

THEOLOGY AND ABORIGINAL RELIGION: CONTINUING “THE WIDER ECUMENISM”

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“Wider ecumenism” goes beyond conventional ecumenical and interreligious dialogue to conversation with indigenous religions. While many indigenous theologians today readily employ “Western” thought forms, an additional methodology is needed to articulate aboriginal experience. Cast in the form of a narrative of four decades of field work, this article describes such a methodology, incorporating the symbolic theology of 18th-century missionary anthropologist Joseph Lafitau, Bernard Lonergan’s ideas on “data of consciousness” and “mutual self-mediation,” Antoine Vergote’s religious psychology, and the complexities of “ethnographic memory” as described by Clifford Geertz.

THE THEOLOGY OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE has tended to concentrate heavily on conversation among the “world religions”—Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism. In recent years, however, the voices of aboriginal or indigenous religions have entered into this dialogue. Many representatives of these communities have come to see their practices and beliefs as forms of organized religion deserving equal recognition in the dialogue, and not simply as disparate elements of spiritual experience that might be appropriated by Christianity. The present article continues this dialogue, although there is an additional tension permeating it, since in fact so many practitioners of aboriginal religion are also Christian or at least influenced by Christianity. My own position is that authentic Christianity can be a “fulfillment” of aboriginal spiritual aspirations. However, whether the discussion pertains to the separate existence of aboriginal religions or to aboriginal experience as a component of Christianity, I advocate here that Christian theologians must address and respect repre-

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sentatives of the aboriginal or “tribal” religions as equals in the discussion. I also propose a theological method that is grounded in aboriginal culture and tradition and levels the playing field for dialogue between “mainstream” theologians and representatives who are marginal to both church and society. Following an interpretation of the kind of “memory” required for this work, I discuss elements from Bernard Lonergan’s methodology as well as a form of spiritual discipline taken from the thought of Paul Ricœur. Finally, I propose a “symbolic theology” that might set the stage for thinkers coming out of an aboriginal thought world.

I have employed the term “wider ecumenism” in the article’s title in tribute to one of the finest missiologists of the 20th century, still among us today—Eugene Hillman, C.S.Sp. Although others have used this term, it was Hillman who, in the late 1960s, examined it in detail in his book, *The Wider Ecumenism*.¹ He sought to develop a theology of dialogue not only with the great “world religions” but also with aboriginal religions with which he was so familiar from his years in Africa. In this early and venturesome exploration, Hillman took as his mentors Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner, and especially Edward Schillebeeckx. He cited the latter on the subject of “natural religion,” which the great Dominican declared to be a fiction: “In the concrete all religion presupposes an at least anonymous supernatural revelation and faith.”² Based on this understanding, Hillman’s books and articles are devoted to leading Catholic theology into fresh and creative engagement with indigenous peoples. He too was attempting to level the playing field by altering power relationships.³ In line

¹ Eugene Hillman, C.S.Sp., *The Wider Ecumenism* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968). Other important books by Hillman are: *The Church as Mission* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1965); *Polygamy Reconsidered: African Plural Marriage and the Christian Churches* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1975); *Many Paths: A Catholic Approach to Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989); *Toward an African Christianity: Inculturation Applied* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1993).

² Cited in Hillman, *Wider Ecumenism* 61. While this citation uses somewhat different wording from Schillebeeckx’s (*Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* [New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963] 8 n. 2), the difference is insignificant for my discussion.

³ This is my own reference to the work of Michel Foucault, for whom power is a fundamental category for social and political analysis; it is not an oppressive or violent “thing,” but rather a relationship between persons and groups. “Power is not a substance. Neither is it a mysterious property whose origin must be delved into. Power is only a certain type of relation between individuals” (Michel Foucault, “Politics and Reason,” in his *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*, ed. and intro. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Alan Sheridan et al. [New York: Routledge, 1988] 57–85, at 83). Actually, for aboriginal thought, power may well be more real than that, but Foucault’s description challenges any theology of inculturation.

with his pioneering work, my article elaborates a developmental methodology that will include indigenous theologians in theological conversation with mainstream theologians and with the official Church. Since most of my own context is my experience among the native peoples of North America, I beg the reader's indulgence for autobiographical references that reflect on earlier developments in methodology.

THE PROBLEM OF ETHNOGRAPHIC MEMORY

It has been remarked that hindsight is always 20–20. Certainly, it is easy to criticize the work of predecessors (as one must do), and even easier to believe (as one should never do) that the critic would have proceeded in a far more enlightened manner. Being painfully aware of this propensity, I begin my article with a critical summary mostly of my own development over a period of 35 years, leaving me free to claim that I have indeed acquired greater enlightenment during that period.

Of great value in this process is Clifford Geertz's strikingly "postmodern" reflection, *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist*. Written late in his career, it illustrates the confusing historical problem of critiquing past events.⁴ His experiences of reexamining such events are no doubt behind Geertz's earlier remark that cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete.⁵ As a theologian whose context constantly demanded anthropological thinking, I have found his memoir a source of important insights into the slow process of learning within a field context. In his reflection on his own history, Geertz attempts a kind of epistemology of memory focused on his own interpretation of events (which he liked to view as "texts") that occurred many years earlier. As the older and wiser Geertz brooded over his many experiences in the two regions of Indonesia and Morocco, he realized that the only "constant" is change. He complained: "It is Heraclitus cubed and worse. When everything changes, from the small and immediate to the vast and abstract—the object of study, the world immediately around it, the student, the world immediately around him, and the wider world around them both—there seems to be no place to stand so as to locate what was altered and how."⁶

It is not, however, just Heraclitus's steady stream, but a complex swirl of many streams, "a confusion of histories, a swarm of biographies," so that "what we can construct, if we keep notes and survive, are hindsight ac-

⁴ Clifford Geertz, *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1995).

⁵ Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in his *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) 3–30, at 29.

⁶ Geertz, *After the Fact* 2.

counts of the connectedness of things that seem to have happened: pieced-together patternings after the fact.”⁷

While I empathize with Geertz’s experience of those two baffling worlds of North Africa and Oceania, space allows only a brief comment on it. The lesson Geertz derives from his field work is crucial for all theologians who take history and social context seriously. One can readily embrace Geertz’s conundrum: “It is difficult to know what to do with the past. You can’t live in it, no matter how much you may fantasize doing so, or how gravely nostalgic you grow when remembering it.”⁸ The lament becomes downright elegiac: “Of all the bromides about the past, that it is prologue, that it is a bucket of ashes, that it is another country, that it is not even past, that if you don’t remember it you are condemned to repeat it, that it is the debris that piles up in front of us as we back into heaven, about the only one that comes to much as usable truth is Kierkegaard’s ‘Life is lived forward but it is understood backward.’”⁹

As Geertz concludes his memoir, he reverts to the book’s title, noting that *After the Fact* is a double pun, two tropological turns on a literal meaning. Thus, on the literal level, it means looking for facts, and then trying to interpret them “ex-post”—something that anthropologists (add here theologians and historians) are condemned to deal with. But there is a second turning, which Geertz calls even more problematical, to “the post-positivist critique of empirical realism, the move away from simple correspondence theories of truth and knowledge which makes the very term ‘fact’ a delicate matter.”¹⁰ It is typical of Geertz to end his book in a tone of combined excitement and resigned bafflement shown in his other works: “But it is an excellent way, interesting, dismaying, useful, and amusing, to expend a life.”¹¹

In this article, however, I highlight a pithy gem of wisdom found earlier in Geertz’s book, because it is of immense hermeneutical importance to all scholars, including theologians, working “in the field.” He writes, “Field research in such times, in such places, is not a matter of working from the cultural baggage you have brought with you so as to enter, without shape and without attachment, into a foreign mode of life. It is a matter of living out your existence in two stories at once.”¹² Of course, Geertz’s reference here is to “the anthropologist projecting him- or herself onto a local scene as a minor actor, odd but harmless, and a solemn observer, searching out assorted facts.”¹³ He is, however, referring also to the story of all the social and political struggles of those worlds into which the researcher enters and

⁷ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. 166.

¹¹ Ibid. 168.

¹³ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. 165.

¹⁰ Ibid. 167–68.

¹² Ibid. 94.

his inevitable involvement with those struggles. It is with a profound empathy that I cite Geertz's memoir, sensing its applicability to my own less flamboyant history in missiology. *Caeteris paribus*, all the dynamics described in *After the Fact* are present in a review of the last 35 years of inculturation praxis in the native North American scene and in any efforts to advance that praxis.

