

An Indian Perspective on the United Church of Christ

In response to the invitation to write a letter to the United Church of Christ from an Indian perspective, my first imperative is to state unequivocally that I do not speak for all Indians any more than you could speak for your racial ethnic group. But, I have had some experiences in this church in local, conference, national, and theological education settings that have fed my perceptions about Indians and the UCC.

However, I will share by quoting liberally from various sources, in part to give authority to some of the points of view that may be new to people. Also, I will be limiting my remarks as much as possible to the United Church of Christ and our churches.

First, to European Americans:

The Missionary Heritage

It has become commonplace to understand the missionary heritage with Indians as, at best, ambiguous. Consider it this way: Indian Christians have been asked to accept a theological/faith perspective for Christianity which legitimated and justified our genocide.

For instance: Lewis Hanke, in a small document entitled "Aristotle and the Indians," quotes from the minutes of a town meeting in Massachusetts, in 1640:

1. *The earth is the Lord's and the followers thereof.* VOTED
2. *The Lord may give the earth or any part of it to his chosen people.* VOTED
3. *We are his chosen people.* VOTED

Here, in these ludicrous minutes, is an illustration of how our Pilgrim forebears used Covenantal theology to justify their attempt to exterminate the Indians. This is not an illustration of human frailty! Rather, it is an illustration of a group of highly ethical representatives of civilization, chartered by the English crown, holding a covenant with Almighty God as the New Israel, with a mandate to occupy the land and exterminate the barbarous savages in the process. And, they (or shall I say 'we') did it in good biblical conscience.¹

1. Alfonso A. Román, "The Making of a Character: A Reflection on the American Missionary Association and the Indian Work," Presented to the 100th Anniversary of the Dakota Association, June 11, 1988, p. 4. Emphasis added.

124. THEOLOGY:

"An Indian Perspective on the United Church of Christ"

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Norman W. Jackson (b. 1929) is a Congregational Christian/UCC minister educated at Hartford Theological Seminary. He is generally thought to be the first American Indian to obtain a graduate theological degree in the UCC. Jackson was conference minister of the Kansas-Oklahoma Conference UCC (1974–78), executive associate to the president of the United Church of Christ (1978–85), executive director of the Council on American Indian Ministry (CAIM) (1986–89), and conference minister of the Hawaii Conference UCC (1989–96). He also taught at Eden Theological Seminary and at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities.

Jackson has consistently challenged the United Church of Christ to take its American Indian ministry seriously. He has also encouraged indigenous peoples to claim the legitimacy of their own local theologies. His essay on "An Indian Perspective on the United Church of Christ" appears in a special issue of New Conversations (Spring 2000) on the theme "American Indians in the United Church of Christ: Nurturing Our Spirituality Across Many Cultures."

SOURCE: Norman W. Jackson, "An Indian Perspective on the United Church of Christ," *New Conversations* (Spring 2000): 52–55.

It may be difficult to read this material, but [Alfonso] Román goes on to ask:

Surely, one of the questions the United Church of Christ must ask itself is: what tragic flaw in that belief system known as Reformation theology could have permitted these people to do what they did and do it in the name of God? It is a question directed not solely at the past. It is a question of crucial importance for our time as well (Don Gall, *Marginal Religion among the Lakota Sioux*).²

George Tinker's judgment is that:

John Eliot, the highly publicized Puritan missionary to Indian peoples in Massachusetts and the most renowned of the early missionaries in what is today the United States — if not the most successful — comes out of a much discussed historical context . . . the beginnings of the fundamental attitudinal structures that underlie Indian-white relationships in North America, even to the present day, can be traced to the first English colonies of which Eliot was a part. Moreover, the basic outlines of the Euroamerican missionary profile are already clearly evidenced in Eliot, and this combination of immigrant attitudes of superiority and missionary profile makes Eliot an interesting test case for my thesis. To wit, *in Eliot we witness the intentional erosion of Indian culture along with its results, the unintentional devastation of those peoples, all accomplished by thorough confusion of gospel and culture.*

This chapter *will demonstrate Eliot's participation in the full range of what I have identified as cultural genocide in all its social, economic, political, and religious aspects.*³

Here are a few of John Eliot's own words:

As for these poore Indians, they have no principles of their own, nor yet wisdom of their own, (I mean as other Nations have).⁴

Or, a little closer to our UCC Indian congregations,

2. *Ibid.*, 4.

3. George Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Genocide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 21. Emphasis added.

4. Quoted from *ibid.*, 21.

WHERE CUSTER FAILED, RELIGION SUCCEEDS

Kindness Is a Great Civilizer,

"What military tactics failed to do, religious work did with love."

These were the words of Reverend C. L. Hall, pioneer missionary and a prominent figure in North Dakota history, in recalling the events *in subjugation of the Indians* — The significant phase in this missionary's life is the contrast between himself and Custer. Both men started out at the same time with practically the same object in mind: to subdue the Indians — but with totally different weapons.⁵

The above references are separated by about two and a half centuries — centuries during which European invaders, through a variety of means, essentially genocided a people.⁶ The Manifest Destiny doctrine widened the legitimization of "the invasion of America."⁷ That there appears to be little cognizance of this genocide on the surface of the American conscience testifies to the adequacy of the various rationales for this destruction. When I hear Paeans of patriotic praise to the United States as a wondrous nation of immigrants molded from the wilderness I am reminded of this absence of cognizance.

And Now . . .

