

CLASHING WORLDVIEW ASSUMPTIONS THAT BROUGHT SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND SPIRITUAL DEVASTATION TO NATIVE AMERICAN PEOPLES

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Introduction

The historical record of missions among the First Nations of North America has been a saga filled with enormous potential, as well as great failures and sadness. In the peoples' pervasive belief and faith in a monotheistic Creator lay rich missional potential: the Spirit of the Lord was already here revealing the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to them. The source of grief lies in the fact that so many of the early missionaries were unable to recognize and embrace the intrinsic, God-given value of the people to whom they were sent. Craig Storti describes this blindness in terms of how our worldviews affect our interpretations of what we see as we ascribe meaning and value to what is observed or experienced. When it is something unknown, it can only be interpreted through the lens of previous "non-experience," an empty vacuum, and is typically misunderstood.¹ Those Western/modern assumptions produced a deep-rooted case of ethnocentrism in American Christianity, what Storti refers to as "the ethnocentric impulse" or "phenomenon of cultural conditioning."² There was a European expectation that these Native people would act, think and behave like them because that is how "real" or "normal" people are. The unrecognized and unreasonable assumption that Native people should act like them placed the European missionaries in a sadly ironic position: operating at an instinctive level in their expectations and dealings with Native people, European interpretive instinct overcame truly reasonable logic.³ Ethnocentrism—the instinctive assumption that *our* culture is the best, that *our* way of being is normal and right—is a fundamental fact of the human condition.⁴ When the Native people exhibited local behavior that violated values so fundamental to European identity and sensibilities of self-esteem, Europeans felt left with no choice but to reject those behaviors.⁵ New negative categories had to be created.

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1. Craig Storti, *The Art of Crossing Cultures* (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2001), 81.

2. Storti, 67.

3. Storti, 70.

4. Storti, 68.

5. Storti, 89.

One long-term effect of this cultural blindness is that today, among the hundreds of tribal groups around the world, Native North Americans are among those who have never seen the rise of an indigenous church movement or a widespread revival. Today only three to five percent of First Nations people have a vibrant, born-again relationship with Jesus Christ despite more than four-hundred years of being tiny islands surrounded by the “sea of American Christianity.”⁶

The miniscule number of Native believers, combined with their total absence from Christian leadership within American evangelicalism today, is indicative of an embedded ethnocentrism and the resultant devastating breakdown of communication.

To help us all move forward in the great enterprise of global missions today, this paper explores why missions failed, and remains largely ineffective today, among First Nations people. In this exploration, we will glimpse two periods of First Nations history in the United States: the early period of colonial missions, and the Urban Indian migration in the 1950s. This paper will seek to identify which worldview assumptions influenced cross-cultural communication understandings that contributed to the migration of Native people to today’s urban centers. Despite five hundred years of missions, only a tiny number of Native people are followers of the Jesus Way today. The thesis is that the problem stemmed from a clash of worldviews. Those few First Nations peoples who did respond largely abandoned their cultures in favor of a “Christian”—Euro-American—cultural framing of Jesus and the faith in submission to the biblical instruction of early missionaries.

To understand the First Nations missions’ context, one must first know something about the prevailing worldview assumptions of the early missionaries, as well as something about U.S. federal policies that eventually led to the steady migration of Native people from reservations to major urban centers. Only against this bracing background of historic realism can we appreciate the need for, and difficulty of, bringing the Jesus Way into the First Nations cultures of today.

Early Colonial Missions History

Dr. Paul Hiebert writes that “White Man’s Burden”—his perceived need to educate and civilize the world—is a central feature driving this heritage of ethnocentric blindness.⁷ The early colonial missionaries among First Nations people were not free of the prevailing societal attitudes of their day toward Native North Americans. They equated Christianity with Western culture and the West’s obvi-

6. In keeping with much of the literature available, I will use the terms Urban Indian, First Nations and Native interchangeably.