I delineate here the process of the present article. First, I discuss early efforts at doing a phenomenological method, which soon demanded an "intentionality analysis," or Lonergan's search for the "data of consciousness." Second, I describe efforts to carry out a type of Lonergan's "mutual self-mediation" in conversation with native leaders. Third, I discuss an anthropological analysis of aboriginal religious experience. This leads into a theological process which I call—after Geertz—"theology after the fact," and in which I discuss the value of Lonergan's functional specialty, foundations, and the appropriate "conversions." One important factor in conversion here is a spirituality of the cross as advocated by Ricœur. Finally, as a method for facilitating aboriginal methodology, I discuss an approach to symbolic analysis as found in Louis-Marie Chauvet, Antoine Vergote, and, in retrospect, the 18th-century Jesuit missionary Joseph Lafitau.

DEVELOPING THEOLOGICAL METHOD

In my own initial forays into "inculturation" (the term found wide acceptance only after 1975¹⁴), I had not yet made a significant "turn" to the work of Bernard Lonergan, other than an early futile attempt to understand *Insight* and a somewhat fruitful classroom study of his christological work, *De Verbo Incarnato*. It was only upon reading his *Method in Theology* in 1972, that I began to see that elements of Lonergan's method had been at work in what I had been doing three years earlier. That is, I had already been struggling at realizing his definition of method: "a normative pattern of recurrent and related operations yielding cumulative and progressive results."¹⁵ Likewise, Lonergan's "transcendental method," as formulated in his "transcendental precepts," was already coming into play in my desire to broaden my horizons through what he had called "self-

¹⁴ On this history, see Pedro Arrupe, S.J., "Letter to the Whole Society on Inculturation," *Studies in the International Apostolate of Jesuits* 7 (June 1978); J. Peter Schineller, S.J., *A Handbook on Inculturation* (New York: Paulist, 1990); Achiel Peelman, *L'inculturation: l'Église et les cultures* (Paris: Desclée, 1988); François Guillemette, "L'apparition du concept d'inculturation: Une reception de Vatican II," *Mission: Revue des sciences de la mission* 2.1 (1995) 53–78.

¹⁵ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972) 4.

appropriation,” or growth in personal authenticity.¹⁶ The method was emerging in somewhat awkward efforts to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible, and in love with the object of my quest—with God, with the native people, and with learning. Lonergan had stated much earlier, in his follow-up lectures to *Insight*, that we learn method by *doing* it, and only subsequently formulate it or describe it.¹⁷ He was talking about “praxis,” in the modern sense of the term, and I was learning laboriously by doing it.

The medium of praxis for me at that time was conversation—that art so often extolled by Ignatius Loyola as the most effective form of spiritual communication. In 1969, while engaged in summer youth ministry on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming, I found myself in conversation with two young Arapahos who challenged me with some troublesome questions, among which was, “Why has the church always attacked our tribal religion?” These discussions led me to become—in Lonergan’s terminology—increasingly “attentive” to the aboriginal spirituality which I had not ever attacked, but until then had mostly ignored. The phenomenological method became more and more pertinent to this situation, and in 1970 I turned to the work of sociologist of religion Joachim Wach, especially his *The Comparative Study of Religions*.¹⁸ This book, relying more on written texts than on personal communications, does not plunge the reader into profound analyses of aboriginal spirituality but describes religious elements common to all humans. Wach’s description of religious experience as manifesting itself in thought, action, and fellowship, or, in the better-known terms, creed, code, and cult, aided my exploration of Arapaho religious experience.¹⁹

This early attempt to “interpret” made operative in me Lonergan’s second precept, to be intelligent in searching into common religious experience, as well as his third precept, to be reasonable in the effort to “revision” a Christian theology of religions.²⁰ Finally, his fourth precept, to be

¹⁶ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Understanding and Being: An Introduction and Companion to Insight: The Halifax Lectures*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan 5, ed. Elizabeth A. Morelli and Mark D. Morelli (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1988) 3–32.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 3–4.

¹⁸ Joachim Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions* (New York: Columbia University, 1966).

¹⁹ See Carl F. Starkloff, “American Indian Religion and Christianity: Confrontation and Dialogue,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 8 (1971) 317–40, reprinted in *New Theology*, vol. 9, *Theology in the Context of the New Particularities*, ed. Marty E. Marty and Dean G. Peerman, (New York: Macmillan, 1973) 121–50.

²⁰ Here I am following Lonergan’s practical description of the functional specialties: “Being intelligent includes a grasp of hitherto unnoticed or unrealized possibilities. Being reasonable includes the rejection of what probably would not

responsible, was ushering me into the realization that to change existing mission policies would require much work. The self-appropriation demanded in these movements was only the beginning of other complex extrapolations of the transcendental method, of which I gradually acquired deeper knowledge, thanks to my Toronto colleague Robert Doran, who has elaborated transcendental precepts that call for further forms of conversion—psychic, affective, and political.²¹ What had begun as an exploratory article developed into a small book, *People of the Center*,²² which explored means for a comparative study of possible “functional equivalents” between aboriginal spirituality and Christianity.

Phenomenology, no matter how thickly it may describe a phenomenon, is not an adequate philosophical or theological method in itself, as Lonergan had argued.²³ However, the initiatives in dialogue with native leaders were to deepen the description process and so respond to another critical argument from Lonergan that faulted scholars for relying on “data of sense” that only mimic the positive sciences,²⁴ including anthropology when it goes “after the fact.” Philosophy and theology, however, must seek their proper data in “intentional consciousness,” or more specifically in “data of consciousness.”²⁵ By this phrase Lonergan refers not merely to the information one acquires from other persons or other objects of research, but to the dynamic of mental processes at work in the researcher gathering information. William Stolzman’s *The Pipe and Christ*, while it has been appropriately critiqued for oversimplifications, nonetheless exemplifies the

work but also the acknowledgment of what probably would. Being responsible includes basing one’s decisions and choices on an unbiased evaluation of short-term and long-term costs and benefits to oneself, to one’s group and to other groups” (Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 53).

²¹ See, e.g., Robert M. Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1990) 42–62.

²² Carl F. Starkloff, *People of the Center: American Indian Religion and Christianity* (New York: Seabury, 1974). The efforts at dialogue featured in this book were already being more deeply anticipated by fellow Jesuits in South Dakota, especially William Stolzman and Paul Steinmetz. See Paul B. Steinmetz, S.J., *Pipe, Bible, and Peyote among the Oglala Lakota: A Study in Religious Identity* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1980) and William Stolzman, S.J., *The Pipe and Christ: A Christian–Sioux Dialogue* (Chamberlain, S.D.: Tipi, 1986). Stolzman’s book is an early venture into comparative theology, developed from conversations over more than a decade, whereas Steinmetz’s book is a work of religious phenomenology, emerging from earlier reservation work and subsequent scholarly research.

²³ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan 4, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1992) 440.

²⁴ Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 94.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 95, 201–2.

painstaking effort needed to understand the intentionalities of all parties to a dialogue. However, two dangers inhere in such intentionality analysis: first, the researcher falls into the anthropologist syndrome by incessantly asking questions and so in general making a nuisance of him- or herself; and second, “informants” often tend simply to satisfy the biases behind the questions themselves by giving the answers they think the questioner wants. In this area of learning, the pastor or missionary, if he or she has truly established longstanding rapport with native leaders, may have an advantage over the anthropologist.

One memorable example of this point occurred during the process of creating an Arapaho eucharistic text that required more than five years of work. Once when I had asked a question about the genuine practice of an old tribal religious custom, one of the elders admonished me, “Remember, Father, we can’t go backward!” As the other men expressed enthusiastic agreement with this warning, I gained an appreciation of the deceptive appeal of primitivism—the desire to keep a people at a certain stage of cultural development whether it nourishes them as a community or not. Many pastoral and social crises demand of the missionary or social worker a deeper insight into cultural phenomena and human intentionality.

The cumulative dimension of Lonergan’s method became manifest in ongoing efforts to understand aboriginal religion and spirituality, and in earlier tribal leaders’ struggles to relate them to foreign intrusions. Working with an oral culture, it was no longer possible for an investigator “after the fact” to capture the intentionality of the aboriginal leaders in their first encounters with Christianity. However, attentive listening to present-day leaders yielded “progressive results” in understanding how these modern leaders were thinking. Fresh insights came from listening to these elders and medicine persons as they exercised the function of *bricolage*, to use Levi-Strauss’s felicitous expression.²⁶ Originally, *bricolage* described a kind of skill in gamesmanship, but in later usage it refers to the craft of employing all kinds of means to interpret and integrate diverse experiences, especially through the narration of myth.

By 1977, the work of several scholars in the history and phenomenology of religions made it possible to describe further the tribal religious practices that had left earlier missionaries baffled, hostile, or indifferent. Thus, the aforementioned Joachim Wach, as well as Mircea Eliade, Gerardus Van der Leeuw, and Rudolf Otto provided clues to assist the interchanges occurring between mission personnel and native leaders. Participants on both sides seemed to grasp the dynamics, if not the actual “concepts” such

²⁶ Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1966) 16–33.

as “the Holy” and its manifestations in experience. One happy development was that gradually these Christian tribal leaders began to question the missionaries about the more abstruse doctrines of Christian faith and about Catholic practices that occurred especially after the sometimes disturbing changes introduced by Vatican II. In retrospect, I can see now that we were into a growing process of what Bernard Lonergan called “mutual self-mediation.” This term calls for at least a brief explanation.

