

An American Indian Theological Response to Ecojustice

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By now readers of this volume should be relatively aware of the extent to which modern ecological devastation has put the lives and well-being of American Indian peoples at risk. Indeed the bulk of this volume has used particular cases studies from illustrative Indian communities in order to demonstrate the range and intensity of ecojustice concerns among Indian people in general: land, water, mining, toxic waste deposit sites, and the like. It is ironical that those who have the deepest cultural connection to American soil would be among those most deeply affected by the modern, technological devastation of the land.¹ Yet it is the painful truth that ecological devastation, while it eventually affects the well-being of everyone, initially and most particularly affects American Indians and people of color on this continent and two-thirds-world people in general more directly and adversely than it affects White Americans, especially those of the middle and upper classes.² As Ward Churchill implies, genocide seems all too often to accompany ecocide.³

There are those in the world today who regularly espouse an environmental consciousness predicated on American Indian belief systems, summoning images of a simpler existence with a built-in concern for the whole of creation. This common notion that American Indian peoples and other indigenous peoples have some spiritual and mystical insight on environmental issues confronting the world today is usually an instinctive if unstudied recognition of the differentness of those cultures. It thus tends to be a relatively intuitive truth-claim based on little research and an overabundance of romanticization. Even those who have had the opportunity to witness the poverty of our poorest reservations, evidenced by the rusting hulks of worn-out automobiles parked in various states of abandonment around reservation homes,

continue to recite their own facile version of Native concern for the environment.

On the other hand, there are others who have a more openly racist concern for protecting the privilege of White power and discourse in North America and who find ways to use their position and prestige to deprecate American Indian environmental consciousness. Sometimes this perspective is packaged in the clothing of modern academic research, typically by White scholars who use "Native American Studies," as Gerald Vizenor would remind us, as a "trope to power."⁴ Namely, many White scholars who specialize in Native American studies feel so threatened by the emergence of Native scholars that they have used their academic positions and their manipulation of the discourse more to empower themselves than in the quest for truth. Other commentators in the largely White liberal ecology movement, as Jace Weaver has already noted in the Introduction to this volume, seem to have their own racist power agenda.⁵ Namely, there seems to be a lingering self-defense (or defensiveness) among many in the more reactionary environmentalist set, like *Earth First!*, that other peoples have also abused the natural world—they just lacked the resources and technology to do it as exhaustively as Europeans and Americans have done.⁶

The truth of the Native world is far more complex and sophisticated than either of these sides would allow. This essay is, then, an attempt to begin a process of theological reflection that must finally be inclusive of many more voices than that of this author alone. The immediate need is to begin to delineate some of the complexity and sophistication of Indian beliefs in general, while paying attention to the specifics of different tribes along the way.

What follows is one Indian scholar's attempt to reflect theologically on the relationship between American Indian peoples and what Western theologians would call creation and the contemporary ecological devastation of that creation. The occasion for this essay, obviously enough given the context of this book, is the continuing program of the World Council of Churches' program unit called Justice, Peace, Creation (JPC) and the particular case study designed by the JPC unit around the topic "Creation as Beloved of God." It was around this assigned topic that we assembled nearly two dozen Indian persons from nearly as many tribal traditions for conversation in March 1995.

I want to move beyond the mere reporting on how ecojustice issues uniquely affect the indigenous peoples of the Western hemisphere. Rather, I want to suggest that these examples are indicative of a systemic problem that is pervasively political and intellectual. The modern "world system," driven by the economics and politics of domination, functions primarily on the basis of maximizing profits with only minimal regard for environmental concerns. In turn, this world system is sustained intellectually in no small part by the prevailing theologies of

the powerful churches of Europe and North America and the philosophies taught in their universities. If the European and Euro-American churches do not pay particular attention to these philosophical and theological foundations, which underlie modern technology, economics, and international politics, and their resulting contexts of ethno-ecojustice, then the political realities of interethnic and international injustice and ecological devastation have little chance of changing for the better.

"CREATION AS BELOVED OF GOD"

The first step in this theological reflection has to do with language and culture, and with the inappropriateness of typical Euro-Christian cultural language for referencing American Indian cultural realities. Three words in the assigned program title will pose problems for Indian peoples linguistically, culturally, and theologically—namely, *creation*, *beloved*, and *God*. If Christianity is to make any legitimate claim to universality, it must struggle to overcome the cultural limitations of its traditional categories of theological analysis in order to better accommodate peoples with radically different cultures and languages. Otherwise, the Christian enterprise is forever condemned to perpetrate imperialist acts of colonization and conquest.

Beloved

"Creation as Beloved of God" is actually very strange language for an American Indian community to consider. Of course, it makes sense in the context of the World Council of Churches, especially given the scriptural tradition that understands God as typified by love in terms of the New Testament Greek word *agape*. But this is a relatively technical linguistic-cultural phenomenon that only works universally for Christianity with careful translation from the Greek and ongoing education. In a cultural world that has been consistently abused by Christianity,⁷ and one that has also struggled to maintain its own cultural and spiritual identity, the technicality of Greek language translation is almost completely irrelevant or even antagonistic. This imposition of meaning is then heightened by the fact that no Indian community I know of refers to God's relationship with creation as characterized by love. Of course, Indian peoples have nouns and verbs to describe emotive-bonding relationships between people, but we do not, as a rule, impute these same human emotive states, like love, to God. God and the spiritual realm can be happy or upset with things that humans do; they even have expectations for our continued participation in maintaining the balance in the world. There is no sense, however, that God

or the spiritual realm has any different regard for human beings than for the rest of creation, and there is certainly no notion of God's relationship with the whole of creation as marked by the human emotion of love.

This is in sharp contrast with Euro-Christianity and its consistent interpretation of its sacred texts. For instance, most commentators on the gospel of John insist that God's love for the world (Jn 3:16: "God so loved the world. . .") must be understood as love for human beings. The Greek word *cosmos*, translated "world," is usually interpreted in this context as referring only to the world of human beings. God's salvific act in Christ Jesus is thought of as efficacious only for human beings, and, hence, God's salvific love for the world must imply logically that the world is here limited only to those who are most privileged in creation and are the proper object of God's affections. The danger of such privileging of human beings should be obvious. It runs the risk of generating human arrogance, which too easily sees the world in terms of hierarchies of existence, all of which are ultimately subservient to the needs and whims of humans.

