

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN INDIAN ADJUSTMENT

A paper prepared to help the church evaluate the modern mission effort among American Indians.

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The topic assigned me by Dr. Calen Weaver was: "Encouraging Indians to relate realistically to the total cultural enterprise in the present world while fully utilizing the values in Indian heritage and history." Any society goes through a similiar process as it moves through time. If a given society does not there are some abnormal conditions which are preventing its members from making just that kind of adjustment. A society which does not adjust in this way will disappear, even though the disappearance may be a slow and agonizing process. It strikes me that many American Indian societies are right now in the throes of this slow agony. However, in these times they are not by themselves. It seems obvious that American society generally is going through a similiar agony of trying to fit a 19th century set of values to a 20th century technology.

This kind of process is of course what we Americans, or any other people for that matter, have had to do throughout all our history. Americans no longer wear buckskins and carry long rifles (and we are glad of it) but we are just as much committed to constitutional government as Davy Crockett was, although our notions of what constitutional government is have changed to fit our different times and conditions.

I am setting down some of my ideas about what the church might do to help American Indians make this normal kind of adjustment and how abnormal conditions that stand in the way of this adjustment could be identified and changed.

To begin with, let me speak a bit about what tribal societies look like under normal conditions, how religion functions in tribal societies as opposed to urban societies, and how change and particularly religious change comes about in tribal societies.

First, we know that the life in tribal societies is integrated and consistent from one sphere to another. There are no categories such as we have in urban life, like religion, politics, economics, etc. Life is all of one piece. The quality of economic activities is not significantly different from that of religious activities. In fact, meanings spill over from one sphere of life to another so much that such categories are meaningless. Observers have commented on "how much religion is a part of everyday life" in tribal societies. I think these comments could be better put by saying that life in tribal societies is integrated and sacred.

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What we could call religious ritual and meaning sanctions all social usages and explains the meaning of life to the tribal person.

Robert Redfield has characterized behavior in a folk society as personal, spontaneous, and uncritical. Interaction is with the total "whole" person as opposed to interaction in an urban setting where one usually deals impersonally and with the partial person in terms of such things as role and function. Needless to say, folk people interact primarily with fellow kinsmen. Kinship is the primary regulatory mechanism. The institutions of the community are built upon the kinship system so that one interacts with kinsmen as kinsmen, even in an institutional context.

Redfield further characterizes the folk society as sacred. In lay terms, one could say that religious meaning and sanction (as I have commented above) permeates all aspects of life. Importantly, Redfield comments on tradition as the guide for behavior. In this sense he does not mean to define tradition as simply time-tested custom. In some sense, every society is regulated by time-tested customs. Christianity is one such complex of time-tested custom in Western Civilization. Tradition, in the sense Redfield wants to talk about it, means that people in a folk society take their cues for their behavior from their external environment, social and physical; not from within, as say we do in modern America, from internalized goals or internalized codes of morality.

Of course, even today the majority of the world's population live in folk or folk-like societies. Certainly this is so in much of rural America and a great deal of metropolitan America as well. One need only think of the personal quality of working class life in American cities. Ethnic groups in American cities are very folk-like in many respects. Working class Negroes exhibit these characteristics to the extreme, and just offhandedly, they seem to me to resemble displaced, fragmented tribal people. One would suspect this to be the case just by looking at Negro history in America even with out behavioral observation. None of these groups, however, are as folk-like as the intact tribal people of America, the American Indians.

Even such a folk-like group as rural whites in the South are urban when compared to American Indians. Let me contrast the purely folk tribal life of American Indians with the more urban aspects of life in the rural South. Life there is categorized into religion, politics, economics and the like. Saturday night is a time for "whooping it up", Sunday is the day you go to church, and the rest of the week you are the economic man. Each of these spheres of life have different institutions which present differing and conflicting ideologies in competition with one another. The Southern white man learns a personal, manly code of honor from his family, pacifism from his church, free enterprise in his work, and "wheeling and dealing" in his political life. I am over stating the case, to be sure, to make my point. It looks to me as if each of these ideologies balance one another off. The individual must make some kind of sense out of this diversity and inconsistency by taking something from each of these ideologies in varying degrees and erecting a personal ideology.