7. Dr. Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1994), 54.

ous superiority over other cultures. This supposition is not necessarily based on truth, but on ideals about “progress” of industry, science, and commerce. Clearly, the West was “civilized” and the rest of the world was “primitive.” Hiebert notes how this pattern was established early on:

The seventeenth-century New England Puritan missionaries largely set the course for modern missions. They defined their task as preaching the gospel so that Native Americans would be converted and receive personal salvation. But early in their missionary experience these New Englanders concluded that Indian converts could only be Christians if they were “civilized.” The model by which they measured their converts was English Puritan civilization. The missionaries felt compassion and responsibility for their converts. They gathered these new Christians into churches for nurture and discipline and set up programs to transform Christian Indians into English Puritans.⁸

The Puritans of New England punished the Pequot tribes people for their opposition to European settlement by killing hundreds of Pequot men, women, and children, and by selling hundreds of others into slavery. The captive male Pequots were sold and shipped to the West Indies while the Puritans made slaves at some of the tribe’s women and children.⁹

Many colonies, states, and territories paid bounties for Indian extermination. Bounties varied from \$25 to \$130 for each male scalp and usually half that amount for women and children. For instance, in 1775, the British Crown offered £40 for Indian male scalps and £20 for females and children.¹⁰ “The only good Indian is a dead Indian” was a later expression that reflected the attitude that lasted four hundred years.

Behind these un-Christian and inhumane actions lie, as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman describe it, “conceptual machineries of universe maintenance” and the idea of a “symbolic universe.”¹¹ Here, ideas, concepts, and experiences become “objective” norms. They become the definable building blocks from which socially constructed realities—societies and institutions—are constructed. In both cases, there is a kind of legitimated “norm” that emerges from underlying meanings. However, they write, “there is no such thing as a harmonious, self-enclosed, per-

8. Hiebert, 54-55.

9. David A. Rausch and Blair Schlepp, *Native American Voices* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1994), 61.

10. Rausch and Schlepp, 61.

11. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality – A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 104.

fectly functioning ‘system.’” Every society has problems. When deviant problems arise—those in contradiction to the status quo—a crisis of definition of reality is provoked.¹²

When the first British and Erench refugees arrived in North America, they brought as carriers a hostile pandemic-like religion—a Christianity infected with hegemonic worldview assumptions fueled by modernity, humanism, and rationalism. This viral strain surfaced when their reality was threatened by the “deviant realities”¹³ of the Host People of the land; their response was to legitimate their own “official universe” by demonizing the foreign reality as “heretical.”¹⁴ These socially constructed realities justified their ethnocentric attitudes and genocidal tendencies toward the Host People of the land.

Thankfully, there have been exceptional men and women who felt called to Native peoples—John Elliot, William Penn, Evan Jones, Jonathan Edwards, and David Brainerd to name a few—who truly loved the people in a “contextual” and genuine way, a way that sought to distinguish Christianity from the hegemonic worldview assumptions that were the rationale for much of the culture-clashes.¹⁵

However, the dominant mission force over the centuries remained both ethnocentric and hegemonic. This ethnocentrism would sink deeper yet into the American consciousness as reflected in the following newspaper article. In 1890, while editor of the *Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer Newspaper* in South Dakota, L. Erank Baum (author of *The Wizard of Oz*) wrote in an editorial:

With his fall the nobility of the Redskin is extinguished and what few are left are a pack of whining curs who lick the hand that smites them. The whites, by law of conquest, by justice of civilization, are master of the American continent, and the best safety of the frontier settlements will be secured by the total annihilation of the few remaining Indians.¹⁶

Though extreme, this was indicative of the prevailing attitudes across the land. One year after this article appeared, the U.S. Army massacred 256 Lakota/Sioux men, women, and children at Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Lakota/Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. It was the last “official battle” that ended the era of military warfare with the Nations.

12. Berger and Luckman, 105-107.

13. Berger and Luckman, 106.

14. Berger and Luckman, 107.

15. Randy Woodley, *Living in Color: Embracing God's Passion for Ethnic Diversity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 123-131.

16. As quoted in Richard Twiss, *One Church, Many Tribes – Following Jesus The Way God Made You* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 2000), 38.

First Nations People in Crisis Today

Though colonialism is gone, the neo-colonial effects linger. Native author, George Russell, using U.S. Census figures and other sources, cites alarming statistics about contemporary Native life in the United States.¹⁷

- Today there are nearly 2.5 million self-declared Native Americans in the U.S.
- *According to the 2000 Census, 78 percent of these 2.5 million Native people live in urban areas while only 22 percent live on reservations* (emphasis added).
- There are 563 federally recognized tribes or nations.
- There are 150 different languages and dialects spoken on a daily basis.
- Less than 10 percent of contemporary Indians speak their native languages.
- Alcohol mortality is 770% greater than for all other races combined.
- Tuberculosis is 750% greater than all other Americans.
- Diabetes is 6.8% greater than all other Americans.
- Accidental deaths are 280% higher.
- Suicides are 190% higher; 1 in 6 adolescents has attempted suicide.
- 52% finish high school.
- 17% attend college and 4% graduate.
- 2% attend graduate school.
- 75% of the work force earn less than \$7000 per year.
- 45% live below the poverty level.
- Average unemployment is 45% and several reservations are as high as 90%.
- In 1924, Native people were granted U.S. citizenship.
- In 1962, New Mexico was the last state to allow Native people to vote.

