

Conference: COV&R Conference
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Title: Unveiling Girard's Immemorial Lie, Native Americans, and Positive Reciprocity
Presenter: Suzanne Evertsen Lundquist

“A good theory about humanity must be based on a good theory about God” (René Girard, *Battling to the End* xv).

On November 5, 2009, President Obama met with the largest gathering of cabinet and tribal leaders in U. S. history. Of the 564 federally recognized American Indian tribes, 400 representatives attended the summit. During his opening remarks, Obama outlined problems facing Native Nations: some tribes have 80% unemployment; 25% live in poverty; 14% are without electricity; and 12% have no safe water to use. Furthermore, health problems plague tribal peoples—especially tuberculosis, alcoholism, diabetes, pneumonia, and influenza. The issues Obama did not address I learned from Seneca Indian Michalyn Steele, a tribal attorney for the Department of Justice who is currently on loan to Larry EchoHawk, Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs. I met with Steele over lunch on June 11, 2010 during her stop-over in Utah. Steele told me she was deployed by EchoHawk to meet with tribal leaders throughout the Western states so she could more particularly apprise the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Indian Health Services about the most pressing needs of tribal communities. Steele learned that above all else, tribal elders are concerned with the loss of their young people to suicide. Steele discovered that suicides among adolescents have doubled over the past year. Tribal leaders say these suicides are contagious and are brought about by despair. According to Steele, next in order of concern are the nearly 35% of youth with sexually transmitted diseases and the invariant 25% of highschool girls who are

pregnant.

In an offhand comment, Steele mentioned she thought both the causes and solutions to these problems are theological. A truncated overview of the causes include an understanding of genocide, separatism, and scapegoating. In her 2002 Pulitzer Prize winning work "*A Problem from Hell*": *America and the Age of Genocide*, for example, Samantha Powers outlines the practices included within the parameters of genocide: "The perpetrators of genocide," says Powers, "attempt to destroy the political and social institutions, the culture, language, national feelings, religion, and economic existence of national groups. They hope to eradicate the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and lives of individual members of the targeted group" (43). In other words, genocidal practices brought about the erasure of what Native Nations call the *sacred* foundations of their identities. During the establishment of the United States, 90% of Native Americans were obliterated through disease and warfare. Powers writes that "reckoning with [nineteenth century] American brutality against native peoples" is long "overdue" (67). Perhaps it is easier for mainstream Americans to deny the current state of Native Nations because many exist as separate sovereign nations within the United States. Carol Ward, Elon Stander, and Yodit Solomon contend that a preponderance of surviving Native communities have moved from the status of "captive nations" to "internal colonies" (212).

In *The Scapegoat*, René Girard asserts that "human culture is predisposed to the permanent concealment of its origins in collective violence. Such a definition of culture enables us to understand the successive stages of an entire culture as well as the transition from one state to the next by means of a crisis" which is met with "periods of frequent persecutions" (100). In *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Girard contends that the "whole structure of religion

[and political systems grounded in religion] can be traced back to the mechanism of acquisitive mimesis” (18). Girard explains that acquisitive mimesis divides individuals or groups when they “converge on one and the same object [in this case, Native land] with a view of appropriating it.” What follows is *conflictual mimesis*—the unifying of individuals or groups against a common “adversary all wish to strike down.” In *The Scapegoat*, Girard contends that “Persecutors always believe in the excellence of their cause, but in reality *they hate without a cause*” (103). In American history, the cause is Manifest Destiny—a version of which still divides blue and red states. Girard calls such ideologies “fate-filled idolatry to which the victim is subject” (*Foundations* 27). Fate-filled idolatry must remain unconscious, says Girard, or the entire project of majority rule will be found to be unjustified or unsupportable. What must doubly be held unconscious are the psychological, social, and ethical consequences of scapegoating Native peoples. Maria Anna Jaimes Guerreo claims: “The systematic displacement of native peoples from their land base, which was both their economic source of livelihood as well as their spiritual foundation, set up conditions for colonially induced despair” (qtd. in Ward, Stander, and Solomon 213).