Lonergan explored the idea of mediation throughout his writings, but in a 1963 lecture he developed what he called “mutual self-mediation.” In typical fashion, the lecture began with a brief discussion of the Aristotelian syllogism as the primary analogue for mediation from what is already known for certain to what is yet unknown. He then went into a complex development of mediation as the process of all organized movement, even the mechanical mediation of the interacting parts of a watch. But, while the watch is a functioning whole, it is not alive, so Lonergan shifted his attention to living organisms that have their own finality. Of living things he could say, “We can think of self-mediation as a whole that has consequences that change the whole.”²⁷ And, while living organisms exercise a self-mediation that is a “displacement upward,” there is a further self-mediation that is a “displacement inward” in conscious beings.²⁸ Beyond animal instinct there is human consciousness, which is the autonomous disposal of oneself through conscious decision-making. More, in humans this conscious activity takes place in community—community with a history. The decisions arrived at in community are the result of a sharing process Lonergan calls “mutual self-mediation”²⁹ that leads those involved to a deeper consciousness in making decisions.

The purpose of Lonergan’s lecture was to enhance the understanding of how Christ mediates for us and is mediated to us in prayer. My interest here, however, is in the power of mutual self-mediation as an intercultural and interreligious activity. John Dadosky has incorporated the concept to explain the practice of inculturation, in which theology mediates between faith and culture, and the church engages a culture or another religion in a shared and mutually critical process of growth.³⁰ Thus, the idea of mutual self-mediation is the gift of transformation necessary for authentic incar-

²⁷ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, “The Mediation of Christ in Prayer,” in his *Philosophical and Theological Papers, 1958–1964*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan 6, ed. Robert C. Croken, Frederick E. Crowe, and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1996) 160–182, at 167.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 169.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 174–75.

³⁰ See John D. Dadosky, “The Dialectic of Religious Identity: Lonergan and Balthasar,” *Theological Studies* 60 (1999) 1–22.

nation of the gospel within a culture; it calls for openness and creativity by the dialogue partners. Dadosky has also demonstrated how mutual self-mediation works through the participation of a Christian in Native American ritual and the dialogue that accompanies that participation.³¹

“MUTUAL SELF-MEDIATION”: TWO EXAMPLES

I recall here two notable case studies of how mutual self-mediation led to “cumulative and progressive results” during my praxis work of the 1970s and 1980s. The first case was an investigation into the mystery of God and the enduring question about the possible monotheism or polytheism of ancient peoples—an investigation for which the German anthropologist Wilhelm Schmidt is especially remembered. The case began around 1970, when, as yet knowing very little Arapaho, I began to ask elders about the name their people gave to “the Supreme Being,” a mystery shrouded in ancient oral tradition, but testified to in the collective memory. The true anthropological and theological “moment” began in 1975 when we came to an agreement to collaborate in creating a full eucharistic text in Arapaho, a collaboration that was to last five years.³² The quest to employ the correct Arapaho name for God (reminiscent of the dialogue of Matteo Ricci with Mandarin leaders) led in a very “liberationist” direction. A fully satisfactory answer to the question of what the early *Hinono’ei*,³³ or Arapaho people, believed, is lost in antiquity and the mysteries of oral tradition, but the discovery process turned out to be creative. Sometime during the tortured years of the tribe’s struggles to survive the agony caused by Euro-American frontier expansion, tribal leaders seem to have adopted a mysterious word, *nihauthau*,³⁴ embedded in their mythology and referring to a mysterious spider figure, to describe “white men,” probably Spanish soldiers whose dress reminded the Arapahos of spiders. This descriptive term for Europeans led their spiritual leaders, at least when talking to whites, to

³¹ See John D. Dadosky, “‘Walking in the Beauty of the Spirit’: A Phenomenological and Theological Case Study of a Navajo Blessingway Ceremony,” *Mission: Journal of Mission Studies* 6.2 (1999) 199–222, at 210.

³² Not to enter into the laborious detail around this project, I refer the reader to three articles by me: “God as Oppressor? Changing God’s Name among Contemporary Arapahos,” *Kerygma* 17 (1983) 165–74; “Aboriginal Cultures and the Christ,” *Theological Studies* 53 (1992) 288–312; and “In Search of the ‘Ultimate Meaning’ in Arapaho Tradition and Contemporary Experience,” *Ultimate Reality and Meaning: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Philosophy of Understanding* 18.4 (1995) 249–63.

³³ This word, probably derived from *hinen* (man), means “people,” but modern Arapahos say that it means simply “Arapaho.”

³⁴ I am employing a simple phonetic spelling here, although the Arapahos now have a special alphabet.

explain their understanding of God as “White Man Above,” since Jesus had been presented to them as a white man.

The team of elders and missionaries, dutifully following earlier Catholic and Episcopalian catechisms, began by employing this name (*Hixchebba'nihautau*) in our various preliminary texts, until a young mother protested against teaching her children “to call God a white man”! Following this protest, the elders felt the freedom to call to our attention the other words for the Supreme Being that they saw as lying deeper in their past. The result was that the eucharistic text finally employed a name that, while still not irrefutably “aboriginal,” at least was authentically Arapaho: God now became *Bahaatixt*, or “the only one over all things.” This process was truly mutual self-mediation, leading elders, tribal people, and missionaries into “cumulative and progressive results”; it was a “praxis” that influenced at least a linguistic liberation from oppressive policy.

The second example of mutual self-mediation praxis began in Canada in the late 1970s, when Michael Murray, S.J., and collaborators initiated a program to train native people for church ministry and especially for the permanent diaconate. Lonergan’s theological college, Regis, became deeply involved in this project, although Lonergan himself was too unwell by that time to participate directly. But the project truly exemplified his method, especially his eighth functional specialty, communications, that relates to the quest for “common meaning,” or a “common field of experience.”³⁵ As with the cultural and political struggles in the United States, and indeed among all native people in the Americas, the education process had to be involved in justice issues. Among these were treaty rights, substance abuse, diabetes, alienation of the young often leading to suicide, family dysfunction, and physical and sexual abuse in residential schools. These issues became central to articles in the journal *Kerygma* (renamed *Mission* in 1994), published by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate at St. Paul University in Ottawa.

While work with the aboriginal people led the churches into many social and political situations between 1980 and 2000, the concern that most exercised us was that of indigenous church leadership. There were (and are) very few native priests in North America, and thus ecclesial leadership ultimately rests almost entirely in the hands of nonnatives. The Ojibway people, in particular, had put forth more than a dozen men who became deacons during this period, and these deacons were all well accepted as church leaders in their communities. This fact led to the publication of several papers arguing not for abolition of the celibacy requirement, but for

³⁵ See Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 356–58.

dispensations at least for these men (all except one were married) to eventually be ordained to the priesthood.³⁶ A committee of bishops supported this argument and eventually presented the case to the Vatican, but the dispensation was not allowed. However, the whole petition process illustrates growing self-awareness and extensive ecclesial collaboration on the local level to develop a “native Church”; indigenous leadership is a *sine qua non* if native people are to become “agents” of their own history. Mutual self-mediation was taking place as native people and missionaries strove together to experience the various “conversions” necessary for progress toward a native church.

ASSISTANCE FROM CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

During the late 1980s and the following decade, younger scholars, especially anthropologists, began contributing to the conversation about indigenous religion and Christianity.³⁷ The arrival of these younger scholars confirmed my own conviction of the importance of anthropology and sociology as companions (the former word was “handmaid”) for the discipline of systematic theology. Of immense value was the work of Gibson Winter in demonstrating the crucial symbolic importance of indigenous ministry.³⁸ Geertz’s dense but creative theorizing on cultural systems provided essential tools for categorizing and concretizing arguments in favor of inculturation.³⁹ Victor Turner, whose great work was cut short by a premature death in 1983, provided many resources for theologizing on the

³⁶ See David Nazar, Carl Starkloff, and Michael Stogre, “Papers Proposing a Married Native Clergy in the Sault Ste. Marie Diocese,” *Mission: Journal of Mission Studies* 4 (1997) 9–28. This journal, formerly titled “Kerygma,” over these years and since contains numerous articles on indigenous matters. Foremost among their authors is missiologist Achiel Peelman, O.M.I.

