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RELIGIOUS STUDIES: THE FINAL COLONIZATION OF THE  
AMERICAN INDIAN

In late 2019 I was invited to deliver a paper at an international symposium, “Re-Envisioning Religious Studies as a Global Discipline,” hosted by the *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* held in conjunction with the annual American Academy of Religion conference. The question posed for the conference was: How are we academics going to re-envision religious studies as a global discipline?<sup>2</sup> That conference title and the question posed already presumed a great deal about the world and about the academy. For an American Indian, the first order of business must be to ask whether and to what extent the category “religion” is indeed universal (let alone global) and whether it applies to American Indians at all. The underlying presumption, of course, is that all human communities have something that fits into the scholar’s normative cognitional category called religion. Discovering that this category is not a human universal might not immediately disqualify the whole academic discipline of religious studies. It certainly would, however, call on serious conversation about the category itself and some of the so-called religions that have been characteristically included in the set.

Essentially, I want to make the argument I have heard persistently made by traditional American Indian elders from a great variety of Indian Nations over the past half century. Namely, they have insisted repeatedly that American Indians had, and those who try to continue living a pre-colonial worldview have, no religion. They, and I, make that argument over against the host of euro-christian scholars who have made their careers (not to say substantial wealth) identifying themselves as scholars of “American Indian religions.” Ojibwe scholar and writer Gerald Vizenor rightfully classifies this colonialist euro-

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<sup>1</sup> I use a very intentional capitalization / non-capitalization convention. Since, for instance, *ie wazhazhe* is not a eurochristian language and even colonialist orthographies are not Native, I tend to leave all words in lower case, eschewing capitalization even at the beginning of sentences. wazhazhe is the self-appellation of our Nation. The colonialist names are Osage and Osage Nation.

<sup>2</sup> The substance of this essay was first presented as a talk at the “Re-Envisioning Religious Studies as a Global Discipline,” hosted by the *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* at the University of Denver, November 15-16, 2018. I do want to express gratitude for the editorial expertise of my wife, Dr. Loring Abeyta, for her help on the final draft of this essay.

christian academic enterprise – engaged by academics who are, then, de facto experts about Indians: anthropologists, historians, comparative religion/religious studies folk – as a “trope to power.”<sup>3</sup>

As an American Indian, a citizen of the Osage Nation, I need to acknowledge that I am not singularly an academic teaching American Indian studies.<sup>4</sup> I have been a very active participant throughout my academic career living a social life and a volunteer work life in urban Indian communities, both in Denver and previously in the Bay Area. For nearly five decades I have associated myself with the American Indian Movement, joining consistently in their political activism.<sup>5</sup> I also became a participant in Native ceremonial life early on and eventually rose to some position of leadership in the urban Indian community of metropolitan Denver. During my tenure at Iliff, I also served (pro bono) as the “spiritual leader”<sup>6</sup> of Four Winds American Indian Council in Denver, working with postcolonial urban Indian poverty and providing a consistent meeting place for Colorado AIM and its planning for political action. Unlike most of my colleagues in academia, my campus office never could become an ivory tower place of retreat. The community knew where I worked, so it became a hub for Denver urban Natives who had community issues to discuss, personal crises, culturally particular needs, many times involving a family in crisis needing small amounts of money to make ends meet.

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

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<sup>3</sup> *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> This much, of course, means interestingly that I too, just as does Gerald Vizenor, come under Vizenor’s disapprobation of exercising a trope to power, even as we attempt to do what we do from an Indian perspective and on behalf of Indian Peoples.

<sup>5</sup> I was, for instance, arrested with an AIM contingent in a Berkeley anti-apartheid protest at the University of California in the early 1980s protesting the university trustees’ apartheid investment policies.

