

# Native Spirituality

## The making of a new religion

*Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson*

Using historical data coupled with personal experience this article makes the case that native or aboriginal spirituality has been evolving into a religion similar to those of the Judeo-Christian tradition with one surprising distinction: the concept of sin has been replaced by the concept of historical trauma. Health is promised those who follow prescribed beliefs and practices. The author concludes with an appeal for a more traditional aboriginal spirituality where beliefs are not held religiously and evidence based discussion is possible.

### **C**ultural Evolution

The elder officiating the aboriginal sweat lodge ceremony explained we were entering the womb of mother earth and wearing anything man made would be an affront to our mother, hence our nakedness. Women did not need this ceremony in the late 1960s because they were cleansed during their menstrual cycle. The sweats of my youth were not considered religious. Anyone could participate regardless of their belief system which, for me, included interconnectedness to community.

About 15 years later, on a reserve in north-western Saskatchewan, we were offered the choice of two such “sweats:” male only and mixed. The Cree hosts explained that the mixed sweat came from the Blackfoot, and they were honoring both traditions. The dress code had changed to ensure modesty although one still had

to remove jewelry, eye-glasses and watches. After the millennium I had the opportunity to ask a Blackfoot elder about the origin of the mix sweat, which had now come to predominate in all but the

Saulteaux (Plains Ojibwe) bands. He told me it had never been part his tradition; it had “come from the south somewhere.” He said modern women, as wage earners, need cleansing.

Everything evolves. By demonstrating a mechanism whereby the complex could evolve from the simple, Darwin removed the argument used by religionists that a creator-god was existentially necessary on logical grounds. With cultural evolution no founder is necessary to create religions. For example, confounding those who believe Christ founded Christianity, there was a Christian community in existence before his putative birth and the four gospels outlining his life were written a generation after his putative death by people who never met the

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The willow frame  
for a sweat lodge in  
Canada's boreal forest  
near Lake Superior.

*(Photo by D. Gordon E.  
Robertson. Wikimedia  
Commons)*

man (Baigent, 2006; Doherty, 1999). Evidently, at some point near the beginning of the second century, a community of believers realized they had a new religion and retrospectively created a beginning by ascribing divine paternity to a dead rabbi of a Jewish sect that had been seeking a messiah to end the Roman occupation of their homeland. Similarly, the Mohamedanism of Islam had murky beginnings evolving out of Hagarian Judaism with its beginnings defined retrospectively after the establishment of the Arabian Empire (Spencer, 2012).

Evolving religions borrow freely from earlier sources. For example, the Beatitudes in Christianity are direct copies of Buddhist writings and the notion of Satan came from the Zoroastrian god Ahriman. If we trace religious precepts back in time, we eventually come to pre-historic hunters and gatherers who developed ways of living and understanding that included notions of supernatural agency. In filling a very human need to answer the question "why" such people often attributed agency to lakes, mountains and whole species. If everyone "knows" that a person needs to make a sacrifice to the sentient spirit of a lake

to ensure a safe journey across, then one makes the sacrifice. Such beliefs are not religiously held if held tentatively subject to new evidence should such evidence arise.

Religious belief begins when a source is considered authoritatively omnipotent. For example, a Saulteaux elder expressed the concern during a workshop we co-facilitated that "white" schools teach his grandchildren Earth goes around the sun, but his elders taught him the reverse. In choosing to believe that the remembered word of people now dead trumps current evidence, the elder was giving evidence of a religiously held belief. It was not always thus.

While I was on the staff of the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College a Dakota elder used to say "Dem Crees, we taught them everything they know." This provocative assertion has a historical basis - the Cree, on entering the Great Plains during the 18th century, adopted many of the cultural practices of the Sioux such as powwows, sun dances, horse dances and the heyoka. It would be incorrect to say that the Plains Cree converted to the religion of the Sioux. It would be more correct to say that those Cree who entered the plains

chose practices that seemed to have worked for the peoples already present. Truth was context specific and correct action was divined through human observation and reason. George Catlin, a U.S. American artist who partnered with a Cree woman at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, described these pragmatists as a nation of atheists.

### **Mutations to Aboriginal Spirituality**

“I saw the Holy Ghost sitting at my bed... He was dressed in high class white man’s clothes.”

– Cree Chief Piapot to a Christian missionary, 1871

The Cree and other peoples aboriginal to North America were not atheists.

