

Knowledge and Religion: Native Perspectives in a Changing World

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Abstract

The present article discusses the influences Christianity and Western philosophy have exerted in Native American life after colonization. Several Native American authors, through their postcolonial reconstructions of indigenous culture and history, question such conceptual and religious interference imposed after European arrival in the "new continent". The idea here is to analyze how this religion-culture debate evolved and how it is represented in contemporary native literature.

Keywords: *Postcolonialism , religion , philosophy.*

Resumo

O presente artigo discute a influência que o Cristianismo e o pensamento filosófico ocidental exerceram na vida dos nativos americanos após a colonização. Vários escritores americanos de origem indígena, através de reconstruções pós-coloniais da cultura e história de seus povos, questionam a interferência conceitual e/ou religiosa que foi imposta após a chegada dos europeus ao "novo continente". A idéia aqui é analisar como esse debate religioso e cultural vem sendo representado na literatura contemporânea indígena.

Palavras-chave: *Pós-colonialismo, religião, filosofia.*

Knowing is not so much about the assemblage of existing knowledge as it is about recognizing our constitution as 'ourselves' within the fragments that we process as knowledge. (Avtar Brah)

human existence and life as compared to European mainstream viewpoints. The encounter with Western paradigms after the advent of colonialism has deeply affected the practical life of American indigenous peoples. Weaver (1997, p.viii), a Native American scholar, in the introduction to his book *That the People Might Live* argues that natives have always been very skeptical about theology because, contrary to Judeo-Christian traditions, theirs are not primarily religions of theology but of "ritual

INTRODUCTION

Native cultures all over America have developed very particular explanations of

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This article is a summarized version of the fourth chapter of my thesis entitled *Race, Gender and Culture: Reconstructions of 'America' by Native Women Writers*, presented at UFSC in 2001.

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observance". Unlike Western societies, where religion became, to some extent, isolated in a sacred sphere, native traditional religions are totally integrated into daily life. It is interesting to point out that the Cherokees, for instance, have one single word for 'religion', 'culture', 'land', 'history' and 'law', which indicates how interwoven such aspects of social life are in their tribal community.

Considering that native religions² are communal, rarely used for personal purposes or self-empowerment, one can imagine how impressed most tribes were by the status delegated to European priests and other religious people who arrived in the 'New Land,' with highly (imperialistic) political and religious aims. After the encounter with colonizers and some consequent changes in indigenous life style, several natives started feeling some weakness in their own religious traditions when trying to solve those problems brought to this continent by white colonizers, problems such as new diseases, famine, and the like. Some tribes at first accepted the new priests, considering that they might in effect be better prepared and more powerful since they knew how to deal with those problems. Others believed that native spirits had abandoned their land after white invasion. Of course, later on most natives became aware that white colonizers (including priests) were the ones who brought such crises to America, which might explain why they could better relate to the implied difficulties of the new times.

As Dippie (1982, p.6) states, "the European image of the Indian oscillated between the noble savage and the bloodthirsty devil". Of course, such changeable opinions depended a lot on the policies of the moment. When New England settlers were looking for a national origin to differentiate themselves from the English, they defined natives as "brothers" or "fathers" of the New American civilization. When they noticed that natives were not so glad to "exchange land for civilization," colonizers proclaimed the necessity of saving those lost souls; thus, religion

started playing a fundamental role in excusing all massacres that happened in the 'new, virginal land' (Dippie, 1982, p.7).

Christianity and all attempts at converting "the savages"³ have marked native culture in several manners: young children were taken to missionary schools in order to become "civilized" or "Christianized." Once there, most of them were forbidden to speak their original languages, causing an inevitable rupture with their cultures at home. New words and notions were introduced to native vocabulary such as 'sin', 'salvation', 'punishment' and 'confession' and, at the same time, native worship started being defined as a sacrilege by the priests. Thus, the specific terrain for native production (and revalidation) of ancient knowledge, that is, traditional ceremonies and language, became conflicting sites for those interested in resisting cultural extermination. Schools and imported religious institutions brought books, literacy, churches, priests to this continent but they worked as 'cultural erasers;' from such "innovative" perspectives, native memory and traditions did not count at all, and were even expected to disappear. Western religions and European knowledge became, in fact, integrated agents for the "civilizing" and acculturation of those "lost souls." In addition, Christianity has always been involved in land conflicts. At the very beginning of colonial (un)structuring, priests were mainly interested in guaranteeing new pieces of land for the concrete establishment of their religious buildings, schools and churches. Thus, American territory was understood to be an empty space for God's work, which could only be completed through the interference of Western religious people. As Deloria, Jr. (1988, p.30) states, Christianity "endorsed and advocated the rape of the North American continent, and her representatives have done their utmost to contribute to this process ever since". Thus it is not surprising that most postcolonial native writers are extremely interested not only in analyzing how native land was taken but which forces have played important roles in the dismantling of

²Here I use 'religions' in the plural as a way of stressing the non-universalizing tendency of tribal organization of beliefs and practices. Such religions do not follow 'one' book nor a unique Spiritual Guide; on the contrary, such elements vary significantly from tribe to tribe, from region to region, often being determined by natural and geographical particularities.

