
Theory—Articulating a Native American Theological Theory

Steven Charleston

To do theoretical analysis is to analyze thought itself, its assumptions and its rules. Put succinctly, theory analyzes the signposts (orders, rules, assumptions) that structure and direct thought.¹

In 1973 I sat in a seminary classroom as a new student preparing for ordination in my Christian denomination. The professor was explaining why the religious worldview of ancient Israel was so unique. He told us that no other people of that time had come to an awareness that God was singular; monotheism was the special province of Israel's spiritual development. Moreover, he explained

1. Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 4.

how this understanding had been woven into an even deeper theology that connected the tribes of Israel to God through a covenant, a promise of a land reserved for them, and the vision of a national identity as God's chosen people. This, he told us, was the unparalleled story of the Old Testament, the term common in those days for what we have come to call the Hebrew Covenant.

As I sat there, I kept thinking to myself, "But I have heard this story before. This is nothing unique." In fact, it is quite common because it is shared by many tribes, many peoples, who have a memory of themselves as a People, chosen by the one God to inhabit a special land and to be in covenant relationship with their Creator. It is the story of my own ancestors. It is the "old testament," the traditional theological story, of many Native American peoples of North America. I was only a first-year student in those days, too shy in my own education to contradict my professor, but now, many years later, I realize that the vast majority of seminarians still have not heard the other half of the story of monotheism. There is a complementary theology to the testimony of ancient Israel, an ancient theology that arises out of another promised land. There is a story of the indigenous nations chosen by God to dwell here, in North America, over centuries of our spiritual development.

It is the goal of contemporary Native American Christian scholars to correct an educational deficit by offering the resource of a theology truly indigenous to this hemisphere. Standing firmly in the history, tradition, and experience of Native America, these women and men seek to express how Christian thought sounds when spoken with a Native accent. They ground Christian ideas and visions into the soil of Native American story. And in doing so, as diverse and culturally nuanced as their scholarship and storytelling may be, they present a unified view of theological perspectives, shaped by,

organized by, and responsive to the “theory” of Native American theology.

Getting Started

What is the theory implicit within the way that Native American people do theology? To ask that question is to ask a series of interrelated questions: How do we think about ourselves as Native People? About our own history, identity, and future? How do we understand the organizing principles of our culture? Where do these principles come from and what do they say about the nature of the world in which we live as Native People? How do we process thought as a distinct social community and what does that say about our matrix of values? And ultimately, what do we think about God and all of the collateral issues that flow out of our theologizing about God to create the spiritual reality we inhabit and strive to preserve?

These are the kinds of questions that shape a Native American theological theory. Answering them reveals our rationale for the process by which we develop theology. However, before we attempt our answers, we need to highlight one of the central cultural values within this process, that is, its collective nature. Native theory is a group project just as Native theology is a communal process. No one person, Native or otherwise, can define Native theory. What follows here is one set of answers. I offer my interpretation of Native theory as an invitation to the larger Native community to continue the development of our Native Christian position. I believe I have captured some of the major generic themes that North American indigenous cultures use in forming both their ancient traditions and their Christian theology, but I welcome other Native colleagues to trace these threads in their own context.

How Do We Create and Transmit “Theory”?

In traditional Native American cultures, the process of theology was undertaken through the medium of story. The first step toward articulating a Native American Christian theory is the awareness that this medium is still definitive for Native culture: we are a people of oral tradition. This is a crucial starting point. It reveals a process of theology-making that is fundamental to the core principles of Native civilization. Even in the midst of the digital age, even in the endless flow of electronic information that characterizes our moment in human history, and even though we participate fully in this reality and are shaped by it as much as any other cultural community, Native People still carry with them the legacy of being a People of the spoken word. This is not an anachronistic quality of our culture. It is not a reluctance to adapt to technology. Rather, it is a core value. Native communities were formed over centuries by the process of information sharing, analysis, and organization passed through the communal exchange of spoken words. Story is the container for Native theory; the spoken word is the content.

