

# Religion and Revolution Among American Indians

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In the last year and a half the familiar stereotype of the faithful Indian companion silently marching alongside the white hero à la Tonto has been rudely shaken. First a group of Sioux Indians invaded a sleepy Nebraska town where one of their kinsmen had been brutally murdered and demanded justice. Then there was the occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs headquarters during the week of the 1972 national elections and the almost total destruction of that building. Tempers had hardly cooled by the end of 1972 when the same group of Indian activists invaded Custer, South Dakota, burned a stall-like Chamber of Commerce building and scared the settlers who had moved into the Black Hills, winding up their confrontation with the destruction of several bars in Rapid City, South Dakota.

Following the Custer confrontation American Indian movement leader Dennis Banks addressed the South Dakota legislature and pledged a new era of race relations in the state. Hardly a week had passed before Banks and three hundred other Indians seized the hamlet of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, a community on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and the scene of the brutal massacre of Sioux Indians by the United States Cavalry in 1890. Banks, Russell Means, Carter Camp and other Indian activists, reinforced by traditional leaders of the Oglala Sioux, held the little community for seventy-two days against the U.S. federal marshals, the marauding white vigilantes who prowled the reservation after dark and the tribal police, aptly called the "goon squad" by the harassed reservation residents.

If Indians have not been successful they have at least been energetic. Wounded Knee was already a familiar site to the many who had read Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, but it achieved

international status as Indian activists appeared nightly on the evening news and correspondents from around the world swarmed to South Dakota to record the most recent of America's Indian wars.\* The problem with all the attention focused on the series of incidents provoked by the new wave of Indian activists was that very few people understood just what all the fuss was about.

To be sure, the United States had broken the Indian treaties. But also in 1972 the United States moved toward abandoning Formosa after basing much of its post-World War II foreign policy on the defense of Nationalist China, so the breaking of treaties was hardly viewed as a mortal sin by the American people. Others attributed the troubles to demon poverty. Ever since Lyndon Johnson declared his desire to create a Great Society in 1964 it was commonly acknowledged that, of minority groups in poverty, Indians were at the very bottom, because the Pueblos of New Mexico still lived in dirt houses and the tribes of the Pacific Northwest still hunted and fished for food.

The most popular interpretation of the Indian outbreak, however, came from the New Left, which saw the future as a series of revolutions by the oppressed, and since they were suffering most from what the Nixon Administration termed benign neglect, it was a fulfillment of New Left doctrine when war-painted Indians on ponies appeared on television from the confines of Wounded Knee, South Dakota. Clearly, the revolution was just around the corner.

With the characteristic enthusiasm and penchant for cameo roles in symbolic demonstrations, the

\*For a fuller discussion of the difference between covering and creating the news as it relates to the media's role at Wounded Knee, see the four-part series by Neil Hickey, "Was TV Duped at Wounded Knee?" in *TV Guide*, beginning in the issue of December 8, 1973.—*The Eds.*

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personalities of the "movement" of the sixties pilgrimaged to South Dakota to pledge their solidarity with the Indian protestors. A righteous Marlon Brando sent an Indian girl to spurn his Academy Award and announce to the outraged audience, which had made millions from cowboy-and-Indian movies, that Brando had not only disclaimed their morality but that he himself, that very night, was winging his way eastward to aid the besieged defenders of Wounded Knee.

They were all there. Ralph Abernathy arrived pledging to use his influence with Richard Nixon to bring the incident to a happy ending. Mark Lane showed up hoping for another Attica, and Bill Kunstler arrived offering his considerable skills as a trial lawyer to the leaders of the occupation. The National Council of Churches formed a human wall of noncombatant participants around Wounded Knee in an effort to prevent the federal forces from invading the little town. Successful in their initial effort, they promptly went on an undisguised ego trip as conciliators of the first rank and became useless in further discussions. Unfortunately, Jane Fonda was busy delivering a child and so could not attend the festivities, but since her Oscar was already in hand, there was no apparent crisis in which her involvement was required.

Had it been simply a misunderstanding by the sympathetic liberal white community, the events of Wounded Knee might have been comprehensible, but the Indian participants had no better grasp of the situation than did their New Left allies or right-wing foes. While the White House was busy trying to trace a connection between the American Indian movement and the Communist conspiracy, Indians of various tribes alternately applauded and booed the Indians on both sides of the occupation. Richard Wilson, the Neanderthal chairman of the Oglala Sioux tribe, whose excesses had largely created the desperation of the Oglalas that led to the confrontation, demanded that federal forces leave the reservation so that he could lead a thousand of his followers to Wounded Knee and kill everyone.

Now that we are somewhat distanced from the sorry melodrama of Wounded Knee, we can better examine the nature of the Indian protests which have increased both in frequency and in violence over half a decade. What is the relation of the present Indian movement to the problems, ideologies and energies of domestic America? We cannot understand the Indian protest when it is clothed in the symbols of yesteryear and interpreted through the rhetoric of post-Vietnam America. The further question asks about the connection between the Indian movement and most Indians.

