
Twenty Years On: The Once and Future Theology of Native America

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The Scope of this Article

Twenty years ago, I wrote a chapter for an anthology on Native American religious identity. I titled it, “From Medicine Man To Marx.”¹ It was a theological analysis of economics from the Native American spiritual viewpoint. In it I made a few theological observations that projected a return of nascent colonialism and the rise of an unexpected part of traditional Native American culture to a place of prominence. In its opening sentence I said that I wanted to make one simple assertion: “I believe that in the next generation of Native Christian theology we will experience a significant shift from spirituality to economics.”²

Was I right? Spoiler alert: as with most visions some of the vision is clear and other parts are through a glass but darkly. However, I think I got enough of it “right” to find myself, two decades later, wanting to look ahead another twenty years to see what may be in the path before us. This article will seek to sketch that future.

However, before we get to tomorrow, we need to deal with today. What did I project would happen twenty years ago? What was my theological rationale? How accurately did my analysis align with recent developments? What relevance would that have for today’s theological perspective?

My first task in Section One of this article will be to unpack what I wrote in 1998. I will set out my major points and examine them in relation to contemporary issues.

My second task will be to articulate where I believe we are now. Section Two will trace the impact of the last twenty years on contemporary Native American theology.

Section Three will chart where we may be going twenty years into the future. I will look ahead to the year 2040, to determine where developments may take Native American theology in that generation.

I dedicate this article to my colleague and friend, A nakfi (my brother), Dr. Gordon Straw.

Section One: Where We Were

To place my theological positions in context, let me begin by sharing something I wrote in the original chapter that would still hold true for today:

I am not a politician or prophet. I am speaking here only of the fundamental context to which Native American theologians are going to have to respond in the next generation. My thesis is that this context will cease to be the relatively benign atmosphere we have known in the last few years of this century; if things continue to emerge along the channels already charted by economic policies among international capitalist nations, and, if the present rates of consumption within those nations also continue as they have at current levels, then the bottom line for the poor of the world will be reached by the middle of the next century. This is not a difficult equation to factor. It is, sadly, common sense and simple experience.³

When I wrote these words in 1998 the “fairly benign” climate for Native American theology was a confluence of several inter-related factors. The American economy was strong. Tribal sovereignty was creating economic and technological options for Native American nations. The popular image of Native Americans was centered in positive associations with spirituality.

However, a common sense look at the foundational issue just beneath the surface of this otherwise hopeful scenario revealed some trajectories of change that would be major concerns for the future. Essentially, I argued that two channels were flowing beneath the positive economic outlook twenty years ago: (1) the rise of international capitalism as a new form of economic colonialism, and, (2) the contrasting decline of natural resources sufficient to sustain this economic model.

Both of these trajectories have their points of origin in the same soil: colonialism. My chapter took pains to outline the psychological aftermath of Western-style economic colonization. That is an

1. Jace Weaver, *Native American Religious Identity: Unforgotten Gods* (New York: Orbis Books, 1998).

2. *Ibid.*, 155.

3. *Ibid.*, 162.

important factor to keep in mind when projecting any culture into the future. In the theological context of Native America, that psychology is shaped by the experience of having one value system, or as Howard Clark Kee would call it, one *symbol system*,⁴ forced on top of another. Assimilation is the polite word for what is, in effect, social engineering and psychological reprogramming. That level of cultural dislocation creates social havoc, but it also imprints a dual intellectual citizenship on any person who endures it. Therefore, the older, original system does not disappear. It is not culturally forgotten, but remains within the oppressed community as a living alternative.

My analysis twenty years ago suggested that it was exactly this ability of Native Americans to retain our spiritual memory that had been largely responsible for sustaining our culture. Native American religious tradition has proven to be the bulwark against cultural assimilation. It has been the ark that has carried us safely through centuries of conflict between the symbol systems of colonialism and of our ancestors.

