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Religious Studies – The Final Colonization Of American Indians, Part 1 (Tink Tinker, wazhazhe udsethe)

📅 June 1, 2020 👤 editors_religioustheory 📁 Native American Religions

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The following is the first of a two-part series. The second can be found [here](#).

In late 2019 I was invited to deliver a paper at an international symposium, “Re-Envisioning Religious Studies as a Global Discipline,” hosted by the *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* held in conjunction with the annual American Academy of Religion conference. The question posed for the conference was: How are we academics going to re-envision religious studies as a global discipline?[1] That conference title and the question posed already presumed a great deal about the world and about the academy.

For an American Indian, the first order of business must be to ask whether and to what extent the category “religion” is indeed universal (let alone global) and whether it applies to American Indians at all. The underlying presumption, of course, is that all human communities have something that fits into the scholar’s normative cognitional category called “religion”. Discovering that this category is not a human universal might not immediately disqualify the whole academic discipline of religious studies. It certainly would, however, call on serious conversation about the category itself and some of the so-called religions that have been characteristically included in the set.

Essentially, I want to make the argument I have heard persistently made by traditional American Indian elders from a great variety of Indian Nations over the

past half century. Namely, they have insisted repeatedly that American Indians had, and those who try to continue living a pre-colonial worldview have, no religion. They, and I, make that argument over against the host of euro-christian scholars who have made their careers (not to say substantial wealth) identifying themselves as scholars of “American Indian religions.” Ojibwe scholar and writer Gerald Vizenor rightfully classifies this colonialist euro-christian academic enterprise—engaged by academics who are, then, de facto experts about Indians: anthropologists, historians, comparative religion/religious studies folk—as a “trope to power.”^[2]

As an American Indian, a citizen of the Osage Nation, I need to acknowledge that I am not singularly an academic teaching American Indian studies.^[3] I have been a very active participant throughout my academic career living a social life and a volunteer work life in urban Indian communities, both in Denver and previously in the Bay Area. For nearly five decades I have associated myself with the American Indian Movement, joining consistently in their political activism.^[4] I also became a participant in Native ceremonial life early on and eventually rose to some position of leadership in the urban Indian community of metropolitan Denver.

During my tenure at Iliff, I also served (pro bono) as the “spiritual leader”^[5] of Four Winds American Indian Council in Denver, working with postcolonial urban Indian poverty and providing a consistent meeting place for Colorado AIM and its planning for political action. Unlike most of my colleagues in academia, my campus office never could become an ivory tower place of retreat. The community knew where I worked, so it became a hub for Denver urban Natives who had community issues to discuss, personal crises, culturally particular needs, many times involving a family in crisis needing small amounts of money to make ends meet.

As part of this community work, I also spent considerable time on different reservations visiting with *ieska* (interpreters, so-called medicine people) and learning as much as I could in order to provide useful leadership in my immediate community. Most importantly for the sake of this paper, that constant immersion with the *ieska* enabled me to provide ceremonial help back to my own urban Native community. This ceremonial space we provided at 4Winds, however, was never a religion or even religious.

What Indian communities have done traditionally for centuries only *becomes* religious or religion when it becomes hyper-attractive to eurochristian colonialists either for establishing colonial control or satisfying colonialist curiosities (political or academic) or to enhance their own individualist sense of religious well-being and self-empowerment (new-age seekers). The work of religious studies in terms of Native Peoples has always served what Lisa Lowe calls “the agency of an imperial will to know.”^[6]

It should be increasingly apparent, as Chidester clearly demonstrates, that the category “religion” is a colonially invented one,^[7] naming a political characteristic of colonizer societies. As such the invention of religion in the late 19th christian century enables a close (academic) inspection that participates in the larger colonial project of control and power over the colonized Other by parsing out bits of a People’s culture into bytes that might be better understood by eurochristian onlookers. Indeed, no Native languages seem to have any word for religion, and most of the accoutrements of religion identified by ethnographers or

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comparative religionists studying (or rather, signifying, as Charles Long would call it)

Native societies use words that have been lifted out of Native languages but reinterpreted, usually by the first christian missionaries, in order to characterize that Native society in terms more understandable to and manageable for the colonial power. Hence, words like *wakoⁿ* (ie *wazhazhe* / Osage) are immediately appropriated by colonialist missionaries and colonial government functionaries to signify the euro-christian category “sacred.” *wakoⁿda* is, by the same process, taken over by the missionaries to signify some Native notion of the euro-christian word god or higher power. (“You see, they are just like us, but just more primitive.” Less-than.) But these appropriations essentially falsify the culture of the Native colonized Other and irrevocably taint the euro-christian interpretation of the supposed Native reality.

