

ABORIGINAL CULTURES AND THE CHRIST

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THE CONTEXT of this essay is ultimately "the underside of history."¹ This is a phrase used today to describe the situation of the poor of the "third world," but it is equally serviceable, properly understood, for contemporary aboriginal cultures struggling for life in North America. Manuel and Posluns have given them the title "the fourth world," or the world of aboriginal cultures oppressed by modern societies.² The essay is also missiological, understanding that term to represent the character of the Church as "sent" into the world to announce good news, not so much by direct proselytizing as by working to change the conditions that obscure that good news.

The "catholic" nature of the Church—its being-for-the-whole—calls it to serve the very delicate process of inviting particular cultures to participate in the world community without renouncing their own identities. Numerous xenophobic occurrences around the world during 1990 and 1991 have highlighted the utopian nature of such a dream. But a succession of events in North America—most recently in Quebec—demonstrate painfully how that participation will have its day, whether through aboriginal peoples' being driven to the edge by exclusion and cultural invasion, or by gracious and facilitated dialogue. Nor can we overlook the basic fact that, in order to be effective, any challenge to the "aboriginal peoples" (peoples whose culture remains close to its origins) must finally come from members of those cultures themselves.

The thesis of our paper, consequently, is a dangerous one, because of the constant failures of cultures everywhere to practice universal openness, and even more because the Church itself is still struggling to transcend European particularism. Nonetheless, the thesis is this: In the context of aboriginal spirituality, a historical personage with divine mandate as the Christ challenges each local culture to grow within itself, as well as to further the process of wholistic salvation within a world horizon. Indeed, it is a daunting challenge to relativize specific historical forms of Christianity that have endured for two mil-

¹ On this phrase, see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1983) 169–221.

² George Manuel and Michael Posluns, *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality* (Don Mills, Ont.: Collier Macmillan Canada, 1974).

lennia, and even more daunting to transplant some transcendent Christological "kernel" into an entirely new "husk." Cultural change is a matter of generations, centuries, even millennia, and the historical role of Christ will function differently over those ages. And yet, such contextualization is the missionary role of the Church, a role to which this paper is intended to contribute.

THE EXAMPLE OF LAS CASAS

Our model for a cultural Christology for mission among aboriginal peoples originates historically in the campaign of the great apologist for the Amerindians, Bartolomé de las Casas (1474–1566). There has been so much discussion of him, especially during the recent controversies over the Columbus quincentennial, that there would hardly seem to be anything more to say. But his political and theological writings do indeed help open the way to a Christology for aboriginal cultures.³

Las Casas's life is becoming better known with contemporary historical writing, but it may be helpful here to mention the high points of that long and dramatic life. Las Casas came to "the new world" about one decade after Columbus's first voyage; he came in the role of a cleric not yet ordained to the priesthood, and as a recipient of a grant of land known as *encomienda*, which was a kind of fiefdom taken from aboriginal ownership and awarded to colonists, leaving the resident Indians bound to that land. After his ordination (probably the first in the "new world"), he continued his land ownership and served as chaplain to the *encomenderos*.

However, the abuses, indeed atrocities, being committed by the colonists did not go undenounced. There was a sizeable group of scholars and missionaries, most of them Dominicans, who preached against this evil. Las Casas does not seem to have been touched by that preaching for some time, even when he was denied the sacraments by a Dominican. However, there was obviously something taking place within him, because in 1515 he began to criticize Spanish practices and to try to effect humane changes in the *encomienda* system. But these actions

³ Any doubt as to the influence of Las Casas can be put to rest by reading Juan Friede and Benjamin Keen, eds., *Bartolomé de las Casas in History: Toward an Understanding of His Work* (De Kalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois Univ., 1971). If the authors in this anthology exhibit a healthy diversity of interpretations of Las Casas, they all agree totally on the enduring greatness of this ecclesiastical and social reformer. An additional work in English, tending toward the hagiographical but still in line with other historical writing, is an earlier biography: L. A. Dutto, *The Life of Bartolomé de las Casas and the First Leaves of American Ecclesiastical History* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1902). It should also be noted in passing that Gustavo Gutiérrez has undertaken a vast project on Las Casas.

very quickly proved insufficient for him, as he became convinced of the inherently evil nature of the system.

In 1522 Las Casas entered the Dominicans, where he was to remain virtually cloistered for five years. When he emerged, profoundly changed not only spiritually but intellectually, he undertook a campaign for colonial reform that lasted through nearly forty years of astounding labors until his death in Valladolid at the age of ninety-two. This campaign included a brief tenure as Bishop of Chiapas, during which time he engaged in many encounters with the conquistadores which often put him in danger of death. He made eight trips across the Atlantic to plead his case in the Spanish court. His most famous trip was his final one, undertaken in order to do theological battle with Juan Ginés de Sepulveda, the most prominent ideologue of the conquistadors; he did not exactly "win" this debate, but he succeeded in preventing any acceptance of Sepulveda's theories among respected scholars or political leaders. He was highly regarded in his lifetime by both King Charles V and King Philip II.

The present article is not intended as a history of the work of Las Casas; my intention here is to present him as a theological exemplar whose theory and praxis might serve as models for a culturally sensitive Christology. As Lewis Hanke points out, Las Casas was a largely self-taught theologian, deeply influenced by the Dominicans after he entered the order at the age of forty-eight. During his "cloistered" years, Las Casas acquired a training grounded in the Salamanca School as represented, for example, by Francisco Vitoria and Domingo de Soto. Typical of this school was the conviction that "thought and action must be so intimately fused that they cannot be separated, and that spiritual truths must be made manifest in the world about us."⁴

Historian Juan Friede, an expert on Las Casas, has penetrated to the heart of the problem of cultural oppression. Beneath the horrifying accounts of the conquistadores' atrocities, beneath the greed and outright sadistic cruelty of so many oppressive colonials, Friede places his finger on the phenomenon of cultural blindness and of forced acculturation. Paulo Friere was to deal with the same problem later under the name of "cultural invasion."⁵

Regarding Las Casas's epic warfare against this kind of oppression, Friede and Keen have written: "His teachings concerning the unity of mankind, the principle of self-determination, and the right of men to

⁴ Lewis Hanke, *Aristotle and the American Indians: A Study in Race Prejudice in the Modern World* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1959) 113.