In fact, this “translation code” for our culture, spirituality, has been so successful for us that we came to a point in 1998 (and are still there today) where we have to guard against our symbols being taken and misappropriated by zealous seekers from other cultures. The popularity of Native American spirituality, in all of its aspects, is a testimony to how well Native Americans could articulate a clear and persuasive spiritual alternative to the value system of the dominant culture. People born into that dominant context sought escape from it by seeking adoption into indigenous spirituality. Native American traditional religion continues to be a target for what Michael Harrington once called “the chic primitivism of a bored affluence.”⁵

Fighting off the advances of culturally amorous suitors, however, was not the biggest of our problems as I saw them twenty years ago. Much more critical to us was the fact that colonialism was stirring beneath the guise of globalization at the same time the planet was running out of resources. “While I do not pretend to be an expert in the field of the social sciences,” I wrote, “I believe there are clear indicators that Western-style colonialism will reappear in the next century far beyond the limits it has already manifested in communities of poverty around the world... What we once considered only Western European colonialism has become international technological consumerism. We are continuing to evolve into a global culture of consumers, a new elite of the international class of wealth and privilege, over against those millions of others who support this habit through their own poverty and hard labor.”⁶

In 1998 I saw the potential flashpoint of a new colonialism grasping for what was left of Native American resources. I pointed out that about 80% of uranium, 10% of all oil and gas reserves,

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and 30% of coal is on land controlled by Native American nations. In addition, many tribes have rights over water resources that are increasingly needed for urban development. Finally, approximately ninety tribes have land that is still heavily forested while millions of acres of “Indian land” are leased for food production. Basically, in keeping with our past experience of colonialism, what we had would be what colonialism would want. It would be a case of exploitation *déjà vu*:

This resurgent colonialism can be charted through a few bell-weather signs: (1) “the diminished role of a democratic electorate in the United States,” (2) “the special interests and lobbies... as the power behind the throne of Western states,” (3) “the demarcation line between the poor and the affluent,” (4) “the quick draw use of American military power,” and finally, (5) “the basic mathematics of global debt and national deficit... the tectonic plates beneath the superstructure of global capitalism.”⁷

My argument twenty years ago was that in the face of this resurgent colonialism Native America needed more than its theological vocabulary of spirituality. We needed to speak with a new voice, one that articulated our economic values in direct contrast to global consumerism. Moreover, we needed to do this quickly because there was an urgency to answer a single question: “What will happen when Western societies begin to become desperate for more resources to continue maintaining their affluence over against the needs of the rest of the world?”⁸

In light of that question, Native theologians needed to advance the economic alternative embodied in traditional Native American culture: “The fundamental economic theory that runs as an unbroken thread throughout Native tradition is symbolized in the term *commonality*.”⁹ Commonality as the traditional Native American economic paradigm was built on a series of inter-related social constructs:

- The foundational understanding that land may not be owned
- The communal use of land and the means of production

4. Howard Clark Kee, *Who Are The People of God?: Early Christian Models of Community* (New Haven: Yale Press, 1995), 11.

5. Michael Harrington, *The Politics at God's Funeral: The Spiritual Crisis of Western Civilization* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Wilson, 1983), 149.

6. Weaver, *Native American Religious Identity*, 160.

7. *Ibid.*, 161.

8. *Ibid.*, 162.

9. *Ibid.*, 165.

- The equitable distribution of goods based on need
- The use of kinship modalities rather than class structures
- The exercise of consensus in governance
- The embodiment of community through individuality rather than individualism

Taken all together, these ancient threads of economic and social organization stood in sharp contrast to consumerism and capitalism:

We will not succeed in offering people a way into community against capitalist colonialism unless we succeed in offering them a genuine *alternative*. That alternative is the Tribe. It is precisely the ancient models of state and society, of economics and production, of giving and receiving that were the hallmarks of Native civilization. In other words, we have something to offer people other than just our spirituality... Speaking of these alternatives means speaking in the harder language of economics. It means speaking in ways that will sound like Marxism.¹⁰

Section Two: Where We Are

Looking back, what did I get “right” in my analysis twenty years ago? I put that word “right” in quotes because I want to emphasize that my intentions, both then and now, are not to predict outcomes but to chart trajectories. In 1998 I saw a pressing need for Native American theologians to begin speaking in economic terms as much as spiritual terms. We needed to blend the two, showing how our economic paradigm has theological relevance to the rising tides of consumerism.