³I am using the word most commonly applied when referring to natives at the beginning of colonial time, obviously derived from a Christian, "civilized" perception of the "New World".



native territory. In a clearly postcolonial questioning of American government international attitudes at the present moment, Deloria, Jr. (1988, p. 51) claims:

Until America begins to build a moral record in her dealings with the Indian people she should not try to fool the rest of the world about her intentions on other continents. America has always been a militantly imperialistic world power eagerly grasping for economic control over weaker nations.

Similarly to Deloria, many other contemporary native writers call attention to the fact that American government should respect cultural difference inside the country instead of advocating international human rights, mainly in relation to foreign policies.

Vernon (1999, p.75) points out that, only in 1987, the Church Council of Greater Seattle eventually declared a formal "Bishops' Apology" to natives living in the US. That document "apologized to Indian people for the signatory churches' long standing participation in the destruction of traditional Indian ceremonies" as well as for not having defended them from federal injustice. Intrigued with such sudden (and delayed) excuses on the part of an institution that has largely been involved in the devastation of traditional native culture, Vernon reviews the life and narratives produced by some Indians who are known as representatives (and survivors) of Christian institutions such as William Apess (b.1798), Rev. Peter Jones (b.1802), Edward Goodbird (b.1869), Thomas Alford (b.1860) and Charles Eastman (b.1858).

These five early native (male) voices give hints as to how intensely the introduction of Christianity has affected life in America. All these men, with the exception of Rev. Jones, a Chippewa who totally rejected native ways and even his Indianness, were interested in keeping traditional native views together with new Christian perspectives. In fact, they (as well as other natives) had experienced the prohibition of their original tribe's worship, the attacks on their languages and worldviews, and were expected to buy the idea that conversion and religious domestication were preconditions for entering American society as citizens. In addition, entering the Church

represented a way of bettering their social conditions; by becoming Christians, Indians could not only get better formal education but were also allowed legal ownership of land (Vernon, 1999, p.81). According to colonial mainstream understandings, only Christian Americans were considered citizens, having the right to own property. In the same article, Vernon stresses that postcolonial native narratives of the twentieth century produced by New Christians expressed a growing discomfort with the notion that negation of 'original' culture was a requirement of conversion, which exposed the existing tension between Christianity and native culture. She also claims that, in the discourses produced by native Christians interested in analyzing the world through the lenses of postcoloniality, Christianity is presented as "a means of survival and as a vehicle of adaptation, reflecting considered choices which do not necessarily imply rejection of Native spirituality or 'Indianness'" (Vernon, 1999, p.76). In fact, Christianity represented a means for native survival in a mixed world where white supremacy had been established through force.

THE RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL DILEMMA

At least since Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, 1968, native poets, fiction writers and theorists have been interested in representing or studying the dilemma that so many Native Americans have faced since colonization: "how does one remain whole while accepting the supernatural and ritual practices of the tribe and simultaneously assimilating white Christian attitudes required by white presence and white colonization?" (ALLEN, 1986, p.96). According to several authors, proximity to the 'civilizing' attempts of white Christians has not improved the already existing system of values in native country. This is another reason why native writers concentrate their efforts in marking their own territory "contrapuntally to those non-Native voices" that have been almost



THE LITERARY REPRESENTATION OF THE RELIGIOUS-CULTURAL DILEMMA

exclusively heard throughout American history (Weaver, 1997, p.xii). In this context, syncretism is not only inevitable but a “peculiar strength” for fighting “internalized oppression” as well as for reconstructing memory and history in more liberating ways. Towards the end of the twentieth century, since colonization processes have not ended and natives still refuse total assimilation into the dominant society, Christianity is still an important theme for those interested in keeping hybrid and alternative interpretations of the world constructed from the viewpoint of a minority group. What has been defended since the 1960’s (mainly by Vine Deloria, Jr.) is an inclusive Christianity, in which native people may incorporate their values, creating their own versions of contemporary (native) religion.