³⁷ See, e.g., Raymond A. Bucko, *The Lakota Ritual of the Sweat Lodge: History and Contemporary Practice* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1998); Michael J. Steltenkamp, *The Sacred Vision: Native American Religion and Its Practice Today* (New York: Paulist, 1982); *Black Elk, Holy Man of the Oglala* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1993); Clyde Holler, “Black Elk’s Relationship to Christianity,” *American Indian Quarterly* 8 (1984) 37–49; “Lakota Religion and Tragedy: The Theology of *Black Elk Speaks*,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52 (1984) 19–45; Damian Costello, *Black Elk: Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2005).

³⁸ See Gibson Winter, *Elements for a Social Ethic: Scientific Perspectives on Social Policy* (New York: Macmillan, 1968) and *Liberating Creation: Foundations of Religious Social Ethics* (New York: Crossroad, 1981). Winter’s work inspired my own article “Keepers of Tradition: The Symbolic Value of Indigenous Ministry,” *Kerygma* 52 (1989) 1–120.

³⁹ See Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System” and “Ideology as a Cultural System,” in *Interpretation of Cultures* 87–125, 193–233; “Common Sense as a Cultural System” and “Art as a Cultural System,” in Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowl-*

place of ritual among marginalized peoples, especially to enable them to be a dynamic element in the church.⁴⁰

Three decades of intercultural, pastoral, and theological activity have provoked in me an interest, not to say an obsession, with “syncretism.” This very complex phenomenon, which theologians had tended to disavow, gradually impressed itself upon me as an unjustly embattled concept. But in the mid-1980s, the revisiting of syncretism was an idea whose time had come. Robert Schreiter discussed it with great perceptiveness in 1985 and returned to it again in 1997, and Leonardo Boff made it a category within liberation theology.⁴¹ I first addressed the issue in the late 1980s, concluding that mission theologians would have to free themselves from the haunting specter of “syncretophobia.”⁴² The outcome of this preoccupation was extensive research, in the spirit of Geertz’s “after the fact” epistemology, into works on syncretism and into the history of the tortured interpretation of that concept.⁴³ With the further assistance of Lonergan’s functional specialties, these studies led to the production of a monograph, *A Theology of the In-Between*—more properly a study of method than of a complete “system,” a method that would require collaboration by many experts. Within that method lies an interpretation of syncretism as a symbol, not of distortion or disorder, but of the enduring quest for unity.⁴⁴

edge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology (New York: Basic Books, 1983) 73–93, 94–120; Carl F. Starkloff, S.J., “Inculturation and Cultural Systems,” *Theological Studies* 55 (1994) 66–81, 274–94.

⁴⁰ See Carl F. Starkloff, S.J., “Church as Structure and Communitas: Victor Turner and Ecclesiology,” *Theological Studies* 58 (1997) 643–68. Of this article’s numerous references to Turner’s works, the most pertinent for this context are to his *The Ritual Process: Structure and anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine, 1995) and, with Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University, 1978).

⁴¹ See Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985) chap. 7; Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997) 71 and *passim*. See also Leonardo Boff, *Church, Charism, and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*, trans. John W. Dirksmeier (New York: Crossroad, 1985) chap. 7.

⁴² Carl F. Starkloff, “The New Primal Religious Movements: Towards Enriching Theology as Hermeneutic,” in *Exploring New Religious Movements: Essays in Honor of Harold W. Turner*, ed. A. F. Walls and Wilbert R. Shenk (Elkhart, Ind.: Mission Focus, 1990) 169–78, at 173.

⁴³ See Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, 5 vols. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University), esp. vol. 5, *In Search of Order*.

⁴⁴ Carl F. Starkloff, *A Theology of the In-Between: The Value of Syncretic Process* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 2002). “In-Between” is a translation of the Greek *metaxy*, which Voegelin had used to describe human existence and historical consciousness in the world of things for those awaiting final participation in the eternal order. See my discussion of this in *Theology of the In-Between* 53–61.

Finally, several early readings about the work of the 18th-century Jesuit missionary and proto-anthropologist Joseph Lafitau coalesced when I discovered in the rare books section of the Regis College library an original edition of his masterwork, *Mœurs des sauvages Américains*.⁴⁵ Later, an expert translation of and commentary on this work mitigated my struggle with Lafitau's premodern French, to the point where I came to appreciate the immense value of Lafitau's volume for missiology today.⁴⁶ This missionary had labored over many issues that continue to challenge both pastoral ministers and scholars in comparative religion. While writing a book on Lafitau's work,⁴⁷ a book that was especially concerned with his attention to symbols and "figures," I found the stimulus to explore methods of deeper analysis of religious experience, and thus transcending the differences between the "aboriginal" and the "modern," to illumine the way to more enlightened dialogue. From that exploration emerged a process to develop a "conversation" grounded in theological method and in the analysis of religious "data of consciousness." It is to this theological process that I now turn.

THEOLOGY "AFTER THE FACT"

After discussing the many complex and confused "facts" of field work, I will shift into a pastoral mode and develop a method for relating theology to its "origins" in primordial religious experience common to both contemporary and "primal" religions. This move will involve a number of acts of faith—faith in the relative assurance of what contemporary aboriginal people remember of their oral traditions (such as in my explorations into the names for God), and faith in the tradition formed by the Christian memory, beginning with the Acts of the Apostles, as it entered into many cultures.

The point of departure for this dialogue between traditional European and aboriginal forms of thought is grounded in Lonergan's functional specialty, foundations. The basic idea of foundations, following the specialties of "oblique" discourse—research, interpretation, history, and dialectic—is not to formulate doctrines but rather to enhance "the human reality that

⁴⁵ See Joseph-François Lafitau, *Mœurs des sauvages américains: Comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps* (Paris: Saugraine l'aîné, 1724).

⁴⁶ See Joseph-François Lafitau, *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Times*, 2 vols., ed. William N. Fenton and Elizabeth Moore (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1974).

⁴⁷ See Carl F. Starkloff, *Common Testimony: Ethnology and Theology in the Customs of Joseph Lafitau* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2002).

the theologian is.”⁴⁸ This means that the theologian must be disposed to undergo further religious, moral, intellectual, and affective conversions in order to pursue the “direct discourse” of his or her trade. Thus begins a form of that aforementioned “self-appropriation” in the theologian, or in any other thinker. That is, the theologian must, by an act that is prepredicative, preconceptual, and pre-judicial, search his or her consciousness *prior* to forming judgments, concepts, or words.⁴⁹

For many who were working to reformulate a theology of mission in the 1970s and 1980s, it was a matter of learning the art (not skill) of empathy, a felt but unsentimental identification with the intentionality of native peoples. To be sure, such identification entails awareness of historical background, cultural and social dynamics, and the function of ritual drama, but it also means something more subtle and profound. An anecdote from those decades may help to explain.

During the six years of conversation on faith and culture between missionaries and Arapaho elders, one moment stands out in my memory. The occasion was an intense discussion of “visions,” which figure so powerfully in aboriginal experience. Does one actually *see* and *hear* the spirits or communicate with the Creator? Perhaps one does have such experiences in dreams, but dreams are not really the point here. It was at this juncture in the conversation that one of the men, Jesse Oldman, without saying a word, simply pointed to his heart, in a gesture that “demythologized” any literal interpretation of “visions” or “voices.” It is in the heart that genuine religious experience must take place.

So much for the beginning of foundations. It continues into a “second act,” as foundations is “the first in any ordered set.”⁵⁰ The ordered set may develop propositionally, but, more importantly, it must be “an ongoing, developing reality.”⁵¹ As with much of his teaching, Lonergan employed mathematical analogies to explain such development, but I—deficient in mathematical skill—offer an alternative example of the process. Having at first attempted to understand indigenous spirituality according to my own formation in a linear, “Western” process of understanding, I could do no more than puzzle over the intentionality of native ceremonial leaders (*bricoleurs*, in Levi-Strauss’s terminology). The insights of historians and phenomenologists of religion were helpful in offering categories, but something was clearly lacking in my understanding, because I was still operating

⁴⁸ Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 270.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 14–15. Note that Lonergan is recognizing Heidegger’s insistence that a philosopher must strive to penetrate behind ontological thinking to *ontic* thinking—thinking about what *is*.

⁵⁰ Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 269.

⁵¹ Ibid. 270.

predicatively, conceptually, and judgmentally. Jesse Oldman's gesture and others like it helped to clarify the deep significance of "intentionality analysis." The experience of recognizing symbolic gestures such as this led me to focus more on listening than on talking and, as a teacher, on enabling persons to voice their thoughts rather than on too much of what Freire called "the banking method" of instruction.⁵² While these conversations demanded growth in the foundational experience of intellectual conversion, even more important was the challenge to a moral and religious conversion precipitated by my later reading of an article by Paul Ricœur.

