Renewing body, soul, and mind
Learning from Indigenous spirituality

Iris de Leon–Hartshorn

In recent years, I have been talking with church people about the effects of the Doctrine of Discovery, which European monarchies beginning in the mid-fifteenth century espoused in order to justify colonization and seizure of lands inhabited by Indigenous peoples. This concept in international law was expounded by the United States Supreme Court in a series of decisions, most notably by Chief Justice John Marshall in Johnson v. M'Intosh in 1823.

In my work with Mennonite churches I have been laying open the ways this policy and the worldview that produced and flowed from it brought grave harm to the bodies, souls, and minds of Native peoples, stripping them of identity, establishing the foundation of the United States' racist sociopolitical system, and resulting in genocide. My hope is that one day our churches, our nations, and our globe will renounce this doctrine, and that my work in my corner of the church will contribute to that repudiation.

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As I embarked on this work on the Doctrine of Discovery, I did some discovering of my own, and some reflecting on the impact of this doctrine on my life. Among other things, I had a DNA test done. I have always referred to myself as a Mexic-Amerindian, on the assumption that, like most Hispanics, I am of mixed blood. To my surprise, the results indicate that I am 70 percent Dene from the Southwest—that is, Navajo or Apache. I assume Apache is the more likely, because that tribal group occupied areas around what is now the United States–Mexico border. Of the remaining 30 percent of my DNA, 15 percent is Indigenous from the Chiapas region in southern

Mexico and 15 percent is Arab, likely a strand that entered at the time of the Spanish conquest of North American territories.

This revelation about my genetic makeup got me to thinking about my worldview, about how much affinity I feel for an Indigenous outlook and about how I have struggled with Western Christianity. I experience effects of the conflict between the two in my mind, body, and soul, and I am moving toward embodiment of a spirituality that combines elements of Indigenous outlook with Christian faith.

Four elements of an Indigenous worldview

American Indian theologian and scholar George (Tink) Tinker has identified four elements that distinguish an American Indian worldview from that of the dominant culture.[1] These distinctive features are a communal worldview and social structuring, spatial orientation, an ideal of harmony and balance, and an understanding of the interrelationship and interconnectedness of all life.

Communal worldview and social structuring is the complete opposite of the individualism of Western society. For people shaped by Native spirituality, all is to be done for the good of the community. No one makes decisions affecting family, community, or nation apart from the group; decision making is communal.

Spatial orientation refers to the importance Indigenous peoples attach to space; in their spirituality place is more important than time. For example, a ceremony begins only when people have determined that the space is right and that the community is prepared to undertake it. Again the contrast with Western practice is sharp: in dominant culture, events start at an established time.

An ideal of harmony and balance points to the way all ceremonies and all social and political acts of the community and the person in community are oriented toward establishing or reestablishing harmony. The ideal of balance—personal, communal, and cosmic—is more central than the concept of liberation to Indian worldview.[2]

Interrelationship/interconnectedness is also a hard concept for those whose worldview is the dominant Western one. Mary E. Clark writes that "one of the basic images of reality on which the Western world view rests is that all entities in the universe are

isolated, discrete objects that have distinct boundaries, much like we imagine atoms to be."[3] In Indigenous worldview the opposite is true. Everything is connected and related. We are not separate from but part of all creation. In Indigenous life, people respect animals and plants and all that God has created. We are not beings isolated from the rest of creation. Mistreatment of the earth is mistreatment of ourselves, because we are all affected.

Western Christianity versus Indigenous worldview

The racist culture the Doctrine of Discovery grew out of and perpetuated has sought to eliminate Indigenous spirituality. Western colonizers did not understand or value an Indigenous worldview, and they tried to force assimilation into the dominant culture and conversion to its religion. Despite the resilience of Indigenous communities, this effort to eradicate an Indigenous way of seeing and living has caused great harm. Ever since 1492 the push for assimilation and conversion has been an ongoing assault on Indigenous peoples, conducted in the apparent absence of any desire to understand—much less appreciate—their worldview.

