

## Outside The Theme

# Decolonizing the Language of Lutheran Theology: Confessions, Mission, Indians, and the Globalization of Hybridity

By George Tinker (*wazhazhe*, Osage Nation)

**Abstract:** Christianity as we know it in the United States is essentially a european ethnic religious movement, one that has necessitated decolonizing processes as it has spread into the formerly euro-colonized global world. In many ways, lutheranism has been and continues to be even more discretely ethnocentric, based largely in the thinking, the cultures, and the languages of the germanic north. This essay challenges lutheran theologians to begin a dedicated process of decoding the narrowly ethnic and implicitly colonizing language of lutheran theology.

**Key Terms:** decolonize lutheranism, lutheran confessions, lutherans and Indians, globalization of hybridity

### Reflecting on Hybridity

I am a citizen of the *wazhazhe udsethe*, or in English, the Osage Nation. I belong to the *hunka*, the Earth Division, of the *wazhazhe*, and I am a member of the Eagle Clan, one of fifteen *hunka* clans. But I am also what is called a “mixed blood” American Indian. That is, in my case, I am Indian/Osage on my father’s side; on my mother’s side I was ordained as a lutheran pastor some thirty-five years ago.<sup>1</sup> At least in the United States, being lutheran has always been an ethnic identity (northern european, german, or scandinavian), and my mother was born of full-blooded norwegian parents. In the

attempt to sort out my mother’s identity in myself, I went to seminary, became ordained, and did a phd in biblical studies.

Having done that much, I began in mid-life to focus on sorting out my father’s identity in myself. Thus, I have pursued an *emic* understanding of American Indian cultures and spiritual traditions for the past thirty-plus years of my life,<sup>2</sup> struggling to hold in tension that paternal Indian self with my maternal lutheran self with some sense of authenticity and honesty.

I should add here a caveat. I am not speaking explicitly in this essay to American Indian folk or to indigenous lutherans generally. This essay has been conceived and written with White lutherans

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largely in mind. Were I speaking to an Indian audience exclusively, I would say these things in a vastly different way. And it should be noted that I am speaking here to Lutherans in terms of their historically heavily bounded subculture of ethnicity in North America—even as that subculture begins its inevitable contemporary decline.

African American literatus W. E. B. Du Bois famously described what he called the “double consciousness” of Black folk, the struggle to be both American and Black.<sup>3</sup> Any American Indian is necessarily susceptible to a very similar double consciousness dilemma. Every American Indian, and indeed every indigenous person worldwide, who has been converted into Christianity, into whatever denomination, necessarily deals with the notion of two-ness described by Du Bois, if in a decidedly different way. For us it is precisely a matter of hybridity, which means learning to live two cultures, two disparate sets of values, simultaneously.

## Mission in a Postmodern Culture

I want to insist at the outset that culture does not consist of relatively independent blocks of language or behavior patterns that can be pulled out of the whole social structure and replaced at will with other blocks that represent behavior patterns or linguistic discourse structures from some other social whole. Rather these so-called blocks are wholly interdependent and interconnected. To switch any one of these blocks is likely to damage the integrity of the whole and ultimately threaten that culture’s sustainability. Changing one cultural value inevitably means shifting the whole set of values practiced by a people, many of which may be unintentional shifts initiated by missionary imposition on the target community and its native culture. My assertion here has huge implications for our analysis of hybridity processes.

Lutheran mission outreach is tricky business at best, especially for people of color, indigenous peoples, and people whose language competency is in languages other than the Latinate and Germanic dialects that power the discursive center of Euro-

and Amer-European Lutheran theologies. It is easy enough, of course, to claim respect for another’s religious beliefs even as one argues the centrality of one’s own theological system for one’s own life.<sup>4</sup> But how, in the final analysis, are we to engage the other in meaningful dialogue and at the same time maintain the sacral universality of one’s own religious traditions, in this case the Lutheran Confessions? More importantly, what are we to do in this postmodern (or is it hyper-modern?) twenty-first century with notions of mission—and global mission in particular? These are the two questions I hope to address in this essay.

## Privileging Indian Cultural Values

Some two decades ago Paul Schultz (White Earth Ojibwe) and I wrote *Rivers of Life: Native American Spirituality for Native Christians*, a study booklet targeted to Indian Lutheran communities.<sup>5</sup> While Paul and I would write the book very differently today and would undoubtedly push the envelope much further, it was a relatively radical piece for the mid-1980s. We challenged the relevance of traditional Lutheran language for Indians and argued that drawing from Indian cultural traditions, values, and spirituality was the only legitimate way for Indian peoples to express their faithfulness to God. We began to challenge, from an Indian perspective, one of the foundations of Luther’s brilliant and startling theology of justification. Namely, we began to critique the relatively new European notion of individualism that leapt out of the European Renaissance, burst into Luther’s reinterpretation of the notion of justification in the Epistle to the Romans, and then was codified forever in the mental musings of René Descartes.

While the individual has thus become the starting point for Euro-Western thinking generally, American Indians invariably would continue to make community both the starting point and the goal of religious faith, intellectual thought, morality, and ethics.<sup>6</sup> For us, salvation of the person must

give way to the salvation and healing of the whole community first of all, and ultimately the healing of the whole of the earth. *Today I would press further that the notions of salvation and healing must be culturally unpacked in an Indian context, that salvation in particular must give way to the much more traditional Indian ideal of personal, communal, and eventually cosmic balance.* And instead of arguing over how we might articulate the euro-theological notion of salvation in some manner that might be more compatible with Indian cultures, I would press that the process needs to be turned around. *Why can we not conceive of Indian cultural values of balance functioning as a corrective to the colonizer's world of values and language, thus reshaping that very notion of salvation?*

As part of the Lutheran Church in America-funded project, Schultz and I took our text to a variety of Indian lutheran communities to test what we had written. The response of one Indian lutheran woman from a long-established Indian lutheran congregation was representative of the general reactions to our document across Indian country. Indeed, her response should be jarring to White lutherans everywhere: "I thought it was just me. I thought that there was something wrong with me, something deeply un-lutheran. But what you have in your book is exactly what I have always thought and believed!"