They exhibited a presumption of supernatural forces that anthropologists have termed “folk religion.” Such belief facilitates conversion to an organized and codified religion, and most converted to Christianity. But the religions of the colonizers were often agents of oppression, as evidenced by the church administration of Indian Residential Schools (Robertson, 2006). Cognitive dissonance among the converted drives rapid cultural evolution.

Wovoka, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Paiute shaman who was raised by Christian missionaries, taught that by living piously and by performing a type of round dance called “the ghost dance” the Europeans would be vanquished, the buffalo would return to the plains, and the way of life of people aboriginal to North America would be restored. Wovoka performed levitation and bullet stopping tricks to convince onlookers of the power of his magic. As the new religion spread northward his Lakota Sioux disciples came to believe the ghost shirts worn by dancers would stop the bullets of the white men. The massacre

at Wounded Knee in 1890 put an effective end to this belief, but like the Messianic Jews who were

repeatedly disappointed in their search for a Christ who would lead them to military victory over the Romans, the dispossessed and colonized Amerindian people formed a cauldron in which various religious mutations could evolve.

One of these mutations is “mother earth.” In almost all languages aboriginal to North America grammatical gender is between animate and inanimate as opposed to the male and female differentiation common among European languages. “Mother” is animate and is conjugated with one set of rules while “earth” is inanimate and is conjugated

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differently. The two cannot be combined linguistically. It is therefore not surprising that in his examination of Hopi, Navajo and Yaqui legends Gill (1991) found no evidence of an earth mother deity. The earliest known myth common to the Cree, Dene and Ojibwe involves the earth covered by a great sheet of ice which melted leaving an ocean but no land. Two boys floating on a log (another version has a grandfather in a canoe), called on various animals to help and eventually a muskrat was able to dive beneath the waters to retrieve a bit of earth from the bottom. Through the use of song, this earth grew to become the land on which humans live today. In short, animate beings acted on an inanimate earth to create a habitation suitable for survival. The European mythical heritage reflects a different grammar.

In Spanish, as in other Romance languages, Earth (la Tierra), cannot be expressed in any way other than in its feminine form. One of the earliest Greek legends has Gaia (mother earth) mating with Uranus (father sky) to produce the

titans who in turn mated and produced the gods. Gaia eventually helped her grandchild Zeus defeat the titans. So just how did the notion of mother earth become aboriginalized?

Gill traced all published references of an aboriginal mother earth to just two 19<sup>th</sup> century sources. In 1810 the Shawnee chief Tecumseh met with U.S. general W. H. Harrison. Tecumseh subsequently died in the War of 1812. In paying a tribute to his legend eleven years later *The National Recorder* reported that an aide to Harrison had offered Tecumseh a chair with the words, "Your father (the general) offers you a seat" to which the chief was said to have replied, "The sun is my father and the earth is my mother and I will repose upon her bosom" (p. 14). There were no transcripts of these proceedings and no sources were cited, but newspapers at the time were known to embellish their stories to maintain reader interest.

Approximately 70 years later, on the opposite side of the American continent, Wanapum tribal leader Smohalla is reported to have said to U.S. Indian Affairs officials, "You ask me to plough the ground. Should I take a knife and cut my mother's bosom?" (Memoirs of Major J.W. MacMurray as quoted in Gill, 1991 p. 131). Smohalla described the farming practice of haying as disrespectfully cutting mother earth's hair. He described mining as digging into mother earth's body and chipping away at her bones. He was not recounting traditional beliefs but was delivering new teachings divinely given to him during a pilgrimage to a mountain top. Like the Ghost Shirts, Smohalla predicted a day of redemption when people of European descent would be removed from the American continents leaving aboriginal people to resume their pre-ordained way of life. At that time the

spirits of the deceased who were true to their aboriginal ways would return to their bodies in a great resurrection.

It is probably no accident that the grafting of earth to mother happened first among an Amerindian people from the Sahaptin language group, one of the few languages lacking grammatical gender. A Gaia-like creation story accompanied these new teachings involving a male creator-god uniting with mother earth to give birth to humans, but the record of Smohalla's views prior to his mountain top conversion offered a quite different view:

