

First Nations/Native Americans and Religion

Bibliographic Conversation and Recommendations

Presenters:

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ABSTRACT A quick search using the subject “Indians of North America – Religion” in Bridwell Library’s catalog retrieved 130 results out of a collection of about 490,000 volumes. This suggests (a) The Library of Congress may want to consider revising some of its subject headings (but that is a topic for another time), (b) religious and spiritual practices among native North Americans/First Nations are not widely studied by our students. While there are certainly exceptions, likely this situation is not unique among theological libraries. This session represents an effort to rectify this by sharing and inviting colleagues to share recommendations of resources on spirituality and religious beliefs and practices of various native North American/First Nations groups and their relation to the faith traditions that are more broadly represented in our collections.

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“In this effort to convert the American Indians [John Wesley] was, of course, singularly unsuccessful.” Encyclopedia of World Methodism (1974, p. 1201a)

I have to admit that I chuckled over this quotation. In my life prior to theological librarianship, I did a lot of work in the history of the Americas, or the “New World” as Europe and its adventurers called it. Thus, my perspective is historical, and my understanding of the consequences of the encounters between Europeans and Native

North Americans (per the LC subject heading) can be summed up as one long, profound, and ongoing misunderstanding of one another. Sometimes it was violent, sometimes accommodating, but the power dynamics were rarely equal.

This session is intended for sharing “recommendations of resources on spirituality and religious beliefs and practices of various native North American/First Nations groups and their relation to the faith traditions that are more broadly represented in our collections.” Before we get started with our conversation, then, I wanted to make five brief points. These suggestions are not about specific resources so much as guidelines to keep in the back of our minds as we undertake studies of indigenous cultures and assist others in their undertakings.

First, most obviously, this is a really big topic. This map of the western hemisphere represents broad linguistic groupings of peoples indigenous to the Americas. From a European perspective we are talking about two continents, five centuries, three empires, half a dozen colonial powers, nearly three dozen post-colonial nations (if we count the Caribbean and Central and South America), innumerable groupings of native peoples both pastoral and nomadic, extinct or surviving, each with their own cosmological variation. Overlaying that with the Christian religion in its myriad denominations further complicates the subject. Anyone undertaking research in this area will need to narrow the focus of their project pretty pronto lest they drown in a tsunami of material.

Second, in the last generation most scholars have come to accept that various European diseases wiped out possibly as many as twenty million indigenous Americans, some of whom had never even encountered a European, such was the speed with which disease spread. European primary source material describes expeditions entering villages devoid of life—their inhabitants having either died or fled. Entire populations simply collapsed. Consider the implications such a drastic shift in population held for religion and religious practices. For comparison consider the European plague pandemic of the fourteenth century which contributed to the multi-faceted Crisis of the Late Middle Ages. Further, in primarily oral societies, how are culture and theology sustained when everyone succumbs to disease?

A third issue to bear in mind at the outset of any inquiry is the historic record, which in European terms, means a written record.

Researchers need to develop a keen sense of the worldviews of the observers as well as those they observe. Before the advent of Anthropology and Ethnology as scholarly disciplines in the nineteenth century, the people who most frequently lived with, or in proximity to, indigenous groups in the Americas tended to be missionaries. Through their efforts a rich collection of written primary source material regarding indigenous religion, culture, and practices has been preserved, but these are vexed materials. Researchers need to ask themselves what preconceived notions were held by those writing for the historic record. Were they steeped in Dryden's depictions of the Noble Savage, Alexander Pope's romantically primitive "Lo! The poor Indian . . .," or, conversely, did they subscribe to the image of bloodthirsty demons whose only hope for redemption was a forced imposition of an equally bloodthirsty form of Christianity? Between these two extremes fall a wide range of perspectives, each colored to a greater or lesser extent by the lenses through which these recorders viewed their situation.

Fourth, academic disciplines, as we all know, are a modern Western construct. These artificial silos demand the use of a variety of disciplinary resources to get where we want to go in the study of indigenous peoples in the western hemisphere. For example, aspects of indigenous religious practices, ancient or modern, might wind up with subject headings (another modern construct) that fall in the areas listed here:

- Anthropology
- Archaeology
- Art
- Art History
- Demography
- Economics
- Environmental Studies
- Ethnic Studies
- Ethnography
- First Nations Studies
- History
- Literature
- Native American Studies
- Regional (Geographic) Studies
- Religious Studies
- Sociology
- Theology

Further, resources in one area might compensate for the dearth of resources in another. For example, if indigenous voices do not speak much in the historical record, they may have greater volume in the archaeological record. The use of more than one kind of resource in more than one area of study can yield more and better results.