This is to say, after more than three hundred years of christian missionary activity, dating back to the puritan missions in New England and including now a century of White lutheran pastoral guidance (much of it under the strict control of Missouri Synod leadership—i.e., the Church of the Wilderness on the Stockbridge-Munsee Reservation), this woman and her people still cling to much of their original Indian worldview and have not entirely embraced the lutheran expression of the missionary-propagated, european-developed, and colonially interpreted gospel. This woman's struggle with double consciousness as an Indian and a lutheran, like my own struggle, has been largely unnoticed by most other lutherans in the U.S.; but it is something to which all, particularly theologians, should pay attention because it has import for their own articulation of their faith.

## A Contemporary Reformation

As we attend to questions of hybridity and colonialism in the context of global mission, especially with attention to ethnic and cultural diversity, and things like ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue, lutheran folk need to reflect deeply and rethink themselves. That is, lutherans must move beyond a simplistic verbal bondage to their historical rootedness in the european church reformation and its sixteenth-century german language and move toward a contemporary reformation that is relevant to today's world with all of its diversity of languages, peoples, cultures, and value systems—along with the political movements of empire and colonialism that have dotted the landscape for the past five hundred years and continue today in that peculiar form of U.S. empiric hegemony called globalization.

As for indigenous people who have some connection within the lutheran family, we need to be asking ourselves, why did our grandparents find this northern-european expression of Christianity to be compelling enough to join this church instead of one of the multiplicity of other colonial expressions of missionary outreach competing for their attention? What was so compelling about the germanic languaging of the gospel? And for ethnic euro-lutheran people (including amer-european lutherans), I want to argue that some of the underlying philosophical substratum of their lutheranism needs to be challenged at a basic level and opened up for radical rethinking and contemporary reformation. This is much more difficult than to pass a resolution calling on some political entity outside of the church to do something. Any liberal can do that. But the times call for something much more radical in terms of self-reflection and re-evaluation.

### Transforming a Euro-Western Worldview

While I want to challenge the particularities of lutheran theological ideologies in some of their foundational aspects, ultimately, I am arguing for a transformation of the euro-western worldview

in which lutheranism is so firmly planted. It is an unfortunate reality that some of the foundational philosophical thinking of the euro-west, especially the so-called european “enlightenment” (usually proudly capitalized as a universal “Enlightenment”), from the philosophical musings of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke to those of Immanuel Kant and Georg Hegel, has been deeply implicated in the development and implementation of euro-western colonial imperialism over the past five hundred and fifteen years (since the columbian misadventure of 1492). What we need today is a whole new critical analysis that will enable us to see much more clearly how our lutheran foundational thinking has been a part of the euro-colonial past, and continues to be a culpable part of the ever-expanding imperialism of the globalization movement that marks the so-called “american century,” meaning the U.S. ascendancy in the global arena. So I am going to be very bold indeed and push as many lutheran buttons as possible, just in order to begin the process of dialogue and reflection that we need now to generate newness, healing, balance, and peace in the world.

As an American Indian and an Indian theologian who reflects deeply on issues of traditional Indian cultures and religious structures, I continue to appreciate the classic lutheran doctrines of *sola gratia* and *sola fidei*, and their corollary, justification by faith (in spite of my critique of its inherent euro-individualism). While Martin Luther’s fresh articulation of the notion of justification a half-millennium ago is usually expressed in language that uses categories that are quite different from any Indian cultural expressions, the underlying idea is one that can be readily embraced in some form by indigenous Indian communities: *wako<sup>n</sup>da*, the creative force of the universe, intends good for the earth and all its inhabitants far beyond what humans might have merited. To put it into words that would be most easily understood by many native peoples, the Creator “pities” or “has compassion on” the creation and each of its life-forms.

The lingering problem with the lutheran doctrine is that it continues to find its most frequent articulation in the late medieval languages that were so much a part of the reformers’ european world.

While I also appreciate something of this lutheran languaging (especially in its own historical and cultural context), I also must insist on the validity of traditional American Indian ways of seeing the world and relating to what euro-westerners call god or God. The really tricky question is this: How can we make room for those traditional native voices in a world that has been so tightly boundaried by the traditional euro-lutheran language and worldview (and culture) inherent in the Confessions? How can “northern” euro-lutherans (including particularly amer-european lutherans) make room for fellowship and *koinonia* with those whose natural, cultural predisposition is to see the world fundamentally differently from amer-european folk?

## Rethinking the Role of the Confessions

For the sake of argument, let me suggest that it is time to challenge the primacy of the “lutheran Confessions” as a universal and normative interpretation of the gospel. In this postmodern world of growing global awareness and resistance to the globalization of U.S. colonial power, is it not time for amer-european lutherans to begin a new reformation of themselves, a transformation that learns to revere the Confessions as important historical and culturally rooted statements rather than as universal statements of truth applicable to all people everywhere? Can lutherans find the courage and take the risk to challenge their persistent urge to impose that language and those documents on the Two-Thirds World Other? To do this would mean holding the Confessions as symbols of where we came from, and not as symbols of what we believe.