Inherited oppression or colonially induced despair manifests itself in joblessness, poverty, poor health, cultural malaise, family disintegration, alcoholism, and other collective indicators of a failure to thrive—including suicidal ideation and practices. Despite the ongoing efforts of tribal leaders to countermand adolescent malaise, the invisibility of tribal peoples and scepticism about a future impact the psychological and physical well being of Native youth. Christiane Northrup, M.D. gives indisputable evidence that beliefs are physical: “A thought held long enough and repeated enough becomes a belief. The belief then becomes biology,” says Northrup.

Furthermore, beliefs “are energetic forces that create the physical basis for our individual lives and

our health. If we don't work through our emotional distress," says Northrup, "we set ourselves up for physical distress because of the biochemical effect that suppressed emotions have on our immune and endocrine systems" (35). Again, loss of Native belief systems, disrespect for tribal belief systems, as well as the invisibility of tribal theologies to mainstream educational systems all give rise to loss of direction for Indian youth. And, according to ecopsychologists, loss of direction in ecological groundedness gives rise to addictive behaviors—including substance and sexual addictions. Noted Native theologian, Vine Deloria, Jr., claims that liberation theology is primarily founded on the need for respect by Native and non-Native Christians for the traditional beliefs of tribal religions (107-108).

When Sue Monk Kidd interpreted Elizabeth A. Johnson's ideas about the functionality of God symbols, Kidd noted that God symbols give "rise to ways of thought and patterns of behavior. The core symbols we use for God represent what we take to be the highest good. They become 'the ultimate point of reference for understanding experience, life and the world'" (153). In explaining postmodern theology, David F. Ford outlines three ways through which God can be "identified": through the "key figures" who worship him; "through God's compassionate involvement in the sufferings of people" (primarily through the condescension of the Messiah); and the ongoing possibility of radical revision or change—the belief that there is "always more" from God as He/She interacts in history (36). For Native American theologians, the lack of understanding or interest in Native theology constitutes a breach in the understanding of world religions of major witnesses for God—witnesses that stem from the Old Testaments of Native America. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim orientations to God pivot around the Torah. Native witnesses do not.

There is insufficient time to develop all that the Native Old Testaments of America have to contribute to contemporary theological debates. But noting some might generate desires for further study and considerable attempts to be engaged in the reclamation of tribal youth within the various and particular United States to which participants in this conference will return. Choctaw Indian, Steve Charleston (a consecrated bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Alaska) says that his commitment to Christ is based on “the original covenant God gave to Native America” (69). Charleston wants to heal “false divisions brought into . . . tribes by Western colonialism” by helping Native tribes find a “common center” that will invite them to “join with millions of other Christians in a second reformation” (69). First of all, Charleston claims that “indigenous theology” is autobiographical (70). Therefore, talk about Native theology necessarily stems from Native perspectives on “Jesus and the gospels, on Paul, eschatology, redemption, salvation, sin, resurrection, community, grace, love, and God.” You can’t, says Charleston, “have a ‘new’ testament if you don’t have an ‘old’ testament.” The Old Testaments of Native America tell of “the active, living, revealing presence of God in relation to Native People through generations of Native life and experience,” claims Charleston. Furthermore, Charleston “asserts that God was not an absentee landlord for North America” (73). What results from tribal histories is the contention that there are both tribes of Israel as well as the tribes of Native America.

Charleston summarizes Native beliefs, using past tense to situate the genealogy of long-held themes found in the sacred narratives of Native Americans:

Native America believed in the oneness of God; it saw God as the Creator of all existence; it knew that God was active and alive in the history of humanity; it remembered that the land had been given to the people in trust from God. Native People accepted the revelation

from God as it was given to them through prophets and charismatic leaders; they recognized sacred ground and holy places in their worship; they maintained a seasonal liturgical calendar; they had a highly developed belief in the incarnational presence of God and expected that presence to be revealed in times of strife or disaster. (77)

Charleston notes that it is the “land-based covenant” that gives Native peoples their identities.