⁵ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Seabury, 1968) 150-52.

the satisfaction of their elementary material needs have acquired a new relevancy, a new *actualidad*.”⁶ Another historian says of him: “His life is a magnificent lesson and example of the conduct (the honesty, study, and valor) that should guide the actions of the Christian intellectual confronting a hostile political environment.”⁷

The work of Las Casas is especially pertinent to the present essay, because he sought finally to free the Amerindians from foreign control and restore them to their own leaders—a principle of indigeneity, the violation of which creates the most subtle kind of oppression. Las Casas himself had to evolve into this position; as one of his biographers writes, he underwent an initial conversion from calloused slaveholder and *encomendero* to a benevolent local despot seeking to create a paternalistic utopia inspired by his reading of Thomas More.⁸ It was the failure of this project that led Las Casas into a second conversion, his entry into the Dominicans and the eventual undertaking of his passionate life’s work: to completely obliterate the *encomiendas*. Finally, he saw that nothing less than a radical turn to indigenous leadership could reverse the process of oppression.⁹

It is to this later Las Casas that we look for our model of a culture-transforming Christology. This radical reformer not only sought to rescue theology from the clutches of an arid late medieval scholasticism and return it to a sophisticated interpretation based on Scripture, patristics, and authentic scholasticism, but also called it out from the halls of the university into the struggles of the world. The translator of his famous *Defense* writes that Las Casas thus helped to enact a four-fold reform of theology, renewing it from the Bible, from earlier and especially patristic theologians, from canon law and Roman civil law, and even from Aristotle—where “the Philosopher” was compatible with Christian morality.¹⁰

Narrowing down the scope of this dramatic and complex period of history, our focus here will be on three aspects of Las Casas’s thought and praxis: (1) his reemphasis on the person and witness of Jesus

⁶ Friede and Keen (n. 3 above) xi–xii.

⁷ Manuel Giménez Fernández, “Fray Bartolomé de las Casas: A Biographical Sketch,” in Friede and Keen 67–125, at 117.

⁸ Marcel Eduard Bataillon, “The Clerigo Casas, Colonist and Colonial Reformer,” in Friede and Keen 352–440, at 385. Las Casas is a good example of a gradual “conscientization” that did not plunge him immediately into radical activity.

⁹ Bataillon 414.

¹⁰ Bartolomé de las Casas, *In Defense of the Indians: The Defense of the Most Reverend Lord, Don Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, of The Order of Preachers, Late Bishop of Chiapa, Against the Persecutors and Slanderers of the Peoples of the New World Discovered Across the Seas*, trans. Stafford Poole, C. M. (De Kalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois Univ., 1974) xvi (translator’s preface).

Christ, over against Aristotle, as the final court of appeals on human rights and dignity; (2) his interpretation of local aboriginal life and attitudes, remarkable for its time, over against such academic theorizing about them as the work of his antagonist Sepulveda; and (3) his sense for the integrity and slow pace of change of cultures, likewise remarkable for its time, grounded in a respect for the "natural" rights of human beings regardless of religious or moral condition.

Jesus, God's Witness against Exploitation

Although it is probably safe to assume that the vast majority of conquistadores cared little for ideological debate, they nonetheless welcomed the writings of Sepulveda, which justified making war on the Indians and enslaving them.¹¹ Being an Aristotelian and humanist, Sepulveda appealed especially to Aristotle's teaching on natural hierarchies of humanity and on the justification for the superior enslaving the inferior.¹² While even Las Casas, being a true son of Aquinas, hesitated to dismiss Aristotle completely, and even used him at other points of his argument, on this matter he was uncompromising: wherever Aristotle opposed the deep personalistic love of Jesus for all, Las Casas simply exclaimed, "Goodbye, Aristotle! From Christ, the eternal truth, we have the command, 'You must love your neighbor as yourself.'"¹³

Las Casas's Christology can be divided into two types: first, a kind of social-gospel Christology that asks simply, "What would Jesus do and what did Jesus teach in these cases?" This is the Las Casas who refuses to allow Aristotelianism to override authentic Christian moral theology. His *Defense* is filled with such examples. While we cannot here discuss in detail Las Casas's exegetical work, it is pertinent to mention his refutation of Sepulveda's use of the parable of the feast in Luke 14:15–24. One of Sepulveda's major arguments for justifying war on the Indians lay in the words of the householder who sent out his servants to find guests for the feast: "Force them to come in." Las Casas simply returned to the patristic distinctions in hermeneutics, citing the above case as one of figurative interpretation signifying peaceful forms of persuasion. Sepulveda employed so many arguments favoring forced conversion of the Indians that one quotation from Las Casas is appropriate: "They should be ashamed who think to spread the gospel

¹¹ For a summary of his positions, see Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1982) 109–18, and Las Casas 11–16.

¹² E.g., Aristotle *Politics* 1.2.1252b–1259b.

¹³ Las Casas 40.

by the mailed fist."¹⁴ He frequently employs a form of contemplative interpretation, calling his readers to imagine, almost in an Ignatian manner, the gentle persuasion of Jesus in contrast to the violence permitted by Sepulveda.

Other statements which exemplify his thought are the following: "Christ wanted love to be called his single commandment" (citing Col 3:17),¹⁵ and "Christ seeks souls, not property. He who alone is the immortal king of kings thirsts not for riches, not for ease and pleasures, but for the salvation of mankind, for which, fastened to the cross, he offered his life."¹⁶ In sum, for Las Casas, only in imitating the example and teaching of Christ and the Apostles will pagans be able to acknowledge, of their own free will, the way of truth and the worship of the one true God.¹⁷

The second dimension of Las Casas's Christology is more subtle, and in a sense ironic. While he rejects Aristotle as the final arbiter of Christian ethics, nonetheless, as a good Thomist, he embraces the Thomist distinction between nature and supernature. However, far from espousing a distinction-of-planes theory, such as has been eschewed by Gutiérrez,¹⁸ Las Casas's point was that all humankind is gifted by God with the "same" nature, regardless of religious affiliation or even regardless of moral condition. Thus, for example, he wrote of the Indians, "They are our brothers, redeemed by Christ's most precious blood, no less than the wisest and most learned men in the whole world," and for this reason, St. Paul could write that he had a duty to Greeks and barbarians as much as to the Jews (Rom 1:14-15).¹⁹ It is the same Christ for all. In his famous speech before King Charles V, Las Casas said:

If the blood of one man (Abel) never ceased crying to God, until it was avenged, what shall not the blood of the thousands do, who, having perished by our tyranny and oppression, now cry to God: *vindica sanguinem nostrum Deus noster*. By the blood of Jesus Christ, and by the stigmata of St. Francis, I beg and beseech your majesty to put a stop to that torrent of crime and murdering of people, in order that the anger of God may not fall upon us all.²⁰

Las Casas continues the scholastic teaching that the pope has no jurisdiction over pagans, and he argues in the *Defense* that the Church has *dominium* over people only after they have made a free faith-

¹⁴ Ibid. 225.

¹⁵ Ibid. 39.

¹⁶ Ibid. 40.

¹⁷ Ibid. 179.

¹⁸ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973) chap. 5.

¹⁹ Las Casas 39.