A Crucified Theology

Ricœur's work provided me an insight that I offer here as a foundational principle for theology's praxis of dialogue with indigenous religion and spirituality: "Take up your cross and follow me." Ricœur's brief paper—really more of a homily than a scholarly article—was entitled "Whoever Loses Their Life for My Sake Will Find It."⁵³ Redolent of Moltmann's *The Crucified God*, Ricœur's paper makes a dramatic argument for the application of Jesus' "hard saying" in Matthew 16:25 to what Lonergan calls not only *religious* conversion but also *intellectual* conversion. The religious and moral dimensions of Jesus' challenge are so evident as to need no explanation, but the intellectual facet of that saying is Ricœur's contribution. Ricœur suggests that, to arrive at religious or spiritual conversion, we should isolate the saying from its context and focus on its power as a paradoxical wisdom saying. Wisdom warns against the danger of the quest for power: "We need to admit that the dream of hegemony is the secret dream of every one of us, which we only lack the strength to carry out."⁵⁴ He then proposes a third form of the will to power: besides the desire for possessions and political and economic power, we experience the desire for power through knowledge. The noble project of enlarging, clarifying, and improving life has its dark aspect: our knowledge is called into question as soon as it turns from humility to self-aggrandizement by our ability to manipulate ideas. While science may seem to be the most obvious example of this paradox, Ricœur argues that, perhaps even more than profane knowledge, religious knowledge needs to be called into question. Thus, "the height of the mastery of knowledge may well be the will to include

⁵² Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1968) 57–74.

⁵³ Paul Ricœur, "Whoever Loses Their Life for My Sake Will Find It," *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 284–88.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 285.

God in our enterprise of intellectual domination, by demanding of God that God guarantee our obstinate search for a guarantee.”⁵⁵

The challenge to lose one’s life for the sake of Jesus has been deprived of its devastating power in our modern liberal, pluralistic societies, where one is no longer persecuted for one’s faith. Nor can most of us imitate the radical poverty of a Francis of Assisi or of the hermits who leave the ordinary world. So how does the religious intellectual live this Christ-mysticism? The response is that “taking up one’s cross” is, for the Christian scholar, tantamount to sacrificing one’s passion for absolute and secure knowledge. The Protestant suspicion of natural theology is evident in Ricœur’s testimony: “To take up my cross is to renounce the representation of God as the locus of absolute knowledge, the guarantee of all my knowledge. It is to accept knowing just one thing about God, that God was present and is to be identified with Jesus crucified.”⁵⁶ There is thus a “higher logic” involved here: “that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again” (Lk 24:7).

Much can be said both in rejoinder to and acceptance of this powerful witness. One could challenge it with the customary rebuttal that it leaves us on Calvary or at the tomb and offers no place for resurrection. However, since the Resurrection itself is a matter of faith rather than empirical certitude, Ricœur’s challenge stands. One could likewise add more fuel to the unending debate about types of natural theology and argue that human reason is not to be excluded from the enterprise. But then, the great philosopher himself is no antirational oracle; he simply calls us to relativize our natural knowledge. I suggest here an approach to that process through a corrective to the hegemonic use of knowledge that Freire called “cultural invasion.”⁵⁷

Cultural invasion is a phenomenon of the “power differential” in mission, a phrase I once heard from missiologist Harold Turner; it means preaching the gospel from a position of civil and even military power. However, this type of power, which every Christian must reject out of hand, is only a crude externalization of the even deeper tension riding in its wake. The material advantages held by those who brought Christianity to tribal peoples signaled the possession of psychic, intellectual, and spiritual power, with the result that often the native peoples concluded that their “medicine” was impotent to resist that of the invaders. While the deeper meanings of the church’s doctrinal and symbolic manifestations were obscure to them, they perceived a much greater spiritual “mana” in them and so embraced them. However, Camerounian theologian Fabian Eboussi

⁵⁵ Ibid. 286.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 288.

⁵⁷ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 150–52.

Boulaga phrased a dramatic turn on this power struggle in his book *Christianity without Fetishes*, in which he cleverly reverses the European nomenclature of “fetishism” applied to indigenous religion. Eboussi argued that European missionaries employed their own laws, doctrines, and sacraments as fetishes or power objects in the encounter with indigenous thought and symbolism.⁵⁸ Thus, an authentic African Christianity would have to begin by returning to the very origins of Christianity, where Africans could interpret the Christian message in terms of their own symbolic cultures. I cannot here discuss Eboussi’s complex dialectics, but his point is that Christianity has been constantly presented through the mediation of European culture and hegemony. Once again, “Western” Christian theology faces a call to humility.

One may indeed argue about the degree to which two millenia of Christian tradition can be de-Hellenized to facilitate the growth of what Rahner called “world church,”⁵⁹ and the topic begs deeper study. What I propose here, however, is that Ricœur’s short homily should move the Christian theologian to relativize the hitherto absolute authority of Hellenistic language, at least to the point of granting indigenous theologians and spiritual leaders equal advantage in the exchange of ideas. In what follows, I suggest an adaptation of theological method that might facilitate such an exchange. Two authors whose thought is decidedly postmodern can be of assistance: sacramental theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet and theologian-psychoanalyst Antoine Vergote.

Chauvet’s Theological Method

While Chauvet’s thorough rejection of metaphysics is open to question (as Joy Blaylock also points out),⁶⁰ his massive study of symbolism is an important hermeneutical tool in the dialogue with indigenous spirituality. With the help of Heidegger’s methodology, he first summons philosophers (and theologians) to transcend the quest to know “being” in order to arrive at Being, by means of a phenomenology of “being in the world” and the investigation of language.⁶¹ Chauvet would seem to agree with Ricœur and

⁵⁸ F. Eboussi Boulaga, *Christianity without Fetishes*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981).

⁵⁹ Karl Rahner, “Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II,” *Theological Studies* 40 (1979) 716–27.

⁶⁰ Joy Harrell Blaylock, “Ghislain Lafont and Contemporary Sacramental Theology,” *Theological Studies* 66 (2005) 841–61, lucidly discusses Chauvet’s work in dialogue with another theologian. I am indebted to James F. Poag of Washington University, St. Louis, for alerting me to the significance of Chauvet’s work.

⁶¹ Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Interpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1995).

Moltmann when he challenges theologians to “risk” unbelief by surrendering their desire for certitude (which they hope to attain through metaphysical reasoning as well as through dogma) and plunging into a dialogue with the world in company with the crucified God.⁶²

What is the value of this argument for including aboriginal thinkers in theological dialogue? I suggest that it lies in Chauvet’s focus on a phenomenology of bodily reality rather than on metaphysical, “logocentric” reasoning. Taking off from Heidegger, Chauvet calls the body the “arch-symbol” in religion and urges theologians (sacramental theologians in particular) to consider this more concrete mediation.⁶³ That is, theology must mediate our being-in-the-world by means of symbols. While Chauvet’s categorical dismissal of metaphysics risks leaving theology in the clutches of fideism, his method does reinforce Ricœur’s argument against making God into a first premise for the proofs of the validity of Christianity. Such argumentation is of little value for a cross-cultural dialogue between “Western” and indigenous thinkers. One is reminded of Geertz’s anecdote about the encounter between an Englishman and a local Indian villager who tells the Englishman (an ethnographer?) that the world rests on a platform on the back of a giant elephant, which in turn stands on the back of a giant turtle. The Englishman, confident of his apologetics, asks the villager, “But what does the turtle stand on?” “Another turtle,” the Indian replies. The Englishman fires back the devastating counterquestion, “And where does *that* turtle stand?” “Ah, Sahib, after that it is turtles all the way down!”⁶⁴

While linear Western thought is not to be disparaged, as some wish to do today, it will not serve as a primary tool for a dialogue of equals in the mission context. But a deeper examination of intentionality behind symbols can open up the process of mutual self-mediation, where both religion and a culture are influenced, challenged, and enriched by each other. The “turtles all the way down” story is much more than a gentle squelch; it highlights, first, a primordial concern with spiritual origins of the universe and, second, each culture’s concerns with causality in general, whether through metaphysical reasoning or symbolic cosmological exegesis. Which more powerfully articulates the mystery: the argument about an infinite series of causes or the mind-boggling Hindu theory of kalpas and manvantaras?⁶⁵

⁶² Ibid. 65–66.

⁶³ Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament* 151–54.

⁶⁴ Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description” 28–29.

⁶⁵ For a brief understanding of this type of thought, see Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper, 1959) 114–16 and *passim*.

The Contribution of Antoine Vergote

Antoine Vergote is a priest-theologian-psychiatrist and professor emeritus at the University of Louvain. His approach to religion is based not on truth judgments but on a psychoanalyst's extensive dialogue with his clients' religious experiences.⁶⁶ *Pace* Freud, Vergote denies that such experiences are forms of repression and interprets them as genuine aspirations for transcendence, to be mediated thorough symbolic language. His dense argumentation and complex figurative poetic prose frequently set a stumbling block to grasping his many valuable insights. But for the purpose of my search for symbolic interpretation, I suggest four stages in Vergote's thought: (1) the concept of "archeology" (made famous by Foucault and Derrida among others); (2) the quest for "the originary"; (3) the power of myth and metaphor; and (4) the application of these three to interreligious dialogue.