In any case, the imposition of the word *beloved* functions necessarily to negate or at least to falsify the traditional Indian understanding of God and God's relationship to creation. If we are to insist that *agape* actually refers to "acting in the best interests of another," rather than to the emotion of love, then we need to inquire seriously about the effectiveness of translating the Greek into a language like English and then having to translate the translation before sense can be made of the original. Thus if one wants to affirm that God always "acts in the best interests" of human beings and of the whole of creation, why must we use the emotive word *love* as the only suitable language for articulating the concept, especially when that language usage proves to be foreign to specific cultural communities?

God

God is yet another problem for Indian people except to the extent that we have already been colonized by past missionaries to assume that the word is an adequate gloss for our own naming of the Sacred Other. To begin with, the word *God* is a difficult word in modern theological and philosophical discourse. The givenness of its meaning for European and Euro-Americans has long since given way to a modernist and postmodernist angst that leaves the word without an immediately agreed-upon sense. Much more important in this context, there is a facile assumption that languages are merely codes for one another, and that a simple translation settles all difficulties. Hence, the question too often asked of Indian peoples is: What is the word for God in your language?

Christianity and its sacred texts regularly impute to God attributes that are intrinsically human-like, even if these attributes are seen as somehow more than human in God's case. Hence God is indeed identified not only as having emotions such as love and anger, but God is identified as the personification of love itself. The intense sophistication of Indian tribal spiritualities takes a different tack. Namely, what Christians would refer to as God is understood as a spiritual force that permeates the whole of the world and is manifest in countless ways in the world around us at any given moment and especially in any given place.⁸ *Wakonda*, who is ultimately an unknowable mystery that is only knowable in particular manifestations, makes itself manifest first of all as Above and Below, *Wakonda Monshita* and *Wakonda Udseta*, symbolized as sky and earth, and called upon as Grandfather and Grandmother, he and she. *Wakonda*, which has no inherent or ultimate gender, is knowable only in the necessary reciprocal dualism of male and female. Thus, to assume that the simplistic gloss *God* somehow is adequate to translate and classify *Wakonda* (or *Wakan Tanka*, *Gitchy Manitou*, etc.) into English immediately falsifies the internal, cultural meaning of *Wakonda* for Osage peoples (or Lakota or Ojibwe, in the case of the other examples). As a result of extensive colonization and missionization, Indian people who would never do so in their own language have become perfectly comfortable in referring to God as "he" in English.

Creation

Finally, the word *creation* presents problems insofar as it assumes either the Judeo-Christian creation story or something like it. While every tribe has several creation stories, they simply are not valorized the way the Judeo-Christian accounts are in Christianity. To begin with, the word *creation* is not a common usage in very many tribes, and when it is used it almost always represents a convenient English signifier that has no immediate referent in the speaker's own language. Moreover, when the word is used in a Christian context, it seems to Indian peoples to connote a heavy dose of reification that is completely lacking in any Indian intellectual tradition. That is, in the Euro-American context, creation is objectified as something that is quite apart from human beings and to which humans relate from the outside.

Another pronounced difference between Euro-American and Indian traditions is the usual assumption in the Indian of the pre-existence of the world in some form. Thus most Indian story-telling begins with the givenness of the world of which we are an integral part. Rather, then, than conceiving of an initial creation that was long ago and has little continuing relevance in a world in which only human redemp-

tion is in process, Indian intellectual traditions conceive of the world in constant creative process that requires our continual participation.

If the words *creation* and even *creates* have a distinctly borrowed flavor in an Indian context, there is no easy alternative for articulating *what is*, or *that which we are a part of*. Some sense of what is at stake is apparent in a Lakota phrase that may be illustrative. *Mitakouye oyasin* can be translated as a prayer "for all my relations." As such it is inclusive not only of immediate family or even extended family, but of the whole of a tribe or nation; of all the nations of two-leggeds in the world; and particularly of all the nations other than two-leggeds—the four-leggeds, the wingeds, and the living-moving-things. It is this interrelatedness that best captures what might symbolize for Indian peoples what Euro-Americans would call creation. More to the point, it is this understanding of interrelatedness, of balance and mutual respect among the different species in the world, that characterizes what we might call Indian peoples' greatest gift to Euro-Americans and to the Euro-American understanding of creation at this time of ecological crisis in the world.

HUMAN PRIVILEGE AND COMMUNITIES OF RESPECT

In the biblical creation story and in the ensuing Christian tradition, human beings are significantly privileged over against the rest of creation. Indeed the relationship stipulated at the beginning of the book of Genesis, as it is too commonly interpreted by Euro-American readers, is one of subjection and domination:

And God said to them [the humans], "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Gn 1:28).

In American Indian cultures there is no similar privileging of human beings in the scheme of things in the world. Neither is there any sense in which somehow humans are external to the rest of the world and its functions. To the contrary, humans are seen as part of the whole, rather than apart from it and free to use it up. Yet there are expectations of human beings. We do have particular responsibilities in the scheme of things, but, then, so do all our other relatives in the created realm—from bears and squirrels to eagles and sparrows, trees, ants, rocks, and mountains. In fact, many elders in Indian communities are quick to add that of all the createds, of all our relations, we two-leggeds alone seem to be confused as to our responsibility toward the whole.

I have long suspected that European Christianity has undergone a millennia-long transformation that eventually put humans in opposition to the rest of creation. At the very least, this is signified in the theological, philosophical, scientific, and economic struggle for control over the world, its environment, and its "resources." This may have begun as early as the time of Aristotle, with the birth of so-called objective observation and description, an incipient scientific method. It continued its development during the European Renaissance with its neo-Aristotelian project of emerging taxonomic systems and the control over the world that seems to come from naming and categorizing. The philosophical and scientific basis for control of nature was initially rooted in the acts of naming. Perhaps the modern Euro-American need for exerting control over the world was most explicitly founded by Descartes in a logical extension of both Aristotle and the Renaissance. Descartes most clearly announced the ultimate knowability of the world and the human responsibility to do the knowing (and hence, exert control).

This philosophical movement toward greater and greater human control over the environment was paralleled by an ever-increasing importance granted philosophically and theologically to the individual in European cultures. This shift toward the ascendancy of the individual necessarily included a concomitant displacing of community values. I would argue that this shift meant not only the displacing of the importance of human communities, implicitly devaluing notions of the common good, but that it also meant displacing any lingering sense of the importance of a community inclusive of nonhuman entities in the created realm. In the Indian intellectual tradition and in cultural practice human beings are not privileged over the rest of the world, nor are individuals privileged over the good of the whole community.