<sup>6</sup> Colonialism messes everything up. For 30 years I could never really figure out what to call my work in the community – in english to explain to non-Natives. My brother, who is *heyoka ieska*, suggested years ago that I, like himself, just use “traditional American Indian spiritual leader” when we had to fill in that blank on a couple’s marriage license – even though the colonialist language is problematic. We have neither “spirituality” nor “leaders” *per se* in the euro-christian sense in our languages, and the truth is that I never “led” anybody. I was merely present at 4Winds as another (yet key) community resource to which people could turn.

What Indian communities have done traditionally for centuries only *becomes* religious or religion when it becomes hyper-attractive to eurochristian colonialists either for establishing colonial control or satisfying colonialist curiosities (political or academic) or to enhance their own individualist sense of religious well-being and self-empowerment (new-age seekers). The work of religious studies in terms of Native Peoples has always served what Lisa Lowe calls “the agency of an imperial will to know.”<sup>7</sup>

It should be increasingly apparent, as Chidester clearly demonstrates, that the category “religion” is a colonially invented one,<sup>8</sup> naming a political characteristic of colonizer societies. As such the invention of religion in the late 19<sup>th</sup> christian century enables a close (academic) inspection that participates in the larger colonial project of control and power over the colonized Other by parsing out bits of a People’s culture into bytes that might be better understood by eurochristian onlookers. Indeed, no Native languages seem to have any word for religion, and most of the accoutrements of religion identified by ethnographers or comparative religionists studying (or rather, signifying, as Charles Long would call it) Native societies use words that have been lifted out of Native languages but reinterpreted, usually by the first christian missionaries, in order to characterize that Native society in terms more understandable to and manageable for the colonial power. Hence, words like *wako*<sup>n</sup> (*ie wazhazhe* / Osage) are immediately appropriated by colonialist missionaries and colonial government functionaries to signify the euro-christian category “sacred.” *wako*<sup>n</sup>*da* is, by the same process, taken over by the missionaries to signify some Native notion of the euro-christian word god or higher power. (“You see, they are just like us, but just more primitive.” Less-than.) But these appropriations essentially falsify the culture of the Native colonized Other and irrevocably taint the euro-christian interpretation of the supposed Native reality. It is in that process that a Native society is identified as religious or has the formality of a religion imposed upon it,<sup>9</sup> even as it becomes more colonized and more assimilated. Eventually even we come to believe it about ourselves. But, as it turns out, that was the colonialist point all along, and, wittingly or unwittingly, academics in comparative religions/religious studies have played and continue to play key roles

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<sup>7</sup> Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Duke, 2015), p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> David Chidester, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion* (U. Chicago Press: 2013). Chidester had previously demonstrated that whether colonial interpreters identified Natives in southern Africa as having a religion or not depended largely on what the needs of the colonizer might have been at any given moment. See his *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Univ. of Virginia Press, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> David Chidester describes the shifts in colonialist interpretations of Indigenous communities in South Africa, where whether those communities had “religion” or failed to have religion depended on the shifting needs of the colonizer. In his *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Univ. of Virginia, 1996).

in the colonial process of reducing Indigenous Peoples to regulated, quantifiable products.

We can fairly quickly demonstrate the conundrum by looking at traditional (pre-colonial?) Osage culture. A couple of years ago, I published an essay whose title speaks to the issue: “Why I Don’t Believe in a Creator.”<sup>10</sup> There at greater length I demonstrate why *wako<sup>n</sup>* and *wako<sup>n</sup>da* must be understood in a completely different cognitional world than the euro-christian consciousness and its religious notions of the sacred; god; higher power; creator, the supernatural, the numinous, etc. Osages are a clear example of a so-called “dual society” of the sort that Lévi-Strauss insisted did not exist in reality, and which Alfonso Ortiz demonstrated was nevertheless the case for his own people, the San Juan Tewa.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, as Barbara Mann (Seneca / haudenosaunee) insists, without referencing Lévi-Strauss’ profound structuralist failure, all north American Indian cultures were intensely shaped around a reciprocal dualism – beginning with the Twinned Cosmos.<sup>12</sup> Francis LaFlesche (*umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup>* / Omaha) makes the same claim of reciprocal dualism for the Osage – long before Lévi-Strauss.<sup>13</sup>