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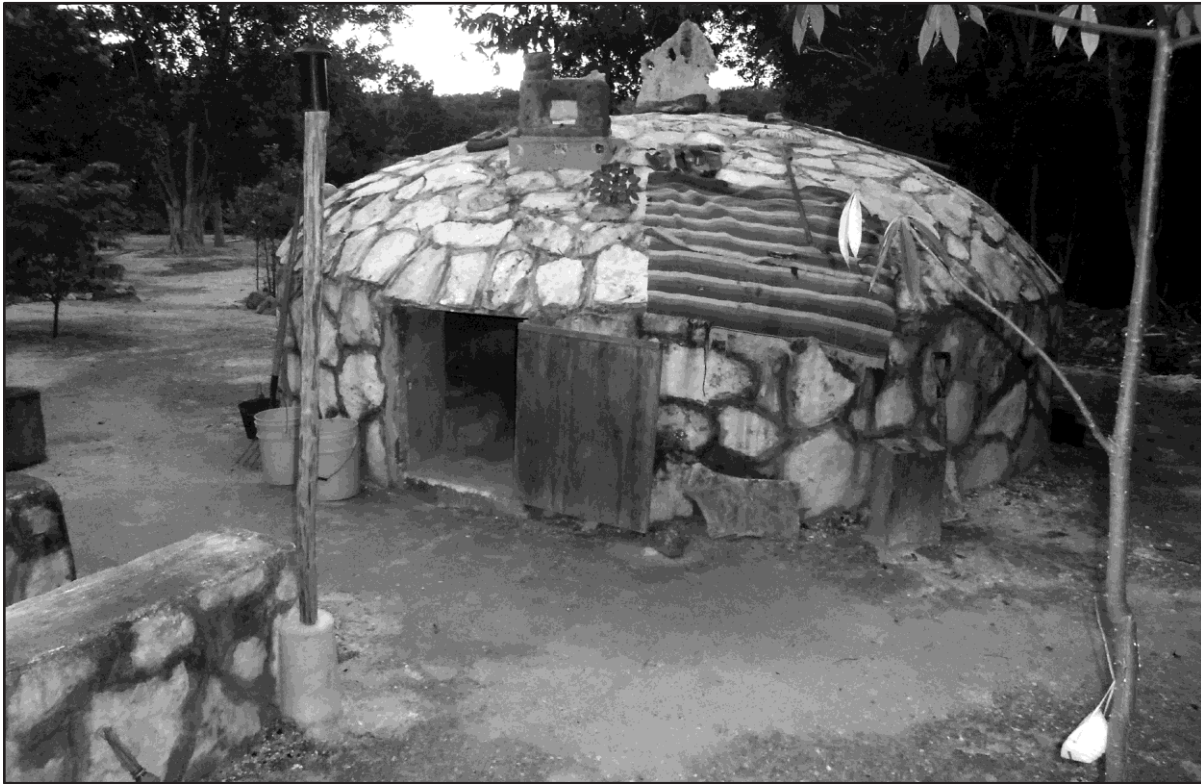
It is good for man and woman to be together on the earth.... We do not know

how the earth was made, nor do we say who made it. The earth was peopled and their hearts are good, and my mind is that it is as it ought to be. The world was peopled by whites and Indians and they should all grow as one flesh. (Bell, 2011)

One Ojibwe creation story that may be traditional involves four lesser creator-gods who were in communication with a Great Spirit. Creation stories in an oral tradition are often difficult to authenticate, and it is possible that this creation story was influenced in some ways by European contact. The story as presented, however, sheds light on a worldview where it would have been quite presumptuous for a human to pray directly to the Great Spirit. The modern "Great Spirit" has evolved into a more Jehovah-like "Creator" who receives prayers directly, often at the commencement of meals. Such a creator can be used to establish racial primacy.

In 2005 philosopher Chris Di Carlo developed an anti-racist theme "We are all of African descent," and he presented this theme to a class on critical thinking at Wilfrid Laurier





A Mayan sweat lodge near Tulum, Mexico. The floor, benches and interior walls are concrete. (Photo by the author.)