²⁰ Cited in Dutto, *Life* 279.

choice and accepted baptism.²¹ In other words, we see here a Christology that is not only "kenotic" as relating to earthly rule, but one that respects the goodness of nature (and therefore, of culture). While there is indeed only one graced order, Christ loves the "nature" even of those who have not explicitly espoused that order.

Las Casas, Interpreter of Aboriginal Life

Las Casas possessed the gift for "listening to a culture,"²² even though his friendly interpreters admit that he probably exaggerated the virtues of aboriginal peoples for the sake of argument. He was able to do what so many missionaries (as well as anthropologists) have failed to do: to understand the Indians as persons rather than as conglomerate groups. Pagden points out how, in contrast to blanket categorizing of aboriginals as "barbarians," Las Casas could grasp the truth that all peoples and persons are unique.²³

As a true pastor, Las Casas the bishop made a sharp distinction between those who "blaspheme" and those Indians who spoke out in anger against the mistreatment and atrocities perpetrated in the name of expansion and even of missionary activity.²⁴ The colonists, as well as many missionaries apparently, simply assumed that the gospel was self-evident and "*ex opere operato*," in a false understanding of that phrase. Therefore conversions should be forced, and the "heathen" were inexcusable whenever they resisted. Colonists also seized upon biblical condemnations of human sacrifice to justify their attacks on Indians. Against all of this, Las Casas challenged the Spaniards to conceive how their gross mistreatment of the Indians could possibly create conditions in which the gospel could be accepted in faith and freedom.

It was in this context that Las Casas constructed his famous defense of the Indians against the charge of human sacrifice. He argued that according to natural law sacrifice is the highest form of worship.²⁵ It was not self-evident, he argued, that such worship should not extend even to the killing of human beings. That is, human sacrifice might conceivably be offered in good conscience. In such cases, he offered a contextualized version of the just-war theory to the effect that any war which cannot prevent the evils it inflicts on innocent victims, should be stopped, and no attention paid to the wrongs the war would attempt to

²¹ Las Casas, esp. chap. 6.

²² The term has been recently popularized by Robert J. Schreiter, C.P.P.S.; see *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985) 39–45.

²³ Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man* 122.

²⁴ Las Casas 165.

²⁵ Ibid. 234.

right.²⁶ In all of this, Las Casas contrasts the gentleness of Christ with the violence of the colonists.

Las Casas, Culture, and Natural Human Rights

Las Casas had a keen sense of the integrity of cultures as grounded in natural human rights and he appreciated the slow pace of change of cultures. His Christology can be seen as one that deeply respected culture as a "natural right." As we have seen, his common-sense Christianity clearly perceived the absurdity of expecting rapid conversion and change, especially when promoted by "the mailed fist." He anticipated the age of dialogue when he wrote, "Does the Indian who has never heard the name of Christ believe any less, at least in a human way, that his religion is true, than the Christian does of his religion?"²⁷

One historian calls Las Casas a forerunner of the doctrine of pluralism, especially in his willingness to tolerate human sacrifice in order to avoid the greater evil of a war of conquest that would destroy thousands.²⁸ He worked toward gradual transformation, based on good example and preaching. Another writer sees Las Casas as a true Catholic reformer reflecting the best in Luther and Calvin, "an early, shining, though incomplete application of the principles that should govern missionary work among non-Christian peoples."²⁹

Again we note Las Casas's concern to protect the rights of unbelievers. Christology thus respects these rights in both Christian and non-Christian.³⁰ As Pagden illustrates, Las Casas held that all communities founded on civic virtues and values can achieve a state of "active happiness."³¹ There is a delicate balancing of "nature and grace" here that is a forerunner of later thinkers like Ripalda, Rahner, and de Lubac.

This is not to overlook the fact that Las Casas was indeed a very evangelical missionary. What he saw, however, that few of his age seemed to see, was that there are "successive creative epochs" and historical phases, and all societies and cultures must pass through

²⁶ Ibid. 243.

²⁷ Ibid. 329.

²⁸ Angel Losada, "The Controversy between Sepulveda and Las Casas in the Junta of Valladolid," in Friede and Keen 278-307, at 298.

²⁹ Benno Biermann, O.P., "Bartolomé de las Casas and Verapaz," in Friede and Keen 442-84, at 479.

³⁰ For a detailed discussion of this point, see Venancio D. Carro, "The Spanish Theological-Juridical Renaissance and the Ideology of Bartolomé de las Casas," in Friede and Keen 237-78.

³¹ Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man* 135.

them to the final phase, each being at a different stage. It is pertinent to the next section of this essay that Las Casas could hold, in Pagden's words, that this final stage is reached "when the greatest of the sacred creators, who alone can provide access to the full understanding of the world—Christ himself—will bring the universal process to a close."³² That is, Christ himself will become the eschatological culture hero.

Rather than enter further into Las Casas studies, it will suffice here to summarize the lessons of his work for those seeking to explore a meaningful Christology. Such a gospel-like stance, even one this enlightened, is under attack in our time. Certainly the burden of proof as to the fulfilling nature of the mission of Jesus Christ lies upon those who lay claim to such a stance. Thus Las Casas's Christology was not one for the aboriginal peoples, but for the European colonists. How the native people might respond to the person of Jesus Christ would have to wait until injustices could be rectified and some kind of peaceful, dialogical evangelization might begin. It is a sign of this enduring historical problem that even today the only effective Christology for Latin America seems to be the image of the crucified peasant Christ. In North America, the context of my own writing, creative aboriginal work in Christology is still being impeded, not only by the struggle to surmount a more subtle oppression, but also by the failure of the Church to clear the barriers to native ministry and theological work.

In the final part of this paper, we shall examine a possible Christology, both for native persons examining their traditions, and for non-native companions. We hope that the ensuing discussion will help to avoid such dichotomies as body/soul, present life/afterlife, and, eventually, even of church and culture. It is not that we must cease to believe and hope in an eternal life; it is more that we might come to see a continuity between cultural salvation and eternal salvation. The hope of the paper is that we might advance further the amiable and positive hope expressed by a Sioux medicine man, Charlie Kills Enemy, in a short summary speech given at the close of an interfaith dialogue some fifteen years ago: "Last night I prayed in our Indian ceremony, and that helps me for my present life. This morning I received my Holy Communion, and that helps me for the next life." What follows is based on the question: Can we find a higher integration between cultural wholeness and eternal salvation?

AN ABORIGINAL CONTEXT FOR CHRISTOLOGY

If and when distinctively cultural Christologies are formulated within a universal church community, it must clearly be Christian

³² Ibid. 142.

natives themselves who do it. All my suggestions are presented as from a friendly fellow traveller whose culture brought Christianity to native peoples in the first place, and who, almost as if by chance, found himself one day in their midst. It is therefore important to state a certain "bias" here: that is, the awareness that the European and Euro-American stewardship of the Christian message has inevitably been conditioned, and often compromised, by its cultural and political affiliations. The foregoing section describes perhaps the best historical example, although mission histories of North America abound in similar problems.³³ Our Christological faith has suffered from an overload of particular European religiosity. This means that everything that might be proclaimed to tribal cultures needs to be dramatically directed first at our own brand of tribalism.

