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## **The Basis of Indigenous Spirituality**

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The belief that God is everywhere and knows everything is the basis of indigenous people's spirituality. Spirituality originates from the Spirit of God. Spirituality for the indigenous people is a way of living in the constant consciousness of the presence of God. It has to do with the way they live, act, and relate with God, fellow human being and the whole of God's creation.

Indigenous peoples' spirituality emphasizes on the wholeness of life and interconnectedness of all. It is basically a spirituality of relationship; our connectedness to one another and the whole of God's creation and the spirit world. Tribal worldview makes no distinction between what is the spiritual and physical, material and immaterial, sacred and secular; heavenly and earthly, etc.

Honesty, sincerity, speaking the truth and dignity of labor are all important spiritual values of the people. Hospitality, communitarian spirit and respect for one another are the hallmarks of tribal people. They practically lived out these values in their life.

Theirs is a spirituality that is centered on community, social justice and peace. They lived and worked for maintaining balance and harmony in the community as well as for the whole of creation.

Indigenous peoples' worldview can be described as the recognition of the undifferentiated unity of all things, meaning, there is no distinction drawn between the spiritual and physical, material and immaterial, sacred and profane, and spiritual and earthly. Nor does an indigenous worldview recognize any structure of hierarchy in creation. They see the world and all its surroundings in holistic perspective. While a Western worldview is essentially anthropocentric, an indigenous worldview is creation-centered and is characterized by understanding the interdependence and the interrelatedness of *all* creation, including human beings. Therefore, indigenous peoples across the world that I know believe that the whole of creation are our relatives. The Lakota nation of American Indians has an expression which describes beautifully all that concerns the Indigenous worldview, "We are all related."

Leroy Little Bear observes that the indigenous "paradigm is comprised of and includes ideas of constant motion and flux, existence consisting of energy waves, interrelationships, all things being animate, space/place, renewal, and all things being imbued with spirits."<sup>1</sup>

As noted above, indigenous "peoples do not differentiate their world of experience into two realms that oppose or complement each other. They seem to maintain a consistent understanding of the unity of all experience."<sup>2</sup> Referring to Naga religious view, J. H. Thumra asserts that "unlike many modern Christian belief in the dichotomy of the 'sacred' and the 'secular' or the 'spiritual' and the 'material', the traditional Naga religion does not have such a dichotomy. For them the 'sacred' and the 'secular' are one."<sup>3</sup> In "An Emerging Asian Theology: Tribal Theology," Wati Longchar makes a useful comparison between dominant Christian worldview and traditional Tribal worldview in which he underscores their differences.<sup>4</sup> Indigenous peoples around the world view reality in its wholeness and perceive life as one single web and many smaller webs of relationships which is the antithesis of the dominant Christian dualistic and individualistic views. Further, their cultural and religious values are governed by respect for one another and reciprocity is the norm for their day-to-day interactions.

The well-being of all creation including that of human beings depends upon preserving and restoring the harmonious interrelationships of all creation. All living creatures including humans are meant to work toward maintaining balance and harmony and these are to be seen as the ultimate concern of all beings. Indigenous peoples do not believe in the superiority of humans over against the rest of creation.

Indeed, indigenous people consider animals, other living creatures, and all created as "people" in the same manner as the various tribes of human beings are people."<sup>5</sup> Indigenous peoples claim they have reciprocal relationships with all living things, which includes the so-called "inanimate" objects such as rocks, plants, and other natural forms.<sup>6</sup> Everything is imbued with spirit so all is sacred for Indigenous peoples. Because all creation is sacred the very land we walk and till must be treated with respect and reverence. Therefore, they treat life and creation with respect and reverence. One reason land is sacred for Indigenous peoples is that it is the dwelling place of the spirits; the ancestors have lived and worked the same land and they take their final rest and their bones becomes the land.<sup>7</sup>

Indigenous worldview is further characterized by being spatially oriented rather than temporally focused as is of the Euro-American worldview. This worldview of spatiality essentially accentuates and locates the all important life qualities of relationships among and between human beings and the whole of creation. This understanding extends and embraces the way Indigenous peoples view the world and relate themselves to the spirits and God(s). In "Full Circle of Liberation: An American Theology of Place," George E. Tinker argues that the traditional Christian Euro-centric notion of God's action in time, which incidentally, is also embraced by Black theologians and Latin American theologians, is not how American Indians could understand a relation to God. God acts in space and in place. Tinker explains, "God reveals God's self in creation, in space or place, not in time."<sup>8</sup>For Tinker and other Indigenous thinkers, the traditional linear thinking of temporality that is fundamental to the Western intellectual tradition is quite alien to Indigenous peoples and is in fact destructive to their livelihood.

Space-creation centered spirituality calls for critical reevaluation of our ways of life, our Christian spirituality and our attitude towards all God's creation. The ecological crisis which we are confronted today is primarily a spiritual crisis. Looking from the indigenous people's holistic view of life, there is no separation between what is physical and spiritual, matter and spirit and everything including human, spirits and the rest of creation are interrelated and interconnected. For the indigenous people spirituality is therefore a way of life; our living style, habit and the way we conduct and relate with other fellow human beings and creation are all integral part of their spirituality.

#### Notes:

1 Leroy Little Bear, "Foreward", in Gregory Cajete, *Native Science*. x.

2 Deloria, *Spirit and Reason*. 354.

3 Jonathan H. Thumra, "The Naga Primal (Traditional) Religion and Christianity: A Theological Reflection," in V. K. Nuh, ed. *In Search of Praxis Theology for the Nagas* (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 2003), 54.

4 For a detailed comparison see A. Wati Longchar, *An Emerging Asian Theology: Tribal Theology: Issue, Method and Perspective* (Jorhat: Tribal Study Center, 2000), 64.

5 Vine Deloria, Jr, *God is Red: A Native View of Religion*. 2d ed.(Golden: North American Press, 1992), 89.

6 Walking Buffalo articulates this truth: "Did you know that trees talk? Well they do. They talk to each other, and they'll talk to you if you listen. Trouble is, White people don't listen. They never learned to listen to the Indians, so I don't I suppose they'll listen to other voices in nature. But I have learned a lot from trees: sometimes about the weather, sometimes about animals, sometimes about the Great Spirit." Quoted in Deloria. *Ibid*. 90.

7 M. Horam, *Nagas Old Ways New Trends* (Delhi: Cosmos Publications, 1988), 15f.

8 George E. Tinker, "The Full Circle of Liberation: An American Theology of Place," in David G. Hallman, ed., *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994), 221; *Spirit and Resistance*, 91-92.

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