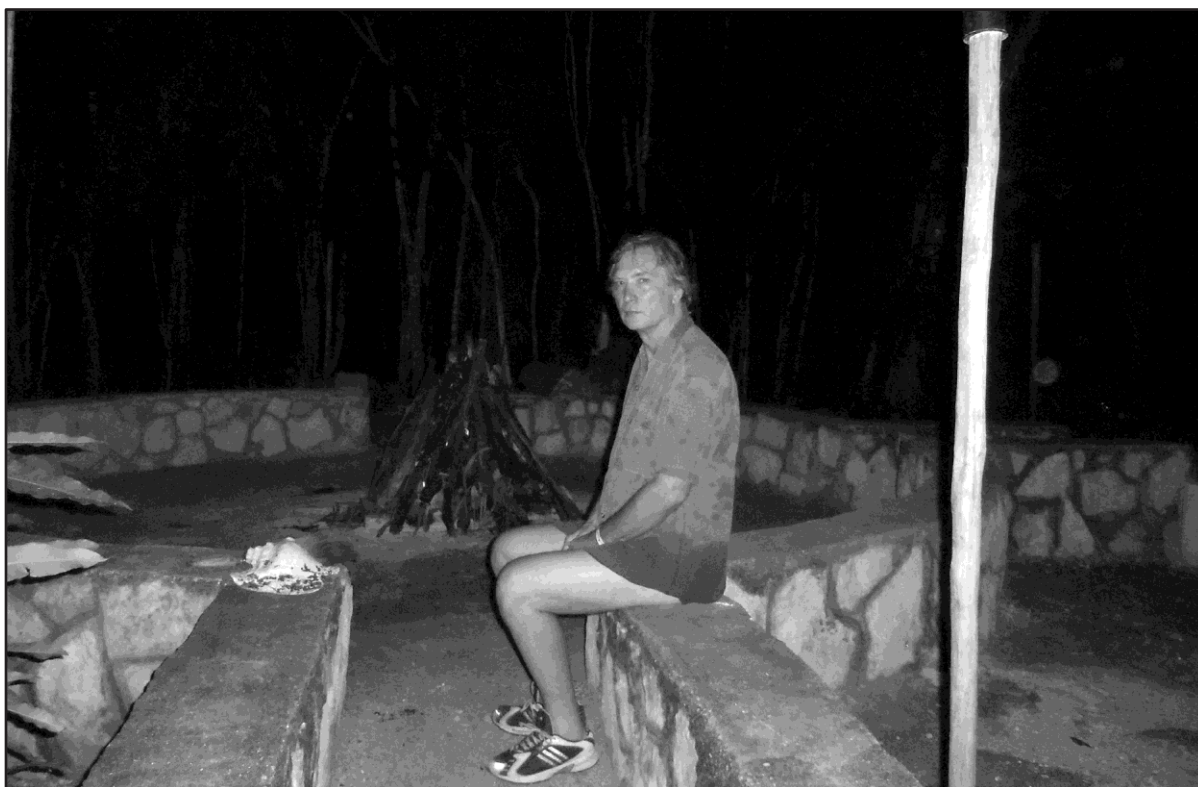
University. His view of a common human descent from African origins is not controversial in scientific circles and is, in fact, in accord with the teachings of many traditional aboriginal elders who say that we are all related. None-the-less, one of Di Carlo's students presented the view that "the Creator" placed aboriginal people on the American continents. The woman refused an invitation to organize a class debate on the issue and, with two other students, left complaining to the university administration about Di Carlo's "religious insensitivity." Di Carlo was subsequently denied a full time position, and he moved on to another university.

If a creator-god placed people of a particular racial ancestry on a specific continent then all other inhabitants of that continent are forever interlopers. The dream of Smohalla and Wovoka that a messiah would rid the American continents of Europeans was, like the early Jewish messiah, discarded, but it evolved into a smoldering sense of entitlement that cannot be debated.

### **Pan-Indian Spirituality**

My daughter and I attended a powwow on the Kahnawake reserve near Montreal in 2002. With the exception of one dance that was traditional Mohawk, the drum songs and dances were all native to the northern plains. A couple of years later we attended a family reunion on the Ashcroft reserve in western British Columbia. The drum songs at the honor feast were plains culture except for one traditional Salishan hand drum number. The export of plains culture goes beyond songs and dances. In his study of two bands in Nova Scotia, Poliandri (2011) noted that what is understood as Mi'kmaq spirituality as practiced by traditionalists often involves the beliefs and ceremonies of the Sioux and Blackfoot.

Although the Plains Cree adopted the practices of the Sioux more than two centuries ago, their brethren who stayed in the woodlands did not. In 1851 some of these "Bush Cree" came to a newly established Anglican mission and formed the community of Stanley Mission in what became northern Saskatchewan. The community



The author sitting in front of a wood pyre heating rocks for a Mayan sweat lodge ceremony near Tulum, Mexico. (Photo by Millie Goulet.)

eventually amalgamated with the Lac La Ronge Band. During the 1990s, the band's health department, headquartered 80 kilometers distant, conducted workshops and sponsored cultural gatherings promoting Native Spirituality. The local elder support worker was threatened with disciplinary action for failing to promote Native Spirituality with sufficient vigor. The community elders said they recognized that historically their people had not always been Christian, but many of the practices promoted by the "traditionalists," including powwows and sun dances, had never been part of the Woodland Cree culture. The efforts convert them to Native Spirituality were felt to be oppressive.