So, for instance, *wako<sup>n</sup>da* must be a duality at the very least – *wako<sup>n</sup>da* above and *wako<sup>n</sup>da* below. In my youth I was taken under care by two important Osage elders. Asked to “pray” (a pure colonialist category, btw) at a meal some forty years ago, I recited the euro-christian/Indian kind of prayer to which I had become accustomed, only to be corrected by a close relative and Osage elder, Sylvester Tinker. He taught me to begin a “prayer” by acknowledging both the cosmic energy of the above and of the below: *wako<sup>n</sup>da mo<sup>n</sup>shita ski wako<sup>n</sup>da udseta*, identified relationally as grandfather and grandmother. You cannot, he instructed, point only to the above (e.g., “Dear Heavenly Father...” or even “Creator”). That is never enough; there must be both, male and female, in order to be a whole. About a decade later, this was re-emphasized by my adopted father, our eagle clan elder who had adopted my birth father as a brother. I should add here that this happened in my younger adulthood, long before Native colleagues pressed me to address the complete lack of words for pray

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<sup>10</sup> In *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice, and Life Together*, edited by Steve Heinrichs (Herald Press, 2013), pp. 167-179.

<sup>11</sup> Alfonso Ortiz, *The Tewa World: Space, Time, Being, and Becoming in a Pueblo Society*, (U. Chicago, 1969) pp. 8, 84, 137, et inter alia. Ortiz cites the well-known discussion of dual societies in Lévi-Strauss’ *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, (1963), particularly Chapter Eight, “Do Dual Organizations Exist?” pp. 131-166 (reprinted from “Les organisations dualistes existent-elles?” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia*, 112:2; January 1956).

<sup>12</sup> Barbara Mann, *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas* (Peter Lang, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> LaFlesche, *Rite of the Chiefs; Sayings of the Ancient Men*, BAE 36: 1914-1915, (US Government Printing Office, 1921).

or prayer in American Indian languages – that is until missionaries picked words in each of our languages to represent their own important “religious” discourse.<sup>14</sup>

In accordance with the reciprocal dualism Mann describes for Iroquoian Peoples, the old Osage architecture divided every village into two halves, between *tsisho* and *hu<sup>u</sup>ka*, a sky and an earth division, mirroring the cosmic whole.<sup>15</sup> There was a road that physically divided each town into halves, going from east to west, a natural solar dividing line.<sup>16</sup> The division-specific clans were then grouped discretely on their separate sides of the road (nine to the north; and fifteen to the south), with two important ceremonial leaders (*gaihega*) housed in the middle of the town, across the road from one another, representing each division.

*widseke* Sylvester Tinker coached me further as a budding young scholar on some important details of Osage culture. As an eagle clan person, Tinker was part of the *hu<sup>u</sup>ka* division of the nation, divided as we have seen between *hu<sup>u</sup>ka* and *tsisho*. Tinker went on to explain that in the old Osage villages the *tsisho* and the *hu<sup>u</sup>ka* would all sleep in a particular, prescribed manner, with their heads to the east. The *hu<sup>u</sup>ka* would all sleep on their right side, while the *tsisho* slept on their left side so that the two divisions slept facing one another across the road maintaining a singular whole even at night. Thus, were they divided but united at the same time – to answer Lévi-Strauss’ infamous conundrum. It was a physical manifestation of the symbolic unity – to cite Ortiz’ rejoinder to Lévi Strauss; it enabled the people to model their experience of the universe where the energy above and the energy below, sky and earth, maintained cosmic harmony and balance.<sup>17</sup> This reciprocal dualism is so pronounced across Indian Country that Mann argues the primary number for Indian folk is the number two. Indeed, she argues that the number one (e.g., monotheism) is dysfunctional, that the cosmos itself only works

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<sup>14</sup> The Osage word coopted by missionaries to signify “pray” is *wadá*. In actuality, it merely means “speak” or “talk.” The term lacks any up-down image schema of petitioning a higher power inherent in the euro-christian word pray – even though contemporary Native folk have come to use the words pray and prayer persistently in english.