These conditions exist all across “Indian Country” in the United States, some described as “Third World” conditions. The revenues from casinos are starting to make a dent in the economic disparity and impoverishment. Yet, on those more geographically isolated reservations the poverty and problems prevail. Two of the three poorest counties in the United States are in South Dakota, the home of the Cheyenne River and Pine Ridge Lakota/Sioux Reservations.

Christianity Among Native People Today

To further exacerbate these problems, the few Natives who did come to faith in Christ under an old paradigm embraced what they were taught, and they now propagate that ethnocentric and bad theology as “good Bible.” They exhort their fellow native Christians to “come out from among them and be separate” and “touch not the unclean thing” in reference to our Native cultures, as if to say our cultures are evil and unclean and should be avoided by those who have become Christians.

17. George Russell, *American Indian Facts of Life: A Profile of Today's Population, Tribes and Reservations* (Phoenix, Ariz.: Native Data Network, 2004), 35, 54, 68, 101.

When First Nations people come to Christ, Jesus does not ask them to abandon their sin-stained culture in order to embrace someone else's sin-stained culture. Yet the unchallenged ethnocentrism of such efforts to witness gives precisely this impression. By doing so, they have only succeeded in leaving the traditional non-believing Native world without a witness from the inside. Native people, because of the rejection of their culture as Christians, have been left without a witness for Jesus Christ from within the cultural contexts of their spiritual, traditional, and ceremonial life experiences.

Representing the concerns and collaborative effort of several dozen Evangelical Native leaders in 1998, CHIEF, Inc., Ministries published a biblical position paper against syncretism.¹⁸ In the document, syncretism was defined as the “*subtle attempt to integrate biblical truth and faith in Christ with non-biblical religious beliefs, practices, and forms. The result is an adulteration of biblical truth and the birth of ‘another gospel.’*” Following this statement, they make exaggerated and grossly generalized applications of their definition, indicting many cultural and ceremonial expressions as syncretistic:

believers should not, therefore, use or attach any spiritual value to items regarded as sacred such as tobacco, cedar smoke, sweet grass, peyote, . . . masks, drums, dances, etc.; to places regarded as sacred as mother earth, . . . sweat lodge, or other traditional religious places of worship, etc.; or to spirit beings . . . or nature spirits, etc.

Without going into detail, this became a theological “line in the sand.” On one side stood the conservative evangelical, and on the other stood the new generation of contextual Native leaders. Sadly, the statement only reinforced the disposition of the traditional non-believing Native person who saw Christianity as the “white man’s religion,” wanting nothing to do with it.

Margaret Nydell¹⁹ aptly describes this same kind of scenario when she identified a major cause of hostility between today’s Arab and Western Nations: people transfer the meaning of their own culture’s functions to the other culture’s functions. In other words, they erroneously assume their socially constructed realities are the same for others as they are for themselves; meanings and realities are assumed to be dynamically equivalent. In addition, lack of understanding of the complex cause-and-effect relationship between peoples’ values, beliefs, and assumptions and their behavior is at the heart of a cross-cultural misunderstanding of culture.²⁰

18. Christian Hope Indian Eskimo Fellowship (CHIEF), “A Biblical Position by Native Leaders on Native Spirituality,” *The Journal of the North American Institute of Indigenous Theological Studies*, 1, 1 (2003).

19. Margaret K. Nydell, *Understanding Arabs: A Guide for Modern Times* (Boston: Intercultural Press, 2006), 31.

20. Craig Storti, *Figuring Foreigners Out – A Practical Guide* (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 1999), 6, 7.

Behaviors are linked to beliefs and assumptions. The Europeans had no way of interpreting correctly the true beliefs and values of the people based on the behaviors they witnessed because they were so foreign.

Going further from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, Berger and Luckman²¹ assert that every-day reality, or “commonsense reality” as a person or group knows it, is a socially constructed reality; human beings live in a real “inter-subjective” world of everyday life. One’s knowledge of things is constructed in the daily interactions with others in “face to face” encounters that are categorized—typificatory—into interpretive constructs that serve to define meaning or what is real, or really real.²² It applies to personal identity, language, and biology, conscious and subconscious “knowing,” which all contribute collectively to a shared knowledge of things or socially constructed reality. From their own cultural context—their daily face-to-face interaction with each other—the Euro-American believers assigned meanings to Native practice in terms that made sense to them. This allowed them to categorize Native culture, ceremony, and ritual as pagan, idolatrous, and demonic, suitable only for rejection and replacement—all without ever attempting to understand the social meanings from within Native ways of understanding.