If we are going to be sensitive to the power of the north (the U.S., Canada, and northern Europe) in world lutheran discourse, then we need to reflect on the role of the Confessions in maintaining euro-privileging as a racialized and geopolitical imbalance within world lutheranism and in the world generally. Namely, the continued use of the Confessions as the theological center of the

lutheran witness, and as the hermeneutical center of gospel interpretation (as per the Augsburg Confession), will continue to perpetuate relationships of imbalance between historic euro-lutherans and all peoples of the Two-Thirds World (including American Indians), because it necessarily will continue to privilege those who have some inherent attachments to the historic languages of lutheranism and a history of both reading and interpreting those confessional texts critically and living out of some relationship of intimacy with them in their church life. Confessions-talk becomes, as it were, comfortable code-talk for White american lutherans when they engage in religious discourse.

### **The Example of Lord**

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A linguistic analogy can be found in the English language use of the word *lord* for Jesus in the United States. The word no longer has any everyday meaning for folk in north America, who have long ago developed a more democratic social context far removed from the feudal lordships of Europe. The word, however, has such historical precedence (especially in the biblical text) that it could not simply be abandoned. Thus, *lord* has been relegated strictly to religious usage in the U.S.—unless the evening news is reporting on some event in Britain involving some anachronistic upper class, honorific public figure.<sup>7</sup>

Yet the use of the word to refer to Jesus or to God maintains a high-level doctrinal status among lutherans as well as for most american christians, even though it lacks today any normal meaning or daily usage other than its religious one. Thus, the word must be infused with its special religious and doctrinal meaning for each american child on the basis of the religious training of their parents and historical knowledge preserved in habitual action. In Jesus' day, of course, the word *kurios* was indeed in everyday usage and had a commonly understood set of meanings. It was not a religious word at all; indeed, that was its power! Yet the word has come to carry a distinct religious meaning—and only that religious meaning—

for americans, which allows them to function in a religious comfort zone. For American Indians, of course, the word only can be interpreted in its oppressive colonial meaning—the imposed lordship of the White euro-conqueror—since Indian peoples never paid homage to lords or had the kind of hierarchy that would result in any comparable notion of lordship.<sup>8</sup>

In much the same way, the Confessions provide amer-european lutherans with a comfortable set of religious ideas and categories of cognition. The lutheran sense of connection with the Confessions lends itself to the development of a common identity and solidarity, firmly rooted in the particularities of language developed over the past five hundred years. Whether the ideas are indeed universal or not, the people who have lived these ideas daily over generations and have long infused the language with special meaning come quite naturally to think that everyone, or everyone who is rational, will see the world the way they see it. In this way, the Confessions provide (euro-) lutherans with a basis for a perceived universal understanding of their faith, which, in their minds, easily can be moved across all cultural and historical boundaries.

### **Universally Normative Truth Claims**

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An example of this sort of confident sense of lutheran identity comes across in Timothy J. Wengert's short essay on the Confessions. The opening preface says about Wengert's essay: "The essence of *The Book of Concord*, according to one of the editors of Lutheranism's newly translated confessions, is letting others understand the truth of our faith, that is, sharing the gospel of Christ."<sup>9</sup> Here we have a universalist statement of the lutheran faith and the interpretation of the gospel. The *Book of Concord* (BC), that is, the "Lutheran Confessions," articulates "the truth." While this has an all too comfortable lutheran ring to it, it is an explicit claim of universal normativity.

Wengert wants to argue that the BC is not a "theological rule book," but it is never really clear that he is serious about that proposition, especially since he continues to frame his interpretation of

the volume in terms of normative truth. Wengert reminds us that the documents, the Augsburg Confession in particular, “arose as a confession of faith.” Yet Wengert immediately proceeds to a conclusion that belies his earlier protestation: “Thus, this volume in particular can function as a handy training manual for congregational members who wish to share their faith.”<sup>10</sup> Again, the implicit assumption is the typical European colonialist notion of universality.

That these historical, culturally discrete documents can be so easily imposed on twenty-first-century Euro-Americans who live half a millennium distant from sixteenth-century Germany is a difficult enough proposition. The mere thought that anyone would think that they might translate so easily into a Two-thirds World cultural context is fraught with quite another problematic. Namely, bringing American Indians or other Fourth World peoples to Christ must be perceived as relatively simple once we can get those disparate (“primitive,” “underdeveloped,” “racially,” or at least culturally “inferior”?) communities to think like sixteenth-century Germans.

### *The Deep Structure of Language*

Human language is terribly complex and always deeply cultural, social, and habitual. Just clarifying the intent of a speaker when the culture is fully shared is difficult enough. Take for example this relatively simple sentence: *the girl hit the boy with the bat*. It is fairly straightforward, except that we do not know from our perusal of the surface structure given here exactly what the nature of the action was as it was pictured in the mind of the speaker (Noam Chomsky’s notion of deep structure). Who, for instance, was holding the bat? The sentence would have to be re-spoken in an alternative syntactic structure, shifting perhaps to the passive voice: *The boy was hit by the girl who used the bat*; or *The boy over there who is holding the bat was hit by the girl*. These alternatives suddenly picture two very different scenarios, either one of which would have been an appropriate possible meaning of the original. Either one would begin to explain

the action, although the description is still lacking in that we still do not know in the first example if the hitting was in the act of sporting, i.e., an accidental swing of the bat, or whether it was an act of criminal assault. We can change the surface structure around so as to clarify a thing or two, but essentially we cannot clarify the nature of the word *bat* without a sustained analysis of the deep structure of the speaker of the sentence.

If we were to speak the sentence in much of Asia (outside of Japan and Korea), it would make little sense at all, since people might have no understanding of the word *bat*—presuming, of course, that they would understand the English of the sentence at all. In major parts of the world, the intuitive understanding of the sentence, clarified or not, might only indicate to us the category of colonization endured by the natives of the land, whether the context were presumed to be a baseball game or a cricket match. And the sentence began as such a simple one.