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Sometimes I hear the comment that people of color in the church need to "get over it." This comment reflects a failure by those with power and privilege to understand generational trauma. Trauma inhabits the bodies of groups of people, who experience it so deeply that it has become part of their individual and collective DNA. For Indigenous people in the United States and Canada, the trauma in question reaches into their minds, bodies, and souls. When cultural practices that express and shape a community's spirituality have been taken away or destroyed, the community is left without the glue that has kept it together, and people are deprived of purpose. They suffer in mind and body and spirit. Many Indigenous communities in North America are now trying to recover their culture and nurture the ceremonial practices that bound them to each other and gave their life meaning.

The harm that Indigenous people continue to experience today is sometimes the result of the actions of Christian people.

For example, many reservations are "dry"; sale of alcohol is prohibited. Yet just outside these reservations, near the entrances, you find small settlements in which people sell liquor from a tire shop, a restaurant, or a convenience store, exploiting the vulnerabilities of their Indigenous neighbors and contributing to the destruction of their bodies and spirits and the integrity of their communities. Many of the people running these shops will say they are Christian. In the summer you will also see busloads of church people who come to the reservations—patronizingly—to "help the Indians," again without understanding or appreciation of their traditional culture and worldview.

Many Indigenous people in North America do not see a way of being Christian and reconciling that faith with their Indigenous spiritual values. Western Christianity is just too embedded with empire and a history of colonization and oppression. The history of the churches' efforts to convert Indians is too enmeshed with governmental policy that has deprived Native peoples of their land, their children, their language and culture. I ask myself, what does it mean for me to say I am a Christian, when Indigenous parts of the church are continually under threat by the church itself?

A renewed Christian faith corrected by Indigenous spirituality

Lame Deer's critique of Western Christianity is apt:

> *You've made a blondie out of Jesus. I don't care for those blond, blue-eyed pictures of a sanitized, Cloroxed, Ajaxed Christ. Would you like it if I put braids on Jesus and stuck a feather in his hair? You'd call me a very crazy Indian, wouldn't you? Jesus was a Jew. He wasn't a yellow-haired Anglo. I'm sure he had black hair and a dark skin like an Indian. The white ranchers around here wouldn't have let him step out with their daughters and wouldn't have liked him having a drink in one of their saloons. His religion came out of the desert in which he lived, out of his kind of mountains, his kind of animals, his kind of plants. You've tried to make him into an Anglo-Saxon Fuller Brush salesman, a long-haired Billy Graham in a fancy night shirt, and that's why he doesn't work for you anymore. He was a good medicine man, I guess.*[4]

Years of stress related to loss of cultural cohesion and a constant micro-aggression contribute to the prevalence of high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, and stroke among Indigenous people. Another contributing factor in these chronic conditions is change to a Western diet and loss of a traditional food culture. I am reminded of the woman who bled for many years (see Mark 5:25–34). She was beaten down after being sick for so long. And "she had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse." But she had faith, and she reached out to touch Jesus, whose power—released by her faith—restored her to health.

In my work against racism and for intercultural competency, I hear the stories of many people of color who stay faithful to Jesus, despite—rather than because of—their experience in the body of the church. At times they feel they have tried, in every way they know how to, to speak to the racism in the church, but to no avail. Like that bleeding woman, deep down inside they know that the real Jesus—the one with black hair and a dark skin, not the sanitized, Cloroxed, Ajaxed Christ—is there to stand with them. Somehow they know that when the churches deny space for them, Jesus will provide a way. It is that resiliency that keeps people of color at the table.

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In my body and mind and spirit, I experience the harmful effects of efforts to eradicate Indigenous worldview and practices. I have personal struggles around issues of identity, lack of self-care, isolation, disconnection from community and self, a devaluing of my own gifts, and a constant struggle to prove myself. Despite these negative effects, I have also experienced empowerment, found ways to keep true to myself, and grown in my relationship with God. If my experience is a reliable indicator, Indigenous ways of seeing and living can enrich and deepen—and yes, correct—the Western Christian tradition I have also been formed by. My journey of discovery has convinced me that fostering the four Indigenous spiritual values identified by George Tinker has potential to broaden our understanding of God, make us more faithful follow-

ers of Jesus, and contribute to our restoration in body, mind, and spirit.

