means of imparting information or a way of filling up the silence we are so much afraid of. But we ought to know that they are more than that. A person's career may be demolished by a newspaper headline.

In the Bible, heaven and earth are created by the Word of God. The Law is God's Word given to His people through Moses – spoken and written. The ten commandments are the ten words. The prophets are bearers of the word of God, the word which not only announces what God is doing, but also puts His Will into effect. It is the Word of God which does not return to Him void. In the New Testament James reminds us of the power of the tongue. People who bless God and curse men made in His image are the worst kind of hypocrites. We treasure the Bible as the Word of God. Supremely, Jesus is God's Word made flesh. Words matter. The Word defines everything.

From words, we go on to names. For the American Indian, names are sacred. They are not spoken carelessly. In some tribes, individuals have their own secret name. I was very interested in the following words of a Navajo¹:

It has been said by some researchers into Navajo religion that we have no Supreme God, because He is not named. That is not so. The Supreme Being is not named because He is unknowable. He is simply the Unknown Power. We worship Him through His Creation. We feel too insignificant to approach directly in prayer that Great Power that is incomprehensible to man. Nature feeds our soul's inspiration and so we approach Him through that part of Him which is close to us and within the reach of human understanding. We believe that this great unknown power is everywhere in His Creation. The various forms of Creation have some of this spirit within them. As every form has some of the intelligent spirit of the Creator, we cannot but reverence all parts of the creation.

Come back with me, please, to the Christian Bible. Our God's Name is too holy to pronounce except by the high priest in the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement. Jesus is the Name above every name. The third commandment is not to take the LORD's Name in vain. We gave the animals their names. Abram, Simon and Saul took new names when they fulfilled their God-given vocations. We are named in our baptism. In Revelation Jesus promises a new name to those who remain faithful through persecution and temptation. It hurts a lot to be called names. In our materialist society, the Name of God has become an expletive. It makes you think.

Those words of the Navajo bring me on to the Indian's reverence for nature. Everything is seen as partaking of the divine spirit – inanimate things, as well as animals and plants. Prayer goes into gathering, building and especially hunting. The quarry has to be treated with great respect. If we do not reverence the world and especially the creatures who give up their lives so that we may eat their meat and wear their skins, there will come a time when the world is barren and there is nothing left to sustain human life. If we selfishly exploit the cosmos, we will destroy it and ourselves.

Again, there are biblical parallels. The ancient Israelites were farmers rather than hunters, but some of the same principles apply. The blood of any animal killed for food or hide is poured out on the ground. The blood is the life and the life belongs to God. There are times when fields are left fallow. Areas are left to be gleaned by the poor. Corn, grapes and

¹ Cited in "The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian" by Joseph Epes Brown

olives, flocks and herds are the gifts of God. If we want to enjoy them, we must not greedily exploit them for ourselves alone. We offer them back to God in thanksgiving. We respect nature's need to regenerate. We share with the less blessed.

The Christian tradition does distinguish the secular from the sacred. We are given dominion over creation. Cultures which worship the whole of Nature as sacred are unable to experiment on nature, to create sciences and technology. Until the white man came, the American Indian still lived in the stone age. We have felt free to exploit nature, to engage in commercial farming, to dig mineral ores out of the rocks, to build highways and cities, in short, to establish a technological society. We have conquered many diseases. We have created an abundance of food which the American Indian could never have imagined. We can travel all around the world in a day or two. Our civilised society makes possible a literate culture with books and computers and highly sophisticated art and music.

And yet you can't see the stars for the streetlights. You can't hear the silence for the hum of the traffic. Motorways scythe through woods and fields. The atmosphere is polluted by summer smog. We are afraid of global warming, the exhaustion of our reserves of fossil fuels, the rising tide of refuse. We believe that our present lifestyle is unsustainable, yet we are so addicted to it that we cannot bring ourselves to take any serious action. We are caught up in a cycle. We have persuaded ourselves that we cannot live without satisfying our demand for consumer goods, yet, the more we consume, the more we want. Isaiah asked people several centuries before Christ *Wherefore do you spend your money for that which is not bread? And your labour for that which satisfieth not?* They couldn't answer him then. We can't answer him now, but we don't draw the obvious conclusion!

Are we happier with all our consumer goods than other people are and have been without them? Do we feel more satisfied or fulfilled? I can't answer that question, but I do know this. I can remember my grandparents marvelling at the beauty and intricacy of an ordinary English garden flower. They weren't New Age weirdoes. They were just ordinary people with their eyes open to the world around them. When, however, I cruised in Glacier Bay on the coasts of Alaska a few years ago (something my grandparents could never have dreamed of doing) we were surrounded by mountains and enormous wonderful glaciers, there were hundreds of seals and seabirds, and some of the people on our ship wouldn't even come out of the hairdressing salon to see them. Spoiled or what? [Incidentally, George Vancouver, who was the first white man to map Glacier Bay and much of the coast of Alaska and British Columbia said that, in all his travels, he never came across anywhere nicer than Richmond!]

There is actually a strong tradition which says that indulging the body actually makes it much more difficult to commune with the reality of the spirit, with ultimate reality. There is a very strong tradition in Christianity of fasting and mortification of the flesh, of spending time alone with God, in order to enjoy a more intense and immediate experience of the Divine. American Indians fast and mortify the flesh and go on retreat to meet the spirits, but we don't anymore. Again, it makes you think.

