

Native Americans

Chief Seattle

How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?

Every part of the earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experiences of my people. The sap which courses through the trees carries the memories of the red man.

The white man's dead forget the country of their birth when they go to walk among the stars. Our dead never forget this beautiful earth, for it is the mother of the red man. We are a part of the earth, and it is a part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters; the deer, the horse, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the juices in the meadows, the body heat of the pony, and man -- all belong to the same family.

So, when the Great Chief in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land, he asks much of us. The Great Chief sends word he will reserve us a place so that we can live comfortably to ourselves.

He will be our father, and we will be his children. So we will consider your offer to buy our land. But it will not be easy. For this land is sacred to us. This shining water that moves in the streams and the rivers is not just water but the blood of our ancestors. If we sell you land, you must remember that it is sacred, and you must teach your children that it is sacred and that each reflection in the clear water of the lakes tells of events and memories in the life of my people. The water's murmur is the voice of my father's father.

You must teach your children that the ground beneath their feet is the ashes of our grandfathers. So that they will respect the land, tell your children that

the earth is rich with the lives of our kin. Teach your children what we have taught our children, that the earth is our mother. Whatever befalls the earth, befalls the sons of the earth. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

Even the white man, whose God walks and talks with him as friend to friend, cannot be exempt from the common destiny. We may be brothers after all. We shall see. One thing we know, which the white man may one day discover -- our God is the same God. You may think now that you own him as you wish to own our land, but you cannot. He is the God of man, and his compassion is equal for the red man and the white. This earth is precious to him, and to harm the earth is to heap contempt upon its Creator.

A Feather in God's Cap

Until Europeans arrived, Native Americans didn't know what they didn't have. As long as they didn't know, they had no reason to be concerned about their profound disadvantages.

They had no steel weapons or armor, no gunpowder, no windmills, no watermills, no domesticated animals other than dogs. Wheels were toys they had seen in central Mexico. Their maritime adventures were limited to canoes and rafts. The only system of writing was restricted to a few Mesoamerican elites, so there was no permanent communication or record-keeping. They had no ideology or curiosity that drove them to explore much beyond their small known world. (They were also profoundly lacking in diseases, but the Europeans had a quick cure for that).

Europeans in Columbus' time, on the other hand, had a wide array of domesticated plants and animals, advanced agricultural practices, written communication and records, the most advanced maritime technology in the world, powerful military skills and technology, very strong religious beliefs, a cornucopia of diseases, and ambition out the wazoo.

This great continent could not have been kept as nothing but a game preserve for squalid savages.

-- wrote Teddy Roosevelt as the guns fell silent on the plains.

. . . from

Vine Deloria, Jr:

The World of the American Indian

While Europeans embraced Christianity, Indians had no comparable organized religion. That didn't make them atheists per se, although Europeans would not be too concerned about the distinction. If they were not Christians, and they clearly were not, then they must be pagans, and they must be persuaded or coerced to become Christians. To Europeans, that's all there was to it.

The label applied to Indian beliefs is *animism*. They made no distinction between the natural and the supernatural. They were interwoven into a very complex system in which everything in the natural world had a spiritual or supernatural component. Things

were also beings, and beings had various measures of power. Power pulsed, ebbed, flowed, and varied in concentration through every object and being in the natural world, interacting in ways that Europeans could not begin to fathom.

Indians saw themselves as simply one part of that intricate, interactive dynamic.

Encounters with non-human objects was a social experience, because objects were more like than unlike humans, and they could, in fact, morph into human forms at times. The key to successful and peaceful interaction was *reciprocity*. That meant, among other things, minimizing waste and exercising ecological restraint.

It was necessary to kill fish and animals for food. It made good sense to clear trees for fields. But Native Americans proceeded with caution, wary of offending the affected spirits and provoking some sort of supernatural counterattack. Fishing and hunting excesses, for example, could result in crop failures or destructive wind storms. The spiritual world was volatile, dangerous, and often unpredictable. So a good crop, a successful hunt, an abundance of fish – all such gifts of nature were to be accepted only with utmost gratitude and humility.

But that wasn't always enough to assure survival or prosperity. Sometimes existence in this perplexing process required a bit of trickery or manipulation. At other times, soothing or mollifying the spirits was a more appropriate approach. Visions and fasting were among the tools of the trade, and visions sometimes came in the form of dreams. Natives considered the dreamworld of nighttime even more real and powerful than their daytime existence.

The most skilled and experienced Natives became *shamans* – intermediaries between humans and inanimate objects. They could perform special rituals, heal or inflict illness, predict and sometimes influence the future.