Countless native authors, when trying to characterize their literature, refer to the alternative worldviews of texts by Indians—more focused on space than on time, presenting time as cyclical instead of linear, reality as non-anthropocentric and ecologically-oriented. Weaver (1997, p. 28) stresses that, as a result of a difficulty on the part of native cultures to admit any split between sacred and secular spheres, native worldview remains essentially religious, involving the native’s deepest sense of self and embracing tribal life, existence, and identity. Observing that the literature produced by natives tends to express a preoccupation with the imposition of foreign, Westernized worldviews, this article analyzes representations of religious and philosophical issues, arguing that such knowledge can be taken as an integral element of literary discourse.

Even after five hundred years of insistent attempts to destabilize the traditional religious systems of indigenous tribes, Christianity has been, in this sense, unsuccessful due to the “intimate connection between Native religion and Native culture and community” (Weaver, 1997, p.viii). As only 10 to 25% of contemporary Native Americans are Christians, one can conclude that imported Western cultural and religious philosophical patterns have not always succeeded in the battle of paradigms which has taken place in America during the last centuries. Many Christianized natives adopt syncretic practices: they go to church but keep following traditional ways and ceremonies.

Conflicting elements of American postcolonial world are largely represented in the literature produced by contemporary native writers. Native women writers have been mainly interested in analyzing the differences existing between their “original” cultures and that colonial, imported one to which they have been exposed, one that has been responsible for several changes in native gender system, affecting women’s private and public lives in quite negative ways. Such literature became not only a tool for elaborating their conflicts but also a strategy for the maintenance of traditional stories, beliefs and values apart from those imposed by a dominant, colonizer’s culture which has historically privileged male-centered worldviews. Such women writers also want to discuss topics which have been treated by male native (Christianized or not) intellectuals since the beginnings of colonization and Christianization, issues women have very rarely had the opportunity to debate.

The representation of such cultural encounters and the implied syncretic arrangements in the fiction produced by native writers may exemplify what Homi Bhabha (1994, pp.1-2) refers to as the existence of “in-between spaces” where strategies of singular and communal selfhood can be organized in the articulation of cultural differences. In fact, such “in-between places” have to be constantly recreated as inexorable sites of conflict, of coalition, of interchange. Besides, taking such coexisting realities into consideration reminds us of the fact that our times are times of “contamination,” where most cultures have already been positively or negatively affected by others, and where “purity” is a fantasy (parodying Haraway’s statement that “origin is a fantasy”).

Weaver, quoting Guerrero, brings up a fundamental aspect to the discussion: unfortunately, the illusion of white superiority has very often been accepted as an “unquestionable factual reality” by native people. If colonial knowledge and the imported

educational institutions implied an inevitable internalized oppression on the part of native people, it is exactly through revolutionary practices, by moving back to their traditions and rereading them in creative ways, that natives can (re)emancipate themselves and, at the same time, build a more democratic and inclusive American society. Literature can thus stand for the site where a more positive construction of native identity, in its constant struggle against colonialism, might be elaborated. Even acknowledging that the history told by such “new subjects” who have survived in the margins can never be ‘the’ final version of any history or story, the present text considers listening to those voices “contrapuntally” (Weaver, 1997, p. xii) to be of fundamental importance.

SUSAN POWER AND THE REPRESENTATION OF CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS CLASHES

Susan Power, a young contemporary North-American writer of native descent, living in Chicago and being a member of The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, comments her cultural duplicity as follows: “it was important for me to move back and forth between the worlds that also exist within me, to nurture both spirits”⁴.

In her first novel *The Grass Dancer*⁵ (Power, 1994), she presents “the new times” and the implicit adaptations in native life style as inevitable, though not always desirable. Thus, one of the characters in the novel, Anna Thunder, a medicine woman from that Dakota group, when seeing a periodic table for the first time and hearing from her granddaughter that “an element is a substance that can’t be split into simpler substances”, firmly states: “That’s my story . . . I’m all of a piece” (GD, p.21). She thus starts using the name Mercury, Mercury Thunder. Mercury (or Anna), however, is not so open to other new religious elements. At the

moment her granddaughter gets interested in Christian matters, she firmly states:

You get back with your Jesus . . . You take him right back where you found him, and don’t bring him to me. That one has too many faces. You don’t know where you stand with him. Give me honest Jack anytime, because I know he wants to do me in, but I can see him coming a mile away’. (GD, p. 47)

(Anna) Mercury can better deal with what she knows well enough, in this case, evil as perceived by her powerful Indian eyes and not a foreign, blond, blue-eyed imported messiah.