While this list can look daunting, especially in today's superabundance of information, determining sound project parameters can help to focus researchers in specific areas. The best approaches include interacting with sources using an analytical mind, combined with respect and sensitivity; using sound methodology; cross-checking sources against one another; identifying your source's biases at the outset; and consulting a wide variety of sources. Above all, seek indigenous voices, expertise, and authority throughout your work.

Once upon a time, a MacArthur "genius grant" winner, Ramón Gutiérrez, wrote a book called *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away* (1991). While lauded at the time for the use of groundbreaking methodology, the book nevertheless proved "celebrated but controversial," in the words of reviewer and ethnologist Sylvia Rodriguez. Other reviewers called it "arrogant," "imperialistic," and "appropriative." In New Mexico, Pueblo Indian groups, whose history and culture represented a significant portion of the book's content, went ballistic over it. Scholarly debate continued for some years over the work, with Gutiérrez meeting his critics and defending his position. Which brings me to my final point: We all need to cultivate what my colleague David Schmearsal refers to as Critical Humility. Scholar Alison Freese outlined the ways in which Gutiérrez failed to do this in his book. Of her seven objections, three in particular stand out:

Information from one Native American group [was] used for other groups, regardless of cultural, geographic, or temporal distance.

One example was all that [was] needed to prove a key generalization.

Ethnographic information gathered up to 500 years after conquest and colonization [was] used to describe precontact aboriginal cultures.

I can hear you say now, "Yeah, Jane, but this book came out in the 1990s. That was a long time ago and nobody read it anyway." In response I'd suggest that 1) this book was standard graduate school reading in history for at least a decade and 2) it was Stanford Univer-

sity Press's bestselling publication of all time. In other words, this book, for all its faults, has a Very. Long. Reach.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that the five points mentioned above are not merely academic or historic. One has only to scan the news to see that indigenous peoples of the present continue to deal with issues regarding their right to maintain and control their own physical resources, cultural expressions (including religion), and sovereignty. Resistance to Euro-American appropriation does not simply refer to the territorial encroachments of the past. In terms of religion, we see the threat to sacred sites posed by the Keystone Pipeline. We see the commodification of sacred objects and symbols to sustain much-needed tourist dollars. In the U.S. we struggle with religious debates over the gaming industry. Examples such as these abound.

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Before opening our session for conversation, I would like to take just a few minutes to consider how we might apply some of the points Jane has made in our contexts and in our vocations as theological librarians. When proposing this session, we identified as learning objectives that participants would “come away with a list of recommended titles on ‘Native Americans/First Nations and spirituality/religion’ to consider including in their libraries’ collections” and would “come away with greater familiarity with some of the essential reference works, primary texts, and secondary sources to recommend to students who are researching topics pertaining to ‘Native Americans/First Nations and spirituality/religion.’”

To this end, while I was still Reference and Digital Services Librarian at Bridwell Library, I created a LibGuide: [Native American Religion](https://bridwellguides.smu.edu/c.php?g=921636) <https://bridwellguides.smu.edu/c.php?g=921636>. As with all such guides, my purpose in creating this (in addition to fulfilling, in part at least, two of the objectives of this session) is threefold: (1) To familiarize myself with a subject area and with relevant library resources, especially if it is a subject of which I have limited prior knowledge, (2) To offer students, colleagues, and other researchers a starting point for beginning research when I am not available to offer assistance in

person, and (3) To serve as a reference for my own research and while assisting others, reminding me of sources I have found useful, relevant, and interesting. In other words, I create such guides to compensate for my being ignorant, absent, or forgetful.

This trifecta of motivation was especially true in this case. Native American history, culture, and religion are topics in which I had done little prior reading and research. Moreover, the process of creating this guide proved to offer a gauntlet of problematic terms and perspectives, exacerbated by the relative paucity of materials I was able to discover in our collections. I thus present this, not as a final, comprehensive product of an expert, but as an initial step in what I hope will be a fruitful discussion of the ways we can support, and further, research in this area.

DISCUSSION

Lively conversation occurred once the formal aspects of the presentation were done. Of particular note was the contribution of Cindy Derrenbacker, who introduced the group to NAIITS, an Indigenous Learning Community (<https://www.naiits.com/>). According to their website, “NAIITS, is one of the three divisions of Indigenous Pathways, a non-sectarian organization dedicated to encouraging the Indigenous community to develop and to articulate Indigenous perspectives on theology and practice.” It is an excellent resource and one that everyone in the room was happy to learn about.

SOURCES CITED:

- Sylvia Rodríguez, “Subaltern Historiography on the Rio Grande: On Gutiérrez’s *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away*,” *American Ethnologist* 21, no. 4 (Nov. 1994): 892–899.
- Jojola, Ted, Alison Freese, et al. “‘When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sex, and Power in New Mexico, 1500–1846,’ by Ramón A. Gutiérrez (discussion on the Mythologizing of Native Americans in the Academic World),” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 17, no. 3 (1993): 141–177.