Lutheran confessional theology introduces language that is much more sophisticated and much more deeply rooted in the cultural deep structures of a community’s thinking. As such, it is also much more abstract and open to an enormous array of interpretations. The Confessions presuppose a common understanding of the world and how it works, an understanding that non-European peoples may not share at all. Moreover, the comfortable use of Lutheran confessional language and categories of faithfulness presupposes a shared belief system that works well for White Americans but ultimately may have little to say to Two-thirds World peoples without imposing a whole new cultural transformation on those people, something that can only happen over generations. Thus, confessional theology is an intellectual exercise and, as such, requires a common language, mutual understandings, and shared beliefs to have real meaning.

### *Problems for Evangelism*

How, then, can we expect to evangelize peoples of distant lands and distant cultures whose languages, values, and cultural experiences defy any easy access

to mutual understanding or shared belief? Yet, the current lutheran models of evangelism inevitably mandate the imposition of new beliefs—and not just the message of the cross. Particularly for indigenous peoples who continue to live a culture rooted in an ancient understanding of the close relationship between themselves and the Creator, a conversion to Christianity involves a cultural conversion that mandates a whole new worldview, including a whole new cultural vision of what euro-western peoples call “god,” a new worldview which turns the American Indian world upside down and posits a separation of the self from God that had never been experienced by Indian peoples prior to missionary colonization. This newly imposed worldview, so comfortable for euro-lutherans, becomes severely limiting for American Indian peoples in terms of how they view the relationship of humans to the rest of the created world.

### Three or Four

Let us briefly raise a couple of specifics that address the question: What does not work for Indian people without significant cultural conversion? Any number of key lutheran and euro-christian concepts simply do not fit easily into those cultural milieus. Take for example the third-century doctrine of the holy trinity that has become so foundational for lutheran belief.<sup>11</sup> While, as Georges Dumézil has demonstrated, trinitarian (trifunctional, he calls it) thinking has been part of the cultural and linguistic foundation of all indo-european language communities, the fundamental sacred number for Indian communities is four.<sup>12</sup> As Alfonso Ortiz (San Juan Tewa) regularly articulated it, Indian peoples are “relentlessly tetradic.”

Forcing Indian peoples into the trinitarian mold of euro-western Christianity forces a collapse of a whole tetradic worldview, and begins the process of crowding out the value system that is predicated on this tetradic worldview. From that point on the stories and ceremonial traditions of a people will no longer work and eventually must be abandoned. The only possibility of maintaining indigenous identity and still appropriating Christian-

ity is to take on christian identity in some other modality than in its euro-western form. One indigenous community I visited some years ago in the Philippines accomplished this by reshaping the trinity into a tetrad, calling on God as Father, *Mother*, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup> It could also be noted that while the community included male priestly functionaries as healers, the leader of the community has always been a female.

## Fall-and-Redemption Theology

The fall-and-redemption schematic that is at the root of german and swiss reformation theologies generally fails on several grounds to translate easily and naturally into any American Indian notion of the world and the human place in it. Eventually, we need to understand that fall-and-redemption theologies have proven destructive for Indian communities.

### Problems with “Sin”

First of all, American Indian cultures and languages lacked any concept or word that was comparable to euro-christian notions of *sin*. Traditionally, as we have already noted, Indian peoples always have lived cultures that were predicated on community-ist value systems, which means that euro-western individualism is a deeply foreign concept that must be imposed over generations to effect a change. In the world of Indian peoples the source of social imbalance and disharmony lies in the community rather than the individual, and thus reconciliation must occur at the communal level. Inappropriate actions on the part of one affect the whole; and thus the actions of the one are engaged carefully in order to protect the whole.

Accordingly, Indian ceremonial acts performed in order to restore harmony are done for the sake of the whole even when they are done by a single person. More often than not, the ceremony is performed by the community as a whole (the village, a whole clan, a society within the village, etc.), or

it is done in the presence of the whole community even if there is a key actor.<sup>14</sup> Any notions of individual sin, individual repentance, and individual salvation must be understood very differently in a community-ist cultural context. Secondly, American Indian cultures pervasively tend to see the world in terms of the infusion of the sacred through all of life and all of creation. Thus, for Indian people the typical reformation dichotomy between divine grace and human sin is entirely too rigid and too confining a vision of the world. It necessarily overlooks the sacred in each of us, as it is in all of creation.

### *Problems with “Law” and “Gospel”*

More importantly at this late date in the history of colonialism, American Indian people have been so oppressed and left in such poverty that any traditional lutheran proclamation of “law” and “gospel” necessarily will function to further repress most Indian persons, even when they have begun to embrace missionary individualism. As Paul Schultz and I wrote in that earlier booklet, Indian people are so depressed communally that traditional preaching of sin and redemption results in the Indian hearer getting psychologically stuck in the first part of the proclamation (the law) and never being able to hear the “good news” part of it.

One direct result of the history of oppression and conquest is the lingering sense of poor self-esteem suffered by Indians as persons and as whole communities. Indians are the poorest ethnic community in North America today, with an actual unemployment rate that is ten times the general unemployment rate for the U.S., and five times the rate for African Americans. Indians suffer the shortest longevity, higher illness rates, a stunning teen suicide rate—three to ten times the U.S. average,<sup>15</sup>—a school drop-out rate stuck at fifty percent, etc.<sup>16</sup> While these statistics are the tragic result of more than a half-millennium of the violence of conquest, colonialism, civilization, and conversion (religious and cultural)—each representing a different strategy of White racist oppression of Indian peoples, they also go a long way toward

explaining the intense dysfunctionality of today’s Indian community.<sup>17</sup> The statistics are a constant reminder that racism and its residual genocidal results continue in a variety of ways to hold Indian communities down,<sup>18</sup> the residue of a continuing history of racialized violence.<sup>19</sup> The net result of these drastic social statistics, then, is that Indian peoples suffer a dysfunctional sense of dependency on the U.S. government that has been carefully cultivated by that government and that results in a severely degraded sense of self-esteem.