Charleston insists that God “relates to humanity through love, not through disinformation” (74).

But, says Charleston, Native Americans did not always “get it right” because human experience is “finite and fallible.” However, the “mighty acts of God in North America were witnessed and remembers. They were interpreted and passed on.” And taken “together, they constitute and original, unique, and profound covenant between God and humanity” (77).

Charleston believes that in the 21st Century, the “Christian church is going to experience a second major reformation. . . . It will cross over not only denominational lines, but also over lines of color, class, gender, and age. It will change the way people think and feel about themselves.” And the “leaders of the coming reformation will be women,” claims Charleston (79). According to Cherokee Indian William Baldrige, who is also professor of pastoral ministries and cross-cultural theology, seminal to the contributions of Native Christians is the belief not only in Jesus Christ, the son of God, but also in the Daughter of God, Corn Mother, who also sacrificed herself for the benefit of humankind (87). What both the son and daughter of God teach is “the sacrificial nature of the spiritual life.” Baldrige suggests that those “who hoard their spiritual life lose it and are left with nothing but religion” (88). Baldrige contends that Native peoples have something profound to share with non-Natives: “transforming images of God” (90). Baldrige says:

The time has come for the sacrifice of seeing God as only Father for a concept that allows the next generation of children to live. The time has come for the emerging Christian experience of God as Father and Mother. Transformation of our images from God the Father to God our Parent(s) will not destroy Christianity but fulfill it. Mother God is not an alternative to Father God; she is an expansion of our possibility to experience God. God as Father will not be lost by including the experience of God as Mother. Father images of God will still tend to discipline, order, history, progress, judgment, duty, transcendence, and all that the masculine has to offer. Mother images of God will make more available God's acceptance, creativity, eternity, grace, enduring nurture, immediacy, and all that the feminine has to offer. (91)

Baldrige believes that such a God-image transformation will give Christians the "courage to fulfill the work of Christ." There are a host of witnesses among Native prophets that maintain a balance between the masculine and feminine messianic attributes of God. Black Elk's vision of Christ, for example, includes instruction given by twelve men and twelve women—in an apostolic witness that Black Elk would come to depend on "two sticks"—"one painted white and one red": sacred symbols for the Old testaments of Israel and Native America (246). A list of salvific sacred women among Native tribes also illustrates a call for respect for female reproductive cycles. An exemplary illustration would be Changing Woman who brought about the regeneration of the Navajo people during their evolutionary emergence into this world. Iroquois attitudes towards the constitutional balance between male and female powers or the virgin birth of the prophet Deganawidah (the founder of the Iroquois constitution upon which the American constitution is particularly grounded) are sacred narratives that formulate Native Old Testaments that suggest the

need for a re-imagining of God (Lundquist 26).

Of particular note is the official recognition of the Iroquois contribution to the U. S. Constitution through the October 4, 1988 House Congressional Resolution 331. This Resolution was passed to “acknowledge the contribution of the Iroquois Confederacy of nations to the development of the United States Constitution and to reaffirm the continuing government-to-government relationship between Indian tribes and the United States established in the Constitution” (reprinted in Utter 434-435). The Iroquois Constitution was inspired through the Creator’s intervention in to the lives of two Iroquois prophets. Imagine the rise in the self-esteem of Native youth if they believed in and outsiders recognized the contributions of indigenous cultures to American culture—contributions outlined in Emory Dean Keoke’s and Kay Marie Porterfield’s 2002 *Encyclopedia of American Indian Contributions to the World*.