Located where poverty, disease, isolation, and the inadequacies of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (schools, hospitals, etc.) are endemically ubiquitous, UCC Indian congregations simply do not have the resources to pay fully for pastoral leadership, let alone develop the kind of missional stance their communities absolutely need. From the perspective of a comfortable white middle class life, deprivation characterizes reservation life.

There are Indian folk alive in our churches today who recall being told that one cannot be both Indian and Christian at the same time. You must choose. Using tribal language brought physical punishment. Expressing the faith could only be done in anglo, not Indian, culture. That tradition continues to permeate many of our congregations so much so that a woman

5. From *100 Years at Ft. Berthold: The History of the Fort Berthold Indian Mission 1876–1976*, compiled by Rev. and Mrs. Harold W. Case (Bismarck, N.D.: Bismarck Tribune, 1977), 95. Emphasis added.

6. I refer the reader to Ronald Takaki's *A Different Drummer: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993) for a historical description of how Europeans and Euroamericans dealt with all non-whites. Indians were not the only victims of missionary exuberance and manifest destiny.

7. Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (New York: Norton, 1975). Though an older work, this book covers material not often taught in public school history classes, and explores some long-held beliefs about the reality of the European invasion of the Americas.

at our Convocation stated she could not seek ordination because her ordained grandfather told her that ordained ministry was no place for an Indian woman.

I believe Indian people must acknowledge the ambiguity of the missionary heritage, particularly that part which censures Indian culture. Some time ago, I wrote:

Of the peoples who have received the gospel from Europeans in the past 500 years, American Indians are among those who have not indigenized, contextualized, formulated our own expression of the faith, nor developed our own local theologies. For the most part, Indians in the United States have imitated their missionaries in leadership style and followed rather docilely the polity imposed on them. Worship tends to reflect the tradition of the denomination, including the ethnic flavor of that denomination, more than the specific Indian culture of the tribe involved.⁸

Indian people must engage with the gospel from the Indian experience of genocided history, exiled in our own homeland, culturally pluralistic, and virtually without resources.⁹ We need support and encouragement for this essential task.

We could use pastoral help from non-Indians, but the deep cultural realities along with historically bred distrust requires any non-Indian to be idiosyncratic and filled with *chesed* to receive immediate acceptance as a pastor — though it is possible after time and testing for some to make it. Unfortunately, few non-Indian folk like this receive Calls from God to go to Indian country. But even the best cannot do the Indian theological task.

And So . . .

To the 93% Euroamerican United Church of Christ I say, "Listen up! Read, understand, and internalize the history of your church and nation-state. Participate with us in God's mission so that we may all address the injustice, heal the broken people and ecology, and learn to speak with one another with trust." I cannot help but believe soul work must be done by Americans relative to the genocide that has been, and continues to be, legitimized by the cross, sword, flag, and cash register. We probably cannot help you with that task.

8. Norman W. Jackson, "Native American Theology and the United Church of Christ," *Prism* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 67.

9. Gaming has not solved the economic development conundrums in Indian Country, nor is it likely to.

Do not leave us alone under the guise of self-determination. Not only should you hold us accountable for the *Neighbors in Need* money you send us, but you are a part of it. You have a part of God's mission in Indian country, and we must all prayerfully discern what that is.

No, it will not be easy. There are many prejudgments to overcome. There is absence of understanding. There is a culturally congenital need to deny and avoid historical realities. There is a will to invisibility. There is a desire to blame. But, it seems to me, dealing with those alienating walls of hostility is what the basic gospel is about — to liberate and redeem us from all that stuff — so that "justice (will) roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

And, to Other People of Color in the UCC

We share with you the experience of having been marginalized by the dominant culture. We all know that. So, it would seem natural for all of us to join easily into coalitions of justice and development seeking. I just wish we knew each other better, knew the idiosyncrasies of each others' ways, the depth and uniqueness of each others' cultures, so that our natural self-interests could be more readily organized.

We are the smallest organized racial ethnic caucus in the UCC, and we probably have the fewest intrinsic resources. Our reservations routinely have from 40–80% unemployment, off in isolated places where resources like education, medical support, and economic development are difficult to maintain. But, for many Indian folk, that is home, where our people are, our families, and those with whom we share our culture. We do not do well, often, in urban environments which tend to dilute our cultures and force us into an individualism that is alien to our natures.

We differ from you. We are indigenous to this land, now exiles in our own land. The most obvious theological difference would be in the notion of liberation theology. For us, it is difficult to see the Exodus paradigm without completing it with the Conquest — that biblical narrative which was used to justify invasion of our lands and eradication of us as a people. We are in the midst of constructing our own, probably based on a form of creation theology, so be patient with us.

We celebrate your achievements. And, we know that our destiny, like it or not, is in many ways tied with yours as the dominant culture decides how it is going to handle becoming less than the majority in the coming thirty years. We support you and affirm you.

Let Indians decide who is "Indian" enough. It is ironic to be judged by you in ways similar to the dominant culture's.

There is a phrase — beige — that has made the rounds in recent years. As often as not, one that is disparaged. That is the color given to those of us who are the products of interracial marriage. According to all that I read, this group is growing and growing like the proverbial “Topsy.” We are all going to have to deal with this one, soon.

In Conclusion

Well, my sisters and brothers in the UCC, I call on you to envision that Pentecost community, that new humanity in Christ, that will bring us all into the yearned for community where we are both one and many.