Archeology

Vergote's experience as a psychoanalyst leads him into an "archeology" of religious language; that is, he explores not the prehistoric past but the layers that lie beneath contemporary human consciousness. In this way he hopes to penetrate behind all "ontotheology" or any theology that employs Scholastic metaphysics.⁶⁷ He explores the "symbolic universe" that "structures" human beings and confers on them the power of language, especially the language of religious symbols. If the Word has become flesh, he argues, then theology has to address that incarnation, not in metaphysical, but in "existential," language.⁶⁸ Through human experience, Vergote hopes to develop an archeology of the reality lying behind what humans already "know," and that reality is what he calls *l'originnaire*—the truly originary, primitive, or aboriginal in all of us. He writes: "The originary is conceived as that which is at the source, that which constitutes a beginning and has no previous derivation; that which, for that very reason, is the object of the dream of the noblest authenticity."⁶⁹ This primitive originary is deeper than mere knowledge of one's temporal origins; it describes the memory of a lost integrity.⁷⁰ But this reality is even beyond the power of the psychoanalyst; it is rather the primordial Word, the "I Am" that transcends both

⁶⁶ A more explicitly psychoanalytical study of religion is Antoine Vergote's *The Religious Man: A Psychological Study of Religious Attitudes*, trans. Marie-Bernard Said (Dayton, Oh.: Pflaum, 1969).

⁶⁷ Antoine Vergote, *Interpretation du langage religieux* (Paris: Seuil, 1974) 9. All translations of citations from this volume are mine.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 16.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 28.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 38.

metaphysics and psychology.⁷¹ Contemporary theology would call this originary that resides beneath human consciousness “pre-thematic” (Lonergan) or “supernatural existential” (Rahner).

Parenthetically, one might argue that Vergote’s method is simply another phase of European thought and thus still an imposition. I note two examples of dialogue with indigenous peoples that indicate otherwise, even though we will never answer the question about primitive monotheism that has exercised such scholars as Wilhelm Schmidt⁷² and Joseph Lafitau. The first example comes from my own quest for deeper understanding of an Arapaho theology—literally, their thinking about God—to which I referred earlier. Throughout that quest to discover whether ancient Arapahos believed in a Supreme Being and to know, if they did so believe, what they called that Being, I found myself approaching what Vergote calls an “originary” experience. The unswerving testimony of all Arapahos, especially the elders, was that “we always believed there was someone there; the Christians helped us to learn more about him.”

A second exploration into indigenous theology emerged in a recent project by a Canadian student who dialogued extensively with a group of Ojibway people. In this context too the same question arose: Is “The Great Spirit” aboriginal or the result of Christian contact?⁷³ Hans VanLeeuwen, for some ten years a ministry instructor among several communities of Canadian First Nations people, spent six months with a focus group of nine Ojibway persons, using the customary “talking circle” method that enabled each one to speak without interruption for as long as he or she desired.⁷⁴ Simultaneous to this process were individual interviews conducted with

⁷¹ Ibid. 56.

⁷² Wilhelm Schmidt’s monumental work is *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee: Eine historisch-kritische und positive Studie*, 12 vols. (Münster: Aschendorff, 1949). These volumes, finally assembled only in 1949, have not been translated. A one-volume English digest of this work is *The Origin and Growth of Religion: Facts and Theories*, trans. H. J. Rose (London: Methuen, 1931).

⁷³ See especially the detailed article by Jordan Paper, “The Post-Contact Origin of an American Indian High God: The Suppression of Feminine Spirituality,” *American Indian Quarterly* 7 (1983) 1–23. Paper’s argument is that the concept of a (male) high deity came into aboriginal cultures only after contact with missionaries. While Paper’s article is carefully considered and well documented, it contradicts testimony I have heard from representatives of every tribe—perhaps as many as 20—of differing language backgrounds, that I have encountered in North America. Admittedly, many of these representatives are practicing Christians, but many others use the same argument of an aboriginal Supreme Being to support their independence from the Church. I would add that nearly all these persons consider the gender of that Being to be unimportant.

⁷⁴ See Hans VanLeeuwen, “All My Relations: A Dialogue with the Anishnaabe Way” (Doctor of Ministry dissertation, Toronto School of Theology, 2006).

each person. The unanimous testimony of those interviewed was that their people had always believed in One whom they came to call Gitchi Manidoo or “Great Spirit.” This “Great Spirit” could best be described as a “numinous presence” behind all other spiritual experience. Once again, it must be acknowledged that these persons were all Christians, which means that one cannot conclude with “historical certitude” that Ojibway spirituality had always been monotheistic. In any case, it is not my point to prove this, but rather to illustrate the profound significance of Vergote’s methodology. That is, Vergote is telling us that theological dialogue with aboriginal thinkers must function within a symbolic universe before it can concentrate on argumentation.

The “Originary”

According to Vergote, then, all humans seek a common origin in what in the West we call “God.” Prior to a relationship with God, through the power of linear reason, which tends to discourse on God as an object,⁷⁵ persons seek the God of Exodus: the “I am who I am,” “the primitive (primordial) Word, whose identity is entirely in the act of speaking it.”⁷⁶ But if that Word has become flesh and dwelt among us by inhabiting our world’s very “signifiers”—that is, the expressions of meaning given to all the things signified in our experience—then such experiences come in the form of metaphors that take us to the very origin of language.⁷⁷ It is important to reiterate here that this study of primordial experience is not mere European psychoanalytic jargon; indeed, whatever its value, psychoanalysis does not attain to the primordial human experience but only points to the reality sought through religion and religious language. Vergote is speaking finally as a theologian, seeking to ground his Christian faith in a primordial longing.

Myth and Metaphor

Thus we come to the significance of myth and metaphor in cross-cultural communication, especially in oral cultures. Vergote writes:

Mythic narrative is thus a universe of discourse that subsists by its own power. It is not the human word about things, but the first (primordial) language that comes to human beings and allows them to articulate their experience of things. Myth is the epiphany of the primordial light that opens up the space–time dimension in which things manifest themselves in their essence, and where humans become present to the world.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Vergote, *Interpretation du langage religieux* 54.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 31–32.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 80.

Of course, mythic language must be used *as* mythic and not as a mode of ordinary discourse, lest it degenerate into a fetish that alienates humans from both the quest for God and relations to the real world.⁷⁹ That is, religious language must not become pseudoscientific language, as happens in fundamentalism, nor can it be explained away by metaphysical debate, as in the example cited above about the constitution of the universe. Reason alone cannot interpret the internal structures of human existence.⁸⁰

Interreligious Dialogue

We come to Vergote's understanding of the encounter between faiths, or between faith and culture. He privileges the discourse of "testimony" or witness, in this case often according to the psychoanalytic model. That is, just as in a counseling or therapeutic context the fundamental process is to listen to the other's witness to personal experience, so too the religious discourse can begin only by painstaking listening.⁸¹ In such exchanges, the longing for certitude is the "original sin": it is the desire to hold captive another person's spiritual archeology.⁸² To be sure, just as the therapeutic process finally calls for an objective interpretation of the counselor's experience, so too the interreligious or intercultural dialogue should arrive at a point of mutual trust in the exchange—the "mutual self-mediation" described above.

Early examples of this mutual testimony (granted their adversarial character) can be found in the dialogue between Justin and Trypho the Jew and between the pagan apologist Celsus and Origen. In mission history, the conversations between Roberto de Nobili and the Brahmins and between Matteo Ricci and Mandarin scholars exemplify such listening and bearing testimony. The *Jesuit Relations* report many conversations between missionaries and aboriginal leaders in New France, although these exchanges are touched by polemical language on both sides. Arriving some half-century later on the scene, Joseph Lafitau developed a brilliant discussion of comparisons between Amerindian mythic and symbolic discourse and that of ancient Europeans. Of course, Lafitau gave himself unfair advantage because of his 18th-century biblical hermeneutics that led him to read Genesis and Exodus literally and so superimpose that interpretation onto aboriginal experience. But even this advantage did not keep him from listening with great care to native testimony and developing a fresh method of dialogue. I now adduce the method of Lafitau as an example of the mutual human quest for originary experience and thus for mutual understanding.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 82–84.

⁸¹ Ibid. 162–72.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 112.

⁸² Ibid. 193.