This long-standing awareness has often led me, during the past twenty years, to ask groups of native persons if they would prefer to be rid of us. I fully intended to honor their response if it was in the affirmative. In no case, however, has that been the response; rather, they have responded with the challenge critically to change our praxis of mission. During one workshop, Vine Deloria, Jr., one of the strongest critics of Christian history among native people, responded to such an offer to depart with the remonstrance, "What? Do you want to leave those people to the social workers?" The point was: remain and help *them* finish what *you* started. In fact, Deloria had already written some years earlier that an Indian version of Christianity could be of great value to native people, however doubtful he might be of that happening.³⁴

In the same vein, we might recall the argument of African theologian John Mbiti that Christianity's real value in the African search for a unity transcending tribal ideologies lies in its testimony to a unified

³³ For example, see Henry Warner Bowden, *American Indians and Christian Missions: Studies in Cultural Conflict* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1981). John Webster Grant, *Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and Indians of Canada in Encounter since 1534* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto, 1984). More hostile critics are James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford Univ., 1985); and Bruce C. Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queens Univ., 1976). For more detailed readings, see the bibliography in Carl F. Starkloff, S.J., "Religious Renewal in Native North America: The Contemporary Call to Mission," *Missiology* 13/1 (January 1985) 81-101; and, idem, "Beyond the Melting Pot: An Essay in Cultural Transcendence," in Donald L. Gelpi, ed., *Beyond Individualism: Toward a Retrieval of Moral Discourse in America* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame Univ., 1989).

³⁴ Vine Deloria, Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (New York: Macmillan, 1970) 124.

identity of all in Christ.³⁵ He writes, "And this [an external, absolute, and timeless denominator] is precisely what Christianity should offer beyond, and in spite of, its own anachronisms and divisions in Africa." He argues further that "only Christianity has the terrible responsibility of pointing the way to that ultimate Identity, Foundation and Source of security."³⁶ The unifying role of a renewed and renewing Christianity in Africa has been reiterated for me by a number of African students studying in the "first world" milieu.

A Case Study

The following, then, is a case study set within a modern tribal context for Christology. The discussion is one grounded in symbolism and even (if one theory is espoused) in psychological archetypes. But it is not by any means a case of merely individual religious experience or of individual therapy; rather, it is symbolic of a profound social and cultural reality. Thus this discussion sets its sights beyond the usual deliberations over the adaptation or inculturation of Christian worship within native symbols, however much that aspect may be involved here. The locus of Christology here is nothing less than the continuing self-concept and even the social salvation of the people itself.

To continue with a further argument of Mbiti, employing the work of Nigerian theologian Kenneth Enang, it is possible to delineate a distinctively aboriginal view of the meaning of "salvation." For Africans, for example, soteriology works from both a negative and a positive perspective. Negatively, salvation is: (1) transference from a state of danger to a peril-free one; (2) freedom from physical attack; (3) protection from whatever would inflict jeopardy. Positively, it is: (1) increase and progress in the state that is conceived as safe, prosperous, glorious; (2) maintenance of a peaceful relationship with the objects and persons on which and on whom one's own harmony and that of the world around one depend.³⁷ It is indeed a description that anticipates the parousia; but such is the object of Christian social endeavor.

Experience in such intercultural dialogue has led me to appreciate Bernard Lonergan's emphasis on "the data of consciousness" that lies below external behavior, or "the data of sense."³⁸ If there is to be a

³⁵ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1970) 349.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 363.

³⁷ John S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford Univ., 1986) 135.

³⁸ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972)

possibility of Christian dialogue with and within aboriginal cultures, "marginalized" or not, it must enter into these depths below surface cognition—always with reticence and reverence, and with the invitation of the dialogue partner.

In field work among native peoples, I have received oral communications and stories relating to the central figure in tribal mythology—what scholars have come to call "the culture hero." The fact that there has been a fluctuation between oral communications and written accounts is a vitally important point, because the entire culture hero tradition is subject to endless obfuscation due to the lack of ancient written sources. Available written documents are themselves dependent on highly inadequate communication, and spoken testimonies differ. We cannot, therefore, isolate various historical strata of information as is the case with literary traditions. Work in this area is often only educated guesswork.

The Culture Hero, Trickster-Transformer

In turning to aboriginal mythology, our discussion takes a novel turn, but one that is symbolically highly significant both for mainstream and aboriginal theologians. I refer to the mythology of the "culture hero—trickster-transformer," a symbol that has attracted the attention of a number of outstanding scholars. The prominent anthropologist of the first half of the 20th century, Paul Radin, contributed a work entitled *The Trickster*.³⁹ We shall see shortly how Radin teamed with Carl Jung to construct a symbology of this theme. The leading contemporary expert in North American trickster-culture-hero scholarship is Mac Linscott Ricketts, whose articles supply us with the theme of soteriology. Looking first at a more general presentation in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, we note that Ricketts observes that trickster stories have been called "a mythology of incarnation" and a "symbol of the human condition." The trickster culture hero is a mixture of all the qualities, good and evil, of the human condition.⁴⁰

In a more significant earlier article, Ricketts highlighted the paradoxes of this character; the trickster, who is generally a male figure,

201–2; *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957) 72–74.

³⁹ Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972). The Swedish scholar of religion Åke Hultkrantz can serve as a source of information here as well; see his *The Religions of the American Indians*, trans. Monica Setterwall (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California, 1979) index.

⁴⁰ Mac Linscott Ricketts, "Tricksters," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, general ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 15.45–63 esp. 45.

may take, whatever his external persona may be, the roles of earth-maker, transformer of chaos into order, slayer of monsters, thief of daylight and fire or water to benefit his people, teacher of cultural skills and customs. He is likewise a grossly erotic prankster, a glutton, a vain, deceitful, and treacherous rogue, a restless wanderer on the earth, a blunderer who is often the victim of his own tricks and follies.⁴¹ Ricketts explores this strange character by arguing that the trickster is at one stage a *competitor* to the "high god," claiming a place as creator because he is "here from the beginning."⁴²

Ricketts holds the theory that the trickster is the most primordial personification in mythology, but that he gradually became the cosmic creator, because he used his great cunning and skill to fashion the earth "as it is now," along with its inhabitants.⁴³ Later "religious geniuses," he postulates, created from him the image of the *ideal* culture hero who is free from faults.⁴⁴ In sum, the trickster culture hero is a very *incarnated* creator who gives this-wordly salvation; he renders the entire earth a "holy" place for his children to live on.⁴⁵ He also decrees death for individuals, lest the earth become overpopulated.