Susan Power represents the points of clash still existing between white and Indian culture even after so many years or centuries of contact. In some aspects, it seems that both cultures have coexisted as oil and water, never able to mix equally and properly. According to Wright (1995, p.39), the subtext in *The Grass Dancer* is the incompatibility between “the vital core of tribal Indian life and the essence of Indian identity, and the rational, technological and spiritual groundwork of the West.” Indeed, one reads in Power’s novel that early Christian missionaries have tried to enchant and impress Indians through images and music. Herod, a *yuwipi* (medicine man), explains this to his grandson and some of his friends, while taking them to the river and pointing downstream:

That’s where Christianity came from. . . A steamboat finally made it up the Missouri, using stilts to get over the sandbars. It brought the first piano to this area, the first one our people ever heard. They took to that music, I think, because it’s dramatic, and you know how we are, always ready for a big show. That sound made them believe about heaven better than any priest’s words. They could hear it, couldn’t they? After the piano and all the church music hit this tribe, there were a lot of converts’ (GD, pp. 59-60).

While saying these words, Herod throws some tobacco into the water and states: “I’m just saying to *Wakan Tanka* that I haven’t forgotten Him. I didn’t go the way of the steamer and the great piano. I listen for his voice and the music he makes in the water and through the wind” (GD, p.60). With this character, Susan Power is constructing a

⁴Taken from the Internet Public Library online resources.

⁵Any further reference to this novel will appear as GD, followed by page number.



postcolonial narrative of religion: explaining the changes after contact and, concomitantly, reinforcing native historical versions as well as oral tradition.

Several characters are skeptical in relation to Christianity and white culture in *The Grass Dancer*, Herod being the one who expresses his viewpoint more clearly. He does not trust the Christian God. Through a simple story, he shares his perspective: "[T]he Christian God has a big lantern with the kerosene turned way up, and the people pray to Him for help, for guidance, and he lights the way. Now *Wakan Tanka*, when you cry to Him for help says, 'Okay, here's how you start a fire!' And then you have to make your own torch" (GD, p.285). What Herod really appreciates in *Wakan Tanka* is that he does not require people's absolute adoration and submission to his divinity. On the contrary, it wants people to be independent and, at the same time, responsible for their actions, ideas that really give support to tribal communal organization, where all individuals are expected to be able to survive on their own but be interested in the benefit of the whole community.

Another traditional character in *The Grass Dancer* who develops interesting opinions on Christianity, new and old knowledge is Margaret Many Wounds. Stating that she had entered the Church because of her guilt in relation to having twin daughters with a Japanese man and of having lied her whole life about it, she assumes a rebel position in her last days alive. With her twin daughters and her grandson Harley sitting next to her bed, Margareth openly repents her Christian conversion. At this seminal moment, she does not want to confess nor see the priest: "And don't you let that Father Zimmer near me! All he wants to do is have the last word over my body and go fishing for my soul" (GD, p.96). Margaret tries to go back to the old times, rejecting all cultural imports she has accepted before: "I'm not a sheep . . . There is still time to go back" (GD, p.96). Being closely connected to her grandson Harley, a very young boy at that time, she asks him to go to the yard and bury her cedar rosary, thinking aloud: "Maybe something useful will grow" (GD, p.97).

It is interesting to point out that Margaret dies on the exact day the American astronauts are arriving on the moon. Two processes-one

natural and the other artificial, scientific-are completing their cycles: Margaret's life is ending and men are getting to that distant, previously unreachable moon. While she lays on bed, everybody is watching television to see what the moon looks like. Margareth's daughter, Evelyn, proud and amazed by the opportunity of watching the scene, thinks aloud: "it will be history", while her mother, quite indifferent to what is being shown completes: "it is all history" (GD, p.108).

Harley, the one in the house best equipped to circulate in modern and ancient worlds because of his high sensitivity, notices that there are two moons, in fact-one on the screen and another one in the sky. His grandmother perceptively feels this is the last moment to teach him something; she states that there are many, many more moons than that, "for every person who can see it, there's another one" (GD, p.109). Margaret helps him experience some transcendental moment by making him pretend the moon is inside him. Harley, closing his eyes, is able to see the moon inside him, inside his skull and when he finally, a little afraid, opens his eyes, Margaret is saying: "That's the moon. That is the way into the moon." When the child gets a little confused, pointing to the television once again, the grandmother clarifies: "They can only walk on the surface" (GD, p.110), and continues, ". . . remember that feeling. Remember what it's like to be the moon, and you, and the darkness and the light." After that definition of 'completeness', Margaret dies. Harley, feeling her departure, keeps looking at the men on the moon, while her grandmother's body starts to be washed by her two daughters. Margaret, however, with her traveling soul, appears to Harley once again. He sees her on the television screen, beside (and through) Armstrong; she is there, dancing for Harley and telling him to look at her, "Look at the magic. There is still magic in the world" (GD, p.114).