LAFITAU'S "ARCHEOLOGY"

As a further development of the conversation between Christian theology and aboriginal religious experience, I propose following the line of thought begun in earlier work on Lafitau.⁸³ To summarize this work, I note that Joseph Lafitau was a French Jesuit missionary to New France, serving in a Mohawk village near Montreal between 1711 and 1717, before being called back home to raise funds for the missions. Some ten years later he returned to serve in Canada for two more years. He died in France in 1746. Although he had spent only eight years in Canada, this classically trained, linguistically gifted, missionary acquired fluency in the Iroquoian languages and studied those cultures intensively enough to enable him, on his return to France, to write his *Customs of the American Indians Compared to the Customs of Primitive Times*, still recognized as perhaps the first great work in modern ethnology. This study is also a highly original foray into the realm of comparative religion and semiotics. Lafitau's basic theology requires revision in the light of later developments, but his insistence on what he called "symbolic theology" led him, in the very midst of the Enlightenment, into what today would be identified as postmodernism. His guiding insight into the comparative method was that the understanding of aboriginal as well as of ancient European thought would be apprehended through symbolic rather than linear theological analysis.

As I have detailed elsewhere, numerous writers have discussed Lafitau's use of symbol in a passionate effort to connect aboriginal American experience with that of his own Old World forebears. Most of his theory defies historical or archeological verification, but his sense for common symbolism still arouses our longing (very anti-postmodern!) to discover threads of continuity in human experience. I now turn to Lafitau's symbology in search of both a comparative method that might unify Christian and contemporary indigenous theologies and a deeper understanding of the problems of syncretism and "multiple belonging," a concept now receiving scholars' attention.⁸⁴

Contemporary missiological thought still benefits from the study of the works of Ricci, De Nobili, Alexander de Rhodes, and others in Asia, but it also stands to learn from the labors of Lafitau in North America. While his method antedates phenomenology, it employs its "eidetic reduction" masterfully. Whatever his personal biases were, he rarely allowed them to

⁸³ See Starkloff, *Common Testimony*, and Carl F. Starkloff, S.J., "Joseph Lafitau: A Lesson in Interfaith and Intercultural Understanding," *Mission: Journal of Mission Studies* 12 (2005) 199–218.

⁸⁴ On multiple belonging, see Peter C. Phan, "Multiple Religious Belonging: Opportunities and Challenges for Theology and Church," *Theological Studies* 64 (2003) 495–519.

interfere with his careful description of indigenous customs. As his translators note, regardless of his positions on orthodox church teaching, “what makes him interesting is his arguments with himself when the accepted theory does not fit his observations.”⁸⁵ His theological opinions do not interfere with his study of culture, even though they were conditioned by the literalism of current biblical study. For this and other reasons, Lafitau can be considered “the father of comparative ethnology.”⁸⁶ But even his theological dialectics retain valuable lessons today for those pursuing a dialogue with aboriginal religion. Again we heed Geertz’s wisdom about reading past “facts” and the changing view of them in light of the present. To further a method for including aboriginal thought in mission theology, I highlight three major points in Lafitau’s work: (1) his “system” of interpreting aboriginal religion; (2) the value of “symbolic theology,” especially in the light of Vergote’s arguments; and (3) the “cumulative and progressive results” of this methodology.

Lafitau’s “System”

Lafitau’s translators are loathe to grant him an authentic “system”: “What Lafitau dignified by calling his ‘system’ was by no means a rounded philosophy, but an endeavour to prove, by the comparative method, that all the pagan gods and goddesses owe their origins to Adam and Eve, and date from the time of their expulsion from the Garden of Eden.”⁸⁷ This is, of course, a matter of definition, but I would suggest that Lafitau, pursuing what we today call an “archeology” of religious consciousness, did use a system—if one follows Michel de Certeau, who understood a system as “a whole of which the parts sustain each other by the connections they have between themselves.”⁸⁸ Lafitau himself wrote, “The study I have made of pagan mythology has opened up to me another system of belief and made me go back far beyond the time of Moses to apply to our first ancestors, Adam and Eve, all that the author of whom I have spoken applied to Moses and Zipporah.”⁸⁹ Lafitau’s reference is to Bishop Pierre Daniel Huet, who, in his *Demonstratio evangelica*, had argued that all religions can be traced to the story of Moses. William Fenton and Elizabeth Moore see this “system” as the most important part of Lafitau’s work, since it holds that religion played a

⁸⁵ William N. Fenton and Elizabeth L. Moore, introduction to *Mœurs des sauvages américains* xlviii.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* lxv.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* lxiv.

⁸⁸ Michel de Certeau, “Writing vs. Time: History and Anthropology in the Works of Lafitau,” trans. James Hovda, *Yale French Studies* 59 (1980) 37–64, at 47.

⁸⁹ Lafitau, *Customs of the American Indians* 1:33–36.

part in every action of primitive peoples, thus putting them into a train of philosophers and theologians reaching back to Plato.⁹⁰

I suggest that Lafitau's construction might more profitably be called a philosophy or theology of history appropriate to his age and transposable, *mutatis mutandis*, to current explorations into the archeology of religion. What this missionary sought to accomplish was to demonstrate the unity, especially the spiritual unity, of the human race from its origins. Many of his European compatriots questioned the equality of tribal peoples with the Europeans, if not their very humanity. Of course, Lafitau's degenerationist theory, which argued that our first parents lost the gift of an ideal religion, relied not so much on biblical fundamentalism as on a Catholic dogmatic tradition that called for literal exegesis. His insight, however, is deeper than any dogma; it shows a profound grasp of symbolism or of "figures."⁹¹ He sought areas of "common meaning" in symbols shared by new world aboriginals and ancient Europeans.

Symbolic Theology

Anthony Pagden has noted that Lafitau, while agreeing with Descartes that religion is innate, was not thinking of innate *ideas*, but rather of "an intuitive recognition of some higher truth."⁹² Lafitau adopted a largely antirationalist, anti-Cartesian approach to the language of symbolic representation, reducing all cultural expression to a grammar of symbols. Pagden compares Lafitau to Ernst Cassirer, in holding a position that emphasizes the *animal symbolicum* above the *animal rationale*.⁹³ Lafitau himself often alluded to a "symbolic theology of the first times,"⁹⁴ meaning that ancient development of religious thought was not through ratiocination but through symbolization. Pagden's commentary on this point is crucial to my argument here: "We will only understand the true meaning of non-Christian beliefs, the myths and the rituals which instantiate them, which—as the modern anthropologist would claim—constitute their beliefs, once we have learnt how to translate the terms of any given set of cultural practices into a common symbolic language."⁹⁵ In Pagden's words, Lafitau

⁹⁰ Fenton and Moore, introduction to *Mœurs des sauvages américains*.

⁹¹ See Starkloff, "Joseph Lafitau" 203–4. "Figurism" was a theory that developed among Jesuit scholars in China, who sought to compare Chinese and biblical symbolism.

⁹² Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (New York: Cambridge University, 1982) 200.

⁹³ *Ibid.* 203, 204.

⁹⁴ Lafitau, *Customs of the American Indians* 1:158, 166.

⁹⁵ Pagden, *Fall of Natural Man* 207.

held that “all human cultures were directed towards one end, the glorification of a single hidden God.”⁹⁶

Although anthropologists dispute this faith-related belief of the 18th-century Jesuit and deny its demonstrability, no one can deny that Lafitau had entered deeply into the aboriginal mind and heart. His experience of native peoples was not the language of syllogistic demonstrability but rather that of symbolic reality, which is where he believed he had found human origins. In Vergote’s terminology, Lafitau intuited a shared human quest for *l’originnaire*—the primitive, the primordial, the source of *human* being. This insight is missiologically significant. One method by which aboriginal peoples, whose religion is predoctrinal, might find their home in Christianity is by way of symbolic interpretation rather than in dogmatic controversy. While a vast terrain of systematic theology remains to be traversed in the dialogue, there is ground for extensive dialogue between Christian and aboriginal thinkers on symbolization. Among the many testimonies I have heard from native peoples, perhaps the most profound one was that of John C’Hair, an Arapaho elder and one of my instructors during the decades of the 1970s and early 1980s. An avid reader, John had read that one anthropologist, Alfred Kroeber, had called the Sacred Flat Pipe the Arapaho fetish. C’Hair protested, “It’s not a fetish; it’s our Ark of the Covenant!” His strong Catholic faith, along with his loyalty to his tribal ceremonies, certainly contributed to this insight, but, by any reading of Arapaho tradition, that remark opened up a vast symbolic field. Indeed, during the Arapahos’ nomadic days, the Sacred Pipe had been the dwelling of “The-One-Over-All” and is still with them today in their “Babylonian exile” on the reservation.