BALANCING THE WORLD FOR LIFE

If we allow for a full translation of the Euro-Christian, cultural-linguistic metaphor of creation, we are left with a substantial thought of extreme importance to Indian peoples. What is clear to all American Indian peoples is that respect for creation, that is, for the whole of the created realm, or for all our relations, is vitally important to the well-being of our communities. While respect for all our relations in this world is critical for all Indian education, it is perhaps most readily apparent in the general philosophy of balance and harmony, a notion adhered to by all Indian communities in one form or another. Respect for creation emerges out of our perceived need for maintaining bal-

ance in the world around us. Thus Indian spirituality is characteristically oriented toward both the everyday and the ceremonial balancing of the world and our participation in it. When the balance of existence is disturbed, whole communities pay a price that is measured in some lack of communal well-being.

Once we have clarified the place of human beings in the ongoing processes of world balancing and world renewal, there are two aspects of what might be considered a general Indian theology that Christians and other Euro-Americans might do well to note. They can be initially categorized as reciprocity and spatiality. My contention will be that attention to these two important spiritual aspects of Indian cultures and what I am calling Indian theology can become radically transformative for the Euro-American system of values and structures of social behavior.

Reciprocity: A Foundation for Balance

The general American Indian notion of reciprocity is fundamental to the human participation in world-balancing and harmony. Reciprocity involves first of all a spiritual understanding of the cosmos and the place of humans in the processes of the cosmic whole. It begins with an understanding that anything and everything that humans do has an effect on the rest of the world around us. Even when we cannot clearly know what that effect is in any particular act, we know that there is an effect. Thus, Indian peoples, in different places and in different cultural configurations, have always struggled to know how to act appropriately in the world. Knowing that every action has its unique effect has always meant that there had to be some sort of built-in compensation for human actions, some act of reciprocity.

The necessity for reciprocity becomes most apparent where violence is concerned, especially when such violence is an apparent necessity, as in hunting or harvesting. Violence cannot be perpetrated, a life taken, in a Native American society, without some spiritual act of reciprocation. We are so much a part of the whole of creation and its balance that anything we do to perpetrate an act of violence, even when it is necessary for our own survival, must be accompanied by an act of spiritual reciprocation intended to restore the balance of existence. It must be remembered that violence as a technical category must extend to *all* one's relatives. Thus, a ceremony of reciprocity must accompany the harvesting of vegetable foods such as corn or the harvesting of medicinals such as cedar, even when only part of a plant is taken. The ceremony may be relatively simple, involving a prayer or song and perhaps a reciprocal offering of tobacco. Many tribes maintained very extensive and complex ceremonies of reciprocation to ensure continuing balance and plentiful harvests. Likewise, there is a

tradition of mythic stories that accompany such ceremonies and function to provide the theoretical foundation for the ceremonies. Ultimately, all of these stories function further to insure the continuing respect of the communities who tell the stories for all the parts of the created world, all the relatives, upon which the people depend for their own well-being. Even gathering rocks for a purification ceremony (sweat lodge ceremony) calls for care and respect, prayers and reciprocation.

In the same manner, ceremonies involving self-sacrifice (typically called "self-torture" or "self-mutilation" by the missionaries and early ethnographers) also come under this general category of reciprocation. In the Rite of Vigil (vision quest), which is very widespread among Indian peoples of North America, as well as in the Sun Dance, the suffering the supplicant takes upon himself or herself is usually thought of as vicarious and as some sort of reciprocation. Since all of a person's so-called possessions are ultimately not possessions but relatives that live with that person, an individual is not giving away a possession when he or she gives a gift to someone else. In actuality, the only thing a person really owns and can sacrifice is his or her own flesh. Thus, these ceremonies of self-sacrifice tend to be the most significant ceremonies of a people. While missionaries typically thought of these ceremonies as vain human attempts to placate some angry deity, Indian communities know that these ceremonies are much more complex than that. Rather, they are much more often thought of as vicarious sacrifices engaged in for the sake of the whole community's well-being. Moreover, they are believed to be ceremonies that came to the community as a gift from the Sacred Mystery in order to help the community take care of itself and its world. Thus, the Sun Dance is considered a ceremony in which two-leggeds participate with the Sacred in order to help maintain life, that is, to maintain the harmony and balance of the whole.

Hence, hunting and war typically involved a complex ceremonial preparation before a contingent of warriors left their home. The Osage War Ceremony, for instance, involved an eleven-day ritual, allowing enough time to affirm the sacredness of life, to consecrate the lives that would be lost in war, and to offer prayers in reciprocation for those potentially lost lives.⁹ In the hunt most Indian nations report specified prayers of reciprocation involving apologies and words of thanksgiving to the animal itself and the animal's spirit nation. Usually this ceremonial act is in compliance with the request of the animals themselves as the people remember the primordial negotiations in mythological stories. Thus, formal and informal ceremonies of reciprocation are a day-to-day mythic activity that has its origin in mythological stories in which human beings were given permission by the animal nations to hunt them for food. The resulting covenant, however, calls on human beings to assume responsibilities over against the

perpetration of violence among four-legged relatives. Even after the hunt or battle, those who participated must invariably go through a ceremonial cleansing before re-entering their own village. Not to do this would bring the disruption of the sacred caused by the perpetration of violence right into the middle of national life and put all people at risk.¹⁰

Animals, birds, crops, and medicines are all living relatives and must be treated with respect if they are to be genuinely efficacious for the people. The ideal of harmony and balance requires that all share a respect for all other existent things, avoiding gratuitous or unthinking acts of violence. Maintaining harmony and balance requires that even necessary acts of violence be done in a sacred way. Thus nothing is taken from the earth without prayer and offering. When the tree is cut down for the Sun Dance, for instance, something must be offered, returned to the spirit world, for the life of that tree. The people not only ceremonially and prayerfully ask its permission but ask for its cooperation and help during the four days of the dance itself.

No model of development, involving modern Western technologies, as far as I know, embodies or incorporates an indigenous ethic of reciprocity as is found in Indian communities. It is not enough to replant a few trees or to add nutrients to the soil. These are superficial acts to treat the negative symptoms of development. The value of reciprocity, which is a hallmark of Indian ceremonies, goes to the heart of issues of sustainability, which is maintaining a balance and tempering the negative effects of basic human survival techniques. Moreover, as far as I know, there is no ceremony for clear-cutting an entire forest.