Giving attention to communal and social structuring as a spiritual value would mean paying more attention to things done with and for the community and placing less value on ourselves as autonomous individuals. Now Anabaptist-Mennonite Christians talk a lot about community. We like to say we interpret scripture in community. But voices outside our faith community often influence us far more than do the voices within it. And our actual communities are often narrow, consisting of people who think more or less as we do. How do we authentically embody community in an individualistic and deeply polarized society? I believe that fostering an inclusive community can moderate our societally induced individualism and help us become more whole people who are better followers of Jesus.

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Spatial orientation is about being rooted profoundly in place rather than being driven by the clock. In traditional Indigenous cultures how a ceremony is laid out and where it is located are far more important than what time it starts. Shifting our values in this direction would be a countercultural move for those of us whose worldview is that of the dominant culture. What if worship started only when we sense that everyone is spiritually ready to begin? What if we met outside instead of inside, so that we could be more attuned to the natural world? An orientation to space could help us center ourselves in readiness to encounter God and engage redemptively with God's creation.

In traditional Indigenous culture, all ceremonies and sociopolitical acts of the community and the person in community are oriented toward establishing or reestablishing harmony. Harmony and balance are valued in self and community and world and cosmos, and in the interaction of all these realities. Valuing harmony and balance would lead us toward lending our energies to the mending of God's creation, from a personal to a cosmic level. Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition rarely gives attention to the cosmic, but considering God's work at this grand level can

give us perspective on our own lives and activities. We occupy a modest place, not that of God or even as superior beings in God's ordering of things. We are creatures, called to embody humility in our relationship with God and God's other creatures. We are not above that creation but are embedded in it. When we center our lives and our activities around harmony and balance, we are joining God in the work God is doing in restoring creation.

This value reminds me of the theology articulated by the writer of the letter to the Colossians: "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in [Christ], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven" (Col. 1:19–20, NIV). God is bringing everything into balance and harmony—but Western Christianity has often limited reconciliation to the human-divine axis and to interpersonal or intragroup dynamics, forgetting that God is reconciling all creation. As long as we understand Christianity only through a Western lens, we will fail to experience the fullness of God's intention for all creation. A Christianity informed by an Indigenous worldview invites this fuller sense of God's salvation as a matter of bringing harmony and balance to our lives, which find their rightful place in the cosmos.

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An emphasis on the interrelationship and interconnectedness of our lives with all creation has been important in my life as I seek to embody its meaning in my interactions. Lakota prayers conclude with prayer "for all my relations." These words point not just to the circle of one's kin but are inclusive of all creation. All created things are related to each other, because they have all been brought into being by the Creator. Our mistreatment of the earth arises from our mistaken notion that other living things are objects and are separate from us, to be exploited by us. Our inability to see ourselves rightly as part of and connected to all creation has led to our destruction of the earth. We desperately need to recover Indigenous ways of seeing and living, so we can begin to find sustainable ways of living on earth.

Conclusion

My work in antiracism and intercultural competency within the church is challenging, and it sometimes takes a toll on my mind, body, and soul. But it has also allowed me to broaden my understanding of God through the gifts that have come to me from outside dominant Western culture. It has provided a rootedness in my life that I lacked and needed.

Many of my fellow believers—those who are Swiss, German, and Russian Mennonites—know their ancestry; much of it is well documented. For those of us indigenous to North America, much of our heritage has been taken from us and our rootedness disrupted or even destroyed, with devastating effects on our bodies, souls, and minds—and our communities. Gaining an understanding of the spiritual values of Indigenous culture has helped me experience God more deeply, and through that understanding I have joined a journey my ancestors were already on. Theologically the Anabaptist tradition is my home, but how it is interpreted and embodied in my life must take into account the insights of my Indigenous ancestors, even as I open myself to hearing the wisdom of other people groups.

Notes

[1] George (Tink) Tinker, "American Indian Theology," in *Liberation Theologies in the United States: An Introduction*, edited by Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Anthony B. Pinn (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 172–75.

[2] Ibid., 171. Tinker points out that "Indian people only became cognizant of a need for 'liberation' after the brutal tragedy of the European invasion and conquest generated the radical imbalance of the subjugation and genocide of the aboriginal owners of the land."

[3] Mary E. Clark, *In Search of Human Nature* (London: Routledge, 2002), 6.

[4] John (Fire) Lame Deer and Richard Erdoes, *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions* (New York: Pocket Books, 1972), 168.

About the author

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