For the American Indian, reality is the realm of the spirit. We only inhabit the realm of the spirit perfectly when we leave the flesh behind us at our death. This insight ought not to be

at all strange to us Christians! But do we live and die as if we believed it? Are the elderly respected for the wisdom they have accrued in this life and their nearness to the next or do we treat people as a waste of space when they are too old to produce much or consume?

I was very interested to read that a common religious symbol among the Indians is the cross in a ring. This is very much a Christian symbol. For us it means eternal life. The Cross of Jesus brings us life. (Indians are well aware of the redemptive power of sacrifice.) The ring signifies eternity. In Indian culture, the ring stands for the cosmos, for the eternal cycle of reality. The four arms of the cross are the blessings which flow from each of the four winds. At the centre is humanity. As Christians we share this sense that human beings are at the heart of the cosmos, blessed and enriched by the spiritual and material creation.

More elaborately, three rings with crosses are depicted one on top of the other joined by a vertical pole through the centre of each. Now the lowest ring is the physical world of plants and animals and inanimate things. The top circle is the realm of the spirit. The central pole and the middle ring both represent the human race. We partake of both the animal and the spiritual and, in some sense, link the two. Compare the Hebrew Bible. God makes man of the dust of the earth and breathes into him the breath of life, the divine spirit. Adam, standing for the whole human race, is both *of the earthly, earthly*, and the son of God. Jesus, the second Adam, the perfect man, the epitome of what it is to be human, is both human and God. He became man so that we should become divine.

We must press on. Peace pipes. Everybody has heard of the Indian peace pipe, but, I for one had not realised how sacred they are. The bowl and stem join heaven and earth. The breath of the smokers is life or spirit. There are special prayers as the pipe is filled, each grain of tobacco representing a different aspect of creation. In some tribes, after smoking the peace pipe, the smokers proclaim, *We are all related*. All those who have taken part in the rite are related to one another and also to the whole created order. Compare this ancient prayer which Christians have used at Holy Communion: *As the grain once scattered in the fields and the grapes once dispersed on the hillside are now reunited on this table in bread and wine, so, Lord, may your whole Church soon be gathered from the corners of the earth into your kingdom.*

For the Indian, there is sacred time. Things are not so much past, present and future, as eternally real. When myths are recited, they are describing and affirming the way things are. The present is eternal. Eternity is always present. We have this in our heritage too. Jews keeping the Passover are not so much memorialising the events of three millennia ago as affirming that they, today, are the people whom God has redeemed. In the same way, the Christian Communion service is not a memorial service for Jesus; it is an affirmation that we are His redeemed people in the eternal present.

We used to have our sacred time, the year revolving around the feasts of the Church, celebrations of eternal truths. Gradually, the year has been secularised. Instead of holy days, we were given bank holidays which had to be on Mondays in order not to disrupt industrial production. Whitsun disappeared as a holiday. Easter looks like being sacrificed as a national holiday. The school year has been restructured in order more efficiently to train the

producers and consumers of tomorrow's materialist society. Sacred time is reduced to two bank holidays and a commercial opportunity for the chocolate industry. Secular society is doing its very best to get the Christ out of Christmas and to ensure that only the gods of silver and gold are worshipped at the Winterval Festival.

And Sunday! I wish I had more time to talk about the loss of Sunday as a sacred day, sacrificed now to Mammon. Forget about the spiritual. Confine church to the reservation. Let a million cars drive to the out of town shopping centres, polluting the air with their fumes, and let millions of people buy goods that they don't need in a world groaning under the strain of exploitation, in which millions do not even have enough to eat, goods that will finish up in land fill sites or at best partially recycled into more consumer dross. And why? Because a society which has fallen out with its spiritual inheritance gets bored if it can't shop.

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Sacred space. The wigwam is round. In the encampment, the wigwams are pitched in a circle. The circle is the cosmic cycle. The fire is the power of the Great Spirit. The pole is virility. The painted symbols signify the unity of Creation – spiritual and material and man's place in the providential order. In the same way, the Israelite Tabernacle in the wilderness was based on the heavenly pattern God showed to Moses on Mount Sinai. The Temple at Jerusalem was built to the same plan. So are our traditional mediaeval churches – three spaces of increasing holiness: nave, chancel and sanctuary. In the church we do not swear, gossip or malign other people. We do not carry weapons. We respect the silence. We are especially reverent as we approach the holy table in the sanctuary. We are attentive to God's Word from lectern and pulpit. The sanctity of our religious buildings sets the standard for the way we ought to behave in the world.

I hope I have been able to convince you that the American Indians have something of great value to teach us, the primacy of the spiritual. It is something we ought always to have known. It is there in our own tradition, but we have neglected that tradition. Indian societies pass on their beliefs by word of mouth from generation to generation. Tradition is rooted in the wisdom of antiquity. It also grows, changes and adapts. If we are bound by the past, we cannot live in a changing world. If we think we are so much smarter than everyone who went before us that we can forget our tradition, we are in for a pretty arid time. Moslems learn Arabic so that they can read and memorise the Koran. Pious Jews do the same for the Hebrew Bible. Each generation learns, lives by and adapts the tradition and passes it on to its children. We're making a pretty poor job of learning, living by, adapting and passing on our Christian tradition. We've consigned our spiritual heritage to the reservation and adapted ourselves to the materialist religion of the C21 west, bowing down to the gods of silver and gold. The question is, what are we going to do about it?