Spatiality: Place vs. Time

That there is and has been historically a fundamental difference between Euro-American and American Indian worldviews emerging from different priorities of space and time has been long recognized by American Indian observers of Euro-American cultures, even if it has not been regularly noticed or granted by the academic specialists or Euro-American observers of Indian cultures. These American Indian observations were first codified by Vine Deloria, Jr., the dean of American Indian academics, in his 1973 book *God Is Red*.¹¹ As I have also argued,¹² it is not a case of one culture being marked solely by temporality and the other by spatiality. Rather, it appears that either space or time has become the primary category of existence around which all other categories are arranged. For Euro-American peoples temporality has been a primary category for many centuries, while space has been a secondary category of existence, subordinate in all respects to the priority of temporality. The sacred is measured in temporality, with a seven-day cycle requiring the repetition of a ceremonial event (mass

or liturgies of worship), most typically on the first day of the cycle, the cycle itself being a relatively arbitrary, human designation. For American Indians, on the other hand, spatiality has been the primary category and temporality the secondary.

In Euro-American (and European) philosophical and theological history it is more common to see intellectual reflections on the meaning of time; it is far less common to see intellectual reflections on space. Hence, progress, history, development, evolution, and process become key notions that invade all academic discourse in the West, from science and economics to philosophy and theology. Thus the Western worldview has an inherent blind spot that prevents any comprehensive or deep understanding of the scope of ecological devastation which is, in fact, accelerating despite our best efforts at "sustainable development." To do no more than propose "solutions," such as reforestation projects, without acknowledging this blind spot is only to address the superficial symptoms of maldevelopment.

In contrast, cultural values and social and political structures in Indian communities are rooted in a worldview shaped by reciprocity and spatiality. Indian ceremonial existence, for instance, is inevitably spatially configured with place taking precedence over the question of when a ceremony will happen. Even in the case of annual or periodic ceremonial cycles, spatial configurations involving spatial relationships between sun or moon and the earth are determinative. The spatial relationship between the community and the sun at solstice or equinox, or the spatial appearance or nonappearance of the moon at full or new moon is more important than calendar dates and Julian months.

This foundational metaphor of spatiality in Indian cultures also begins to clarify the extent to which Indian spirituality and Indian existence are deeply rooted in attachment to the land and to specific territories in particular. Each nation has some understanding that it was placed into a relationship with a particular territory by spiritual forces outside of itself and thus has an enduring responsibility for that territory, just as the earth, especially the earth in that particular place, has a filial responsibility toward the people who live there. Likewise, the two-leggeds in that place also have a spatially related responsibility toward all others who share that place with them, including animals, birds, plants, rocks, rivers, mountains, and the like. With such extensive kinship ties, including a kinship tie to the land itself, it should be less surprising that Indian peoples have always resisted colonial pressure to relocate them to different territories, to sell their territories to the invaders, or to allow the destruction of their lands for the sake of accessing natural resources. Historical conquest and removal from our lands and contemporary ecological destruction of our lands have been and continue to be culturally and genocidally destructive to Indian peoples as peoples.

There is, however, a more subtle level to this sense of spatiality and land rootedness. It shows up in nearly all aspects of our existence—in our ceremonial structures, our symbols, our architecture, and in the symbolic parameters of a tribe's universe. The land and spatiality are the basic metaphor for existence and determine much of a community's life. In my own tribe, for instance, every detail of social structure—even the geographic orientation of the old villages—reflected a reciprocal duality of all that is necessary for sustaining life. Thus the *Hunka* or earth moiety situated to the south of the village and the *Tzi Sho* or sky moiety situated to the north represented female and male, matter and spirit, war and peace, but they only functioned fully because they were together and together represented wholeness. Spirit without matter is motion without substance; matter without spirit is motionless and meaningless. Once again we see reciprocity in a symbiotic dualism, this time clearly configured spatially.

We should not think here of the oppositional dualism of good and evil that we have learned to identify as typically Western (that is, ancient mid-Eastern). American Indian duality is a necessary reciprocity, not oppositional. They are different manifestations of the same *Wakonda*, not of two *Wakonda*, even though they carry personality specificity just as traditional Christian trinitarian doctrine would assert. While they are manifestations of the same *Wakonda*, they are different manifestations, both of which are necessary in order to have some balanced understanding of the Otherness that is the Sacred Mystery. Indeed, *Wakonda* has manifested itself in a great many other ways, all of which help our people to better understand the Mystery, our world, ourselves, and our place in the world. At this point it may also be clearer why the European word *God* is inadequate to express the full complexity of what we have only begun to explore in the Osage word.

Even the architectural geography of our spirituality functioned politically to give the village group cohesion; it functions at a deeply spiritual level that still pertains for a great many Indian people today. While an Osage person may be either *Tzi Sho* or *Hunka*, he or she is a child of parents who come from each of the divisions. Each individual recognizes himself or herself as a combination of qualities that reflect both sky and earth, spirit and matter, peace and war, male and female; we struggle individually and communally to hold those qualities in balance. These value structures begin with spatial designs of existence and are rooted in those spatial metaphors as fundamental mores of communal behavior and social organization.

This is not the only spatial symbolic paradigm of existence that determines Native American individuality and community. The fundamental symbol of plains Indian existence is the circle, a polyvalent symbol signifying the family, the clan, the tribe, and, eventually, all of creation. As a creation symbol, the importance of the circle is its

genuine egalitarianism. There is no way to make the circle hierarchical. Because it has no beginning and no end, all in the circle are of equal value. No relative is valued more than any other. A chief is not valued above the people, nor are two-leggeds valued above the animal nations, the birds, or even trees and rocks. In its form as a medicine wheel, with two lines forming a cross inscribed vertically and horizontally across its whole, the circle can symbolize the four directions of the earth and, more important, the four manifestations of *Wakonda* that come to us from those directions. At the same time those four directions symbolize the four cardinal virtues of a tribe, the four sacred colors of ceremonial life, the sacred powers of four animal nations, and the four nations of two-leggeds that walk the earth (Black, Red, Yellow and White). That is, in our conception of the universe, all human beings walk ideally in egalitarian balance. Moreover, Native American egalitarian proclivities are worked out in this spatial symbol in ways that go far beyond the classless egalitarianism of socialism. In one of the polyvalent layers of meaning, those four directions hold together in the same egalitarian balance the four nations of two-leggeds, four-leggeds, winged, and living-moving things. In this rendition human beings lose their status of "primacy" and "dominion." Implicitly and explicitly American Indians are driven by their culture and spirituality to recognize the personhood of all "things" in creation. If temporality and historicity lend themselves implicitly to hierarchical structures because someone with a greater investment of time may know more of the body of temporally codified knowledge, spatiality lends itself to the egalitarian. All have relatively similar access to the immediacy of the spatially present.