Having accepted Euro-American assigned meanings, Native Christians continue to reject their own cultures as untrustworthy and demonic, refusing to enjoy their own cultural expressions in favor of a heavily Anglicized expression. The following email is one of dozens I have received from Native people who have read my book (*One Church Many Tribes*). The email poignantly describes the dilemma and internal turmoil this rejection creates for Native people today.

I have never felt so inspired after reading your book, as a former Christian who still has faith in God you have answered all the questions that I have been looking for all my life. The main reason I lost faith in the lord was because of the church’s lack of acceptance of Native culture and beliefs. And I hope one day that all changes if Non-Native ministers come to accept our way of life. And as a person who makes Native crafts such as bone chokers, flutes etc . . . I hope that when I do decide to return to the lord that I am not ridiculed for using what God gave me . . . my talent to show others the beauty of our culture. Thank you for sharing your thoughts and beliefs with me. May the Creator shine down on your soul and make your journey a happy one . . . all my relations.²³

21. Berger and Luckman, 23.

22. Berger and Luckman, 23.

23. Andre, “Dilemma and internal turmoil,” email to author (13 March 2004).

The dominantly ethnocentric trends within Christian attitudes toward Native culture is even more problematic when considered in light of larger cultural trends.

Federal Policies Fuel Urban Population Growth

In 1953, the United States Congress passed the Termination Resolution, which called for Indian equality under the law. This meant they no longer existed as tribes, they were subject to state laws, and their lands were sold off; these policy decisions were presented to them as “freedom” from further federal intervention.²⁴ From 1954 to 1962, Congress terminated sixty-one tribes, bands, and communities. In addition, in 1952 Congress established a “Voluntary Relocation Program.” Indians were enticed to leave the reservation through promises of jobs, education, and housing.²⁵ This began a steady migration from the reservation to the city. Assimilation as Indian policy was not new²⁶ and was deemed the best way to handle the embarrassing “Indian problem.” The stated goal was self-sufficiency, but it was self-sufficiency through terms dictated by non-Indians—i.e., the suppression of Indian culture and the adoption by Indians of mainstream traditions and technologies.²⁷ It was assumed that, once in the cities, they would eventually become absorbed into the dominant culture as productive members of American society. As James LeGrand explains:

The “voluntary relocation program” through which thousands of Native people moved from their reservation homes to cities did not result from any specific piece of legislation. Nevertheless, the program, officially inaugurated in 1952 was at least as important as termination policy in its long-term effects on native people. Along with land dispossession the growing influence of wage, labor and wartime experiences, the relocation program contributed to the urbanization of Native people during the latter half of the 20th century.²⁸

24. Carl Waldman, *Atlas of the North American Indian* (New York: Facts on File Pub., 2000), 221.

25. Waldman, 221.

26. Waldman, 217.

27. Waldman, 17.

28. James B. LaGrand, *Indian Metropolis: Native Americans in Chicago, 1945-75* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 45-46.

The following chart shows the steady pattern of urban migration in the past century.

<i>URBAN INDIAN MIGRATION</i>		
Year	Indian Population	% Urban
1900	237,000	0
1910	277,000	4
1920	244,000	6
1930	343,000	10
1940	345,000	7
1950	357,000	13
1960	524,000	28
1970	793,000	44
1980	1,364,000	49
1990	1,959,000	65
2000	2,476,000	78
Source: American Indian Facts of Life (see n.17)		

Pan-Indian Phenomena

With the arrival of Native people from numerous reservations and tribal memberships, the “urban Indian” as a sub-culture came into existence. Feeling lost and overwhelmed in the strange urban world, they found solace and meaning in a new “pan-Indian” identity. Here some of the distinct tribal edges were rounded away and being Native became as important as Navajo, Kiowa, Apache, Lakota, etc.