In making this call for a clearer presentation of our economic theory I believe my results were less than successful. I will leave it for others to determine how widespread talk about a Native American economic theory is today, and how much it has impacted contemporary theology, but my own reading tells me that this aspect of indigenous culture has remained fairly conspicuous by its absence. So, in my own judgment, no, I was not able to stir up a plethora of academic articles by Native American authors on the subject of what I named *commonality*.

However, in other instances my anticipation of trajectories was “right.” For example, my analysis of the impact of rising colonialism on the body politic was on target. Today we do experience “the diminished role of a democratic electorate in the United States.” We are worried about whether or not our votes really count anymore. We believe that “the special interests and lobbies” are the power behind the throne of Western states. The National Rifle Association comes to mind. We see “the demarcation line between the poor and the affluent” grow ever further apart as economic fault lines divide our communities. We understand “the quick draw use of American military power” and see its results played out over and over. And at least some of us still cry like a

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voice in the economic wilderness about “the basic mathematics of global debt and national deficit...the tectonic plates beneath the superstructure of global capitalism.”

Another point I got “right” was my concern twenty years ago that the natural resources remaining on “Indian land” would become a clear flashpoint for the colonial relationship between the United States and Native American nations. The prolonged resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016 and 2017 made international news and underscored the essential conflict between the Native American traditional spiritual paradigm and that of business as usual in the capitalist economy of the United States. This single conflict brought to light how historic colonialism had not been able to overlay European values or Western economic theory onto Native American culture. It illustrated how the core values of indigenous cultures were still intact and capable of resurrecting themselves in a dramatic fashion when tested by a threat to their survival.

In 1998 I wrote, “The economic truth is that most poor nations wait for the other shoe to drop as Western-style capitalist societies continue to absorb the planet at an alarming rate.”¹¹ The Dakota Access Pipeline was one of those shoes. It showed that when the need for diminishing resources is felt in consumer cultures, those cultures will act to preserve their addictions and do so violently. The basis for my original chapter was accurate in this surmised. I continue to believe that the small indigenous nations of America have much to fear when it comes to the appetite of the dominant culture in the hemisphere. The standoff between Native American activists and the oil companies that support the Federal government was a visual aide to what I described twenty years ago being acted out in contemporary reality.

Finally, I think I was “right” about the trajectory of Marxism

10. Ibid., 169.

11. Ibid., 168

as being the context for future discussions of a Native American theology. In fact, this is the most surprising “right” thing I may have suggested back then because in the timeline when I wrote my chapter many scholars believed Marxism was dead. It seemed like an odd thing to do as a Native American theologian to tie my cultural wagon to a falling star like Marxism or socialism.

At the same time I was writing my chapter on the economic theory of Native America, Jim Wallis at *Sojourners* magazine was saying that “socialism is a dead word,” and “if we care about radical Christian transformational politics—Gospel rooted vision that puts the poor, community, and women’s rights at the center—then I want to shed the old Left, socialist tags.”¹² In 1998 I seemed to be out of step with most of my colleagues in theology. But today, that has changed.

In his State of the Union address in 2019 President Donald Trump felt it important to declare in the halls of Congress that “America will never be a socialist country.”¹³ Why would he need to do that if socialism had died twenty years earlier? Part of the answer may be in a *Washington Post* article of February 10, 2019, where it said, “Open advocacy of socialism is now a normal part of our political discourse. Ocasio-Cortez is a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, and Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) won more than 12 million votes in the 2016 Democratic presidential primaries running explicitly as a democratic socialist.”¹⁴ In May, 2019, the Brookings Institution reported that “The generational effect is dramatic. A 2018 YouGov survey found that 35 percent of young adults under 30 were very or somewhat favorably inclined toward socialism.”¹⁵

Times have changed. The reports of the demise of socialism were premature. And while it is far beyond the scope of this article to define and clarify all of the layers of meaning for a word such as “socialism” or “Marxism,” I believe the trajectories are apparent enough to claim that what I hoped would be the fertile ground for a Native American theology of economics has, in fact, become even more fertile. Concepts that we would describe as being socialist are now not only widely accepted, but growing in their emphasis as our global environment continues to deteriorate. Native American “commonality” suddenly seems much more in step with the times.