<sup>15</sup> Again, La Flesche, *Rite of the Chiefs*, p. 59.

<sup>16</sup> James Owen Dorsey drew the road dividing the town as a north-south avenue. Wow. He was there, and there as a professional ethnographer/observer. Yet he failed totally to understand the (spatial) significance of this road. One example is his drawing in “An Account of the War Customs of the Osages, Given by Red Corn (*Hapa-shutse*) of the Peace-Making Gens,” *The American Naturalist*, XVIII (February 1884): 114. Again, Dorsey’s “Camping Circle at the Time of the Sun-Dance” has the opening of the circle to the north (p.455), in “A Study of Siouan Cults,” *Eleventh Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1889-1890* (Government Printing Office, Washington).

<sup>17</sup> Again, Alfonso Ortiz, *The Tewa World*. And for the Osages, see Francis LaFlesche, cited above, and LaFlesche’s works generally in the Bureau of American Ethnography annual reports.

around a persistent pairing of twos: two energies, two halves, two genders, perhaps even plus and minus charges, etc. The division of an Osage village is one manifestation of this dualism.

This gives rise to my own basic interpretive question for academics of religion, framed as follows. Every Osage is born to or marries into a particular clan, and the clans, in turn, are distributed between the two divisions. For instance, I belong to an eagle clan; I have an adopted daughter who belongs to the buffalo bull clan. While our eagle clan is a *hu<sup>n</sup>ka* clan, the buffalo bull clan is *tsisho*. When she first moved in with us—just barely four years old, she had not been taught anything about her osage-ness, so I had to explain to her some basic things about osage life. Since she is *tsisho*, I explained, she had to learn to always put her left shoe and sock on first, and then her right side. Same with a shirt or a pair of pants. Buffalo bull folk (*toka udsethe*) are, I explained, left-sided. Not left-handed but left-sided. It serves to always remind us who we are to pay attention to simple things like how we dress. Don't pay attention to how I dress, I added. I am *hu<sup>n</sup>ka* and eagle clan, so I am right-sided and put on my right shoe first, and so forth. This persistent practice is part of the pairing principal described by Mann, reciprocal dualism. And again, it functions both physically and symbolically to mimic the balancing of the cosmic energies of sky and earth. And doing things this way reminds us constantly of who we are, each one of us.<sup>18</sup>

Indian cultures are very complex, and Osage culture is no different in that regard. Every *uko<sup>n</sup>* or *wigie*<sup>19</sup> is aligned around these paired divisions, and particular clans might have clan specific-responsibilities (hence, division-specific) in any *wigie* or *uko<sup>n</sup>*. For example, two of the *hu<sup>n</sup>ka* clans each have a responsibility to “keep” specific pipes that were dedicated to military actions of defense or the buffalo hunts, and no deliberation to prepare for defense could continue without one of these clans stepping forward with one of these designated pipes. At the same time, for this occasion of supporting the “defenders,”<sup>20</sup> it was another clan from the other division that was called upon to bring the tobacco for loading this pipe. Again, in this small moment in a larger twelve-day event, one can see the importance of having both sides of the road deeply involved in a complimentary dualistic form. The pipe from the *hu<sup>n</sup>ka*

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<sup>18</sup> I am reminded of the old adage that actions speak louder than words.

Colonialist discourse about religion asserts control through words, through disciplinary doctrines. Indigenous Peoples engage with the universe through actions, behaviors, and experiences—through reciprocity.

<sup>19</sup> These words reference certain community acts that euro-christian academics might label “ceremonies” or “rites”, but those colonialist categories really do not do justice to the acts themselves. They belong in an osage community context and should not be forced into some convenient cognitional category to satisfy the euro-christian desire to know and control. So, I prefer to leave the words untranslated.

