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American Indians and Christian Missions: Studies in Cultural Conflict

Jon M. Temme

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BOOKS IN REVIEW

THE SACRED. WAYS OF KNOWLEDGE, SOURCES OF LIFE

PEGGY V. BECK AND ANNA L. WALTERS

Tsaile, Arizona: Navajo Community

College Press, 1977.

xiii + 369 pp. \$9.00

AMERICAN INDIANS AND CHRISTIAN MISSIONS. STUDIES IN CULTURAL CONFLICT

HENRY WARNER BOWDEN

Foreword by Martin E. Marty

Chicago: University of

Chicago Press, 1981.

xix + 255 pp. \$14.95

Many well-intentioned and concerned people have, no doubt, set out to investigate North American Native religions only to be quickly frustrated in the process. This is understandable given the nature of the majority of sources available concerning Native religious experience. On the one hand, there are those works which generalize so freely and so often that little meaningful or accurate information is presented. Books such as these are often easily identified by a title which lumps all tribal beliefs and expressions together under the false rubric of "Indian Religion" (in the singular!). On the other hand, there are countless books, reports and studies which tend to the opposite extreme. Arising from the disciplines of anthropology or comparative religions, these so atomize and individualize Native religious experiences that one is left with the impression that to speak of fundamental concepts among Native religions in general is all but impossible.

Fortunately two books have recently appeared which fall into neither of the categories above. Instead, these books offer both accurate and beneficial introductions to the Native religious experience.

The Sacred is described by its authors as being a textbook "emphasizing the traditional characteristics of sacred ways in North America." Beck and Walters are quick to point out, however, that "traditional sacred ways were and are never unchanging" (p. xii). The body of the book expands upon six central concepts of the sacred shared by Native peoples. These are:

1. A belief in or knowledge of unseen powers, or what some people call The Great Mystery.
2. Knowledge that all things in the universe are dependent on each other.
3. Personal worship reinforces the bond between the individual, the community, and the great powers.
4. Sacred traditions and persons knowledgeable in them are responsible for

teaching morals and ethics.

5. Trained practitioners who have been given names such as medicinemen, priests, shamans, caciques . . . are responsible for specialized, perhaps secret knowledge.
6. A belief that humor is a necessary part of the sacred. And a belief that human beings are often weak—we are not gods—and our weaknesses lead us to do foolish things. (p. 8f.)

In terms of specific tribes and activities these elements of the sacred in Native experience are further developed in terms of: ritual drama and prayer (ch. 2), traditional education (ch. 3), cosmology (ch. 4), shamanism (ch. 5), Native religious movements (ch. 7), anthropology (ch. 8), puberty rites (ch. 9), the peyote road (ch. 10), and sacred clowns and fools (ch. 13).

In addition, Beck and Walters offer more detailed analysis of: the impact of colonization and Christianization upon Native religions (ch. 6 & 11), contemporary religious issues for Native peoples (ch. 14), and Navajo religious experience (ch. 12). The separate chapter on the Navajo experience is indicative of the book's source and primary orientation, although care is taken to be inclusive of many tribal traditions.

The Sacred is packed with information, myths and descriptions, the majority of which are further elaborated via photos, illustrations and maps. What particularly commends this book though is the almost exclusive use of primary sources. A glance at the notes and bibliography reveals few of the standard anthropological studies on Native religions. In other words, the "non-Native middle man" in the interpretation of Native beliefs has been eliminated. Thus one senses that *The Sacred* offers the reader a better feel for what the Native religious experience entails. It is not here treated and analyzed as a bit of datum for a comparative religions course, but it is put forth as a living faith that has power and meaning for Native peoples still today. The authors are to be commended for taking this approach. It is rarely found in other works concerning Native religions.

Only two problems detract from the value of this book. The first is simply the enormous number of typographical errors. One hopes that in subsequent printings (if this should be the case) such mistakes will be corrected. More disconcerting is the problem of the book's genre, *i.e.* textbook. Often the flow of the book bogs down as the authors "stop" every now and then to define terms for an audience not accustomed to the jargon of religious studies (*e.g.*, myth, cosmology, shaman, etc.).

Yet despite these two aggravating traits, Beck and Walters have made an important contribution to the literature concerning Native religions. They have fulfilled the task which they set for themselves, namely: "To describe, not intrude by analysis, the meaning, role and function of sacred traditional practices and observances in the lives of The People, individually and collectively" (p.3). *The Sacred* might be tough to track down in a bookstore; it may be order directly from the Navajo Community College Press in Tsaile, Arizona, 86556.

American Indians and Christian Missions offers far more and less than its title indicates; both the additional and missing elements contribute to the value of the book. First of all, contrary to the title, not just tribes within American borders are dealt with. Bowden focuses upon key Native peoples, even those whose traditional lands also

extended into present-day Canada (the Hurons) or Mexico (the Pueblo). The title should really read *North American Indians and Christian Missions* or, even more accurately, *Selected North American Indians*. That is, Bowden does not offer an exhaustive “blow-by-blow” account of Christian mission work among Native peoples, an impossibility in only 221 pages of text. Rather, he has wisely chosen to focus primarily upon several paradigmatic encounters between Native peoples and the Christian faith, as presented by various mission organizations.

Bowden examines three such encounters in particular: the Pueblo encounter with Christianity via Spanish missions (ch. 1), the Hurons encounter with Christianity via French missions (ch. 2), and the Massachusetts encounter with Christianity via English (*viz.* Puritan) missions (ch. 3). In subsequent chapters Bowden goes on to survey further Native-Christian encounters in the 18th through 20th centuries (ch.4-6).

Because the author has been selective, and limited his in-depth study to three tribal situations, he allows himself the opportunity to discuss these tribes’ religious experiences in some detail. For the Christian audience especially *American Indians and Christian Missions* is helpful in that it emphasizes those aspects of Native belief that impact upon or effect most immediately the encounter with the Christian faith. Furthermore Bowden’s choice of tribes also helps to point out differences in religious beliefs among various tribes. The Pueblo, with their fairly formal religious structure, and the Hurons and Massachusetts, with their more personal faith, highlight well the fact that it is impossible to speak of an “Indian Religion” in the final analysis.

Bowden has also been careful to avoid the trap of “bad guys vs. good guys” in his description of the Native-Christian encounter. He neither glorifies Native, precontact faith (*e.g.*, his forthright discussion of the significance of cannibalism for Huron religion, pp. 70f.) nor does he unduly defend the all-too unholy alliance of Christianization and colonization (*e.g.*, his discussion of the government “use” of Christian missions, and vice-versa).

One wishes that Bowden would have offered more detailed analysis of the faiths of the Natives encountered by missionaries as colonization spilled forth in the middle-west and beyond. The religious experience of the Great Plains tribes receives only a few pages of treatment (pp. 178-185), even though it is upon the Great Plains Native experience that most generalizations are made. All in all, however, Bowden offers much in this book. As Martin Marty suggests in the foreword, we have really three books here: “a short history of Christian missions among the natives; an overview of American Indian religion of a sort that has textbook values of its own; and, most of all, the story of intergroup conflicts in a religious context” (p.xii). Extensive notes and a concluding bibliographic essay add value to this work.

The history of the Native religious experiences, especially after its encounter with Christianity, is a history involving faith, courage, tragedy, and many examples of both far-sighted ecumenicity and short-sighted religious exclusivity. *The Sacred and American Indians and Christian Missions* are good places in which to begin an acquaintance with the Native religious experience and its meaning for, and over against, the Christian faith.

Jon M. Temme