Since we are concerned here with a theory of this image, it will be helpful to refer to the work of a scholar whose own experience was in West Africa, Robert D. Pelton. Pelton has given us an incisive critique of the known trickster theories, and provides further evidence to sustain the application suggested in this article. Pelton analyzes trickster figures from four different West African tribes, seeing in them, not an archetypal idea, but rather a symbolic pattern.⁴⁶ He argues that no one explanation can ever exhaust this complex image. But as with all analyses of the trickster symbol, Pelton's includes such characteristics as mediation between above and below, the paradox of destructiveness and creativity, anomaly as well as order, sacred status as well as profane. The trickster is one who "transforms biological force into cultural structure."⁴⁷ However, Pelton minimizes the culture-hero aspect of the West African tricksters, because he sees them as too "insouciant" and lacking in heroic seriousness; thus they are more exemplars than creators of culture.⁴⁸

It is helpful to examine how Pelton has critiqued three earlier theories of the trickster: the Jungian, the structuralist, and the neo-

⁴¹ Ricketts, "The North American Indian Trickster," *History of Religions* 5 (1966) 327-50, esp. 327.

⁴² *Ibid.* 339.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 340-41.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 342.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 348.

⁴⁶ Robert D. Pelton, *The Trickster in West Africa: A Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight* (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1980) 3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 73.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 227.

Durkheimian, drawing value from all these but seeking to improve on them.⁴⁹ Thus, while recognizing the value of Jung's profound archetypal theory, he faults the great psychiatrist with oversimplifying the image. This has happened because Jung relies too much on the one example of Paul Radin, and because Jung, in seeking a universal explanation, has missed the complexity of the trickster figure. He has overemphasized the linear-historical-evolutionary to the neglect of the concreteness of "synchronicity," or unified temporal experience.

While Pelton praises Levi-Strauss for his insight into the mutual affirmation of the mythic and the social, he finally rejects that scholar's reductionism, thus echoing Eliade's objection that Levi-Strauss denies the specifically spiritual mode of being that he studies. Further, while Levi-Strauss saw only absurdity in the trickster, Pelton argues that traditional peoples saw him as the embodiment of rationality, resolving contradictions in himself. This argument is vital to Pelton's methodology, even as it deepens the point of this article: not only is this primordial figure a trickster and a mediator, perhaps a savior, but he acts in all these capacities by the very means of his paradoxical conduct.

In support of the Durkheimian hypothesis, Pelton can see society as a unique experience of the holy. But he cannot accept the argument of Durkheimian scholar Laura Makarius that the trickster is a mediator who suffers in order that society might triumph; the trickster figure is simply too primitive an image to enable one to draw such a conclusion. In response to all these positions, Pelton sums up his own position: "To see the trickster as the symbol of man imagining his world in its daily joining of opposed experiences is . . . to possess the key that will unlock the problem of his many guises at different times and places."⁵⁰

Reading of Pelton and Ricketts has corroborated much of the reflection that I had struggled with at an earlier stage. At the oral level, I have heard Arapaho elders tell many stories about one they call Ni-hauthau (this is my own particular phonetic). Likewise, Ojibways speak of Nanabush, Crows talk about Old Man Coyote, and Kickapoos have spoken about one whose name I did not have the opportunity to ascertain. One can read about countless other examples throughout North America, such as Raven, Hare, Earth-Maker, and Spider. As we have seen, analogous traditions emerge in Africa and in aboriginal Australia. There are two features common to these figures. First, each one seems to be, at some level of the tribe's story, the one who creates the earth for the people to live on and gives them the means of livelihood and culture. Second, paradoxically, each figure (or at times its

⁴⁹ Ibid. 228-48.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 271.

Doppelgänger twin) has the qualities of a rogue, sometimes treacherous, mischievous, obscene, and foolish. Anthropologists have, of course, only partially unpacked this tradition and placed it in some perspective. But Jung saw this as such an important conundrum that he included the concept of trickster among his archetypes.⁵¹ Whether we are indeed dealing here with an archetype or simply with a metaphor, the underlying experience seems to be one of a human quest for mediation between meaning and absurdity.

The Mysterious Name of God

I draw my own foundational material on this tradition from the Arapaho people, a western Algonquian tribe.⁵² The first hint of the name in question came very early in my acquaintance with the people, when I asked an Arapaho woman for the word they use for "God" and she gave me the name "Jeva'nauthau." About the same time, I was studying an early Episcopalian catechism that used this name. I was also blessed to have in my possession the field notes of a predecessor of mine by some sixty years, Father J. B. Sifton, who was a skilled linguist and spoke both Arapaho and the closely related Gros Ventre, or Atsina, language. In his spelling, the same name appears as "Ichchebbeniatha." And at one point in regular sessions with elders I learned that they have rendered this name in English as "Man Above."

At the turn of this century, two anthropologists, George Dorsey and later the more famous Alfred Kroeber, recorded many usages of versions of the names we have been discussing.⁵³ Especially significant for our discussion here is the collection of stories and myths surrounding Nihauthau. (Linguist Zdenek Salzmänn has since developed a much more precise Arapaho orthography, but my own phonetic transcription will suffice for our present purposes.) In one mythological account Nihauthau (in other accounts the figure is simply "a man") is depicted as wandering about on the surface of an endless body of water, lamenting that he has no place whereon to lay the sacred pipe he is

⁵¹ See C. J. Jung, "On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure," in *Four Archetypes: Mother, Rebirth, Spirit, Trickster*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ., 1973) 135–52. Jung is here reprinting a portion of the larger work of Paul Radin.

⁵² For a fuller account of this important learning process, see Carl Starkloff, "God as Oppressor? Changing God's Name Among Contemporary Arapaho," *Kerygma* 41 (1983) 165–74.

⁵³ See George A. Dorsey, *The Arapaho Sun Dance: Ceremony of the Offerings Lodge* (Chicago: Field Columbian Museum, Anthropological Series 4/75, 1903); George A. Dorsey and Alfred Kroeber, *Traditions of the Arapaho* (Chicago: Field Columbian Museum, Anthropological Series 4/81, 1903). Kroeber has produced other works on the Arapahos, but reference to this one suffices for our purpose.

carrying.⁵⁴ In response to his cries, small animals swim up to him and offer to help him find earth. One by one each dives deeply and returns without ever bringing back enough mud to work with. Finally, the little turtle dives the deepest, and after a long time surfaces with large gobs of mud in its claws and under its shell—a careful little detail once given to me by an elderly Arapaho woman. Nihauthau thereupon takes this mud into his hands and begins to flatten it out into strips of sod which grow in size. He then lays the sod over the primordial waters, and behold, there is dry land! Then Nihauthau populates the land with all forms of life, finally taking pieces of the mud and breathing life into them and creating the first man and woman. He sets these persons—the original “human beings,” called in Arapaho “Hinono’ei,” the tribe’s original word for itself—at the very “center of the world.” Thenceforth, he provides them with the implements of their culture and their spiritual well-being. At long last, having accomplished this primal artistry, Nihauthau is taken up into the heavens, where he is now called “our father.” One immediately senses Christian influence here, but the basic imagery of ascent is an aboriginal one.