This fact should not be passed over lightly. It tells us something important about the source of Native theory. Speaking directly to others impacts the speaker, the listener, and the content of what is communicated. It carries with it a sense of *intimacy*. While contemporary forms of communication can lead to technological isolation, a further distancing of human beings in contact with one another, the substance of Native cultural communication remains in the realm of intimacy. This favoring of contact that brings human beings into close proximity, requires them to look one another in the eye, and generates a field of awareness in which even the subtleties of body language are at play is a cultural value developed over the centuries and never abandoned. Native Americans participate

in the digital age, but they retain an instinctive understanding that communication occurs in layers; long-distance, depersonalized communication may transmit information, but only intimate communication may share true spiritual wisdom. We cannot “phone in” our experience of the sacred.

Native theory emerges from this sense of spiritual intimacy. Our theory emerges from an understanding that theological analysis is textured. While there may be broad generalizations and widespread sharing of ideas, the most critical levels of spiritual awareness occur on ever-more intimate spheres of contact. The last step in analysis is always made one-to-one, up close, and personal. Not only is this understood as the way that God speaks most powerfully to human beings (e.g., through the dreams so common to both biblical and traditional Native American stories), but it also requires the persons participating in the exchange to accept the three criteria for Native communications: accessibility, adaptability, accountability.

Accessibility means that Native theory arises from an oral tradition that allows every person to participate. It is an egalitarian process, not a process reserved to the specialists. While elders in the community are honored for their wisdom, a recognition of the depth of their experience, in Native religious tradition every human being can participate in a personal quest to encounter God. Just as Jesus did in the biblical narrative of his wilderness experience (Matt. 4:1-11), Native men and women go out into lonely places to seek and be found by God. Divine intimacy, therefore, is not confined only to pivotal personalities in the sacred story, but widely accessible to all persons who feel moved to experience the holy as intimately as they can.

Moreover, theory that is transmitted in an oral tradition is highly adaptable. Just as Christian biblical stories remain open to a wide range of interpretations, so do the stories of Native American

tradition remain fluid as they enter into the mainstream of Native theology. The man or woman returning from a vision quest recounts his or her own intimate spirituality. This personal narrative may confirm the traditions of the community, but it may also challenge or even contradict that tradition. The impact of the vision is determined by the reception it receives from the community. Just as the gospel narratives describe the experience of Jesus in sharing his message, there might be times when many people would respond and other times when the words would be questioned or even rejected (e.g., Luke 4:29), for once those words are released into the community they become part of a living story. For traditional Native American theology, this adaptability in the sacred story carries with it an important subtext in the development of theory: it means change is not seen as a negative and consistency is not as important as relevance.

From the European-based cultural perspective this flexibility in Native theological theory may seem disconcerting. In the religious history of Europeans, change was suppressed and absolute conformity expected. Generations of religious wars and persecutions testify to that opinion. In Native America, this level of religious repression did not exist. The theological glue that held adaptability together, that prevented traditions from becoming so relative as to be completely individualistic was the third criteria for Native theory: accountability.

The accountability factor of intimacy in communication means that the person offering the vision or interpretation is directly evaluated by the reaction of the community. Like the prophets of the Bible, Native men and women who express their spiritual views in their communities take the public risk of being heard or denied. The intimacy of the prophetic, of the new, demands a courage of conviction that places the speaker in the midst of the congregation (e.g., Jer. 1:7). In Native American theory, truth is not a static object,

but a process of intimate communication. The visionary may bring a new truth, but the prophet does not own that truth. Its meaning is not contained only in the speaking, but in the hearing. Truth is played out in the democratic spiritual dialogue of the community. Just as the New Testament offers numerous examples of the way Jesus sought to teach a single concept (e.g., the kingdom of God) through many different stories and metaphors, so Native American theory understands that theological concepts are like pebbles in a stream: they may be core truths of a spiritual nature, but they do not exist independent of the interpretive process that constantly flows over them, that refines, polishes, and re-presents them to succeeding generations. Each speaker of a sacred truth, like that truth itself, must stand within the active presence of the community. There are no disembodied messages from on high, only intimate messages from within.