We are used to living in this kind of inconsistent and conflicting world. Individually, we as urban people are perpetually remolding our ideology to fit our personal experience or else we use our goals and purposes to tell us who we are and how we are doing in the world. We guide our lives by ideologies and/or goals. People in tribal communities do not do this. They guide their lives and get their definition of themselves from the people around them. If tribal people pick up conflicting definitions from people in different contexts it literally tears them apart. This kind of inconsistency casts doubt on their whole self image. They are not pickers and choosers of different bits of ideological systems.

So much for the contrast. Now let me talk about how change comes about in a tribal society. Change in a tribal group is probably slower than among a more urban society because any change must be accounted for, integrated with, and made consistent with all aspects of that life. In tribal societies, religious institutions and religious meaning, since religion is the "cement" of that kind of society, must be flexible enough to integrate these changes. A religion which is over dogmatized, ideologized, and hierarchized many times becomes too unwieldy to do that job, as witness Judaism in the time of Christ. And if you need examples of any description of religion in tribal society and how religion functions to integrate change just think carefully of the Old Testament.

When other societies introduce new religions and religious institutions into a tribal society a sequence of events usually takes place under normal circumstances. One, the new religion is usually fully integrated into and made consistent with the already on-going life there. Previous ideas become fused with the new ideas. Leaders of the previous institutions become the leaders in the new religious institutions. And this new integrated religion takes over the job of integration, explanation, and consistency for the tribal society. However, rarely does this happen if there is a differential in power between the people who are introducing the religion and the people who are receiving it. If a tribal people is conquered by force of arms and "occupied" as most American Indian groups were, rarely does this integrated process occur.

One need only look at northern Mexico for examples of fully Christian tribal societies who are still whole, "healthy", functioning tribal groups. These societies still have some control of their own destinies. The Yaqui Indians in Sonora are the best example in North America, I can think of. In the United States there are only a few instances where Christianity has been integrated into the life of tribal people, fulfills the function of their former native religion, and does not in fact fragment life for the people. To my knowledge this was the case with the Papago and the Cherokee (at least before 1950).

Both of these cases were very different from the conversion situation of most other American Indian tribes.

In the Papago case Catholicism was introduced to Papago Indians in the 1870's and 1880's when they were isolated from the rest of the United States and Mexico. However, some revolutionary changes in Papago life such as the surrender of the Apaches and the introduction of new technology had taken place and the Papagos were groping to make sense out of this confusing era. Catholicism was introduced by lay people--Mexican merchants and cowboys in the Papago country and Papago returnees from seasonal work in Mexico. A practicing lay Catholicism grew up among the Papago before Catholic priests began to come into the area and present more formal Orthodox Catholicism. Lay Papago Catholicism is just that. It is Papago Catholicism even as Irish Catholicism is distinctly Irish and different from Mexican Catholicism. Among the Papagos a native medicine man may very well advise a patient to have a dance for his saint in order to cure a specific illness. Up until 1950, Catholic priests in the Papago country functioned as ritual specialists who performed special ceremonies and sometimes conferred with Papago lay religious leaders about distinctly Papago Catholic ceremonies. Other Papago Catholic ceremonies and organizations were completely in the hands of lay people.

The other case of permissive conversion and integration was the conversion of the Cherokee to the Baptist religion in the 1800's when the Cherokee tribe was an independent, sovereign nation. Here the Baptist religion was completely integrated into the life of the people. The Bible and the hymns were translated into Cherokee, the services were in the Cherokee language, former native religious leaders became Baptist preachers, etc. The Baptist church in the local Cherokee settlement became the "cement" of Cherokee society. This institution was thoroughly Cherokee, explained the world, defined what a Cherokee was, and made Cherokee life consistent. However, it was and is a very different institution from the same Baptist church among Southern whites in terms of meaning, function, etc.