### *A Different Starting Point*

Finally, the european church reformation’s theological starting point of human sin and fallenness is counter-intuitive for American Indians, whose traditional culture with its view of the whole world as sacred will not allow the cutting a tree or the killing of a buffalo without careful prayers of reciprocity. For Indian peoples creation itself is the genesis for the spiritual and cultural imagination and the only logical place to begin. Even as people recognize fully the limitedness of the human being and its capacity for disrupting balance, we must begin by affirming the goodness of creation, including the goodness of every human being.<sup>20</sup> Only then can we begin to make sense of the brokenness we have experienced, which came with treaties and covenants so easily violated by the amer-european colonists. A fall-and-redemption theology too quickly blames the victim in an American Indian context or in virtually any Two-Thirds World context.

Thus, before Indians can be converted to a lutheran expression of the euro-gospel and to Christianity, those who have lacked any cultural notion of “sin” in the euro-western sense must first of all come to acknowledge their own sinfulness and need for redemption. People who have lived for centuries, if not millennia, in relationships of communal and personal harmony and balance with the Creator (under their own understandings of the Creator and that relationship) and with each other suddenly must shift to an understanding of individual brokenness that imposes a new need



for a message of salvation, and offers a new and singular source for that salvation, one that is inherently controlled by the European or Amer-European missionary who brings the message.

It does not help to explain to Indians (or to indigenous tribes in Burma) that the best Euro-Western theologians now have a more complex understanding of sin and salvation. For better or for worse, the popular understanding is so deeply rooted in people's minds and lives that even too many of our own American Indian preachers, trained over a three-year period in Lutheran seminaries and seminaries of other denominations in the U.S., fall back into those categorical usages once they are out in the world of weekly pastoral care and preaching.

## Indian Ways of Knowing

Many indigenous peoples have been cursorily dismissed by colonial academics and missionaries as something these academics choose to call "animists." Animists, we are then told, "believe" that there is a spirit residing in everything. By this definition I would have to argue that American Indians are certainly not animists. Most importantly, we have no such "belief," since our understandings of the world (even the spirit aspects of the world) are never predicated on belief. We know, rather than believe. That is, we have knowledge and experience that becomes the foundation for our cultural practices and religious traditions. And it is at the level of day-to-day experience that we continue to be in relationship with our ancestors and a variety of other spirit energies in the world around us. It is the colonialist mind that relegates our experiences to belief simply because the science of the colonizer is unable to replicate our experiences in his laboratory.

## Continuing Relationships with Ancestors

Again, indigenous peoples are dismissed as ancestor worshippers. Yet, lacking any word for "worship," Indian peoples would totally dismiss this colonialist

description of our world. In other words, we do not "worship" ancestors or engage in any activity that any Indian community would describe with that particularly English-language verb—as long as we are being true to our own indigenous languages. The point is that Indian peoples do not *worship* anything or anyone. What Indian peoples do in their ceremonial actions is something categorically different from worship. When, for instance, we take the life of a tree to serve as the center of a sun dance ceremony, it is important to speak with that tree as a close relative. It is alive and certainly it does have spirit, just as do human beings. This is not a matter of belief but a matter of long experience. And as the tree gives its life to carry our prayers into the spirit world, it too becomes one of our ancestors.

The relationship we continue to have with our ancestors can be demonstrated in a story, a historical report. A man went "on the hill" to make what Osages call the Rite of Vigil, for a period of days to fast without liquids as well as without food, and to pray for direction and help for his family and his people. Toward evening of that first day, a man came to visit him, a man dressed the way people used to dress in the long ago. This man had a clan name that indicated he belonged to the same clan as the man who was making this ceremony. In the brief conversation, the man who had appeared promised to help the man making the ceremony, to stand with him through his life, and to help those for whom the man prayed. Then the man disappeared as suddenly as he had appeared.

This report defies Euro-Western belief, since it certainly cannot be replicated in any scientific way. Yet it is a common enough experience among Indian people. We tell our young people that this is always a possibility for them when they engage this ceremony. It does not make them special, but it does give them a new sense of direction for living life. Whether I or anyone else choose to believe the incident happened the way the man reported it is irrelevant, since such a vision does not give this man any power or authority over anyone else in the community. It is merely an experience which helps and gives direction to this man. His responsibility from this time forward is to live this vision

responsibly and to live in relationship with this ancestor.

Many euro-western people today, of course, will try to affirm this experience without trying to understand the metaphysics or the physics of the event. Yet it raises significant problems for many christian people and especially for lutheran folk who hold to a doctrine of *sola scriptura*. Namely, this event introduces the possibility of a new source of information that defies the *sola scriptura* doctrine. If this is a general possibility for all Indian people who engage in this traditional ceremony of prayer and vigil, then there is a pervasive source of information that would mean that any christian Indian might have a source of information not available to non-Indian (euro-western) christians.

For native peoples, *no<sup>n</sup>zhi<sup>n</sup>zho<sup>n</sup>*, the vision quest, is like having a direct line to the spirit world. But it is a deeply personal direct line, one that cannot be controlled by any third person. As such, it is a liberating experience. It frees us from the artificiality of some central authority that exerts power over our lives—like, for instance the authority of professional interpreters of biblical text. Yes, of course, there are community mores and ways of being in harmony and balance within the community. But the vigil gives us the personal direction that we need for living useful and responsible lives. In the same manner, no vision gives me any status of authority over others in my community.