Now we come to ask another question that arises from our reflections of accessibility, adaptability, and accountability: If the intimacy of oral tradition is the source for Native theory, how is that theory put into practice? We can answer in a single word: story. The baseline for Native theory, indeed for Native theology, is story. The history, ethics, customs, and legal precedent of Native People are contained in the myriad number of stories we have continued to share over generations. The religious instructions by which Native People shape their communal spiritual existence are not written into dogmas, but contained in the stories. These stories are allegories for instruction; they set the parameters of our culture, defined in stories and constantly reinterpreted in stories.

Story, as we are using it here, is theory because it is through both individual and communal stories that Native People fashion sacred reality. The analysis of our historical origins, social organization, religious ceremonials, family relationships, ethical imperatives, and

practical knowledge are all a product of storytelling. The reasons for behavior, the sacred meaning of actions, the foundations of culture: all are located within the context of the people's living story.

Consequently, the theory initiated by traditional Native American intellectual activity is still at work in Native Christian theology. They are integrated into the Christian narrative. Consequently, they change and shape that narrative. As the stories are told and retold, they are under constant scrutiny. Questions are asked. Modifications or variations to the story are engaged. Some parts of the story are let go, others are taken up as times and circumstances change. Native American theory is a dynamic process activated by and perpetuated through the context of story. This fact invites us to a new appreciation for the role of the "truth-claim" in Christian theology.

One of the frustrating things for Western anthropologists when they began to study traditional Native American stories was that the stories often came in multiple variations. They could even contradict one another. This seemed confusing to Western scientists who sought not only precision and conformity, but resolution of contradictions. If the stories could not agree, how could they be true? The answer for Native theory is the same answer for the Bible.

The many stories of the Bible are held as an expression of truth by Christians, even though they can vary and contradict one another. They are "canonical," embodying broad truth-claims, because they are accepted by the majority of the Christian community as the accurate expression of God's activity and purpose in human history. They are also open to interpretation and debate, even though they are recited as the tradition of the community. Truth, therefore, is understood in Native theory in much the same way that it was understood by the first followers of Jesus: it is a living presence among the People (John 15:26) made manifest by the actions of the

people themselves (John 14:17). *In other words, truth is an object of our faith, but also a subject of our process.*

This is how Native American theory, arising from the “canon” of our ancient stories, approaches the search for truth. Theory as story represents the Native analytical tools of accessibility, adaptability, and accountability. The story form of theory allows us to accept a given body of sacred text passed on through the oral tradition of the People over generations. This is the core truth of the community. However, every person within that community is empowered to participate in the quest for deeper meaning (accessibility); in turn, the whole community itself is empowered to explore and “try on” new concepts (adaptability); and every teaching thus received is constantly measured against how well that part of the story continues to speak truth to God’s people (accountability).

A historic example of this process occurred in 1805 when the great Seneca leader, Red Jacket, told the Christian missionaries coming to his land that he was aware that the neighboring Europeans all possessed the same sacred book, the Bible, as their truth, but that he would wait before embracing it until he saw how well those same Europeans lived out that truth in their behavior toward his people: “Brother,” Red Jacket said, “we are told that you have been preaching to the white people in this place. These people are our neighbors; we are acquainted with them; we will wait, a little while and see what effect your preaching has upon them. If we find it does them good, makes them honest and less disposed to cheat Indians, we will then consider again what you have said.”² He was articulating Native American theory put into practice. Red Jacket accepted the idea of

2. There are many published versions of Red Jacket’s speech. The citation here is from: History Matters, The U.S. Survey Course Online: a project of the American Social History Project/ Center for Media and Learning of the City University of New York and the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University. Accessed December 5, 2014. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5790/>

a truth-claim; he was willing to adapt and try on a new part of the story; but he wanted to see how that truth actually looked when it was taken off the written page and put into action by those who claimed to believe it. Truth, in Native American theory, is not an ideal to be professed, but a path to be followed.