In some sense, this process happens in any society when a new religion is introduced. Catholicism reflects many of the pre-Christian religious conceptions of the peasant farmers of Southern Europe. The importance of the virgin as an earth-mother fertility symbol is an example. Christian holidays are built upon old Roman and north European pagan festivals. Protestantism reflects not only the values of the new middle class of Europe in the 1500's but also the values of the old Germanic and Celtic warriors--the personal, direct approach to the supernatural, the Spartanism, etc. The Protestant Reformation, from a scientific viewpoint, seems to be a revolt against a religion that did not "fit" north European culture as well as stemming from other "causes". Catholicism could not be integrated into the life of the people of north Europe because of over-control by an outside hierarchy. The difference in tribal societies from other societies in terms of integration and fusion is a matter of degree. All societies tend to integrate and fuse new religious ideas with older conceptions, if the new religion is to become functional. Tribal societies need complete integration and need to use the new integrated religion as an integrative mechanism itself.

It has been my experience that the Cherokee and Papago cases are exceptional in the United States (even these two cases have changed since 1950). It seems

to me, among Plains tribes particularly, that the church is not integrated into the life of the people at all and is unfortunately fragmenting. In fact, the only apparent reason most of the Sioux are Christians at all is because of the power and prestige of the white man. They may get emotional satisfaction from the church but no psychic stability from Christianity as it is presented to them.

On the other hand, there are obvious structural reasons why Christianity became integrated into the life of the Papago and Cherokee and did not among many other tribes of the United States. In a word, the Papago and Cherokee very early had control, because of their independence and isolation, of these new religious institutions and they were able to integrate Christianity into their societies. As a social scientist it seems to me that after the initial conversion of a people, non-natives in powerful religious institutions become disfunctional. Only the native people themselves can integrate a new religion and then use it to make life consistent for themselves. An outsider cannot do this and usually only succeeds in doing the opposite. (In all fairness, I should say that some of the most successful missionaries have helped native people achieve this integration by being "expert advisors" rather than directors of this process.) However, in many Indian communities the church is like a huge crow bar crammed into a delicate machine. It is disintegrating rather than integrating. An outsider with the power, money and prestige of a powerful foreign society behind him is uncontrollable and even the best intentioned and most knowledgeable foreigner in this situation is almost bound to pre-empt native decision-making which is essential to the integration of new religious institutions.

A complicating factor in this whole picture is that the white church authorities who live among American Indians and who control Indian religious institutions are "foreigners" and, of course, most of them feel their alienness very much. Very rarely do they even speak the language of the community they hope to serve. Since they are not part of the Indian community, they naturally form associations with whites of the same class level in the local area and become part of the "power structure" which consists of Bureau of Indian Affairs officials, white store-owners and ranchers, local politicians, etc. Since this power structure consists of people who are very threatened by the difference between themselves and the Indian majority and are dedicated to remaking the Indian community over in their own image, white missionaries soon become "socialized" by these associates and come to conceive of themselves as critics of Indian behavior and directors of Indian destiny.

In such a social situation fragmentation is increased if Christianity is opposed to the native religion. Severe religious factions are created or else, as among the Sioux, a large part of aboriginal tribal religious life goes "underground". Competition for membership among various Christian sects in a tribal group will further increase fragmentation so that the churches really become almost extraneous institutions.

In a "healthy" tribal society, religious sanction which is applied to individual behavior by the religious leaders and religious institutions control

deviant behavior. Since most religious leaders and institutions among American Indians are foreign and external to the community, there are no means of social control left to most Indian communities. Many times Christian churches are still defined as the "whiteman's religion." Much of the disorganization and crime rate in certain Indian communities is a symptom of the lack of this much-needed sacred social control.

