

Medicine Wheel And Bible -- A Child Of Two Cultures Finds Power By Melding

By [Don Jenkins](#) The Daily News

ROY WILSON long ago declared peace between the two religions that were warring inside him. He remains unalterably both the spiritual leader of the Cowlitz Indians and an ordained United Methodist minister. "I discovered both of them were wrong. You don't have to make a choice," he says.

LONGVIEW - The struggle for Roy Wilson's soul started early.

Born to a white mother and a Cowlitz Indian father, he was reared in two religious traditions that were sometimes antagonistic.

A Sunday-school teacher told him he had to give up "heathen ways" to be a Christian.

An Indian elder was more picturesque in conveying the same message. He pointed out a car to the youthful Wilson and asked whether it could travel on two roads at once. "I couldn't see anything wrong with either of their teachings, so there was a war going on inside me," he said.

Long ago declared peace

At the age of 68, Wilson has long ago declared peace. He remains unalterably both the spiritual leader of the Cowlitz Indians and an ordained United Methodist minister.

"I discovered both of them were wrong. You don't have to make a choice."

Wilson, a former tribal chairman who makes his home in Bremerton, has written several books on Native-American theology and history. His work includes "Medicine Wheels, Ancient Teachings for Modern Times" (published in 1994 by Crossroad Publishing, New York, N.Y.), which explores similarities between the Indian practice of

arranging stones for spiritual guidance and biblical theology.

"For me, the medicine wheel and Scriptures come together," he said. "I find no contradictions."

In fact, the result of melding the two is a "far more powerful form of Christianity than the American brand spoon-fed to us by seminaries."

Wilson attended an Assembly of God Church Bible college in Springfield, Mo., after graduating from high school. There, in comparative-religion classes, he studied differences but not similarities between major world religions.

"All that does is create violence, discrimination," he said. "We don't have to convert Muslims. They have their own path."

Wilson started out as an Assembly of God pastor but retired in 1992 after eight years as a United Methodist minister.

"Many changes were very painful. It's not easy to say, 'I'm wrong. What I've been saying from the pulpit is not right,' " Wilson said.

A regretful Wilson choked up describing efforts to convert his father. "I look back and see how crude I was in some of the things I said to him. But he never got upset with me," Wilson said.

He says he can embrace Christianity without rejecting Native-American spiritual practices - and vice versa - and rebukes the Christian church as the "greatest oppressor" of Native Americans.

There are Christians, he said, who inhale his message as a "breath of air.

"Or they're very upset with me and call me a devil from hell," Wilson said. "It seems there's no one really indifferent to what I say."

Wilson, who was born on the Yakama Reservation, wrote his first book when he was 4 years old on brown butcher's paper.

Chapter 1: I love Jesus.

Chapter 2: God is good.

Wilson calls a more recent effort "The Gospel According to Matthew, A Longhouse Version" (CSS Publishing Co., Lima, Ohio, 1994), an experiment in how culture affects religion.

In the book, Wilson rewrites the Gospel and places Jesus' birth in Suquamish on Puget Sound in this century to Indian parents.

Mary Singing Waters and Joe White Eagle replace Mary and Joseph. Holy Men from the East (Yakima, Colville) come bearing eagle feathers, and John the Baptist upgrades his diet from locusts and wild honey to clams, berries and salmon.

Wilson had to submit Matthew to eight publishers before it was accepted.

"The mistake I made was I submitted to conservative publishers. It was too far out for them," he said.

The Levi's-wearing Chee-zoos (a spelling from Indian legends describing Jesus visiting North American tribes) conducts his ministry in Western Washington, healing alcoholics, drug addicts and AIDS sufferers.

Rides into Olympia in a Jeep

In the end, Chee-zoos rides into Olympia in a Jeep. He barges into a large church. Instead of overturning the tables of the money changers, he pitches out the finance committee and scraps the long-range expansion plans.

Wilson said he doesn't mind shaking things up.

Other cultures have left a mark on Christianity, he says, and now it's time for Native-American spirituality to leave its imprint.

Said Wilson: "When you start looking for similarities you get some beautiful insight."