As I studied the Arapaho language and began with the help of the elders to construct liturgical texts from it, I found myself having to unravel the mystery of this name in an even more laborious bit of linguistic detective work. It became clear that the name for God used here connects Nihauthau with the preposition or adverb “hixchebba,” which means “above,” thus producing the name “White Man Above” or “Above White Man.” Hence, the form Ichchebbeniatha used by Sifton. But I was also aware that my inquiries into this combination often drew forth a great deal of merriment from aboriginal instructors.

Eventually a younger native woman argued emphatically that this name for God is entirely unacceptable, because it makes God into “White Man Above.” She was quite rightly incensed that the elders and I had been teaching this name to her little daughter and other primary-school pupils during linguistic catechetics.⁵⁵ I also knew by that time that more traditional Arapahos pray rather to “Bähätixt,” “the One Above All Things,” or simply to “Bätän,” “the Holy One.”

⁵⁴ While I have not studied more deeply the Arapahos’ close cousins, the Gros Ventres or Atsinas, Radin cites the figure of one “Nixant” as one who destroys an early race of wild people by causing water to flow from the earth, himself surviving by using his sacred pipe as a raft (*The Trickster* 160–1). For a work drawn from first-hand sources on the Atsinas, see Sister Mary Clare Hartmann, O.S.F., “The Significance of the Pipe to the Gros Ventres of Montana,” (Master’s thesis, Montana State Univ., Bozeman, Mont., 1955). Hartmann cites the Gros Ventre as calling God “Above White Man,” a finding significant for this article.

⁵⁵ For more detail, see Starkloff, “God as Oppressor?”

Gradually it became clear that the same name, Nihauthau, was the name the native people had given to the whites—Nihauthau for white man and Nihauthaoosa for white woman. I was granted a further breakthrough when on a later occasion several old men entertained me with a number of outrageously comical tales about Nihauthau, translated explicitly for us white folk as "White Man." It emerged that the later Arapaho tradition had come to identify their trickster with the white invaders!⁵⁶ Well enough. But how does this leave him as the creator and culture hero?

The archetypal imagery of an ascension into the heavens of the primordial culture hero is no doubt an aboriginal tradition that probably developed as the culture refined its spirituality. The interplay between heaven and earth is also an archetypal dimension in mythology. But in my own process of discovery I was informed further, in an evening visit at the home of an Arapaho friend of my own generation, that the personage Ichchebba'nihauthau is Jesus. Now it was not surprising to see the reception of the doctrine of the Ascension into native culture in this way. But how the white man acquired the name of Nihauthau, which in itself has nothing to do with complexion or racial features, remained a mystery.

The glossary of words compiled by Kroeber with the help of elder William Shakespeare,⁵⁷ contains the same word, spelled Nihancan, meaning "spider." We already know that there are other traditions that emphasize the creative qualities of the spider, which spins reality from its very own substance. At the same time, one elder emphatically insisted, in remonstrance, "Our God is *not* a spider!"

But native authorities are not exempt from conflicting versions of traditions, even as we are not. An old friend who loved to sit long spells in my office confided to me one day that the whites were given the name of spider in this way: the native people saw the whites constantly stringing line across the prairie and over the mountains—fences, telegraph wires, railroads—ensnaring the entire known world in their webs. The fact that Jesus too was obviously a white man as depicted in church art led logically enough to His becoming the ascended white man. When the earliest missionaries came into contact with the Arapahos and sought to know their word for God, this is the name they were

⁵⁶ Pelton, *The Trickster* 32 provides an explanation of what seems to be obvious in this experience: he notes that the trickster in West Africa has sometimes been seen as a kind of euhemeristic figure, "in which animals are substituted for historical figures who are being lampooned."

⁵⁷ Alfred A. Kroeber, "Arapaho Dialects," *University of California Publications in American Archeology and Ethnology* (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1916–17) 12/3.71–138.

given. It is a tangled web indeed! One of the privileges of pastoral life among native peoples has been that, in a stumbling fashion, I was enabled to share in the conscious decision of the tribal Christians to renounce the racist (and sexist) "White Man Above" God, the oppressor, and restore the more ancient "One-Above-All-Things."

A Deeper Dimension

The patient reader of this narrative will realize that we have not been seeking mere etymological curiosities. The connection between Jesus Christ and the culture hero goes deeper than the confusion of cross-cultural communication. We have already mentioned the people of another culture, the Kickapoos, who seem to have brought the risen Jesus into their tribal mythology and into their own struggle to maintain a spiritual identity. Radin too records data from some later native versions, which transpose the Hare into a culture hero who was born of a virgin and came to teach people how to live.⁵⁸

Furthermore, the phenomenology of religion provides us with a highly cohesive hypothesis (if not an answer) to this mysterious set of connections. Thus, Gerardus Van der Leeuw comments on the way in which aboriginal peoples connect the creator with the culture hero, and even with the trickster. Creation mythology, in the Bible as well as in tribal stories, is also soteriology, because it recounts the people's salvation from chaos, and the granting of a culture in place of chaos.⁵⁹ The culture hero is, in short, a savior figure as well, and the one who provides sustenance and meaning for the community. All of these threads of tradition are preserved in the sacred renewal ceremonies of many tribes.

Still fearful of the danger of straining out a gnat in this intricate hypothesizing, I hasten to add a deeper dimension, relying on a fact that reaches behind the Jung-Radin hypothesis. Each of these authorities had his own agenda, of course: Jung desired to reinforce his theory of archetypes, and Radin to strengthen his economic interpretation of religion. But the work of Radin, wrestling with the paradox of the trickster and culture hero, lends further credence to my own theory. (Mary Douglas' contention that Radin did not intend to connect the

⁵⁸ See Radin *The Trickster* 91.

⁵⁹ G. Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, trans. J. E. Turner (New York: Harper and Row, 1963) 162. Scholars fault Van der Leeuw with his frequent flights of imagination; but other data seems to bear him out in this matter.

vulgarity of the trickster with the culture hero creator complicates the issue, but Douglas's basic intention is to show that creation is not a scatological action.⁶⁰

Carl Jung, for his part, gives the mystery an evolutionary and psychological explanation. For Jung, a "primitive or barbarous consciousness" may continue even for millennia to preserve images of the good–evil paradox in its symbolism. If this is so, then the crudity of the earlier trickster figure reflects a rudimentary stage of consciousness, a "collective personification of an aggregate of individuals."⁶¹ In the early human stage, below consciousness, the trickster is symbolic of the primordial struggle. He is the forerunner of the savior, being really divine, human, and animal all at once. Ricketts, while faulting the evolutionism of Radin and Jung, basically agrees with this theory of development.