In this passage of Power's novel the supernatural plays an important role, introducing Harley to magical events. In several tribes, spirits of the recent dead are believed to appear after death. The strange element here is the television, that is, technology being used in favor of magic,



showing the very syncretic nature of native survival strategies. This is exactly what Margaret is trying to show her grandson-that things are changing a lot but there is still place for magic in people's lives. This event prepares Harley for his future visions and spiritual quest, at the end of which he meets Red Dress, a mythical figure for the Sioux, on the verge of the living world. Such natural and supernatural learning processes passed on from one generation to the next are very typical of oral societies, where the continuance of power and knowledge depends a lot on telling and listening, that is, on reconstructions and revisions of collective memories.

In *The Grass Dancer*, Red Dress is clearly involved in a fight against an imposed and imported culture which cannot peacefully coexist with native life. When she appears to Harley at the very end of the novel, at the moment he is having his first vision, she explains how she perceives his role as the best grass dancer of the group-she tells him he is "dancing a rebellion" (*GD*, p. 299). From a native perspective, it seems that Power's point here is not only to make people trust again their memories, their identities in the present but also remind them that there were other fighters in the past, such as the Ghost Dancers, who may well be still helping and pointing directions to living natives. The Ghost Dance Movement developed towards the end of the 19th century as a religious manifestation among several tribes. The dancers believed they could bring the old times back by dancing and praying to their ancestors, by receiving the visions they experienced in such meetings. White Americans, especially those in the army, getting afraid of the magical tone of such meetings and their power in congregating large groups of natives all over the country, tragically interrupted one such religious dance meetings at Wounded Knee in 1890. Wounded Knee can be considered as the last explicit war event among Indians and whites. It was a real massacre, in which natives were killed while dancing for freedom and expectations of a better life. Susan Power's novel can be read (or listened to) as an echoing voice of that movement, a voice that can still inspire

contemporary natives to dance a rebellion with her.

CONCLUSION

Many critics agree that magical realism has mainly appeared in the Americas in connection to "indigenous and black *Weltanschauungen*" (Walter, 1999, p.64). In fact, the very ritual basis of native worldviews favored the development of native stories on myths and legends. Most of the characters related to the magical events in such novels are those who show a collective rather than an individual identity and who participate in human, natural and cosmic realms of their group's life. The novel by Power also shows such characteristics. Several female characters play a fundamental role for the survival of some original native traits in indigenous cultures. They are all highly interested in collective memory, in listening to the voices of the past as ways of recovering power, agency and resistance. The lives of all Power's characters are determined by magical events, unexplainable or unacceptable from a rational, objective, Western interpretation of reality. These characters' healing, cure or survival possibilities are determined by the help they can get from their ancestors, from totem-like figures, from animals, spirits and ghosts. Since natives perceive 'reality' as very close to 'imagination,' there is no tension between what can be seen or imagined and, thus, the past can be taken as a vital part of the present. The marvelous, the supernatural must be supported by faith, a collective belief in its power; for "myths and legends as lived/living (hi)stories, as value-laden images that endow the facts of ordinary life with philosophical meaning, constitute the very ground for belief in Indian and black cosmologies" (Walter, 1999, p.65).

In fact, the supernatural is here used as a literary strategy which recreates suppressed historical elements and voices in its decolonizing cultural processes. It is clearly a way of resisting: resisting imposed Christianity, imposed cultural models, imposed rationality. In this sense, the supernatural is a way of undermining mainstream, dominant Western paradigms and, at the same time, a possibility



for liberation of meanings, visions and legends from the past in creative new articulations. Contemporary native authors are interested in recreating memory and history but according to their own perceptions, generally supported by native worldviews.

Christianity seems to have profoundly affected most of American tribes, being one shared experience imposed on indigenous peoples after the colonial advent. Thus, the representation of religion and life after contact are of interest to native authors as constituting elements of contemporary life. In this sense, native authors question the past and, at the same time, participate in the construction of new, imaginative ways for contemporary society, alternative and flexible patterns which might determine a better future for all of us.

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