<sup>20</sup> That is, the *akida*, almost always mistranslated at “warriors.”

and the tobacco from the *tsisho* begins the process, in this case, of bringing the whole people into unity of action, just as the two primordial energies of sky and earth insure harmony and balance in the cosmic whole.

Hence my pointed query: is tying my shoes part of a religion? When my daughter learned to tie her left shoe first and then her right, is this a religious act – by definition in the academy? If it is to be conceived as religious, then what actions of people in this old traditional community are to be classed as non-religious (or even more curiously, as secular)?<sup>21</sup> And if it is deemed not a religious act, why so? Where is the dividing line between religion and not-religion? Do not all acts suddenly become religious? If all of life and every personal as well as community act is religious, then what can religion possibly be in this context? This is akin to the word “sacred” when it is used to casually translate *wako*. It turns out, in every Indian language, that everyone (both humans and all the others) and every place is *sacred*. So then, what can sacred mean? If it means everything, then why not use the word everything? In other words, both sacred and religion become meaningless ciphers when they are applied to Indian people.<sup>22</sup>

How, then, will religion scholars separate out in Indian cultures what might primarily interest them as religious aspects of these societies – when there is nothing or nearly nothing left over, and how will scholars of religion rationalize what they have done? Here, you see, categorization fails. Our world is a very different world. Deal with it.

Otherwise we are forced to conclude that scholars in religious studies are merely game-playing at some sort of narrow anthropology, where random aspects of a community’s life come under the academic microscope for its “religion” implications. Here, I am “playing” with J.Z. Smith and Sam Gill – perhaps as a ludic simulacrum of Gill’s discourse, particularly his theoretical argument in “No Place to Stand: Jonathan Z. Smith as *Homo Ludens*: The Academic Study of Religion *Sub Specie Ludi*.” In this essay, the author casts the corpus of his own

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<sup>21</sup> To wit here, I am obliquely referencing notions from Durkheim’s “sacred and profane” and to Mircea Eliade’s reiteration of Durkheim and his presumption of hierophanies as foundational for any religion. Particularly central is the ubiquitous notion of supernatural. None of these cognitional categories pertain to traditional Native American lived experiences. They must be read back into the traditions, and especially back into the texts generated by the so-called experts.

<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that calling certain sites “sacred” completely obfuscates the Native reality of a particular place having a close association with some *wanagi* who either lives at that place or uses that place to communicate with humans. Even Indian politicians regularly fall into the “sacred site” motif when talking to non-Natives.

teacher's interpretive work as a structured form of play.<sup>23</sup> Is he warning us not to take our academic discourse too seriously?<sup>24</sup>

Gill, himself, has a long history of playing with American Indian Peoples, going back to the fatuous absurdity of his "Mother Earth" book, irrefutably a classic colonialist ludricosity (to build again on his notion of "*sub specie ludi*"<sup>25</sup>). I do not mean to merely gainsay Gill's theoretical use of Johan Huizinga's important 1938 book, *Homo Ludens*, but *Mother Earth* was as damaging to Indian Peoples as it was laughably inane. Structured as a piece of academic research conforming to religious studies style, *Mother Earth* is heavily annotated with a great deal of evidence—all of it carefully cherry-picked to prove his thesis and none of it verified on the ground with actual Native communities and none of it traced back to actual Native language usages. But then, for most academic specialists in American Indian stuff, mastering a Native language is not at all important. For other narrow categories of religious studies language proficiency is always required: i.e., biblical studies require greek and or hebrew (and even latin, all preferably capitalized); chinese religions require mastery of mandarin or some chinese dialect; hinduism requires mastery of sanskrit, etc. For this discipline called American Indian religions, however, anyone can play—and get tenure.