Section Three: Where We Are Going

In 1998 I wrote: “The sophistication of Native commonality has allowed it to survive five hundred years of colonialism. Our vision is at once deeply spiritual and utterly pragmatic. In short, Native People can take the lead in articulating a new theological vision of economic justice that can translate older and more limited European ideas into the next century. We can speak in a language that all of the world’s poor can understand. We can transcend the labels

12. Ibid., 167.

13. E.J. Dionne Jr., “Trump’s War On Socialism Will Fail,” *The Washington Post*, 2/10/2019.

14. Ibid.

15. E.J. Dionne Jr., “Socialism: A Short Primer,” *The Brookings Institution*, May 13, 2019.

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of Marxism and socialism by developing a truly indigenous economic theory to support the spiritual vision already so powerfully associated with our culture. In fact...a Native People’s theology can prepare the way for a renewed movement of liberation-style theologies...which can become the counteractive force against colonialism in the coming years.”¹⁶

I still believe that today, although my hopes that it would occur in the last twenty years were wrong. The arc of history moves more slowly than I would like, but it does move, and that arc is taking us even deeper into the need to advance the “other half” of Native American thought (i.e., not only our spirituality but our foundational economic theology).

Over the last twenty years the essential need for this kind of economic alternative has only grown more acute. The end of a more “benign” period in resurgent colonialism has long since passed. The rise of conflict between Native American nations and energy corporations escalates. The political turmoil intensifies. What we saw with the Dakota pipeline is the canary in the mine.

Why?

Because over the last twenty years and projecting into the next twenty years one fundamental equation remains constant: as a colonial-based economic system that feeds the affluent and starves the poor grows ever more hungry for natural resources, those resources continue to dwindle at an alarming rate. While the timeline I projected may have been off, the destination I envisioned has only come closer. In effect, by the year 2040, time will run out.

In 2018 the National Resources Defense Council published this stark assessment on our future:

Earlier this week, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued a chilling report that has sent most people (with the notable exception of the current president of the United States) into a deep funk. In it, some 90 climate scientists from 40 countries conclude that if humans don’t take immediate, collective action to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius by 2040, the consequences will effectively be baked

16. Weaver, *Native American Religious Identity*, 171.

into the natural systems of the planet. With so much heat-trapping carbon in the atmosphere, there will be, in effect, no turning back. The extreme droughts, devastating wildfires, massive floods, deadly hurricanes, and widespread famines that we're seeing more and more of these days will cease to be statistical anomalies and instead be more like seasonal markers, as regular as the changing of the leaves.¹⁷

In a scenario such as this, the desperation of affluent elites to protect and maintain their economic privileges will only grow more virulent. Consumer addiction will finally encounter the reality that the supply is running out. When that occurs, those impacted will do what any addict will do: they will try to steal what they need. This is the classic definition of colonialism.

My argument is simple. As one of the cultures most familiar with the nature and strategies of colonialism, Native American theologians ought to be in the vanguard fighting against it. We should be speaking not only of the spirituality that defends Mother Earth, but of the economic tradition we embody that provides an alternative to it. We must do both at the same time, because if we do not, we will only be the Cassandra culture on the sidelines bemoaning what is to come, but not offering people an option to prevent the impending disaster.

Doing so means taking several inter-related steps and taking them quickly:

First, as Native American nations, we must reclaim our heritage. Not only part of our heritage, spirituality, but all of our heritage, commonality. To do that will be much more difficult for us than it may seem at first. For one thing, it will mean confronting our own "land of the lotus eaters" infatuation with casinos. As a poor and oppressed minority, we found our golden ticket twenty years ago with legalized gambling. The financial benefits have been pivotal for us and the ongoing development of these infrastructures illustrates our dependence on them into the future. However, we cannot ignore the seduction of imagined wealth, which is the cornerstone of colonialism.

Are we, as Native nations, adopting what I called in my original article the "symbol systems" of Western-style colonialism? Are we mutating into an alien economic theory, and by so doing, aiding and abetting the very forces that are working against us environmentally? We cannot have it both ways (i.e., we cannot say that we are deeply concerned about the fate of Mother Earth while walking hand in hand with the very economics that are destroying the planet). In these next twenty years we must come to terms with this theological inconsistency and come to grips with it quickly.