Despite the protestations of some Indian activists and despite the enthusiastic attempts of young



whites to smuggle ammunition into Wounded Knee as a demonstration of their solidarity with the Indians, the connection between the Indian movement and the ideology of the New Left is utterly superficial. People who accept the Third World ideology or the various Marxist interpretations of social and class struggle find the real ideology behind the Indian protest incredible and outrageous. Rather than seeking a new social order or a new system of economic distribution and management, Indians are seeking no less than the restoration of the continent and the destruction, if necessary, of the white invaders who have stolen and raped their lands. As fantastic as such an aim may sound, it has deep roots in Indian consciousness.

The goal emerges from a variety of sources, mostly from religious legends and from prophecies that have been newly interpreted to fit today's situation. The first national exposition of these doctrines probably came from two sources; Wallace "Mad Bear" Anderson of the Tuscaroras, who, more than a decade ago, proclaimed Iroquois predictions of the coming and eventual demise of the white man, and from Clifton Hill, the Creek preacher, whose parabolic sermons have been rephrased in terms of impending moral and physical apocalypse. Such predictions of the end may or may not be authentic to tribal religions. They introduce the whole concept of time as a religious dimension. It was the absence of this dimension that distinguished the Indian version of the "chosen people" motif from the biblical version.

The Indian religions worked in nature, the biblical in history. The concentration on land enabled the Indian to relate to his environment but prevented him from recognizing the historical forces which man had created and which were changing the environment. The predictions, with their sense of history, could not help but change the Indian perception of reality.

The eschatological visions of the contemporary Indian movement are not without precedent. The famous Ghost Dance of the last decade of the 1800's was based upon eschatology, but its theme was the moral worth of the Indian as opposed to the white. The movement of today asserts the cultural superiority of Indian traditions over those of Anglo-Saxon peoples. That inherent superiority will, it is alleged, become historically manifest. Whether this emerging worldview is sufficient to build a lasting movement or to reestablish tribal community is presently being tested; the evidence to date is not encouraging.

The widespread Indian failure to comprehend the experiences of the immediate past is matched by the inability of whites to relate to the modern Indian. Indians compare the best of past Indian cultural values with the worst behavior of contemporary whites; whites look at the most profound and sacrificial efforts of contemporary Indians and find them wanting because they, the whites, can only relate to the Indians of the past they come to know through movies and television. Confrontation on the level of ideas becomes impossible, and misunderstandings abound. Indians have won a temporary victory with the media recognition of their problems. The price of that victory for all of us was the missed opportunity to understand the nature of the deep gulf separating Indian and non-Indian.

The field of literature is strewn with such missed opportunities. Chief Red Fox, at best a cruel hoax on the Oglala Sioux, has sold more books than the five leading Indian authors now writing on modern problems combined. T. C. McLuhan's scissors-and-paste creation of *Touch the Earth* sold more copies and received more attention than Hyemeyohsts Storm's *Seven Arrows*. Both books deal with the religious dimensions of land and creation, Storm's book being an effort to translate Indian beliefs into a poetic form of teaching and McLuhan's book being a collection of sayings of famous Indian chiefs.

In all the contemporary discussions the least understood fact is that tribal governments are split between "treaty Indians" and "Indian Reorganization Act Indians." The traditional, or treaty, Indians draw the line of resistance at the last treaties signed by the tribe with the United States. They demand that the federal and tribal governments settle the argument over the legality of the treaty before embarking on any other development plans. If the treaty is considered to have been

broken, as with the 1868 Treaty of the Sioux and Arapaho, the traditionalists insist that no other acts of the United States can be binding on the tribe until the matter of the broken treaty is resolved.

"IRA Indians" feel that the past is past, although the various treaties and agreements remain as points of reference in dealing with the federal government. They accept the limitations placed upon them by the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, but demand that they receive formal recognition from the United States as the legal successors to the aboriginal tribes. Their point is a strong one from a purely legal viewpoint. The IRA in effect created semiautonomous federal corporations out of the reservation population, thus defying the traditional political organization of the various tribes. The IRA "tribal governments" are no doubt successors to the old tribal communities in a legal sense, but culturally, religiously, historically they are aberrations of the old ways.

This distinction between traditional and IRA Indian carries over into economics with devastating effect. The traditionalists desire the old communal forms of economic life, which in most cases were built around the clan, band or extended family. Such a communal economy focuses on its own survival quite apart from the forces surrounding the tribal community. The IRA Indian views economic development as a goal in and of itself, clearly distinct from communal considerations.