It is in that process that a Native society is identified as religious or has the formality of a religion imposed upon it,[8] even as it becomes more colonized and more assimilated. Eventually even we come to believe it about ourselves. But, as it turns out, that was the colonialist point all along, and, wittingly or unwittingly, academics in comparative religions/religious studies have played and continue to play key roles in the colonial process of reducing Indigenous Peoples to regulated, quantifiable products.

We can fairly quickly demonstrate the conundrum by looking at traditional (pre-colonial?) Osage culture. A couple of years ago, I published an essay whose title speaks to the issue: “Why I Don’t Believe in a Creator.”[9] There at greater length I demonstrate why *wakoⁿ* and *wakoⁿda* must be understood in a completely different cognitional world than the euro-christian consciousness and its religious notions of the sacred; god; higher power; creator, the supernatural, the numinous, etc. Osages are a clear example of a so-called “dual society” of the sort that Lévi-Strauss insisted did not exist in reality, and which Alfonso Ortiz demonstrated was nevertheless the case for his own people, the San Juan Tewa. [10] Indeed, as Barbara Mann (Seneca / haudenosaunee) insists, without referencing Lévi-Strauss’ profound structuralist failure, all north American Indian cultures were intensely shaped around a reciprocal dualism—beginning with the Twinned Cosmos.[11] Francis LaFlesche (*umoⁿhoⁿ* / Omaha) makes the same claim of reciprocal dualism for the Osage—long before Lévi-Strauss.[12]

So, for instance, *wakoⁿda* must be a duality at the very least— *wakoⁿda* above and *wakoⁿda* below. In my youth I was taken under care by two important Osage elders. Asked to “pray” (a pure colonialist category, btw) at a meal some forty years ago, I recited the euro-christian/Indian kind of prayer to which I had become accustomed, only to be corrected by a close relative and Osage elder, Sylvester Tinker. He taught me to begin a “prayer” by acknowledging both the cosmic energy of the above and of the below: *wakoⁿda moⁿshita ski wakoⁿda udseta*, identified relationally as grandfather and grandmother.

You cannot, he instructed, point only to the above (e.g., “Dear Heavenly Father...” or even “Creator”). That is never enough; there must be both, male and female, in order to be a whole. About a decade later, this was re-emphasized by my adopted father, our eagle clan elder who had adopted my birth father as a brother. I should add here that this happened in my younger adulthood, long before Native colleagues pressed me to address the complete lack of words for pray or prayer in American Indian languages—that is until missionaries picked words in each of our languages to represent their own important “religious” discourse.[13]



In accordance with the reciprocal dualism Mann describes for Iroquoian Peoples, the old Osage architecture divided every village into two halves, between *tsisho* and *huⁿka*, a sky and an earth division, mirroring the cosmic whole.^[14] There was a road that physically divided each town into halves, going from east to west, a natural solar dividing line.^[15] The division-specific clans were then grouped discretely on their separate sides of the road (nine to the north; and fifteen to the south), with two important ceremonial leaders (*gaihega*) housed in the middle of the town, across the road from one another, representing each division.

widseke Sylvester Tinker coached me further as a budding young scholar on some important details of Osage culture. As an eagle clan person, Tinker was part of the *huⁿka* division of the nation, divided as we have seen between *huⁿka* and *tsisho*. Tinker went on to explain that in the old Osage villages the *tsisho* and the *huⁿka* would all sleep in a particular, prescribed manner, with their heads to the east. The *huⁿka* would all sleep on their right side, while the *tsisho* slept on their left side so that the two divisions slept facing one another across the road maintaining a singular whole even at night.

Thus, were they divided but united at the same time—to answer Lévi-Strauss' infamous conundrum. It was a physical manifestation of the symbolic unity—to cite Ortiz' rejoinder to Lévi Strauss; it enabled the people to model their experience of the universe where the energy above and the energy below, sky and earth, maintained cosmic harmony and balance.^[16] This reciprocal dualism is so pronounced across Indian Country that Mann argues the primary number for Indian folk is the number two. Indeed, she argues that the number one (e.g., monotheism) is dysfunctional, that the cosmos itself only works around a persistent pairing of twos: two energies, two halves, two genders, perhaps even plus and minus charges, etc. The division of an Osage village is one manifestation of this dualism.

This gives rise to my own basic interpretive question for academics of religion, framed as follows. Every Osage is born to or marries into a particular clan, and the clans, in turn, are distributed between the two divisions. For instance, I belong to an eagle clan; I have an adopted daughter who belongs to the buffalo bull clan. While our eagle clan is a *huⁿka* clan, the buffalo bull clan is *tsisho*. When she first moved in with us—just barely four years old, she had not been taught anything about her osage-ness, so I had to explain to her some basic things about osage life. Since she is *tsisho*, I explained, she had to learn to always put her left shoe and sock on first, and then her right side.