Theory Is Memory

Why did Jesus ask his followers to “do this in remembrance of me”? (Luke 22:19). Native American theory would answer, because he understood that his spoken words would become a story through which his people would gain their identity. Identity, therefore, originates in memory. The intimacy of the spoken word and the medium of story combine to become memory, the collective memory of a whole community. *Memory, therefore, is the unit of theory.* Each individual memory, collected into the stories of the people, refined through interpretation and amended through time, is a piece of the mosaic of memory that defines community. In essence, Native theory asserts that *we are what we remember*. Like Jesus, Native People believe that it is crucial to reenact the story, to bring the old words alive over and over, so that we can remember who we are, live into that memory again, and most importantly, forward that memory into the future, because if we do not, there will be no future.

It is precisely at this critical juncture that we encounter one of the greatest challenges to the practice of Native American theory. Memory is a form of recollection, a re-collecting of thoughts, of events, of histories that form the substance of any people’s self-awareness and self-definition. What we remember, we are. But for Native American nations, that memory is often obscured. Colonialism has infected our community with a form of imposed amnesia. The historical trauma of the Doctrine of Discovery and the

military conquest of the Americas has created a wall that separates Native collective consciousness into a “before” and “after.” The before is before Columbus, before colonization and conquest. The after is the aftermath of colonization, the contemporary experience of Native communities as survivors. It is important that we pause to acknowledge the gravity of this dimension of Native theory because we are not alone in experiencing it. One of the strategies of oppression is to deny or distort the memory of the oppressed. This insidious form of domination has been practiced around the world; it has been practiced against indigenous peoples on a global scale. It has been practiced against women in general throughout history. It has been used against people of different sexualities, workers in lower economic classes, and followers of various religions. It is a common thread of trauma that unites the poor and the oppressed.

In Native America, this practice of erasing a people’s memory banks was carried out in many ways, but perhaps the most germane to our study of Native theory is the suppression of Native languages. Under the banner of “assimilation,” the national governments of both Canada and the United States undertook an intentional, systematic, and well-orchestrated effort to destroy Native American languages. Native children were removed from their homes and communities; they were isolated into reeducation centers called boarding or residential schools; they were subjected to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; and they were punished until they lost their ability to communicate in any language other than that of their captors. The result was one of the most violent and racist efforts at social engineering and ethnic cleansing known in human history.

Therefore, we recognize that Native theory is a *methodology of repair*, a project of restoration. Colonialism sought to erase the traditional memory of Native People and, consequently, to eradicate its story. Native theory, applied to both the Traditional and Christian

theology of the Native community, is a process of reconnecting those bridges, the cultural synapses that were severed historically and intentionally. Native theory is a healing of the story, a way to revive the ancient narratives and then to apply them to the story of the survivors of the American holocaust.

To achieve this purpose, Native theory engages memory as a form of truth-telling. It stands in the uncomfortable and even chilling historical reality of the Native experience of conquest, war, and genocide. It seeks to recall those experiences, not as an end in themselves, a source for blame, but as a transformative catalyst, a vision of truth that can be brought back into the story of the people, reinterpreted and then used as that memory moves into the future. To recapture the story, Native theory seeks out these broken places and confronts them because *healing cannot occur if the physician refuses to look at the wound*. The shattered memory of the Native community cannot be restored if it is restored selectively. Native theory embraces the historical facts of colonization and conquest. It looks at the good and the bad. It exposes the degradation of colonialism, but it also reveals the triumph of the human spirit in overcoming racism and oppression.

In 1993, at a gathering with Native People who began telling their intimate stories of life in the Canadian residential schools, Michael Peers, then the Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada (one of the Christian denominations contracted by the Canadian government to operate the reeducation schools), offered a spontaneous and historic apology. “I am sorry,” he said, “more than I can say, that we tried to remake you in our image, taking from you your language and the signs of your identity.”³ This apology, which set in motion a

3. The full text of the Most Rev. Michael Peers’s apology can be found in the archives of the Truth and Reconciliation process of the Anglican Church of Canada. Accessed December 5, 2014. <http://www.anglican.ca/relationships/trctemp/apology/english>

process of reconciliation still going forward in Canada and beyond, encapsulates the essence of Native theory as truth-telling at work. It illustrates this process of facing the facts, accepting the realities, but doing so in a way that reenergizes a people's memory to tell a new story. It underlines the way that this action must be undertaken by both Native and non-Native people together. It offers proof that the results of such actions can be enormously healing and liberating. What Michael Peers did in 1993 illustrates that Christianity in the Native story is not consigned to being part of the problem, but that it can actively become part of the solution. That "solution" is the goal of Native theory in its project of memory restoration: to allow memory to become the catalyst for community.