ECOJUSTICE, SOVEREIGNTY, AND A THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

Given the fundamental differences between American Indian cultural values and those of Euro-American peoples, it should be no mystery that the relationship between the two has been consistently one of conquest, colonization, and finally the eco-devastation of our territories. Our theological reflection must now move toward a sharper assessment of the systemic causes of this ethno-eco-devastation from an Indian perspective and toward the development of possible solutions. We have already begun to argue that we must understand the connection between ecological and social injustice in the world if there is to be significant transformation from the current global crisis to a healthy and sustainable future. Hence, it becomes empty quixotism to think of treating ecological devastation apart from treating issues of racism and ongoing colonialism, including especially those new forms of colonialism some have called neo-colonialism.

In particular, I am arguing that the twofold problem of ecological and social justice is systemic in character, and that the concerns of ethno-ecojjustice must move beyond the mere naming of ecological devastations that are affecting Indian peoples and other indigenous and poor peoples today. This is a point I can begin to illustrate with a simple example. Over the past ten to twenty years many of us have been converted to the ecojustice vocation of *recycling*, a calling that has piqued our consciences as individual consumers to an extent that our kitchens and garages have become dangerous labyrinths of plastic, aluminum, and glass repositories as we have committed ourselves to a new lifeway behavior. Yet our national situation with respect to garbage disposal and landfill capacity has gotten consistently worse. In spite of our committed new behavior as socially conscious individuals, the United States generated more landfill garbage during the decade of the 1980s (the decade we began actively and broadly recycling) than all the garbage generated during the first two hundred years of its existence. Changing individual patterns of behavior has failed us as a strategy. We need more holistic and systemic solutions, and systemic solutions call for theological and philosophical foundations.

It needs to be said here that by a theological response to the systemic I do not have in mind just another individualistic intellectual exercise of the sort that has plagued our universities and seminaries too much, but rather a theological reflection that is far more communal. Theology must become an exercise in expressing the self-identity of whole communities. For this sort of theology we need stories rather than treatises, essentialist discourse, problem-resolution, or structuralist puzzle-solving. Not even some post-structuralist deconstruction that never seems to emerge from the text will finally be able to touch the hearts and minds of whole communities. For theology of this magnitude, we must have stories.

The Euro-Americans have stories, of course, but they tend to be stories of conquest. For instance, Columbus is the quintessential all-American culture hero, the perfect exemplar for the righteous empire, the "discoverer" and conqueror who knew no sin. Even Jesus, the most important culture hero of America, has become a conqueror in Western storytelling. The sacrificial cross of Jesus has become a symbol of conquest that seems to encourage more conquest.¹³ Thus the myth of Columbus and the stories of conquest continue to play themselves out with disastrous consequences in the lives of modern Indian peoples, as the case studies in this volume all too well attest.

What Euro-Americans do not yet have is a story that accounts for their history of systemic violence in the world and their easy proclivity for rationalizing any act of military or economic colonization and conquest as somehow good. Instead, Euro-Americans and their elected officials seem to engage in a behavior pattern well-known in alcohol

and drug addictions therapy: denial. Too many churches and too many politicians have lived out such a denial, like ostriches with their heads in the sand, as if such eco-devastation and national injustice and immorality cannot possibly affect them, living in the protected comfort zones of American society.¹⁴ Easy answers that reflect some level of denial are too often given: It is too late to rectify injustices perpetrated against Indian nations; too much water has gone under that bridge. Or it is sometimes insisted that Indians are too small a percentage of the population to merit attention. We are forced, they claim, to concentrate on the vast majority of Americans, to maximize the good (and wealth) for the most people. This old Euro-American philosophical tradition of utilitarianism continues to exert its powerful influence on political practice to such an extent that abject racism can thrive, rationalized as being "in the best interests of the state." It becomes all too easy to think of Indian reservations as "national sacrifice areas."¹⁵ Stories of conquest are complemented by stories of utilitarian rationalization.

Even in those cases in which we have begun to address ourselves to community well-being and ecojustice, we seem to do so with isolated strategies and a much too narrow focus. Especially at the level of theological reflection, the churches have not yet begun to deal with ecojustice, let alone ethno-ecojjustice and racism, as a systemic whole, as a system of oppression rooted in structures of power that touch every part of our lives. At the level of liberal political action and theoretical reflection in the United States, solutions have still dealt typically with "them" and "their" problems rather than with the "us" of the United States and "our" participation in the ongoing story of world injustice. As long as the liberal Euro-American story only includes Euro-Americans in the role of moral conquerors providing solutions to others' problems, the real root causes of the problem will never go away. That is to say, even our proposed solutions have not been comprehensive enough to address the problem genuinely.

In this analysis I want to argue two correlative points addressing what I see as a key systemic aspect of the problem, focusing on the rise of Western individualism and the systematic destruction of indigenous communities worldwide. Further, I want to insist that the dismantling of indigenous communities has happened at a philosophical as well as political level. To put it another way, I am arguing that modern ecological devastation is in no small part generated by the Western, European shift that devalued communal interests in favor of the increasing prominence of the individual and that this shift can be measured in the lack of political and economic respect and the lack of theoretical recognition given to the legitimacy of self-governing, autonomous, long-lived indigenous communities. Let me state the argument as provocatively as possible.

Individualism and Western Development

First, the Western commitment to individualism colors all of the West's intellectual and theoretical posturing, whether theology, philosophy, political theory, politics, or law. For Euro-Americans in particular, the corporate level of denial is rooted in a cultural flaw that emerges from a trajectory that has its beginning in the later philosophies of the Hellenistic period and continues through the European reformations to modern notions of American hegemony in the "New World Order." From the Stoics in particular, but also the Epicureans and Sceptics of the third century BCE, the shift to the prominence of the individual can be traced through philosophic and religious movements. While the Stoics shifted their discourse from a search for the common good to a search for the wise individual, religious movements of the first century BCE began a similar shift toward concern for the individual. As the focus of the old Mediterranean cults shifted away from communal well-being, the so-called mystery religions introduced a newly developing concern for individual salvation. This theological shift eventually also won the heart of Greco-Roman Christianity.