As a result, under the IRA, tribal councils have leased tribal lands for strip-mining, introduced sweatshop factories into the reservations and developed housing programs based upon white suburban housing patterns. The failure rate of the new methods is incredible. Housing projects stand virtually empty because the people do not like suburban cluster-type housing. Factories and hour-wage projects are plagued with absenteeism and a high rate of employee turnover. Projects need continual and massive federal subsidies to keep going, and even then they eventually fail because they are so alien to the deeply felt needs of the Indian community.

Education is also a shambles. Federal expenditures skyrocket while the educational level of the Indian community remains almost the same generation after generation. Scholarships find their way to mixed-blood families that live off the reservations and have sufficient political clout to get the attention of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Full-blood reservation people get little attention and fewer educational opportunities. In large part this is because they do not view education as a means of individual salvation and thus rebel against the conformity and depersonalization of the educational system. In most cases they learn only the code words necessary for getting the white man's world to leave them in peace and let them learn on their own what they feel is important.

On the federal policy level the conflict appears

in the perennial question of whether to terminate the federal relationship with tribes in order to establish more individual equality, or to allow the tribes full self-government and thus invite a return to traditional forms. The federal position is curious. The present Administration denies it has any responsibility for individual Indians; its relationship is with the tribes. Yet it builds its policy upon an individualistic ideology which sees integration as the salvation of Indians. While insisting that treaties are a tribal question, the present Administration fails to comprehend the nature of the tribal concern. In August, 1973, a new Civil Rights unit was established in the Justice Department to deal with the civil rights questions of *individual* Indians. This after a year of violent protests demanding the enforcement of treaty-tribal-rights.

Within this mass of contradictions the present Indian movement has emerged; from such confusion the future is not easy to discern. Whichever way the Indian movement goes, it is bound to confuse both allies and enemies. The New Left, for example, still cherishes the vision of oppressed mankind rising in solidarity against the structures of oppression. From the universalistic viewpoint of Third World ideology the Indian drive to reassert the primacy of tribal identity and to reclaim ancestral land appears as an intolerable perversion of radical doctrine.

Those Indians who have assimilated are similarly put off by aspects of the Indian movement. They have "made it" in the white man's world, no small achievement, and they cannot allow the movement to go beyond what the American political center considers proper. They oppose the ideology and the violence of confrontations such as Wounded Knee; they are unable to distinguish between the ultimate philosophical base of resistance from the accompanying destruction of property. In this too they are good Middle Americans.

And, of course, tribal existence is anathema to the federal officials. They recognize a vague and ill-defined responsibility for Indian communities and justify their involvement on the basis of the federal government's having always had programs of assistance to Indian communities and there being no good political reason not to continue to have such programs. But little effort is made to understand Indians, tribal communities or even the nature of the government's legal responsibilities toward Indians.

The traditionalists also have problems in finding their way to a better future. A transformation of values is needed to bring tribal governments into line with the real conditions under which Indians live. This means traditionalists will have to recognize the historical nature of their beliefs. Customs and beliefs were shaped by particular times and places. The

revelations received by the tribes in "olden days" shaped the religious forms and served the needs of distinct communities of another time. Even if the sacred medicine which called the buffalo to the tribe still worked today, there are no buffalo. Religious forms must, in order to be meaningful, relate to a dramatically changed community in a dramatically changed environment.

I believe that, when the traditionalists realize that the basis of Indian tribal religions is not preserving social forms and ceremonies but creating new forms and ceremonies to confront new situations, they will have an extremely promising future. Many tribal religious traditions have their roots in the distant past, but took on their present forms little more than a century before the coming of the white man. The religious traditions of many tribes have been transformed in very recent times through revelations encountered in new environments. Such is the genius of Indian religion.

Unlike many other religious traditions, tribal religions do not depend upon the teachings of a messiah, savior or central religious teacher. They have not been authoritatively set "once and for always." Truth is in the ever changing experiences of the community. For the traditional Indian to fail to appreciate this aspect of his own heritage is the saddest of heresies. It means the Indian has unwittingly fallen into the trap of Western religion, which seeks to freeze history in an unchanging and authoritative past.

I have tried, then, to trace some of the elements in the confusing ways Indians are thinking about themselves and being thought about by others. I have made clear, I trust, that little confidence should be placed in a federal government riddled through with contradictory approaches to "the Indian problem." Nor do the fantasies of the New Left help in anticipating the future—although, unfortunately, the American Indian Movement has tended to imitate the New Left, with the predictable result of a backlash among Indians of all viewpoints. The shape of the Indian future cannot be imported, either from Washington or from other struggles for social change.

Probably within the coming year there will be another major event—a violent confrontation, a struggle with Washington over treaty rights or whatever—that will seize attention throughout Indian country. Ideologies are so much up for grabs right now that any *Indian* faction that is able to interpret that event in a way that brings sense out of the present confusion may well determine how Indian people will view themselves for decades to come.

The gut question has to do with the meaning of the tribe. Should it continue to be a quasi-political entity? Or it could become primarily an economic structure. Or it could become, once again, a religious community. The future, perhaps the immediate future, will tell.