My second point once again springs from my knowledge as a scientist of communities in general and tribal societies in particular. In the above discussion I have tried to make it clear that in a tribal society religious institutions must be integrated into the fabric of life and themselves be an integrative mechanism. There is, however, a facet to religious institutions which one finds in any community--tribal, peasant, or urban. Any institution, religious or otherwise, gives the people in a community (if the institution is functional) a view of the environment they have to deal with. In present day Indian communities this is especially crucial because the major part of the environment that Indian communities must face and understand is, of course, modern urban American society. Nearly all of the political and economic institutions of Indian communities are pre-empted by whites. On reservations, these institutions are controlled under law by the federal government. In a situation like Oklahoma prestigious and powerful local whites control the political and economic institutions. The only institution, given the present situation, which could possibly be utilized by members of an Indian community to get a view of modern urban life is the church. However this is not possible if these institutions are controlled by foreign personnel living in the community with decisions being made by a hierarchy which is not part of the community. Many communities in the United States live a different style of life than standard middle class Americans. They may speak a non-English language in their home and may be taught very different basic values from standard American ones. These communities come to terms with our society and make some adjustment to the majority because the adult members of the community are able to get the experience necessary for this adjustment in institutional niches which both look inward to their own community and outward to the general society. And as you know, many very deviant groups have made successful adjustments here in America. American Indians can very well do the same if they are given the opportunity. The general society however has, unfortunately, pre-empted most of the political and economic institutions in Indian communities. It would be disastrous if, the last place which could provide learning experiences for Indians, the church, is also pre-empted.

My third point is a less general one than the first two but it is applicable to a great many American Indian groups. Many American Indian communities, particularly in the Plains area, do not have a closed-bounded outlook in these days. They see themselves as Sioux and Americans, for instance. And they see a commonality with the Christian world generally. However, in many groups there is no way for them to symbolically act out this relationship. They want to be seen and express themselves as the Sioux community of America, a whole social group which is also part of a larger whole. They do not want to be broken up as a social group, but they also want to be part of the modern scene. They share this attitude with many other non-Anglo-Saxon communities in the United States. However, some mission workers seem unwilling to allow

Indians this kind of adjustment. Not only are Indians blocked off from using the church as a way of acting out this new conception of themselves and their community, but pressure comes the other way. Too often the church is used as a way to pressure Indians for assimilation or conformity. The breakup of a total social group rarely happens to begin with. Break up and conformity are not conditions we require in America to share in the American dream. Thus many Indians are placed in the position of not being able to use "their" churches to act out their relationship with the general society. The church is of course the logical and normal place for this to happen. Anyone who has ever attended a pow-wow knows how much Plains Indians want to express both their solidarity as a tribe and their new commitment to America. However, it is usually only at pow-ows that they are allowed to express this conception. Too many times they have to defend their solidarity as a social group and their way of life in their own churches. Needless to say, this kind of unnecessary pressure is not only dysfunctional but diminishes the usefulness of a church as an institution to American Indians.

In my discourse I have tried to make three main points. Let me summarize them briefly now. Firstly, I have said that in a normal tribal society, life is integrated and all of one piece, that the religious institutions are to a large degree the integrative mechanism of tribal society and make life all of one piece and whole. The tribal personality needs consistency and wholeness. In a situation of change, religious institutions and religious meaning mediate the change for a tribal people. New religious institutions must be integrated into the fabric of life of a tribal society and these new institutions must become integrative mechanisms themselves. Anything less causes fragmentation of life, turmoil, and unhappiness for a tribal people.

My second point, in brief, is that American Indians desperately need their churches as a place to get a view of the general society so as to learn how to adjust to their new environment, the urban world.

My third point was less general but still applicable to quite a few American Indian groups. American Indians do not need more pressure for assimilation. In fact, this pressure is destructive. They certainly do not need it in their churches. In fact, they are put in the position of having to act out their commitment to the American scene in non-church contexts just because too often outside personnel who control their churches will not allow this adjustment and threaten them with the doctrine of social death.