## Challenging *Sola Scriptura*

We can reiterate here that the vigil, as a direct line to the spirit world of our ancestors, brings the lutheran doctrine of *sola scriptura* starkly into question. As long as the doctrine continues to be expressed and interpreted as it has been traditionally, any lutheran Indian person would necessarily need to choose between living her or his traditional culture and being lutheran. After the powerful notion of justification by faith (*sola gratia, sola fidei*), perhaps the most important doctrine for lutheran identity formation is encapsulated in this third part of this reformation formulation: *sola scriptura*. Once again, we need to acknowledge the particular power this teaching had early in the sixteenth-century

Germany. Indeed, its force echoed across the entire roman catholic church. But it is important to remember the causes for the doctrine and the immediate purpose it served.

Luther was struggling with a widely perceived abuse of power on the part of the curate. In particular, catholic tradition and the *ex cathedra* proclamations of the pope had, in Luther's mind, replaced the authority of the oldest christian religious texts, namely the scriptures. He was arguing against the growing strength of a centralized authority that had become so powerful as to compete with the rule of monarchs in Europe. In this historical politico-theological context, *sola scriptura* made perfect sense—just as the American Indian resort to sacred personal and anti-authoritarian sources of information imparted from spirits in the rite of vigil makes sense.

As the lutheran church became an established institution in its own right, however, the doctrine took on a different contextual force. I want to argue here that the doctrine became its own device to help maintain control of the faithful in a very different sense than the situation to which Luther had responded. So I might extend my own argument for the anti-authoritarian personal access to information from spirit ancestors and ask rhetorically why that source of information might not be accorded some equal status to a written scripture.

For better or for worse, the specialization of scripture study has made the Bible less easily accessible to lay readers of the text, and has put growing power into the hands of those specialists who are so trained. The discourse of biblical interpretation has become so technical today that even clergy are not always trained in ways sophisticated enough to interpret the text authoritatively for their congregations. But these problems pale when compared to the particular problems biblical authority raises for indigenous peoples whose native language competency is in languages outside of the family of historic languages of lutheranism.

## “One Down”

In this regard, Indian christians, and other indigenous christians, are destined to be forever

“one down” because they are not native speakers of, or educated in the technical languages of Christianity—greek, hebrew, german, latin, italian, etc.—and neither are they as comfortably conversant in the cultural-linguistic concepts almost automatically presumed by euro-western christians. Thus, Indian christians must rely on “professional” interpretations of their christian faith (i.e., euro-western interpretations) from the missionaries that the denominations have sent us.

Even when we do learn greek and hebrew, we learn it from the same professional euro-western interpreters; and, thus we merely learn to mimic the colonizer who always knows more greek and hebrew than we seem to learn. And if an Indian becomes a scholar with intense language skills and resources, it always seems as if we lose that person to a deeply acculturated and possibly assimilated status within White church or White society, and mimicry becomes even more enhanced. That is, in our mimicry, we always learn the technical language and concepts through those euro-western lenses of concepts like individualism. As a result, we seem invariably to internalize our own colonized status, finally affirming the normativity of the colonizer worldview and eventually the normalcy of hybridity.

I understand, of course, that the hebrew Bible was formative for Jesus and the world of the christian gospels. So surely, this text also should be important and useful for any christian person who embraces Jesus. Yet, one of the curious oddities of euro-Christianity relates to its canonical inclusion of the hebrew scriptures, which results in necessarily forcing all adherents to embrace a history that is not the natural or actual history of the persons or peoples who become adherents—unless they are “Jews for Jesus.” That is, all converts and their succeeding generations are expected to embrace the history of one small, relatively insignificant Asian country—ancient Israel—as their own history, investing their lives with meaning and identity rooted in the historical experiences of a people distant from their own, both in terms of culture and time. This business of appropriating a foreign history as one’s own means, in some regard (more for some than for others), the denial of one’s own proper history.

## Whose History?

For American Indians it means, for instance, the denial of important aspects of our own history in order to affirm not only Israelite history but ultimately also euro-christian history, including amer-euro-christian history. This is particularly evident, for instance, in any intellectual understanding of the history of christian doctrine, which is inevitably a european history—something to which we will return. This becomes especially important as we begin to understand the particularity of the history of christian theology that is essentially a european history, and must always and necessarily fail the test of universality.

More significantly, for American Indians, affirming israelite history means ultimately affirming precisely that historical narrative that has been used consistently by our euro-western colonizer to validate their own theft of our property and murder of our ancestors. As Robert Warrior has demonstrated, the Puritans’ use of the Exodus narrative of Israel’s escape from slavery and conquest of the land of Canaan empowered their colonial invasion of Indian lands and justified in their minds the murder of Indian people. Eventually, it is the same narrative that gives birth to the religio-political doctrine of “manifest destiny” (and eventually the absurdity of the Monroe Doctrine) and all contemporary religious and political forms of american exceptionalism. As a narrative about escape from slavery, it has proven a powerful liberating story for African Americans. Yet for American Indians, Warrior reminds us forcefully that the conquest narrative is one in which we always discover ourselves to be the Canaanites—the conquered—and never the Israelites.<sup>21</sup>

The net result of this process is self-disavowal and even subtle forms of self-hatred on the part of American Indian peoples who are converted (as one disavows the importance of one’s own history in order to elevate the importance of someone else’s history). It must lead the perceptive and sensitive observer to wonder whether any appropriation of the euro-christian gospel can be liberative for American Indians. It is curious that christians are

led logically to believe that “God,” until the birth of Jesus, cared only for one small people on the face of the earth, leaving all others to ignorance, “sin,” idolatry, self-destruction, and eternal damnation. For Indian peoples the message only becomes more difficult since it is conveyed through the clear inference that “God’s” love (in the Jesus event) was denied Indian peoples until God, in God’s graciousness, sent White people to kill us, lie to us, steal our land, and proclaim the saving gospel to us.