The pan-Indian phenomena created a new brand of Indian social and political activity: urban centers with programs and services designed to ease the transition to city life and encourage a sense of “indianness” and belonging. Political groups such as the American Indian Movement (AIM; founded in Minneapolis in 1968) emerged to address the socio-political injustices experienced by Native people.²⁹

Inter-Tribal Powwow

Needing places to socialize and gather, the Inter-tribal powwow became the new traditional gathering place in the city. These were times of reconnecting with the familiar sights and songs from back home on the reservation. Various categories of dance styles for men and women and dance songs were recognized and learned by Natives all across North America. Regardless of one’s tribal background, because they were not tribally specific, anyone could learn these songs and dances and participate in the new “inter-tribal powwow.”

29. Waldman, 227.

Traditional Native Worldview Values

These shared aspects of Native culture need to be recognized and appreciated as a first step toward undoing both the cultural hegemony and the missiological ethnocentricity that has made Christianity seem merely to be the “white man’s religion”—one more tool of cultural assimilation. In my book, I have listed seven major cultural values that generally characterize First Nations culture. I summarize them here to show how essential they are for effective cross-cultural communication of Christianity to occur among Native peoples.

1. Natural vs. Supernatural Dichotomy: Integrated vs. Segregated Worldviews. One of the ideas expressed repeatedly by Native people is that their sacred ways are felt to be inseparable from the ordinary. In contrast Anglo-North-American or Western culture tends to compartmentalize life. Religious activity is often kept separate from all other areas. Religion is thus a segment of life, whereas for Native people it is a way of life.

In Western thinking, there is a sacred vs. secular, natural vs. spiritual split of reality. This split view originates, not in true Hebraic-Christian faith, but in classic Greek philosophy, with emphasis on humanity and its intellect at the center of the universe.

This conflict between the integrated worldviews of the Indian and the compartmentalized, segregated worldviews of Western Christians have been one of the greatest hindrances to effective communication with Native people.

2. Monotheism—Wakan Tanka, The Great Spirit. Contrary to popular opinion, the vast majority of Native North American tribes are monotheistic. There is awareness of the Creator God’s supracultural existence. We are spiritual beings—human creation, living in this physical/mystical world—non-human creation; all is alive and held together by God alone. There is one Creator God who stands behind all that exists, who is in all that exists, and who holds together all that exists. Yet even to the present, Western-thinking Christians “see” spiritism, pantheism, or animism in Native culture—a major obstacle to the Gospel.

3. Nature: Part of Creation, not Superior to It. One of the major sources of conflict between Euro-American and Native cultures, historically and contemporarily, is land. The land-claims issue goes farther and deeper than a desire to obtain more land or big checks. Indian people are determined to settle a very important issue. To the Native, the land is sacred, given by Wakan Tanka or the Creator, to be cared for and loved. They perceive a balanced relationship between humanity and the environment, a partnership of equality and respect. Native culture has an existential assumption that land is God-created, hence sacred, while Western culture views land like time, as a natural resource/commodity. Issues of identity, belonging, “place” relationship, providence, etc., are all issues of land. The West has commodified land as a natural resource, moving it out of the realm of the

sacred to the “secular” world of matter. Incorporating a consideration of land into the redemption equation has never figured into the evangelistic Gospel endeavors of the West.

4. *Time: Quantitative or Qualitative?* To the Euro-American, time is quantitative but to the Native American it is qualitative, as evidenced by the older Native man who was living on a reservation. When asked if he had lived on the reservation all his life, he replied, “No, not yet.” Native people have a circular view of time that is flexible, unlike the Western, linear one that is rigid.

A word to describe one of the major qualities of “Indian time” is *appropriateness*. An event begins when it is appropriate. Most Indian languages do not even have words to designate time. In Western cultures, however, time is regarded quantitatively, as a commodity.

To the Native person, priority belongs to the significant thing he is doing right now. In the Western view, what I am doing right now is subject to what I have to do in one hour. The present becomes subject to the future. In the Native view, what I need to do in one hour is subject to what I am doing right now. The future is subject to the present.

5. *Understanding Individual vs. Corporate Identity.* One of the great challenges has been to communicate effectively our all-too-individualistic version of the gospel and/or of growth in the Christian life within the context of a strong Native tie and connection to family, tribe, clan, and “people.”

The reason many Native young people have found it difficult to “succeed” off the reservation is because of their strong connection to home. (In the Anglo culture this is often viewed as an indication of personal weakness, a lack of intestinal fortitude.) Native people possess a strong sense of belonging to the greater community

When a convert to Christianity is faced with a demand to reject their traditional tribal religion, that person often appears to the community to be rejecting his or her community, family, or friends. Because of their loyalty and sense of belonging to the tribe, it is very difficult for Native individuals to stand against familial pressure, make a unilateral decision for Christ, and then stick to it.

6. *The Importance of Power.* To North American Native peoples, the most important element in the way they view life is the concept and acquisition of power. Nothing could be accomplished without it. With power, it was believed, anything was possible.

This very concept is linked to the belief in a Creator and to beliefs about nature mentioned above. All Native cultures have a supernatural orientation. Power is the life force of the universe. A growing number of traditional Native Americans believe that their current social, economic, and spiritual condition is the result

of failing to continue the tradition of performing the essential power-generating rituals. The function of power, then, is to provide the individual or group with sufficient supernatural energies to survive in a mysterious and modern world.

Consequently, there is a strong move to restore many of the traditional ceremonies. The most prominent in the current “pan-Indian” movement is the “Sun Dance.” There is a powerful renaissance movement of First Nations spirituality sweeping across North America today, as well as among indigenous peoples worldwide.

7. *Nuclear vs. Extended Family.* In Western Anglo culture, emphasis is placed on the nuclear family: Dad, Mom, brothers, sisters, and grandparents. In Native culture, it is the extended family: Dad, Mom, brothers, sisters, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, nieces, nephews, and in-laws. A person’s extended relations are all integral to a person’s sense of belonging.

In traditional Lakota/Sioux culture, each individual enjoyed the security of belonging to the “tiyospaye” (extended family). Though this is no longer what it once was, it is still a highly valued and vital reality in Lakota social structure. The same can be said for most Native cultures.

Summary

All of these cultural values come to play in Native senses of identity, belonging, personhood, community, spirituality, existence, and well being. They also figure as potential barriers to the effective communication of the Gospel to Native peoples. Communication is a two-way street. It is not objective science but is highly subjective and personal. People communicate out of their beliefs and values, and they also filter in-coming messages through their beliefs and values.³⁰

The Federal Government policies of termination and relocation were failed experiments in social engineering that devastated the cultural integrity of three generations of Native people. New urban Indian ghettos formed even as tribal pride and significance eroded. Attempts at planting urban Indian churches—Gospel communication—have largely failed because geographic proximity produced the erroneous assumption that ministry could occur among Native people in the same way as any other urban dwellers. As the statistics clearly reveal, today there is massive socio-economic turmoil that remains unaddressed by the church in culturally relevant ways for urban Natives.

30. George C. Hunter III, “Discovering a Culture’s Beliefs and Values,” Class handout MB720 Fall/05, Ashury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Ky., 2005, 5.

Eugene Nida sees the New Testament as the communication of a new way of life, speaking of the incarnation of God in Christ. Sadly, the coming of the Good News—mired in ethnocentric and hegemonic cultural perceptions and practices—has mostly been experienced as bad news for First Nations people. The ways and means this message is communicated must be radically transformed if future generations of Native people are to realize the biblical outcomes of transformed people and communities. Today several dozen First Nations leaders/ministries have emerged as part of a new “contextualization movement” to address these concerns, like Bandy Woodley’s “Eloheh Village and Indigenous Learning Center,” and the North American Institute of Indigenous Theological Studies led by Terry LeBlanc and myself (Chair and Vice-Chair respectively).

Great strides are being taken to correct the neo-colonial, ethnocentric, and hegemonic tendencies in the American church. We will do well to heed George Hunter’s exhortation for a return to an earlier period where there was indeed an indigenous movement. Hunter points to the model of St. Patrick. He understood the people. He utilized their language, their fascination with rhetorical triads, the contrasting features of idealism and practicality, and their love for poetry, folklore, and nature, as ways to establish a truly holistic presentation of a Biblical faith that was essentially Celtic Christianity.³¹ Hunter sees this as the most strategically significant single insight that was to drive the wider expansion of Celtic Christianity, and stands as perhaps our greatest single lesson from this movement.³² What we need today is a First Nations Indigenous Christianity following the example of Patrick!

The Great Commission constrains us to communicate the Gospel as a new Way of life . . . , “*panta ta ethne*,”—to all of the peoples of the earth.” This mission requires us, in each case, to begin where the target population is, and communicate the meaning of this Gospel and ethic, in their fullness, through their language and other cultural forms, with the goal of raising up and expanding faithful and indigenous Christianity among the people.³³

31. George C. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism – How Christianity Can Reach The West . . . Again* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abington Press, 2000), 20.

32. Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, 19, 20.

33. George C. Hunter III, “What is Christianity—Christian, Evangelical and Democrat,” Class hand-out MB720 Fall/05, Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Ky., 2005, 4.



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