Let me make a few recommendations. It is obvious what much of my discussion is leading up to. Indian communities must have control of their own churches with native leadership in the important institutional niches, so the church can in fact become a Kiowa or a Navajo institution, express this "Kiowaness" or "Navajoness", be integrated into the life of the people, and be an integrative mechanism itself. The only people who can do this job are the people themselves. Outsiders cannot do it, nor can the institution do this job even with native personnel if the money and decision-making power resides elsewhere, outside the Indian community. Further the church as an institution will only become a learning situation and help American Indians in their adjustment when the conditions I just mentioned are fulfilled. Further, without these

necessary conditions the church will never be a bridge between the local community and the outside society, as Indians in many communities so desperately want.

Unthinking pressure for assimilation by the church is not only not positive, it is destructive--as a scientist it appalls me, as a moral American it angers me.

My recommendations are two: One, that the church as an institution be firmly placed in the hands of local Indians along with decision-making power and the money to implement those decisions. (Many church leaders seem to be worried about how to best break into what is termed by them as the "power circle". That is, they are concerned about missionaries being part of the local power structure. If the money and decision-making power was given to the Indian community, in the nature of the case, white missionaries would become "servants" of their congregations and the Indians themselves would "pull" their missionaries out of the power structure and integrate them into the local community or eject them and get a new missionary.) Secondly, I think churches need to look at what the requirements are for Indians to be Christians. It seems to me that much of the "dogma" passed off to Indians as Christian is some bit of the personal ideology of an individual missionary, or else some secular value of middle-class American life. Indians will never become standard middle-class American Protestants anymore than Welsh Methodists will become like southern American Methodists, nor do I think this is necessarily bad. In order to avoid undue pressure, I do think the church will have to decide such questions for Indian Christians as - What is essential and basic in being a Christian? What is of minor importance in church practices? What is superfluous? And what should be weeded out and not included at all, such as pressure for assimilation or the promulgation of some middle-class value? I am suggesting that Indian churches be indeed Indian churches and that democracy, respect and tolerance be the other side of the coin of Christianity. We might, as urban Americans, show to Indians a side of the Judaic-Christian tradition that they have seen little of--democracy, respect, and tolerance. Such attitudes we demand as part of our rights as Americans.

As an aside, let me say that I am not suggesting that people in the mission field give up their life's work. I am suggesting a way that this work can be more productive for mission workers and Indians. I am suggesting that mission workers be advisors rather than directors. I feel this kind of relationship is not only the most feasible scientifically but is central in Protestant thought as I understand it. Further, by being real advisors rather than directors, they could help Indian people achieve this necessary integration, stability, and adjustment. And I assume these are the ends we are all working toward.

American Indians could easily enough become model Christians, although Indian Christians. But their life must not be fragmented, their institutions pre-empted so they cannot get a view of their environment, and the threat of social death hurled at them. The church field could very easily help provide this bright future for American Indians. I am convinced that if these condi-

tions are fulfilled, if "abnormal" circumstances are removed, then American Indians will, as most other groups in the world have, "relate realistically to the total cultural enterprise in the present world while fully utilizing the values in the Indian heritage and history."

Addendum

I was asked at the meeting in Anadarko last year to make some suggestions about how the church might handle the problem of termination of Federal responsibilities to Indians. My first reaction was that this problem is solely the business of Indian tribes and the Federal Government. Realistically however, we all know that the churches as organizations will be asked for policy statements regarding termination.

I would suggest that the churches solicit the opinion of their local Indian congregations and stand behind whatever might be their desires in the matter, even if church officials might think that local Indians are not sophisticated enough to make a judgement, or even if they think local Indians are making a mistake in judgment. The price of Democracy is that people must be free to make mistakes. I am not suggesting that church officials should not counsel their local congregations or cease being their spiritual guide, but the fact remains that it is the Indian community which must take the consequences of shifts in Federal policies. It is possible, or course, for national church organizations to present well reasoned arguments to Congress about the termination policy or to give intellectual and moral backing to the positions of tribal councils and national Indian organizations, but I think this would be mitigating against the position that the Indian community needs the experience in decision-making about church affairs as I have presented it in this paper.