## New Social Imaginary

Surely the time has come for lutheran theologians to reassess the role of *sola scriptura* and to begin the process of rethinking the role of the Bible in informing christian faith. My argument is certainly not to encourage any discarding of scripture. That would be to miss the point. Rather, it is time to reevaluate the insider coded messages embedded in the doctrine, and to distance ourselves from any lingering sense of scriptural universality. Today we must engage in an interreligious dialogue that genuinely respects the scriptures (both written and oral) of other folk, and at least begins to understand that there are whole cultures that stand to be destroyed by the simplistic imposition of one folk’s scripture on another folk.

Had we space, we could continue this exercise by raising other serious questions about various other key aspects of traditional lutheran beliefs and doctrines, but the point would not change. We might raise concerns about the anthropocentrism that is such a fundamental part of the euro-western christian salvation schematic. How can lutherans convince indigenous peoples living in some perception of a necessary balance with all of creation that God’s salvation is intended only for humans, that only humans merit God’s ultimate concern? We need to remember that indigenous peoples are those who cannot conceive of harvesting food they have planted themselves without a ceremony of thanksgiving that includes the asking of permission from the plants themselves before they pick the corn, beans, and squash.<sup>22</sup> Thus, if lutherans want to

limit themselves to institutional goals of conversion, then lutherans must necessarily continue to separate native peoples from their historic and millennia-old covenants with God and to destroy the relationships with creation that these covenants have nurtured, in order to replace those ancient covenants with a new set of promises that forever will be controlled by northern lutherans as colonial masters and stewards of the message.

It is now time for lutherans of the north to begin to reflect on that thin line between holding on to what is particular and creative in lutheran identity and codifying the world with that particular language of discourse in such a way as to impose an amer-european lutheran self, a distinctly cultural (and colonial) identity, on the global Other. The standard confessional assumption that what lutherans have is a universal value applicable to all people everywhere presses all lutherans toward this sort of globalizing colonialism.

To create a shift in this lingering lutheran sense of universality means that lutheran folk—the theologians and the rank-and-file laity—will have to focus on creating a new social imaginary in order to displace the social imaginary that has emerged over the past five centuries and more. This will be a very large theological task, but one that might well prove genuinely salvific for all peoples everywhere.

## Endnotes

1. My use of the lower case for adjectives such as *christian*, *lutheran*, *protestant*, *european*, and *american* is intentional. While the noun might be capitalized out of respect for each Christian—as for each Muslim or Buddhist—using the lower case *christian* or *biblical* allows us to avoid any unnecessary normativizing or universalizing of the principal institutional religious quotient of the euro-west. The language of “christian civilization” was widely used during the conquest. It is an explicit part of Bishop Henry Benjamin Whipple’s programmatic missionizing on the north-central plains in the latter half of the nineteenth century. See my analysis of Whipple in chapter five of George Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Genocide* (Fortress Press, 1993). I have likewise avoided capitalizing adjectives such as *american*, *amer-european*, *european*, etc., for the same reasons. Paradoxically, I insist on capitalizing *White* (adjective or noun) to indicate a clear cultural pattern invested in Whiteness that is all too often overlooked or even denied by american Whites.