Community is the product of shared memory. Community is created, sustained, and enriched by the living out of the collective memory that weaves the traditions of the past through the experiences of the present to reveal the path to the future. Native theory, therefore, seeks to retain the most ancient memories of Native People; it strives to analyze the colonial experience of the people; it supports the development of new forms of shared memory as the people thrive in a new era of Native civilization. In every way, Native theory is the memory of Native People, the substance of their story and the medium of their healing. And most importantly, Native theory activates this dynamic form of memory by welcoming the story of all Native people and cultures.

One of the attacks on the memory of Native People was the effort to divide the community into memory factions. Some were told to forget their religious past and adopt only the imposed memory of the colonizers. They were "converted" by having their own memory banks erased. Others sought to hold onto the original memories, going underground to preserve their traditions. These were Native People who preserved their memories during times of state

persecution in much the same way as first-century Christians, by going into the catacombs, or in the case of Native People, into the hidden places of nature. One of the most fundamental tasks of Native theory is bringing both of those aspects of our shared memory back together. Native theory is not a Christian project. It is not a Traditionalist project. It is the people's project of remembering our sovereign unity and our priority of maintaining community. Our theory honors and incorporates the religious traditions of our many nations. It encourages the development of a uniquely Native Christian theology. It fosters mutual respect and cooperation between the two. Ultimately, it restores the relationship between God and the sacred community; it restores people to the ongoing story of salvation; it brings the memory of divine love back to life. In this sense, Native theory strives to do what Jesus asks: to do this in remembrance so God's people might have a future (e.g., John 14:25-27).

In this regard, Native theory is one way of characterizing the growth of a "pan-indigenous" movement across the Americas, North and South, and indeed, of a pan-indigenous solidarity around the world. Native theory does not erase memory, it erases borders. The legacy of colonialism is the fracturing of particular communities into pockets of amnesia, the dividing of a people into broken fragments of what had once been a cohesive community. Colonialism drew artificial boundaries between people with a racist agenda of white superiority. It set people into religious bunkers and denied the commonality of faith even when the faithful had once shared a common story. Against this pervasive strategy of divide and conquer, Native theory presents a call to reconciliation through a restoration of memory. It invites truth into story by balancing out the evil that was done with the good that was never lost. It draws in the perspective of all autochthonous communities to deepen its level of analysis and

broaden its scope of understanding. In so doing, it affirms the claim of Christ that the process of truth will ultimately set us free (John 8:32).

Three Cardinal Memories

Native theory carries Native memory from the past, through the present, and into the future. It carries the Native story. But what are some of the most important elements of that story? What is the theological content? And is that content strictly drawn from Native religious tradition, or does it lend itself to the development of a truly Native Christian theology? In this brief introduction we cannot articulate every part of that content (and succeeding chapters of this book will pursue this theological project in greater detail), but we can spotlight three of the hallmarks of a Native Christian theology:

1. A sense of human anthropology centered in the communal as opposed to the individual.
2. An understanding of reality as an integrated whole rather than a compartmentalized subject.
3. An acceptance of ambiguity as a value not a problem.

These three categories are among the most foundational of the truth-claims arising from the ongoing internal religious dialogue occurring in Native America. They have each stood the test of time. They have been embraced by a wide spectrum of Native communities. They are actively incorporated into the ethical and spiritual dimensions of both Native traditional and Christian practices. They are benchmarks around which we can shape Native theology.

We the People

Native American theory analyzes all aspects of social, economic, and spiritual life from the perspective of the “we,” not the “I.” One of the