Native interactions with traditional Christianities are fraught with complexity—especially when these interactions challenge the foundations of Old World theologies. Of central importance to Native youth are concerns with the meaning of human sexuality. Catholic/Ojibway novelist Louise Erdrich continually broaches this topic. In her novel, *Tracks*, for example, the character Pauline illustrates the perversity of the traditional spirit/body dualism housed in interpretations of Paul’s doctrines. Pauline is both attracted to and repelled by her sexual desires. She, therefore, challenges doctrines of a virgin birth. Pauline’s sexual ambivalence leads her to proclaim that in “God’s spiritual embrace,” Mary “experienced a loss more ruthless than we can imagine. She wept, pinned full-weight to earth, known in the brain and known in the flesh and planted like dirt” (*Tracks* 95). In *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Erdrich’s central character is a priest who is, in actuality, a woman. Father Damien’s exemplary uses of priesthood

power un-genders and provides a protest to Christian patriarchy. And in her novel *Tales of Burning Love*, readers experience a transformed Pauline—now known as Sister Leopolda. After her death, Pauline/Leopolda speaks to Eleanor, one of the principle characters in the novel. Leopolda comments on the relationship between sexual pleasure and divine love:

You and your sisters are blind women touching the vast body of the elephant, each describing the oddness beneath the surface of her hands. Love is brutalizing, a raw force, frail as blossoms, tough as catgut wire. Lost, found, sprinkled with the wild sweet oils, love changes and is immutable You have all known the deep and twisting nights, the scarves of the magician threaded through the body, changing colors, knotted and then separate. And, too, you know and understand the love a child bears its mother, its father, a parent bears its child. It is a love that is no other thing but pure salvation, and by it, Christ's balancing trick was inspired and foretold. (*Tales of Burning Love* 370)

Erdrich, through most of her novels, sorts through the difficulties of sexual desire—but always with the worth of the child at the root of her musings. In her regard for the child, Erdrich creates a Postmodern ethics.

In her memoir *The Blue Jay's Dance*, Erdrich addresses the topic of “Making Babies.”

Suppose that Native highschool students could/would ponder her observations:

We conceive our children in deepest night, in blazing sun, outdoors, in barns and alleys and minivans. We have not rules, no ceremonies, we don't even need a driver's licence.

Conception is often something of a by-product of sex, a candle in a one-room studio, pure brute chance, a wonder. To make love with the desire for a child is to move the act out of its singularity, to make the need of the moment an eternal wish. But of all passing notions,

that of a human being for a child is perhaps the purest in the abstract, and the most complicated in reality. (3)

Louise Erdrich is not the only Native author addressing the delicate balance between sexual desire, gender harmony, and the worth of the child.

Chickasaw novelist Linda Hogan, among other Native authors, addresses both the profound nature of Native oppression and abuse and the possibility of healing that abuse. Of particular influence in this area is Hogan's novel *Solar Storms*—the story of the healing of severely abused Angela Iron through the efforts of her grandmothers. Hogan propounds a spiritual ecopsychology—a psychology grounded in the respectful harmony that can/must occur between the earth, gender relationships, and the ongoing health of tribal communities. Dora Rouge, the oldest grandmother in Hogan's novel, revises the Genesis narrative for Angela. She helps Angela understand that creation is ongoing and that recovering her connections with her people and the earth can heal her (350). Because Angela has experienced sexual abuse, her healing relationship with Tommy becomes the antithesis to the abuse described throughout the novel. Angela, a teenager, represents futurity. If she can heal, then other teens might address their despair by recognizing and then negotiating a journey similar to that of Angela's.

Many Native authors write about healing the profound wounds perpetrated by colonial violence. Furthermore, many Native theologians contend that Native religions have much to offer mainstream religious beliefs and practices. Baldrige, for example, contends that the fulfillment of Christianity will come “through the sacrifice of colonialism for hospitality, through the sacrifice of imperialism for invitation, the sacrifice of power for service, the sacrifice of fear for fellowship, the sacrifice of isolation from the world for the joy of living at peace with mother earth” (90).

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