Jesus once said that before we look for the speck in someone else's eye we need to remove the log from our own eye. In our context, over the coming two decades, this will mean looking at our financial future through the vision of our ancestors. In what

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ways are we using their values to manage our recent economic advantages? How are we creating models of sustainability? How is what we have been earning finding its way into the hands of the poor or into the fight for environmental and economic justice? Are we practicing what we preach, or just taking the money and running? These are hard questions for any culture to face, but they are the essential questions if we are to retain our cultural integrity in the fullest sense of the word.

Secondly, as Native nations, we must actively participate in rapidly developing new economic alliances. Standing alone, no matter how flush we may feel from any income stream, we need to realize that that stream can be cut off in a matter of moments. Economically speaking, our casinos are built on sand. If we are to continue to prosper over the next twenty years, not just economically but spiritually, we need to build common ground with other communities that can share our long-term goals.

Consequently, if saving the planet is one of those goals, we must ally ourselves with others who see the dangers of resurgent colonialism and the benefits of an equitable economy. The rebirth of socialism is good news for us because it means that younger generations in America are starting to speak our language. They may call it "socialism" while we think of it as our "tradition"; there may be careful adjustments to how we integrate these two symbol systems; the final consensus on a truly sustainable vision may require compromise on all sides; but the bottom line is a hopeful one: for the first time in the last twenty years we have other people of many cultures who may be willing to stand with us for substantive change.

The model of economic addiction under which we now live will break down by the year 2040. It will either be on the hard road to recovery, or, it will be in the full throes of terminal withdrawal. The choice is ours to make.

As Native people, we must make this choice for ourselves by being careful that our casinos do not become addictive. We must intentionally lift up our ancient economic practices just as clearly as we elevate our spiritual traditions. We must then choose to

17. Jeff Turrentine, *Climate Scientists to World: We Have Only 20 Years Before There's No Turning Back*, National Resources Defense Council (NRDC), October 12, 2018.

use those principles to craft a new economic vision, not only for ourselves, but for and with people from all walks of life who share our concern for the planet and for justice.

Over the next twenty years we will have a historically critical confrontation with the old hydra of global colonialism. We will not be able to defeat it alone. We will need many partners from many cultures willing to work together across religious and political borders. We will need the youth for whom socialism is not a bad word. We will need common sense and courage, and most of all, we will need faith. And we will need all of these things as soon as we can get them.

Twenty years ago I wrote of what I called a Second Reformation, “a global community effort to preserve human freedom and natural life.”¹⁸ Today, like so many people of faith through the generations, I am still waiting for that vision to appear on the horizon. Like the theologies of the reign of God I want to be able to see it now and also see it coming into being all around me. My waiting, however, is far from passive. Since I believe in this vision, I try to make it real. I try to live into it. Twenty years ago I did that by writing about the flip side to the coin of Native culture: not only our spirituality, but our economics. If peace and justice is the dream, then economics is the way to turn that dream into reality.

The clock is ticking. If the scientists are correct, we have less than twenty years to start a revolution. Not a Marxist revolution. Not a socialist revolution. But a spiritual revolution. A united front of people from all faith traditions who are willing to embrace a new economic paradigm for the sake of life on this planet. And in the vanguard of that great change must come those of us from our ancient indigenous perspective whose ancestors once lived the dream we seek to restore. An equitable distribution of resources. A sustainable model of life. A commonality based on the spiritual

18. Weaver, *Native American Religious Identity*, 167.

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principle that it is not as important to have more as it is to have enough. Enough for everyone. Enough for Mother Earth to thrive.

Will the vision I projected twenty years ago come to fruition twenty years from now? Is there time to create a revolution of hope, to change history and save the planet? As I said, I am not a politician or a prophet, so I can only give my own answer: for five hundred years my ancestors survived everything rapacious and racist colonialism could throw at them. My people are made of sterner stuff than casinos and cultural centers. When the chips were down and every second counted, they found a way to fight back, to improvise, to share, and to stay alive. I know only too well how challenging these next twenty years will be, but I also know that if any people can confront it, my people can. And not alone, but with allies from every walk of faith. Together we can create a new system, a new economy, and call it by any name we want, so long as it honors the Earth and feeds the people. Yes, we can do that. And with God's help, we will.