Even their superior abilities weren't always enough to maintain the proper reciprocal balance. But, overall, the end result was a great respect for and harmony with nature. Indians were not motivated primarily by ecological concerns, but the environment benefited from their religious beliefs just the same.

The enigmatic religious beliefs of Indians, along with their strange rituals, customs, and practices, made them appear primitive and evil to the white man. Europeans considered shamans to be witches, and Indian religious beliefs were seen to be of the devil. Meanwhile, the natives, even with their profound lack of technology, considered themselves more intelligent and resourceful than their pale-face cousins.

In the European mind, the line of demarcation between human life and everything else in the natural world was clear and distinct. They were, therefore, free to harvest all natural resources without fear of offending the spirits or provoking their wrath. Not only did they have the right to fully exploit the world's natural resources, they were **obligated** to do so. After all, the Bible (in the book of Genesis) tasks mankind to subdue the earth and have dominion over every living thing that moves on the earth.

As far as the European late arrivers to the Western Hemisphere were concerned, Native Americans had failed to live up to that biblical mandate. That proved European superiority, and it fully justified their dominance over the Natives. In fact, it meant that Indians were really nothing more than one of the natural resources to be exploited.

Christopher Columbus wasted no time exercising his European responsibility and Christian duty to have dominion over every living thing. On his return trip to Spain, he took Indian slaves with him. The Queen at

first was appalled at the idea of one human being presuming to own another. But her reservations quickly evaporated when she realized the enormous profits to be made in the slavery business.

That early act by Christopher Columbus spoke volumes to Indians about the nature of Europeans. The Native American "discovery" of Europeans had begun. The white man was there to take whatever he could find of value, including humans. Superior culture and technology compelled Europeans to take control of the Western hemisphere, and their religion compelled them to convert the pagan Native Americans to Christianity. By whatever means necessary.

Animism and Christian Arrogance

While the animism of natives seems strange to us, and is easily dismissed as the pagan religion of primitives and savages, let's stop and reconsider that reaction.

Is there anything militant about animism? Not that I can see. Did natives try to force their religion on Europeans? There is no evidence that they made any attempt at all to proselytize Europeans. They simply wanted to be left alone to continue the way of life they had enjoyed for thousands of years on the land where they had lived for thousands of years. Was there anything objectionable or offensive about animism? Not that I'm aware of. On the contrary, their belief system demanded the utmost respect for mother earth and all the wonders of the natural world around them. Not only respect, but reverence. Their initial reaction to European arrivals was curiosity and friendship. Animosity resulted from European aggression, exploitation, and oppression of Natives.

Indians didn't see themselves as conservationists. Conservation was simply a

natural by-product of their reverence for nature. Not that they always employed sound conservation policies and practices. For example, successive maize crops quickly depleted the soil. But that was due to ignorance, not intent.

Meanwhile, the religion being forced upon them had already been responsible for millions of Indian deaths and the enslavement of millions of others. The Christians they encountered had little regard for mother earth, fully exploiting nature for their own benefit, then moving on to rape other virgin territory. The Christians they encountered had little regard for the lives of natives, their welfare, or even their most basic human needs, rights, or dignity.

Contrary to television and silver-screen depictions of aggressive, savage Indians scalping innocent, peaceful frontier settlers, Native Americans were willing to share their land. At least at first, and up to a point. Of course they fought back against the ineluctable encroachment of Europeans. Who wouldn't? They quickly realized that the white man was not here to share, but to dominate, subdue, exploit, enslave, suppress, and control. Christian Europeans behaved badly out of a sense of divine right, entitlement, and superiority.

Christians like to think they have a monopoly on morals. Christianity, they claim, is good for the country, because it is a force for good. Without Christianity, so the propaganda goes, the nation would regress into depravity. But the history of Christianity tells a very different story.

Teddy Roosevelt dismissed Native Americans as squalid savages. That was the prevailing attitude of the American government and most of its Christian citizens. It seems to me that such a derisive dismissal applied more accurately to Christians. Of the two men, Chief Seattle seems infinitely more reasonable,

thoughtful, enlightened, and compassionate than Teddy Roosevelt.

Thomas Jefferson eloquently evinced that all men are created equal. But that was a goal more than a reality. American equality didn't extend to blacks, women, or Native Americans. Any religion that sanctions and practices slavery (of both Blacks and Indians) has no moral authority. Any religion that participated in the murder of millions of Africans and Native Americans has no moral authority. Christianity has no moral authority.

In addition to the millions of deaths resulting from Christian domination and exploitation, millions of additional Native Americans died from European diseases. While Christians can't be blamed for that, it doesn't say much for their God.