An opposite conclusion is reached by historian of religions Christopher Vecsey, who found a different development among the Ojibways.⁶² After describing the function of the culture hero Nanabozho (or Nanabush) in Ojibway mythology,⁶³ Vecsey discusses modern developments that both illuminate and complicate the overall problem. He cites Christian Ojibway's elaborations of the myth that cast Nanabozho at one point in the role of Noah, surviving the flood and then acting as the Creator, or as an agent of the Creator, to fashion a new man and woman out of the primal mud. According to these adaptations, Nanabozho would be prior in time to both Jesus (as culture hero) and the devil (as trickster).

Vecsey argues that contemporary Ojibway versions of the narratives depict Nanabozho more as trickster than as culture hero because of the efforts of missionaries to wean the people away from primitive mythology. The idea was to make him look ridiculous rather than ambivalent. Likewise, Jesus has gradually replaced the original manitos (spirit beings) and has become the chief mediator between earth and Kitchemanito (Great Spirit).⁶⁴ Vecsey also cites a widespread belief among modern Ojibways that Christianity is a help to them in reaching heaven, but is not much help here on earth!⁶⁵ Like the testimony of Charlie Kills Enemy described earlier,⁶⁶ this account leaves us with

⁶⁰ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1985) 119–20.

⁶¹ Jung, *Four Archetypes* 141–2.

⁶² Christopher Vecsey, *Traditional Ojibwa Religion and its Cultural Changes* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1983).

⁶³ *Ibid.* 84–100.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 180.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 142.

⁶⁶ See above p. 296.

the troublesome question behind all mythology: To whom do aboriginal people turn for a better life?

Let us hasten to add that *all* human societies participate in this history. I am not implying that modern aboriginal peoples belong in that primitive stratum—a fallacy that still appears now and then. Actually, tribal groups who still preserve their primal traditions and practice them might arguably have a better opportunity to preserve their psychic health than many “moderns.” What is significant for our purpose, in any case, is that the development of the archaic figure who is both trickster and creator, whether synchronically or diachronically, is part of the quest for wholeness of a culture. Here I must quote Jung at greater length:

If, at the end of the trickster myth, the saviour is hinted at, this comforting premonition or hope means that some calamity or other has happened and been consciously understood. Only out of disaster can the longing of the saviour arise—and in other words, the recognition and unavoidable integration of the shadow create such a harrowing situation that nobody but a saviour can undo the tangled web of fate.⁶⁷

Whether or not the Jung–Radin evolutionary hypothesis is correct, the interplay between trickster and savior in the struggle of aboriginal cultures for survival is a profound religious question about the good and evil in all of us and in our cultures.

SOTERIOLOGICAL CONCLUSIONS

The soteriological conclusions from the foregoing argument can finally be developed or rejected only by the native people themselves, as is happening today in a strikingly dramatic labor of revitalization, whether Christian or not. Their struggle out of political oppression, and often out of the oppression of alcoholism and cultural destruction, may yet put them at an advantage over their more repressive mainstream contemporaries. The retelling of the old myths in a new context is of great urgency, especially for struggling peoples. Personally, I owe much of what I have learned about psychic and social integration to my journey with native peoples.

Jesus Christ, Culture Hero

But our fundamental question is: Can some analogy between the culture hero and Jesus-as-the-Christ offer anything to these struggling peoples?⁶⁸ Can it both reinforce the goods of cultures and likewise

⁶⁷ Jung, *Four Archetypes* 151.

⁶⁸ The argument is not foreign to Pelton. At one point he cites William Lynch's discussion of irony in the life of faith. Pelton rightly sees Lynch's quest for meaning and

challenge those cultures, and thus avoid falling into the domestication that it underwent in the growth of Roman Empire Christendom? And very importantly, as Pelton puts it, can it assist the peoples of traditional societies to transcend the need to "annul the possible effects of historical factors on their equilibrium"?⁶⁹

Certainly, as Las Casas argued so passionately, an essential condition must be freedom—freedom from coercion to accept foreign cultural impositions at the hands of the Church, and the freedom of inner choice that is the act of faith. But also urgent is the kind of Christian witness that proclaims Jesus Christ as the *transformer* of history (its "culture hero"). Only in this way can there be an entry into a soteriology that looks forward toward a creative future rather than backwards to restoring a lost paradise (a tragedy that often occurred among conquered tribes of natives in various parts of the world).

My argument is based partly on the work of H. R. Niebuhr, that Jesus Christ is the preeminent and unique "symbolic form" of historical Christian responsibility.⁷⁰ If this argument is on target, the role of the Church—a truly *native* Church, as soon as possible—is to recapitulate the role of the culture hero creator on the plane of history. This is best done, as Niebuhr wrote, through the retention of multiple symbols expressing culturally the role of Jesus as symbolic form.⁷¹ The union of the historical Jesus, who grew and learned within a certain culture and eventually challenged it to grow (at times showing it its contradictions), offers us the image of ongoing salvation, both the transcendent salvation of each person and the welfare of human society. Each culture must concretize the ways in which this is to take place.

Among aboriginal cultures, if those of us from outside have any place now, it must be to assist them to free the basic message from its cultural trappings, to carry on the work of separating nonessential aspects of religion from the faith experience. The Church of the dominant cultures (European) must respond positively to the pained and urgent question that is heard so often from native people: "Can the Church accept us *as we are*?" In symbolic illustration of all that has

transformation through the linking of opposites and through the contradictions there experienced as the vision of a Christ figure (*The Trickster* 259). And, finally, Pelton writes, "The Buddha's smile, the Zen master's pranks, Heidegger's ponderous linguistic somersaults, and especially Jesus' cross—all in various ways proclaim that nothingness will never have the last word because it is the last laugh" (ibid. 283).

⁶⁹ Ibid. 243. Obviously the question must be directed at those who have imposed the present style of historical existence upon aboriginal peoples.

⁷⁰ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978) 161–78.

⁷¹ Ibid. 158.

been said, I mention an incident from my most recent "field experience" in a brief return to reservation life in the summer of 1991. My previous examples of native Christians rediscovering tribal traditions must be balanced by such examples as this.

A common form of prayer among North American native people is the "sweat lodge," a religious form of a sweat bath, symbolizing purification and rebirth in those who crawl into the dark, hot womb of the lodge, which represents the earth. Upon meeting an old Shoshone friend, I received an invitation to join him in such a ceremony. In recent years, he has been coming into touch with his own roots, something he had not done hitherto. This particular sweat ceremony was a remarkable experience, in that my friend has created a syncretism of many elements: Shoshone, Sioux, Arapaho, and Christian. It was also striking in that, of the thirty-three participants, about two-thirds were white, while the rest were Amerindian people from among the Shoshone, Arapaho, Sioux and Assiniboine tribes. Songs were sung and prayers said in all these languages, and there was a powerful atmosphere of solidarity, as is customary in all sweat lodges.

