

## God's Creation: How shall we understand God's Creation?

### **The Generative Land**

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Indian people look at the land as generative. It is where we come from. It is not something we possess or own. Ownership of land is a Western European philosophical notion that's become rooted in political and economic systems.

When the Europeans first came to this country, they created legal and theological fictions that allowed them to take over Indian land. They said Indians didn't really occupy the land because they just roamed the land. Doctrines of vacant domination developed. And if Indians died in a plague, the Puritans considered it an act of God to open it up to them land because then there weren't enough Indians to live in it.

There were consistent efforts in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to teach Indians private ownership of property because it was considered the civilized way of existing. Of course, what it did was destroy the structure of Indian society and culture and meant that Indians were reduced to levels of existence that forced codependent relationships upon the U.S. government.

As Indians were no longer able to take care of themselves, they had to rely on government subsidies and handouts. That codependency continues on to this day—in relationship of Indian people to the church as well as U.S. government agencies such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the India Health Service.

Indians believe that the Creator put them in a specific place and that is their place. To move to another place is a very hard thing to do, and people die when they move. The Osages did not thrive when we\* were moved out of Missouri and into Kansas. And when we were moved out of Kansas and into Oklahoma it became even worse. That's the story of many, many tribes that were relocated in Indian territory, where they had to learn to live in relationship to new land.

The relationship to the land is not only a spiritual relationship; it's one of physical economy as well. You know the land; you know the sacred sites; you know the medicines, the herbs, the foods that grow there and where they grow.

When you are moved to a new place, you suddenly don't have access to those things anymore, so that many of the patterns for religious ceremonies and observances are broken. How can you have a ceremony if you don't have access to the various things of the land that you need to conduct that ceremony.

And I guess I should say straight out that the gospel was not liberating to the

Indians but was a form of bondage. It's not the gospel that's not liberating, thought; it's the proclamation of the gospel that puts Indians in bondage. Consistently the missionaries of the European churches in all our denominations confused gospel with European culture. The gospel they proclaimed was the gospel of "civilization," of a "superior culture." Steven R. Riggs, a nineteenth century Presbyterian preacher missionary in South Dakota called it the "gospel of soap."

One wonders if we have given up our Old Testament in order to leap into the New Testament—the covenant of Jesus. Yet Indian people were forced to disassociate themselves from their old ways—from their religion and culture.

In order to do that, they have to engage in an act of self-hatred and self-denial. They have to look at what they were and say, "All of that was evil." The Puritans said it straightforwardly: "The Indians are the legions of Satan."

Of course, I think there are white missionaries who are trying to be much more sensitive. And some are extremely good and extremely faithful. But we have two problems One is that we have a lot of white missionaries in all our denominations who buy into that colonial mentality and are about the business of whipping Indians into shape culturally. It happens.

The other problem is that the institutional structures of the church, just like the institutional structures of the government, continue to impose themselves on Indian people. It may be on a subconscious level, but they nevertheless forcefully, powerfully, require a cultural shift toward assimilation. I suspect that most people in our North American churches believe in their heart of hearts that the solution to the "Indian problem" is assimilation.

You see, white America wants change to happen on its own terms. White people want reconciliation. They can't understand that their insistence on reconciliation is an insistence that it happen on their terms.

My colleague [at Illiff] Vincent Harding [d. 2014] has an interesting analogy. He is a black theologian of enormous repute. He says that for years white America was busy building this house, and then had people from different cultural groups living in the yards and shanties around the house.

The liberal contribution since the civil rights activity of the 1960's has been to say, "We have to open our house and invite these people to come in and stay." But the problem, as Vincent says, is, "It's still their house. We're still guests." We need to think about building a new house where everybody gets equal say in its design and has equal ownership. Then we need to tear down the old house.

It seems to me that much of the gospel has been interpreted throughout history by Europeans and Americans. Before long it is not the gospel that is being interpreted but an interpretation of the gospel. Some things become so commonplace that you cannot think of understanding them differently. The kingdom of God has been understood in temporal terms by Europeans, primarily Lutheran New Testament scholars, beginning a century ago [the late 19<sup>th</sup> century]. The kingdom of God was dealt with as a question of when it is going to happen. The question of where it is was constantly disallowed; that's not at stake.

It's a question of eschatology: When is it going to happen? And you get all these jargonized responses of realized eschatology, actualized eschatology, imminent eschatology.

I would argue that the European intellectual tradition is fundamentally temporal, with spatial aspects being subordinate to this primary category of time. But Indian people are just the opposite. We're spatial, rooted in the land. And when we read about the kingdom of God, the first and only thought to come naturally to Indian people is, "Well, we don't know much about kings and kingdoms, but it must be someplace. It must be somewhere."

As Indian people we wrestle with that, and I've wrestled with it out loud with numerous Indian groups and Indian people. The kingdom of God has to be right here. In other words it becomes a metaphor for creation.

Jesus' call to repent, to return to the kingdom, is a call to come into a proper relationship with the rest of creation, and the Creator. A proper relationship recognizes that I am simply a part of the creation, one of God's creatures along with other two-leggeds, the four leggeds, the wingeds, and other living, moving things—including the trees, the grass, the rocks, the mountains.

All these things are relative. That's the universal Indian notion of the interrelationship of all things in creation. Human beings are part of creation—not apart from it and somehow free to use it up or abuse it.

This is a whole different slant on the kingdom of God and, immediately and implicitly, on the gospel of Jesus Christ.

--George Tinker,\* "Survival and Self-Determination" in *Cloud of Witnesses*, Jim Wallis & Joyce Hollyday, eds., Orbis Books, 1991, pp. 52-60.

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