2. That is, an American Indian community insider understanding, as opposed to the classic White scholarly presumption of *etic/objective* outsider analysis. The categorization of *emic* and *etic* was invented by Kenneth Lee Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of Structure of Human Behavior* 2nd ed. (The Hague: Mouton, 1967).
3. W.E.B. Du Bois. "Strivings of the Negro People," *Atlantic Monthly* (1897); revised as Chapter One, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" in *The Souls of Black Folk* (193; reprint, New York: Gramercy Books, 1994).
4. For a Reformed example, see Joseph Hough, "Christian Revelation and Religious Pluralism," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 56:3–4 (2003), 70–71; and my critique of Hough: "Abjection, Violence, Missions, and American Indians. An Essay Response to Joseph Hough, 'Christian Revelation and Religious Pluralism,'" *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 56:3–4 (2003), 106–120.
5. Paul Schultz and George Tinker, *Rivers of Life: Native American Spirituality for Native Christians* (Minneapolis: Fortress/Augsburg, 1988).
6. I have published an essay arguing that individualism has pervaded all critical euro-western interpretation of biblical texts, trying to demonstrate that a community-ist reading of the *basileia* (kingdom?) of God, forms an Indian perspective, and makes more sense of Mark 1:14f. Tinker, "A Native American Reading of the Bible," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 174–180; revised in Tinker, *Spirit and Resistance: Political Theology and American Indian Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).
7. We could make the further point that any word that is strictly religious in its usage is one that has become largely meaningless.
8. For a fuller argument about the use of *lord* as an appellation for Jesus, see Tinker, "American Indians and Jesus: Towards an EATWOT Christology," *Voices from the Third World* (fall, 1995):115–134.
9. Timothy J. Wengert, "The Lutheran Confessions: A Handbook for Sharing the Faith," <http://www.elca.org/lp/luconfes.html>.
10. *Ibid.*, 3.
11. It needs to be clearly noted that the doctrine of the trinity is not at all a biblical doctrine but emerges in the europeanization of the church into latin and greek languages as late as the third european century. Yet this late doctrine has become a defining one for the vast majority of Christianity.
12. Dumézil first argued his tripartite description of indo-european cultures in *Flamen-Brahman* (Paris: Librairie orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1935). More accessible (in English) is Dumézil's *Mitra-varuna: An Essay on Two Indo-european Representations of Sovereignty*, trans. Derek Coltman (Cambridge: Zone Books, 1990). While this "trifunctional hypothesis" has been critiqued by many, it has been strongly supported in a very recent publication: Iaroslav Lebedynsky, *Les Indo-européens* (Paris: Éditions Errance, 2006).
13. The indigenous community I visited—at the behest of a group of catholic nuns who were themselves from indigenous communities—was the cult at Mt. Banahaw in Quezon Province.
14. See, for example, my discussion of the community-ist foundations and intent inherent in the plains sun dance tradition: Tinker, "Sun Dance: Further Considerations," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Farmington Hills, Mich.: Thomas Gale, 2005).
15. The situation in Canada is very similar. Note a news article from a few years back: "Native Suicides Hit High," *The Ottawa Sun*, November 21, 2000.
16. Gary D. Sandefur, "American Indian Reservations: The First Underclass Areas?" Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin, accessed March 4, 2011, <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/focus/pdfs/foc121f.pdf>. See also, "The Office of Minority Health: American Indian/Alaska Native Profile," The Office of Minority Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, accessed March 4, 2011, <http://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/templates/browse.aspx?lvl=2&lvlID=52>.
17. See the opening chapter of Ward Churchill, *Kill the Indian, Save the Man* (San Francisco: City Lights Press, 2005), a fine exposé of the colonial boarding schools run by churches and the government for Indian children in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
18. See Ward Churchill, *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas: 1492 to the Present* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1997).
19. See George Tinker, "Racism and Anti-racism in a Culture of Violence: Dreaming a New Dream" in *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue*, ed. Marjorie Bowers-Wheatley and Nancy Palmer Jones (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2002), 79–104.
20. See my essays addressing the WCC's "Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation" process, finalized in conciliar action in Seoul in 1990. I argued then for a different approach that would have made a theological concern for creation the basis for all justice and peace action. Tinker, "The Integrity of Creation: Restoring Trinitarian Balance," *Ecumenical Review* 41 (1989), 527–536; and "*Gerechtigkeit, Frieden und die Integrität der Weihnachtsbäume*," *Ökumenische Rundschau* 28 (1989), 169–180, reprinted as "Creation as Kin: An American Indian View," in *After Nature's Revolt: Eco-Justice and Theology*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 144–153.
21. Warrior's essay has been reprinted at least twice. See Robert Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," in *Voices from the Margins: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, ed. R. S. Sujirtharajah (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989), 287–295; and in *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada*, ed. James Treat (New York: Routledge, 1996), 93–100. One should note Norman K. Gottwald's groundbreaking work in his *Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979), in which he argues for a "peasant revolt" model—as opposed to the traditional (nineteenth-century) model—of conquest underlying the Exodus/Judges materials. Yet, for American Indians the narrative problems remain. Whatever the actual occurrence might have been, it is the historical uses of the conquest narrative that have fueled the euro-western colonial projects and have served to justify their conquests—politically, militarily, religiously, theologically, morally, and even legally.
22. For an extended argument on the personhood of each part of creations, see my essay: "The Stones Shall Cry Our: Consciousness, Rocks and Indians," *Wicaza Sa Review* (2005): 161–185.

## Book Reviews

Lori Pearson. *Beyond Essence: Ernst Troeltsch as Historian and Theorist of Christianity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008. 252 pages.

The most common interpretation of Ernst Troeltsch remains indebted to Karl Barth's famous claim that Troeltsch left theology behind mid-career to accept a chair in philosophy. With these words Barth and other neo-orthodox theologians assert that nineteenth-century German liberal Protestant theology so thoroughly accommodated to the culture that it stopped being theology and just became philosophy. But Lori Pearson shows in her carefully argued book why this interpretation cannot stand. Through in-depth engagement with three of Troeltsch's most significant texts—*The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches and Groups*, *Historicism and Its Problems*, and "What Does 'Essence of Christianity' Mean?"—Pearson adds her strong voice to a growing chorus of scholars who see Troeltsch as more a "theorist of Christian-

ity" or "cultural historian" than a "cultural Protestant."

Pearson's central argument is that because of Troeltsch's immersion in historical research during the years from 1904 to 1914 (roughly the time he was writing *The Social Teachings*), he comes to see that the concept "essence" simply cannot "capture an historical, cultural, and religious phenomenon as pluriform and contingent as Christianity" (4). Troeltsch's historical investigations lead him toward the broader task of "cultural synthesis." In cultural synthesis, Troeltsch does not accommodate Protestantism to the culture, as the neo-orthodox claim, but rather, he strives to render the complex and composite nature of Christian history helpful for understanding and solving the problems of his day. Troeltsch sees Christianity neither as one with culture nor as some pure essence apart from culture, but as a dynamic social force both affected by culture and having an effect on it.

In the first chapter of her book, Pearson sheds new light on Troeltsch's pivotal "Essence" essay by reading it in the context of his engagement with Heinrich

Rickert. While Troeltsch thought a concise definition of Christianity's essence was impossible, he articulates in this essay how the concept of essence still can help clarify the value of Christianity to modern society. In part due to Rickert's influence, Troeltsch employs a rigorous historical method in which the essence of Christianity emerges only after one compiles historical details, forms a concept that synthesizes the values of these various historical individualities, and then renders their complexity in some way comprehensible. Any concept of Christianity's essence is thus rooted both in empirical historical research and in the creative imagination and normative position of the historian.

The next three chapters explore how *The Social Teachings* applies and transforms the theory of Christianity that Troeltsch articulates in the "Essence" essay. Through a careful look at Christian history, Troeltsch shows the extent to which Christianity has been sociologically conditioned, and the way that it is itself an agent of change in the social world (66). Pearson's chief contribution in these chapters is to connect the history