The new traditionalists do not view their efforts as proselytizing but healing. Brave Heart (2003), a Lakota Sioux, popularized the notion that all Amerindian peoples suffer from historic trauma as a result of European colonization. Using audiovisual materials and role play, she "awakens" memories of genocide so that individuals can "relive" experiences that hap-

pened before their births. She explained, "This is done in order to provide opportunities for cognitive integration of the trauma as well as the affective cathartic working-through necessary for healing" (p. 11). The healing was accomplished through prayer, smudging, pipe ceremonies, sweat lodge ceremonies and medicine wheel teachings. The approach has been endorsed in Canada by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation ("A.H.F.", 2006) and used by various government departments. One participant in a workshop on Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition did not perceive the approach as healing:

Our provincial Department of Higher Education and Manpower has no more business teaching Native Spirituality – with the intent of conversion – than it has teaching Tibetan Buddhism.... Imagine what towering indignation would have been engendered had (the PLAR instructor) been a Catholic and she had asked us to burn incense, to partake in Holy Sacraments, to confess our sins,

and tied problem-solving to the four points of the Cross. (Robertson, 2011a, pp. 99-100)

Smudging, often used in a cleansing ceremony, may be compared to the burning of incense. The pipe ceremony, with prayers thought to waft upwards with the rising tobacco smoke, may be thought of as like holy sacraments. The presumption that all participants suffer from trauma and that they need to share their trauma in a group setting may feel like the public confession of sin with the concomitant notion that one can only be healthy (receive salvation) if one accepts the prescribed worldview. The use of a specific medicine wheel to which one's life needs to be ordered may sound similar to tying problem solving to the four points of a Catholic cross. The difference between aboriginal or native spirituality and a religion of Native Spirituality may be understood by reflecting on this medicine wheel.

Only a small minority of the 343 ancient stone medicine wheels uncovered on the Great Plains are divided into four with spokes emanating from a central hub. Some are not divided at all, others are divided using right angles instead of spokes, but the majority are divided in more ways than four, and one, situated in the Bow Valley of southern Alberta is divided 26 times. Using the notion that medicine wheels can be used to represent holistic diversity, I have had native studies students represent themselves within the contexts of their individualized experiences and values. To suggest there is one medicine wheel with primacy that is divided into quadrants representing physical, emotional, mental and spiritual selves is dogmatically restrictive of other conceptualizations.

### Religion and Identity

I have had students tell me they learned to be aboriginal by attending university. I want to tell them that it is likely their home communities

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never had aspects of culture taught at university, and in any case their traditional beliefs and practices were not held religiously, that is for all time and place. But like the Jews who were one of the most secular people on the plan-

et before the holocaust or the Palestinians who were the most secular of Arabs before the occupation, the religification of aboriginality was probably inevitable following the conquest and colonization of America.

A standardized set of beliefs and practices held to be sacred serves to unite and comfort a people who feel themselves to be oppressed and who otherwise might feel that resistance to assimilation is futile. Such religious identification may give one a sense of a higher purpose in preserving that which might be lost forever. Finally, it provides markers of aboriginality for individuals who may otherwise not feel distinctive or connected (Robertson, 2011b).

A form of identity construction based on religiously held values is restrictive. An elder once told me that if one has some aboriginal genetic ancestry one can choose to be "Indian" or "white," but not both. Although some "new age" believers have embraced their own romanticized understanding of Native Spirituality (and some have become pipe carriers), the new religion is, like Judaism, racial specific. Such a worldview increases feelings of isolation toward the majority population with concomitant feelings of hostility when assumptions with respect to worldview are not shared. As Di Carlo discovered, such religious thinking creates a distrust of knowledge and learning with the discussion of some topics proscribed. Education may even be seen as "white" with resultant high dropout rates and a distrust of "western" science. But there is an older aboriginal spirituality.

"All my relations" is a phrase used by many elders to denote the unity of all living things. The evidence in support of evolution is in accord with such a worldview. If all life evolved from increasingly distant but common ancestry,

then our approach to life on this planet and the resources upon which such life depends must be modified to accept such unity and interdependence. If we understand there is only one race, the human race, then in the celebration of our oneness we can accept best practices based on available evidence regardless of source. Naturally there will be diversity of opinion, but in the spirit of “all my relations” we can enter into growthful discussion and debate. Such a non-religious spirituality may guide the building of an increasingly interdependent human civilization. •

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