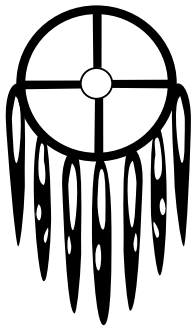


AMERICAN INDIGENOUS SPIRITUALITIES: A PRIMER



The Medicine Wheel, also called the Sacred Circle, is divided into quadrants representing the four directions.

When Europeans began to explore what is now the United States of America, they encountered a plethora of nations, each with a language and a culture, thus a spirituality.

Some descendents of these nations still embrace these original spiritualities. When we attempt to bring together the spiritualities of all of the original peoples of the fifty states of the USA, we immediately find ourselves confronted by an awkward question: is there an umbrella term for all them and their worldviews? In the forty-eight contiguous states, we may well find descendants of North America's original people who refer to themselves as "Indians," but Hawai'ians have never been subsumed under this term, it has been applied to Alaskans only sometimes, and in the contiguous forty-eight states, many "Indians" prefer to be called Native American (or simply, Native). It is probably safe to say that few of them refer to themselves by the term "Indigenous" in everyday (as opposed to scholarly or political) parlance.

Yet "American Indigenous Spiritualities" is the label adopted by the Interfaith Education Initiative. This choice reflects this project's insistence on a rubric under which the spiritualities original to all fifty states can

be placed with some legitimacy. It also reflects a desire to embrace of the terminology currently employed in United Nations and World Council of Churches discourse. This decision was confirmed during conversation at the Episcopal Church Center with Tara Tautari, Executive Secretary of the Scholarships Program of the World Council of Churches—who is Maori, thus is herself an indigenous person. "Indigenous Peoples", she asserts, takes pride of place over "First Peoples" and "Native Peoples" in the arena of advocacy; therefore, she believes, it makes sense to use it in the arena of education.

Scholars who study Indigenous Spiritualities, and advocates for indigenous peoples, fall into two broad camps: those who place the most emphasis on the individuality and particularity of the spirituality of each people; and those who place the most emphasis on the commonalities between these worldviews. The second camp points to such common threads as:



your neighbor as yourself"

- ⊕ An holistic worldview in which humanity, spirits, and nature are inexorably interdependent, thus a worldview that emphasizes human co-existence with creation;
- ⊕ Belief that matter is invested (or, “animated”) with spirit;
- ⊕ Special reverence for ancestors (or, “the Living Dead”);
- ⊕ Belief that the people belong to the land (rather than that people “own” the land);
- ⊕ Explanation of the meaning of life by means of complex, lively, symbolic, oral tradition; and,
- ⊕ Emphasis on the collective/communal rather than the individual.

The first camp insists that there will be far too many exceptions for any generality to hold up. It is important to stress that some of the scholars in *each* camp are themselves indigenous persons.

From an advocacy standpoint, the first camp wants to be sure the distinctiveness of each group—their languages, their stories, their customs—are not lost. The second camp wants this also, but—pointing to indigenous peoples’ shared experiences of colonialism, stereotyping, and disenfranchisement from land, language, economic prowess, and culture—looks for power in numbers: when indigenous peoples come together and speak as one voice, they have more clout. This is the logic behind the United Nations Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues. The United Nations Draft Declaration on Indigenous Peoples deals with rights to land, history, culture, self-determination, and economy.

Discussion of “American Indigenous Spiritualities” must also include discussion of “the spiritualities embraced by America’s indigenous peoples.” These may be categorized under four broad headings:¹

- ⊕ Oral tribal spiritualities, each with its own form and its own history;

- ⊕ Imported (or, imposed) religion, particularly Christianity (the product of European missionary activity which now is the spirituality embraced by the largest number of Native Americans—Hawai’ians and Alaskans included—who often infuse with aspects of their own indigenous culture);
- ⊕ New, distinctively Native American, religious movements (the “Native American Church”—also called “peyote religion”—calls into this category); and,
- ⊕ Trans-tribal spirituality (which builds on notions of a common indigenous American identity and culture).

The relationship between America’s indigenous peoples and Anglican spirituality and the Episcopal Church itself is complex and colorful. Any effort to broaden understanding among Episcopalians about America’s religious diversity, complexity, and interconnectedness must include education about American Indigenous Spiritualities and the spiritualities of America’s indigenous peoples.

¹ A debt is owed to scholar Sam Gill for this outline. See his chapter on Native American religion in Jacob Neusner, ed., *World Religions in America: An Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1984).



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