In *Mother Earth*, Gill attempts to demonstrate that the presumed ubiquitous presence of a mother earth goddess figure was a brand-new notion for 19<sup>th</sup> century Native Peoples in north America, adopted directly from their colonizers' narrative ideation of mother nature/mother earth. Indeed, by Gill's account, Indians were so impoverished in our understandings of our own world that we were forced to build the foundations of our worldview by reading the New York press and adopting ancient european mythology and language (i.e., mother earth) as our own in the early 1800s!<sup>26</sup> I'm sure that Tecumseh (d. 1813) and his brother Tenskwatawa, among thousands of other Natives across the continent, must have had subscriptions to the *National Gazette* or New York's first daily *American Minerva*,<sup>27</sup> but Gill doesn't clarify how the papers made their daily delivery in the

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<sup>23</sup> Published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 66/2 (1998): 283-312.

<sup>24</sup> Gill is, of course, making theoretical use of Johann Huizinga's 1938 book by the title *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (english translation: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1949).

<sup>25</sup> Much like an armchair quarterback, Gill builds his case with plentiful annotative evidence, all cherry-picked to prove his colonialist fantasy. Unfortunately, he never bothered to ask Native folk—much like Levi-Straus and too many other religious studies academics.

<sup>26</sup> Sam Gill, *Mother Earth: An American Story* (Chicago, 1987). Ward Churchill, "Sam Gill's *Mother Earth*: Colonialism, Genocide and the Expropriation of Indigenous Spiritual Tradition in Contemporary Academia," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, Vol. 12:3 (1988), pp. 49-67.

<sup>27</sup> These are two of the earliest daily newspapers in the original colonies of the new republic, predecessors to the *New York Times*, et al.

(hostile?) Shawnee communities of the tense Ohio Valley in those days, let alone across the still Indian western half of the continent.

In essence, Gill's argument is a straw-man argument, one that is not at all rooted in any actual American Indian culture or accurate historical analysis but depends on White, euro-christian cognitional categories that he and others have regularly imposed on Indian people, having presumed that their own euro-christian language is coded for universality. Two points here should suffice to highlight the problematic.

First, Gill's evidentiary citations in that regard are entirely from colonialist translations of what euro-christian observers *thought* that Indian folk might be saying.<sup>28</sup> That's good enough for *homo ludens* Gill. Being Native language deficient, Gill can only trace a history of written documentary evidence reporting the english words that euro-christian observers used to signify whatever it was that these observers imagined Natives said in their own complex languages. Indeed, there is always only a tenuous and imaginative connection at best between any english utterance and its supposed Native equivalent (in any Native language). To wit, Gill satisfied himself with using standard euro-christian sources *about* Indian Peoples and their cultures. At no point did he bother to ask Indian folk or to investigate actual Indian communities. Underlying this sort of evidentiary analysis is the deep academic notion that all historical evidences for Indian cultures must be in written form catalogued by euro-christian observers.

My second point, however, is more pertinent to this discussion. Namely, to set up the strawman (woman) of an earth mother goddess naively presumes the universality of the words god and goddess as a normative part of every human group's languaging of the world. As I have argued elsewhere, Indian languages simply lack any words or equivalencies for the euro-christian category "god" until euro-christians pick one in each language,<sup>29</sup> which does not stop Gill from

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<sup>28</sup> The problems with "chief Seattle's" so-called speech are legendary, to say the least. All we can conclude is that Sealth (not Seattle) gave a speech and that it may have contained some of the rudimentary ideas that got twisted around in the long-after-the-moment victorian english memory of one of the euro-christians present.

<sup>29</sup> "Why I Don't Believe in a Creator," in *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice, and Life Together*, edited by Steve Heinrichs. Herald Press, 2013. Pp. 167-179. The underlying notion is always predicated on some notion of a human universal rooted in language of the supernatural, sacred and profane, Otto's "Idea of the holy," the spiritual, "belief" and "faith". When Indian folk today use words like god or creator when speaking in english, we need to understand the original concept in Native languaging was much more complex and distinctly Other than these english words can even begin to express. At this late date in the processes of colonialism, the english words simply become common ciphers for what our ancestors knew.

presuming the fact. Of course, Indians did not historically and still do not “believe” in Gill’s mother earth “goddess.” He did not even need to write his book to make that point!