Modern theologies of all of our churches continue this overweening concern for the individual and the individual's need for, and impediments to, salvation and well-being. Thus, our systemic interpretations tend likewise to emphasize individualistic analyses: The problem is identified as original sin or, in its secularized version, the individual failings of human beings. Even our interpretations of sacred texts—themselves far less invested in the West's individualism—are regularly interpreted from the individualist perspective. For instance, the synoptic gospels' metaphoric paradigm for the good—the goal of all life, the *basileia tou theou* (usually translated as the "kingdom of God")—is consistently interpreted in individualistic terms. The *basileia*, we are told, has to do with the individual's relationship with God or with the individual's call to decision. Any notion of it being many people together, or all peoples, or all of creation, is little mentioned.¹⁶

Moreover, this problematic is not exclusive to theological education but extends to all academic disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, such as political theory, international law, economics, and the like. The culture of the West (European and Euro-American) is a culture of the individual, and, through modern colonialist institutions (such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund), the imposition of this culture of individualism is quickly being extended throughout the colonized (Two-thirds) world via economic and political development policies. In the ongoing discourse about human rights, for instance, most would argue for understanding such rights in terms of individual rights while vehemently denying extension of the category to groups. Human rights are, by definition, the inherent rights of

individuals and not rights of culturally discrete, indigenous national communities. Hence, the cultures of these communities can be destroyed with impunity.¹⁷

Statism and Indigenous Sovereignty

Second, I want to argue that the very emergence and eventual dominance of the modern state and the concomitant degradation of indigenous national entities contribute significantly to our situation of ecological injustice and devastation.¹⁸ It should not be surprising that indigenous cultural groups, being fundamentally defined by their communitarian values and communal coherence, have been consistently attacked and destroyed by colonial intruders who usurp their lands and resources. Yet it needs to be said that the conquest of indigenous peoples has not been merely a military, political or economic colonization, but that the conquest has been equally engaged at the intellectual and philosophical level. Natural, self-governing national entities have given way to new larger and more centralized, but artificial, government structures identified in common parlance as the "modern state."

It is symptomatic that modern political theory has little interest in defining the appropriate place of indigenous nations in relationship to nation-states. To the contrary, it is assumed that the states have some natural sovereignty over their defined territories, even if their territorial claims wholly include ancient indigenous nations that have never relinquished their own sovereignty to that state. In general in our critical analyses and in our imagination of solutions, we Natives tend to concede too much to modern state systems and institutions. We assume too readily the authenticity and validity of the state and the broad bureaucratic institutions formally and informally associated with it—including our modern denominational structures.

The systemic nature of the problem as it relates to American Indians becomes apparent in the continual and progressive erosion of Indian national sovereignty and self-determination over the past five hundred years. This erosion began the moment that Columbus first claimed Indian land as the property of his Spanish monarchs. It was unabated as the liberal Bartolomé de Las Casas insisted on the peaceful conquest of Indian peoples as the rightful subjects of those same monarchs. And it continued in nineteenth-century U.S. jurisprudence and legislation that legally canonized the "domestic" and "dependent" nature of Indian sovereignty, wholly dependent on and accountable to the plenary power of the U.S. Congress.¹⁹ Today, Indian sovereignty has become a shadow of its former self that invariably shrinks with each new incursion of the U.S. government and multinational corporate power brokers interested in wresting natural resources away from one

Indian nation or another at unreasonably cheap prices to themselves and equally unreasonably high long-term costs to those nations in terms of their environmental well-being.²⁰

To extend the analysis of the problem a step further, the poverty that has consistently plagued Indian peoples since the onslaught of conquest is a natural result of colonization experienced by the colonized throughout the world. And postmodernist deconstruction seems to have little creative effect on the colonizer or on the colonized—except that we, the colonized, continue to experience the deconstruction of our cultures, our ecosystems, whatever is left of our Native economies and our internal sustainability.

With a poverty level that puts American Indians at the bottom of nearly every social indicator, we suffer a resulting level of community dysfunctionality that increases our lack of sustainability and makes us all the more susceptible to external political and economic power. Indian unemployment is stuck chronically at more than 50 percent across the continent.²¹ Per capita income is the lowest of any ethnic community in the United States. Indian longevity figures are twenty years less than the American average. The infant mortality rate is the highest of any group in the United States. And diseases like tuberculosis (nearly eradicated for most of the U.S. population) and diabetes occur at seven and six times the average U.S. rates.²² In some states (like Montana or South Dakota) Indian inmates number more than half of the state's prison population, even though Indians in the state account for less than 10 percent of the total population in the state.

Given statistics such as these, we have precious few political, legal, or even intellectual resources on which to capitalize or for controlling our immense natural resources.²³ Of course, the cultural-economic question for Indian nations may be not only how we develop natural resources but whether we feel that they can be respectfully developed and exploited at all. The continuing reality of our oppression, however, leaves this a moot point, because our poverty leaves us with few defenses against the pressures brought to bear on our communities from the outside. Hence, the prior question is one of Indian sovereignty, for the sake of reclaiming Indian community sustainability, first of all, but, so I shall argue, for the sake perhaps even for the health and sustainability of the world community as well.

Indians want life. We do not just want mere existence, that is, life in the sense of simple biological survival. What we want is life in the sense of self-sufficient, cultural, spiritual, political, and economic sustainability—on our own terms. At this late date, the question is not whether Indian peoples should have the right to self-determining autonomy, but how our communities can regain this rightful heritage without the continuing colonial pressure to feed the consumptive habits of White America. We believe that the larger justice issue involved

is one of both political hegemony and ecological survivability. The answer to this systemic problem may contain part of the answer to sustainability for all people on this earth.

My suggestion that we take the recognition of indigenous sovereignty as a priority is an overarching one that involves more than simply justice for indigenous communities around the world. Indeed, such a political move will necessitate a rethinking of consumption patterns in the North, and a shift in the economics of the North will cause a concomitant shift also in the Two-thirds World of the South. The relatively simple act of recognizing the sovereignty of the Sioux Nation and returning to it all state-held lands in the Black Hills (for example, National Forest and National Park lands) would generate immediate international interest in the rights of indigenous, tribal peoples in all state territories. In the United States alone it is estimated that Indian nations still have legitimate (moral and legal) claim to some two-thirds of the U.S. land mass.²⁴ Ultimately, such an act as return of Native lands to Native control would have a significant ripple effect on other states around the world where indigenous peoples still have aboriginal land claims and suffer the ongoing results of conquest and displacement in their own territories.

American Indian cultures and values have much to contribute in the comprehensive reimagining of the Western value system that has resulted in our contemporary ecojustice crisis. The main point that must be made is that there were and are cultures that take their natural environment seriously and attempt to live in balance with the created whole around them in ways that help them not overstep environmental limits. Unlike the West's consistent experience of alienation from the natural world, these cultures of indigenous peoples consistently experienced themselves as part of that created whole, in relationship with everything else in the world. They saw and continue to see themselves as having responsibilities, just as every other creature has a particular role to play in maintaining the balance of creation as an ongoing process. This is ultimately the spiritual rationale for annual ceremonies like the Sun Dance or Green Corn Dance. As another example, Lakota peoples planted cottonwoods and willows at their campsites as they broke camp to move on, thus beginning the process of reclaiming the land humans had necessarily trampled through habitation and encampment.

We now know that indigenous rainforest peoples in what is today called the state of Brazil had a unique relationship to the forest in which they lived, moving away from a cleared area after farming it to a point of reduced return and allowing the clearing to be reclaimed as jungle. The group would then clear a new area and begin a new cycle of production. The whole process was relatively sophisticated and functioned in harmony with the jungle itself. So extensive was their movement

that some scholars are now suggesting that there is actually very little of what might rightly be called virgin forest in what had been considered the "untamed" wilds of the rainforest.

What I have described here is more than just a coincidence or, worse, some romanticized falsification of Native memory. Rather, I am insisting that there are peoples in the world who live with an acute and cultivated sense of their intimate participation in the natural world as part of an intricate whole. For indigenous peoples, this means that when they are presented with the concept of development, it is *sense-less*. Most significantly, one must realize that this awareness is the result of self-conscious effort on the part of traditional American Indian national communities and is rooted in the first instance in the mythology and theology of the people. At its simplest, the worldview of American Indians can be expressed as Ward Churchill describes it:

Human beings are free (indeed, encouraged) to develop their innate capabilities, but only in ways that do not infringe upon other elements—called "relations," in the fullest dialectical sense of the word—of nature. Any activity going beyond this is considered as "imbalance," a transgression, and is strictly prohibited. For example, engineering was and is permissible, but only insofar as it does not permanently alter the earth itself. Similarly, agriculture was widespread, but only within norms that did not supplant natural vegetation.²⁵

Like the varieties of species in the world, each culture has a contribution to make for the sustainability of the whole. Given the reality of eco-devastation threatening all of life today, the survival of American Indian cultures and cultural values may make the difference for the survival and sustainability for all the earth as we know it. What I have suggested implicitly is that American Indian peoples may have something of value—something corrective to Western values and the modern world system—to offer to the world. The loss of these gifts, the loss of the particularity of these peoples, today threatens the survivability of us all. What I am most passionately arguing is that we must commit to the struggle for the just and moral survival of Indian peoples as the peoples of the earth, and that this struggle is for the sake of the earth and for the sustaining of all of life. It is now imperative that we change the modern value of acquisitiveness and the political systems and economics that consumption has generated. The key to making this massive value shift in the world system may lie in the international recognition of indigenous political sovereignty and self-determination. Returning Native lands to the sovereign control of Native peoples around the world, beginning in the United States, is not simply just; the survival of all may depend on it.

We have suggested that an appropriate theological response must emerge from communities rather than from the minds of individual intellectuals, and that these theological responses to the modern crises of ecological and social devastation must thus begin as a story of existence that can move us beyond the West's usual stories of conquest. Yet having said this much, a word of caution must be added. Any emergent story or theological response must be careful not to fall into the trap of becoming just another layer of the conquest motif. Even the "common" creation story, currently in vogue among many in the ecological movement, runs the risk of being conquest-oriented. It is *common* only insofar as it has been able to impose itself on others, to conquer the stories of others.

Imagine two Indian communities separated by a mountain ridge. While each considers its council fire, located in the center of its valley, to be the center of the universe and tells stories of creation to verify its reality, they know one another quite well. When visitors from one community visit the other community, they also recognize the truth of their neighbors' stories and their claim. Sometimes a single truth is not enough to explain the balance of the world around us.

Yet we need communal stories that can generate "functional" theologies, or, better yet, functional mythologies, that will undergird the life of the community (the lives of communities) in new and vibrant ways. The contemporary crisis calls for imagining new stories that can generate life and not conquest—whether cultural, military, economic, or intellectual!

Notes

1. Donald A. Grinde, Jr., and Bruce E. Johansen, *Ecocide of Native America: Environmental Destruction of Indian Lands and Peoples* (Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 1995): "In a world full of profound and sometimes cruel ironies, one stands out: Native Americans, who held the lands of the Western Hemisphere in a living trust for thousands of years, have been afflicted by some of the worst pollution of an environmental crisis that has reached planetwide proportions" (p. 1).

2. Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr., and Charles Lee, eds., *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites* (New York: Commission for Racial Justice, United Church of Christ, 1987); and Benjamin A. Goldman and Laura Fitton, *Toxic Wastes and Race Revisited: An Update of the 1987 Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Policy Alternatives, 1994). I find Gregg Easterbrook's popular news essay on two-thirds-world pollution problematic, especially in what I see as his short-sighted proposal for resolving two-thirds-world ecojustice concerns (Easterbrook, "Forget PCB's. Radon. Alar: The World's Greatest Environmental Dangers Are Dung Smoke and Dirty Water," *The New York Times Magazine* [September 11, 1995], pp. 60-63).

3. Ward Churchill, *Struggle for the Land: Indigenous Resistance to Genocide, Ecocide and Expropriation in Contemporary North America* (Monroe, Me.: Common Courage Press, 1993); Mark Zannis, *The Genocide Machine in Canada: The Pacification of the North* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1973).

4. Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

5. Jace Weaver, "Notes from a Miner's Canary," herein.

6. This rather absurd and patently "Eurosupremacist" hypothesis is argued, for instance, by George Weurthner, who ultimately reduces pre-contact Indian peoples to environmental pillagers ("An Ecological View of the Indian," *Earth First!* 7 [1987]). For an Indian critique of the position, see Ward Churchill, *Struggle for the Land*, pp. 420, 447f.; and M. Annette Jaimes, "The Stone Age Revisited: An Indigenist Examination of Labor," *New Studies on the Left* 14 (1991).

7. See, George Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

8. This sense is much more than Paul Tillich's notion of pantheism.

9. See, Francis La Flesche, *The War and Peace Ceremony of the Osage Indians*, Bureau of American Ethnography, Bulletin 101 (1939).

10. Leslie Silko's famous novel *Ceremony* (New York: Viking, 1977) is precisely about such a situation. The whole of the novel deals with the healing and cleansing of a World War II veteran for whom a new ceremony had to be devised. The social and spiritual complexities of disintegration and alienation had made it much more difficult for the Laguna people and for himself. Thus, his healing has to do with the healing of the whole community and not just of himself.

11. The book was recently republished in a significantly revised edition: Vine Deloria, Jr., *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Golden, Co.: Fulcrum, 1992).

12. George Tinker, "Spirituality and Native American Personhood: Sovereignty and Solidarity," in K. C. Abraham and Bernadette Mbuy-Beya, eds., *Spirituality of the Third World* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994), pp. 119-132; "An American Indian Reading of the Bible," in Leander E. Keck, et al., eds., *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), pp. 174-180.

13. See, George Tinker, "Columbus and Coyote: A Comparison of Culture Heroes in Paradox," *Apuntes* (1992), pp. 78-88.

14. See, Jace Weaver, "Introduction" to Andrea Smith, "Malthusian Orthodoxy and the Myth of ZPG," herein.

15. This term seems to have been coined in a study commissioned by the National Academy of Science on resource development on Indian lands. It was submitted to the Nixon administration in 1972 as input toward a national Indian policy. See, Thadis Box, et al., *Rehabilitation Potential for Western Coal Lands* (Cambridge: Ballanger, 1974), for the published version of the study. Churchill, *Struggle for the Land*, pp. 54, 333, 367; also, Russell Means, "The Same Old Song," in Ward Churchill, ed., *Marxism and Native Americans* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), p. 25; and Ward Churchill and Winona LaDuke, "Native America: The Political Economy of Radioactive Colonialism," in M. Annette Jaimes, ed., *State of Native America* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), pp. 241-266.

16. George Tinker, "The Integrity of Creation: Restoring Trinitarian Balance," *Ecumenical Review* (1989), pp. 527-536; and "Gerechtigkeit, Frieden und die Integrität der Weihnachtsbäume," *Ökumenische Rundschau* 28 (1989), pp. 169-180.

17. See, Richard Falk, "The Rights of Peoples (In Particular Indigenous Peoples): A Non-Statist Perspective," pp. 17-37; and Ted Robert Gurr and James R. Scarritt, "Minority Rights at Risk: A Global Survey," *Human Rights Quarterly* 11 (1989), pp. 375-405.

18. Many identify the eighteenth century with the emergence of the modern state (see, Cornelia Narari, "The Origins of the Nation-State," in Leonard Tivey, ed., *The Nation State: The Formation of Modern Politics* [New York: St. Martins, 1981], pp. 13-38). It seems more useful and accurate to date the emergence to the sixteenth century with the strong move toward centralization and bureaucratization during the reign of Henry VIII in England, or even the late fifteenth century with the formation of a "modern" Spanish state in the merging of Castile and Aragon with the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabela (see, Robert Williams, *American Indians and Western Legal Thought* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990]; and Stephen L. Collins, *From Divine Cosmos to Sovereign State: An Intellectual History of Consciousness and the Idea of Order in Renaissance England* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1989]).

19. See, Jace Weaver, "Triangulated Power and the Environment," herein; Ward Churchill, *Struggle for the Land*, pp. 42-45; Howard R. Berman, "The Concept of Aboriginal Rights in the Early Legal History of the United States," *Buffalo Law Review* 28 (1978), pp. 637-667; and Felix S. Cohen, "Original Indian Title," *Minnesota Law Review* 32 (1947), pp. 28-59. On the "plenary power" of the U.S. Congress over Indian "sovereignty" and the Congress's resulting fiduciary or trust responsibilities, see, C. Harvey, "Constitutional Law: Congressional Plenary Power over Indian Affairs—A Doctrine Rooted in Prejudice," *American Indian Law Review* 5 (1977), pp. 117-150.

20. Obviously, I have distinguished between nation and state in this essay. For the scholarly critique of statist doctrines, see, Bernard Nietchmann, "Militarization and Indigenous Peoples: The Third World War," *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 11 (1987), pp. 1-16; Russell L. Barsh, "The Ethnocidal Character of the State and International Law," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 16 (1989), pp. 1-30; Gurr and Scarritt, "Minority Rights at Risk"; and Falk, "The Rights of Peoples."

21. George Tinker and Loring Bush, "Native American Unemployment: Statistical Games and Cover-ups," in *Racism and the Underclass in America*, George W. Shepherd, Jr., and David Penna, eds. (Greenwood Press, 1991).

22. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population Division, Racial Statistics Branch, *A Statistical Portrait of the American Indian Population* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984); U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Chart Series Book* (Washington, D.C.: Public Health Service HE20.9409.988, 1988). The 1990 census has not testified to an abatement of these statistical horrors in any category for Native Americans (see, Glenn T. Morris, "International Law and Politics: Toward a Right to Self-Determination for Indigenous Peoples," in *State of Native America*, pp. 71, 84n; Ward Churchill, *Struggle for the Land*, pp. 54f., 79).

23. For an official U.S. government indication of the vast mineral resources of American Indian tribes, see, U.S. Department of the Interior, *Indian Lands*

Map: Oil, Gas and Minerals on Indian Reservations (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978). Churchill comments with a bitter irony: "With such holdings, it would seem logical that the two million indigenous people of North America . . . would be among the continent's wealthiest residents. As even the government's own figures reveal, however, they receive the lowest per capita income of any population group and evidence every standard indicator of dire poverty: highest rates of malnutrition, plague, disease, death by exposure, infant mortality, teen suicide, and so on" (*Struggle for the Land*, p. 262).

24. See, Churchill, *Struggle for the Land*.

25. Churchill, *Struggle for the Land*, p. 17.

Afterword

Where Do We Go from Here?

THOM WHITE WOLF FASSETT

PRELUDE

The Pomo sacred basket has an important place in the moral and cultural development of Pomo children. These water-tight, bright-plumed baskets provided a schooling for young girls that could be obtained in no other manner. Working with sedge, willow, pine root, cedar root, redbud, feathers, and other materials, the California Pomo Indian woman produced what anthropologists and ethnologists have acknowledged as the finest basket made by any people in the world. European observers noted the method of construction and commented on the brilliance of the plumes and the complexity of the patterns. Many of the descriptions were recorded as a scientific measure designed to preserve in the memory of history the wonderful craft and the women who made them. In their documentation, however, they were never able to capture the essence of Pomo basketry.

Few observers know that the Pomo creation story tells of the birth of the people coming to earth in a basket. The infant Pomo girl even lived in a basket which was probably the same one used by her mother and grandmother. For Indian girls to learn how to weave a basket was to learn about the Creator and all of creation. First, she learned to distinguish among various plants; some were used for baskets, others for food and medicine. As she learned about food plants, she also learned about baskets used in food preparation. Because it took nearly a year to gather the materials for the construction of the basket, the young girl learned about the seasons and her place in relation to her family, her tribe, other people, the natural world, and her Creator.

Perhaps the most important lesson she learned was that the earth was Mother to us all, provided by a great Creator for all of the people.