Same with a shirt or a pair of pants. Buffalo bull folk (*toka udsethe*) are, I explained, left-sided. Not left-handed but left-sided. It serves to always remind us who we are to pay attention to simple things like how we dress. Don't pay attention to how I dress, I added. I am *huⁿka* and eagle clan, so I am right-sided and put on my right shoe first, and so forth. This persistent practice is part of the pairing principal described by Mann, reciprocal dualism. And again, it functions both physically and symbolically to mimic the balancing of the cosmic energies of sky and earth. And doing things this way reminds us constantly of who we are, each one of us.^[17]

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Indian Council, a local urban Indian community project.

[1] The substance of this essay was first presented as a talk at the “Re-Envisioning Religious Studies as a Global Discipline,” hosted by the *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* at the University of Denver, November 15-16, 2018. I do want to express gratitude for the editorial expertise of my wife, Dr. Loring Abeyta, for her help on the final draft of this essay.

[2] *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1993).

[3] This much, of course, means interestingly that I too, just as does Gerald Vizenor, come under Vizenor’s disapprobation of exercising a trope to power, even as we attempt to do what we do from an Indian perspective and on behalf of Indian Peoples.

[4] I was, for instance, arrested with an AIM contingent in a Berkeley anti-apartheid protest at the University of California in the early 1980s protesting the university trustees’ apartheid investment policies.

[5] Colonialism messes everything up. For 30 years I could never really figure out what to call my work in the community—in english to explain to non-Natives. My brother, who is *heyoka ieska*, suggested years ago that I, like himself, just use “traditional American Indian spiritual leader” when we had to fill in that blank on a couple’s marriage license—even though the colonialist language is problematic. We have neither “spirituality” nor “leaders” *per se* in the euro-christian sense in our languages, and the truth is that I never “led” anybody. I was merely present at 4Winds as another (yet key) community resource to which people could turn.

[6] Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Duke, 2015), p. 4.

[7] David Chidester, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion* (U. Chicago Press: 2013). Chidester had previously demonstrated that whether colonial interpreters identified Natives in southern Africa as having a religion or not depended largely on what the needs of the colonizer might have been at any given moment. See his *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Univ. of Virginia Press, 1996).

[8] David Chidester describes the shifts in colonialist interpretations of Indigenous communities in South Africa, where whether those communities had “religion” or failed to have religion depended on the shifting needs of the colonizer. In his *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Univ. of Virginia, 1996).

[9] In *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice, and Life Together*, edited by Steve Heinrichs (Herald Press, 2013), pp. 167-179.

[10] Alfonso Ortiz, *The Tewa World: Space, Time, Being, and Becoming in a Pueblo Society*, (U. Chicago, 1969) pp. 8, 84, 137, et inter alia. Ortiz cites the well-known discussion of dual societies in Lévi-Strauss’ *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, (1963), particularly Chapter Eight, “Do Dual Organizations Exist?” pp. 131-166 (reprinted from “Les organisations dualistes existent-elles?” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia*, 112:2; January 1956).

[11] Barbara Mann, *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas* (Peter Lang, 2000).

[12] LaFlesche, *Rite of the Chiefs; Sayings of the Ancient Men*, BAE 36: 1914-1915, (US Government Printing Office, 1921).

[13] The Osage word coopted by missionaries to signify “pray” is *wadá*. In actuality, it merely means “speak” or “talk.” The term lacks any up-down image schema of petitioning a higher power inherent in the euro-christian word pray—even though contemporary Native folk have come to use the words pray and prayer persistently in english.

[14] Again, La Flesche, *Rite of the Chiefs*, p. 59.

[15] James Owen Dorsey drew the road dividing the town as a north-south avenue. Wow. He was there, and there as a professional ethnographer/observer. Yet he failed totally to understand the (spatial) significance of this road. One example is his drawing in “An Account of the War Customs of the Osages, Given by Red Corn (*Hapa-shutse*) of the Peace-Making Gens,” *The American Naturalist*, XVIII (February 1884): 114. Again, Dorsey’s “Camping Circle at the Time of the Sun-Dance” has the opening of the circle to the north (p.455), in “A Study of Siouan Cults,” *Eleventh Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1889-1890* (Government Printing Office, Washington).

[16] Again, Alfonso Ortiz, *The Tewa World*. And for the Osages, see Francis LaFlesche, cited above, and LaFlesche’s works generally in the Bureau of American Ethnography annual reports.

[17] I am reminded of the old adage that actions speak louder than words. Colonialist discourse about religion asserts control through words, through disciplinary doctrines. Indigenous Peoples engage with the universe through actions, behaviors, and experiences—through reciprocity.

◆ American Indians, Claude Levi-Strauss, David Chidester, Euro-Christianity, Four Winds Council, Gerald Vizenor, Osage people, religion

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