While all Natives on the continent had (and I have) deeply embedded notions of what Barbara Mann calls the twinned cosmos, there was and is no way to describe that twinning in terms of deity or deities, gods or goddesses. Yet the notion of “grandmother” as the earth half of that twinned cosmos is pervasive. One measure of its antiquity is that it is ever-present both in the oldest stories the people tell and in the ancient ceremonial songs they continue to sing today. Gill simply fails to ask, presupposing the usual arrogant colonizer impudence, learned from J.Z. Smith in the classroom, that the trained euro-christian observer already knows better than we Natives. Gill, who is Native language deficient, can only be tracing a history of the english words that euro-christian observers used to report publicly whatever it was that Natives said in their own complex languages. Indeed, there is always only a tenuous connection at best between any english utterance and its supposed Native equivalent (in any Native language).

In much the same way, the colonialist academic inventive creation of Indian religions always harms Indian Peoples. I am sure, by the way, that the vast majority of euro-christian academics who teach and write about “Indian religions” think of themselves as doing actual work rather than merely engaging Gill/Smith’s “*sub specie ludi*” (i.e., a type of game-playing).<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, these outsider colonialist descriptions of Indian communities most certainly shape non-Native perceptions of the Native world and then eventually also strongly tend to reshape those same Native communities in perverse transformative ways.<sup>31</sup> Native American “religions” only come into focus as the colonizers re-inscribe themselves into the Native community, re-inscribing their words into the Native language and shaping the Native People as some primal replica of themselves, as a mini-me. And eventually, many Native folk begin to buy into this colonially redesigned self as genuinely their own authentic selves.

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<sup>30</sup> One might conclude that Tink Tinker is just an “academic like us. He seems to be speaking academically just as *sub specie ludi* as the rest of us.” Fair enough, at one level. A key difference is that I live what I speak and write 24 hours a day. I never get to step away from who I am or forget where (locality/spatiality) I am. At the same time, it is easy to point to Tinker’s title and say, but wow, he actually taught “religious traditions.” Yes, that was the title imposed on my historically back nearly 30 years ago, and that is a much longer story that is interesting in its own right. Suffice it to say, the title satisfied the political structures of my institution and its faculty, but the truth is that I pretty steadfastly avoided teaching what my title said I was. I much rather taught Indian cultures and worldview, and used the latter, a singular noun in this case, to differentiate the Native worldview from the eurochristian colonial worldview.

<sup>31</sup> This is somewhat akin (at least metaphorically akin) to the observer effect in physics.

Thus today, American Indians have come to have religion. And indeed, Native religion looks more and more like the colonialist himself. These modern postcolonial Indian religions are shaped after christian religious structures with some add-on symbolic Native forms and ideas, or they tend to conform with new-age individualism. These, however, are not “American Indian” religions. At least not in any uncomplicated form and particularly not in any Indian traditional sense.

In terms of American Indian traditional cultures, then, there is no Native American religion. Essentially, we are left with J.Z. Smith’s famous 1982 dictum about religion generally:

...while there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious--there is no data for religion. **Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study.** It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. **Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy.**<sup>32</sup>

Certainly here, Gill is correct; we are dealing with *sub specie ludi*, indeed. That, however, effectively and merely re-inscribes victimhood on Indian people who find themselves again fighting to negate false knowledge about themselves. But then, the whole structure of academic discourses is set against Indian difference. By the academic doctrine of analogy, everything in the world must be like something the scholar already knows. Under the deadly weight of colonialism and its continuing legacy, this is becoming true across almost all human cultures today, and the academic study of religion is a significant player in that process. Carl Raschke strongly implied this in the title he gave for my oral presentation of these ideas at our symposium back in November: “Is Religious Studies Just the Latest Form of Euro-christian Colonization of Indigenous Peoples?” That this is the case is the substance of my argument. Yet, on the other hand, the enterprise serves the positive purpose of giving jobs to a plethora of otherwise unemployable White euro-christian academics.

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<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi.