

The Collision of Christianity and American Native Spirituality. Article online...

Highlights are areas of incompatible or questionable Ideology / Theology

Other highlights are highly agreed points to discuss.

In their essence, both Indigenous American religions and Christianity have the same goal – to bring the individual into harmony with eternal truth and with God or the Great Creator. **While the concepts of who and how God is vary to a degree within and between these two belief systems, there is much that is common ground and the differences in understanding are usually reconcilable as individuals grow in knowledge and humility.** Increasing in knowledge brings them closer as they realize that terminology and perception are flawed as applied to eternal truth, but that eternal truth is the same for both as they come to understand it more clearly.



Humility allows them to see how fear and incorrect actions on both sides have done harm to individuals in the other and it allows them to repent and forgive (Christian terms), or to walk in harmony and peace (Native concept) as they reconcile and learn from each other. Why then has there been a history of conflict and destructiveness and how can we move into the future without those negative experiences and outcomes?

In both belief systems, the concept of repentance or walking in a new way begins with realizing what has been done that is wrong or destructive. Historically, the majority of the damage has been inflicted upon the American indigenous cultures and peoples by the Christian immigrants to North and South America. Beginning with the Spanish/Catholic invasion of South and Central America and the southern and western parts of what is now the United States and continuing with the European/Protestant invasion of the Eastern areas that became the USA and the westward expansion by numerous groups, most notably the Mormons, the contest for land and the differences in the way of life brought the two groups into conflict. **Rather than treating the displaced natives as equals and accommodating their needs and desires, the pattern of the “white” invaders (for that is how they were seen) was to lie, cheat or destroy. As in all efforts to do something wrong and justify it, the natives were demonized and one of the chief ways to do this was to portray them as “Godless savages”.**

Most American Native groups in both North and South America have the concept of a Great Creator and a number of them have beliefs that are in harmony with basic Christianity. Those similarities were downplayed in the effort to cast natives as inferior or sub-human. Efforts to educate or “convert” the indigenous peoples were sometimes done with coercion or at the point of the sword or gun. Sadly, in the effort to bring “truth” to the natives, organized religions often made significant efforts to destroy or take away the truth the indigenous people already had and

to demolish their cultural heritage. A better way would have been to take the time to see the truth and beauty existing within their cultures and the power and healing that blessed their people through their ceremonies and medicines. It can be argued convincingly that, were it not for those strengthening ceremonies, medicines and understandings, the American Natives would have been totally wiped out, if not physically, then at least culturally.

In the United States, the eradication and subjugation of the natives was particularly destructive and those that survived were mostly placed on reservations and their traditional ways of wandering, hunting and gathering were taken away so that the Europeans could control, fence and exploit the land for profit and colonization. During this time of conflict, the natives also did destructive things in attacking settlements and travelers, often killing or capturing “civilians” including women and children as they sought to discourage the invaders from their intentions to take over the lands.

Once control over the native population was complete, an effort to force a different belief system on them was undertaken, first by the Catholics and subsequently by the Protestants. It is a sad consistency that most organized religion is by nature arrogant. Each belief system in essence says, “if you do not believe everything I do in the way I do and nothing else, you are wrong and will be destroyed or punished by my God, either now or in the next life.” Because of this inherent thinking, there has been an effort, not to just control the American Natives, but to take from them their culture, heritage and beliefs, even when those things are a blessing to them and could be a blessing to everyone else – even when those beliefs could strengthen, contribute to and bless those that have done the damage.

On the other side of the equation, many American Natives have disdain for the beliefs of the “Christian” religions because of the way they have been treated by adherents of those groups. They want to keep to themselves the blessing and empowering medicines, ceremonies and understandings that they have passed down for centuries, believing (in Christian terminology) that they are casting pearls before swine.

Oklevueha Native American Church seeks to repair the damage and bridge the divide, blessing those who have historically been on both sides of the conflict equally. **ONAC has no doctrine other than love and respect for the Great Creator, Father Sky and Mother Earth and all their creations.** The guiding principles of Faith, Charity, Honor, Forgiveness, Humility, Respect and Gratitude find no conflict with true Christianity. In fact, Oklevueha healing and empowering ceremonies encourage those attending to better fulfill their responsibilities to their families, religions and communities. Many Oklevueha members have been able to restore their relationships, return to good standing in their churches and become productive and respected in their neighborhoods as they overcome addictions, self-defeating behaviors and wrong thinking. This is the essence of the Christian ideal of repentance and forgiveness or the native concept of “right-walking”.

Organizationally, Oklevueha NAC calls on both American Natives and Christian religious organizations to forgive the past wrongs, respect the perceived differences, accept the blessings offered by both to the other and stop doing anything that seeks to damage or take away from

anyone the truths freedoms and blessings that benefit their lives. The only resistance of one to the other is to encourage them to stop wrong actions and shine a light on injustices currently being committed if such things exist. Jesus Christ who is the foundational character in all Christian religions encouraged each of us to not find fault or focus on the sins of others, but to look within at our own actions and thoughts. Indigenous wisdom states, “That which we focus on increases.” This encourages us to focus on what we can do that is good, not focus on the faults of others – not to try to change others or make them do what we think is right, but to bring ourselves to right-walking and right thinking and then invite others to do likewise. In keeping with this instruction we seek not to blame but to bless – not to look backward but to walk forward together.

Epecially important in this are the blessings offered to all through the medicines and sacraments of the Native American Church. These natural substances include peyote, ayahuasca, cannabis, san pedro and many other plants, herbs and minerals. They have historically been used by American Native medicine people to assist individuals in dealing with and overcoming a variety of physical, mental and emotional conditions. While we acknowledge the capability of modern medical science in the European modalities, we stand firm in the belief that Native medicines are often more effective and have less side effects than the chemicals and procedures that are usually used. This is now being proven by modern science as treatments for seizure disorders, cancers, auto-immune diseases, mental disorders, neuro-muscular ailments and many others have been shown to respond to these natural remedies even when there is no viable chemical treatment.

There is no conflict with organized Christianity in using these medicines. Many if not most members of Oklevueha believe in Jesus Christ as the Great Creator or Great Spirit. Those who are members regardless of racial background are not breaking the laws of the land in using these controlled substances because they are protected in doing so by the US Constitution, the Freedom of Religion and many laws and court decisions declaring they have the right to participate. They are strengthened in their ability to come into a better relationship with their Creator and with their religious communities as they heal their lives and empower their good intentions.

Let us put to rest finally any and all blame, unforgiveness and destructive actions. Let us find and build upon common ground. Let us bless each other with the truths we have and the healing we offer. Let us respect the culture, knowledge and blessings that can enrich our lives and communities. Let us be grateful for what we gain from each other.

Aho!