During the opening declaration of prayer intentions, I was welcomed back with joy as a long-time friend. But my friend also observed that "perhaps things had not worked out as Carl had planned," because this Shoshone had ceased to practice his Catholic faith. The parting with the Church was amicable, but it was a parting. This is obviously a matter of "unfinished business." A good and sincere man is finding his most authentic spiritual expression and spiritual leadership away from the Church, and that experience is integrating his life for him. I do not feel that this is a tragedy, but one must wonder if true Catholic Christianity might not have to be flexible enough to enable such revitalizations without persons feeling that they have to "leave the Church." The question running throughout the present article is: "How would Jesus relate to this person?" It was a question asked over and over again, though not in the ritual context, by Las Casas.

However, there have been numerous significant events, if not breakthroughs, of ongoing transformation, in aboriginal Christians rendering their liturgy more "inculturated" (though there have been dramatic developments in ways that are not explicitly Christian as well). Today one can especially witness this happening among committed aboriginal Christians, in the creative learning and sharing of students from tribal cultures. In many cases, native ritual recognizes the power of "that man Jesus," as we once heard a young medicine man pray in the darkness of a sweat lodge, although he was not a professing Christian. Many native leaders have incorporated the Christ-mystery within rituals of healing, both from chemical abuse and family disin-

tegration, as well as in the face of political oppression. Most recently, I was in contact with Ron Boyer, an Ojibway deacon living and ministering in his Mohawk wife's village of Kahnawake, during the dismaying and painful confrontation there between Mohawks and the nonnative citizens and police and military of the area. Boyer recounted the power that spiritual ministry is lending to the people's struggle finally to obtain recognition of fundamental native rights.

While any inclination to evangelize demands great sensitivity today, and perhaps even has to be suspended in many situations, I believe that the Christology suggested here is one of dramatic promise for North American native people, because it relies on the essential place of the historical Jesus, who lived the power of salvation for His people and called them to reach out to all peoples. I am also aware that the final testimony to the value of this argument rests for its credibility upon the shoulders of us mainstream Christians who are proclaiming it. That is, will our praxis of salvation help to render effective the symbolism of Christian responsibility? If Jesus-the-Christ is, certainly, one who "constitutes" eternal salvation, it is our historical vocation to continue the role of Jesus as Transformer, or Maker of the New Creation. This point cannot be sufficiently emphasized. It lends additional credence to liberationists' argument for "Christology from below." While there need be no rejection of a high and incarnational Christology (the realm of mythology for those who are not Christians), only a Christ who acts historically in the persons of Christians struggling to assist the liberation process will place the discussion on "the plane of history."

Conditions for a Socio-Cultural Soteriology

In conclusion, it is possible to state a set of conditions on which a praxis of sociocultural soteriology will depend:

1. The mainstream Church must release its hold on cultural control of the Christian message and its practical lived context. Since religion is an expression of culture, there must be a readiness in Christianity to "negate" its religiosity (using the language of Paul Tillich⁷²) wherever that is in opposition to a local culture and where it is discerned as nonessential to the gospel. Tillich's ideal is, obviously, expressed in a very "utopian" fashion, and can be approached only as an ultimate horizon. However, penultimate examples can be suggested. For instance, from a Roman Catholic perspective: the imposition of mandatory clerical celibacy on extended-family cultures; insistence on com-

⁷² Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (New York: Columbia Univ., 1966) 97.

munity leadership by one not of the local community; liturgical and homiletical forms that do not encourage devotion or lived response. One might extrapolate from the record of Las Casas's concern for local leadership that he would today apply this principle to church ministry.

2. Christian ethicists must develop an ethic of human and aboriginal rights that recognizes native principles and values. Recent aboriginal-mainstream confrontations have shown the bankruptcy of a legal system that can view a situation only from a totally European perspective. Thus far it has been a case of the conqueror making the law in his or her own image and likeness. The Christian witness against this, believed to emanate from Jesus of Nazareth, lies in the belief that the law is made for people, and not people for the law.

3. If the mythological imagery of the savior culture hero is to be given historical grounding in Jesus-as-the-Christ and is to continue its historical manifestation, the Church must work to help aboriginal peoples to raise up their own leaders. As I have argued elsewhere, using the thought of Gibson Winter, the powerful symbolic value of local leadership lends credence to the argument that this leadership is a natural right.⁷³ The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World of Vatican Council II certainly upholds this position. In its section on "The Proper Development of Culture," the constitution says explicitly that local leaders must be raised up to develop their cultures in accord with their qualities and traditions.⁷⁴

There may seem to be a danger of proclaiming an entirely immanent "Christ of culture" in the foregoing argument.⁷⁵ But, as we have seen, the role of the culture hero is also that of "transformer."⁷⁶ Jesus-as-the-Christ must be at work within cultures in the person of the local church to work the transformation of that culture. The only response to the problem of the immanent and the transcendent is the witness of the Resurrection; this is the only ultimate testimony that gives the gospel the power which renders it effective as a "social gospel." The words of Paul the Apostle take on special significance in this context: "From now on we know no one according to the flesh, and if we have known Christ in a fleshly way, we do so no longer. Thus, if anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation; the old has passed away and all has become new" (2 Cor 5:16-17). Thus the Resurrection an-

⁷³ See Carl F. Starkloff, S.J., "Keepers of Tradition: The Symbol Power of Indigenous Ministry," *Kerygma* 52 (1988) chap. 4.

⁷⁴ *Gaudium et spes* no. 60, in A. P. Flannery, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Pillar, 1975).

⁷⁵ The phrase is, of course, H. R. Niebuhr's; see *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951) chap. 3.

⁷⁶ Thus Niebuhr's fifth model, Christ as transformer of culture (*ibid.* chap. 6).

nounces the triumph of the mission of Jesus, specifically by focussing that triumph on a new reality. Historically, what is finally important is not the culture or race or sex of Jesus, but the fact that divine love and justice have suffered in a human person and thereby planted the seed of the transformation of human life.

With Reinhold Niebuhr, let us hold that the ultimate meaning of life can be given only by the God who is beyond the tragedies of history.⁷⁷ Moreover, the transcendent dignity of each human person is finally the only argument against any culture's oppression of the person. Nonetheless, salvation is mediated only within particular cultures; there can be no historical well-being ("salvation") for humankind without the transformation of cultures. Such a Jesus Christ as this, both particular and universal, overcomes any "scandal of particularity."

⁷⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937).

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