On the ritual plane, the theologian has only to share in the sacred ceremonies of aboriginal peoples to hear multiple testimonies to the language of symbol that crosses cultural boundaries, however difficult it may be for the “Western” mind to grasp those testimonies. Another Arapaho Elder, Ernest Sun Rhodes, after our group had worked for years instructing me on translating the eucharistic text into his language, once exclaimed, “You know, our language *is* our theology!” In other words, the very deciphering of Arapaho ritual and mythic language becomes a veritable oral system of theology. But one need not be romantically antiquarian in this matter either; to recall once more those words of yet another elder, Joe Duran, “Remember, we can’t go backward; we have to move ahead”; that is, we can work to preserve our symbols and culture, but that culture is not static. I was made aware of this reality later during 18 years as an instructor in ministry formation for a large community of Canadian Ojibway people, as

⁹⁶ Ibid. 208.

many of them, fluent in Ojibway, entered into a dialogue over themes of Catholic theology and transposed it into their experience. But the foundation of our “common meaning,” to use Lonergan’s phrase, was in symbolic discourse.

“Cumulative and Progressive Results”

If theological method follows Lonergan’s definition, I believe I have been describing such a method. The “repeated and recurrent operations” involved in the conversation with aboriginal spirituality begin with the process of intellectual, moral, and religious conversion, not to say psychic conversion—again by way of mutual self-mediation among theologians and native leaders. The necessary movement toward openness to tribal spirituality began for me with an intellectual conversion, leading to a deeper self-appropriation of religious and moral consciousness. Lonergan calls intellectual conversion “a radical clarification and . . . the elimination of an exceedingly stubborn and misleading myth concerning reality, objectivity, and human knowledge.”⁹⁷ Through repeated and recurrent operations that combined persistent listening to aboriginal persons describing their experiences with constant poring over ethnological reports and theories of religion, I found all the stereotypes crumbling at my feet. Having such insights does not necessarily mean immediate and unqualified acceptance of all data, but rather clearing one’s horizon of obstacles to understanding—a lifelong project, to be sure. Lonergan observes that “moral conversion changes the criterion of one’s decisions and choices from satisfactions to values. . . . One has to keep scrutinizing one’s intentional responses to values and their implicit scales of preference. One has to listen to criticism and to protest. One has to remain ready to learn from others. For moral knowledge is the proper possession only of morally good [men] and, until one has merited that title, one has still to advance and learn.”⁹⁸

Through listening to criticism and protest, painful though it be, Christian missionaries around the world learn to let go of a presumed prophetic self-righteousness and to realize the complicity of their churches in colonialism and national pride. The very weariness that one eventually feels over such criticism becomes part of the affective appropriation of a desire to give up control of the discourse.

For Lonergan, “religious conversion is being grasped by ultimate concern. It is other-worldly falling in love.”⁹⁹ The religiously converted person is rendered capable of self-transcendence, but how does this differ from

⁹⁷ Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 238.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 240.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

moral conversion? It is basically an acceptance of grace, of the divine reality that comes to us from beyond our natural competence. While one must presume in charity that such transcendent grace has inspired good missionaries down through history, a further conversion is needed to enable one to believe that grace has enabled many non-Christians to undergo religious conversions. Likewise, Christians from non-Western cultures might experience grace through the mediation of their own unique cultural forms. Over the years, conversations with mission colleagues who have shared in aboriginal ceremonies, as well as my own experiences of these rites, attest to religious conversions in our own lives.

Finally, psychic conversion is an important dimension of symbolism, when it opens one to primordial experience. While Lonergan himself did not live to develop the concept of psychic conversion, his disciple and colleague Robert Doran has highlighted its importance: "Psychic conversion is a transformation of the subject, a change both illuminated and often mediated by modern depth psychology. It is a reorientation of the specifically psychic dimension of the censorship over images and affects by our habitual orientations, a conversion of that dimension of the censorship from exercising a repressive function to acting constructively in one's shaping of one's own development."¹⁰⁰

One need not be under psychoanalysis to experience psychic conversion. Ignatius of Loyola, subsequent to his religious conversion, continued to suffer extreme scruples and depression, until, after many sessions with his confessor, a "quiet clarity of mind" came over him about the mercy of God, and the temptations left him. Likewise, a profound symbolic experience in the form of an image of the Holy Trinity gave him great "consolation."¹⁰¹ A similar kind of conversion happens when one overcomes "culture shock" while engaged in efforts at intercultural dialogue and participates in the symbolic life of another. I return again to Vergote's argument that symbolic participation liberates one for a deepening quest for one's own originary experience.

CONVERTED SPECIALIZATION

In my book on syncretism I discussed Lonergan's functional specialties in some detail.¹⁰² In the experiences that led me to use these specialties as tools for mediating the discussion on syncretism, I found a capacity to employ them in a way that overcame the long-standing myths that Lonergan

¹⁰⁰ Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* 9.

¹⁰¹ See Joseph N. Tylenda, S.J., *A Pilgrim's Journey: The Autobiography of Ignatius Loyola* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1989) 31–36.

¹⁰² Starkloff, *A Theology of the In-Between* 68–87.

gan refers to. For the present argument, it is sufficient to note that the use of these specialties takes on a qualitatively different character when engaged in by a “converted” theologian or, better, by one in the process of conversion.¹⁰³ As one advances toward interior freedom from bias, one’s research into data is enriched by the ability to enter into the intentionality found in different cultures. As I have noted, Lafitau seems to have been moved to transcend his own biases enough to describe and understand Amerindian practices that often repelled him, and even to defend them against European critics.

The two specialties that have been most influential in responding to the aboriginal context have been interpretation and history. Through the use of forms of “the hermeneutic circle,” the theologian acquires the freedom to allow not only the data but also the experience of “the other” to condition his or her interpretive processes. For example, since having heard C’Hair’s superb analogical insight about the Sacred Pipe being the Arapaho Ark of the Covenant, I have never been able to read the Old Testament in the same way. But this testimony only confirmed a more explicit statement made to me some years before by another Arapaho, Francis Brown, who had chosen to follow his tribal religion without benefit of the Church: “Father, I am an Old Testament person.” That is, while he continued to respect the Church, he had no need of another covenant. I might have, like a modern-day Justin Martyr, suggested to him that his traditions could be preparing him for the New Testament, but I could see that for him the Logos was living and active in his Arapaho Way.

It is impossible to overstate the power of earlier specialization in history and historical method to clarify one’s doing of theology. Lonergan’s hermeneutic question, “What was going forward?” has occasioned or caused countless lesser intellectual conversions whenever I come to see how historical events, harmful or beneficial, have conditioned the responses of indigenous persons to the preaching of the gospel. Examples of events in mission history such as the abominable Treaty of Tordesillas under Alexander VI, the suppression of the Chinese Rites movement, and the history of the American “frontier” and its ideology, to mention only a few, enable one to listen more patiently to the complaints of native peoples. On the other hand, one can also be inspired with hope by such events as the papal bull “*Sublimis Deus*” of 1537, which finally, although belatedly, condemned the conquistadors’ treatment of the Amerindians. One can take heart at the history of Las Casas’s titanic intellectual confrontation with Juan Ginés de Sepulveda, the Aristotelian apologist for the *conquista*. In

¹⁰³ See Donald Gelpi, S.J., “The Converting Jesuit,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 18 (1986).

these events, however weakly, what was “going forward” was the idea that violence and cultural genocide in no way witness to the gospel.

CONCLUSION

With apologies for so much autobiographical testimony, I have sought to propose an ongoing process for a theology of a “wider ecumenism” that relates to aboriginal spirituality, not as object for proselytism, but as in itself a holistic religious experience. However, it is also my belief that, for Amerindians who choose Christianity, their own symbolic history can serve as a unique context for an inculturated Christianity. I chose Geertz’s clever pun, “after the fact,” as my theme, because I felt my own history resonating with Geertz’s bewilderment at the impossibility of constructing a continuous “text” that accurately describes his years of field experience. Early on in my mission ministry, I could sense Lonergan’s method at work in me, especially his very definition of method, even if the “cumulative and progressive results” often came about through a great deal of stumbling and muddling. I was often reminded of the fact that there was already an implicit and unsystematic symbolic theology in effect among my early Jesuit predecessors’ efforts to incarnate the Church among North American native peoples.

I have described here what I consider a deepening of method in the progression from the phenomenology of religious categories to intentionality analysis. Paul Ricœur’s brief but inspirational essay—really an apologia for a “kenotic” method of theology—was pivotal for the present article, calling the theologian to die to false certitudes in the labor of wider and deeper understanding. The work of certain postmodern thinkers has provided an entry into a theology of myth and symbol that serves as a corrective to (not an enemy of) linear rationality, and opens up some hope for a shared archeology of spiritual experience.

The work of a more specific praxis of symbolic theology must be held for another time, and, in fact, is better left to the agency of native theologians. I have already indicated a number of mythic and symbolic examples, but there are countless others with which to work. Some native leaders have already worked with tribal myths of origin and redemption, and others have interpreted tribal ceremonies in such a way as to show their compatibility with a Christian identity. The universal symbols of indigenous incense and water usage are already prevalent in Christian liturgies throughout North America. Perhaps the best known of all-inclusive Amerindian symbols is the Medicine Wheel in its many versions, including a development within contemporary social and cultural settings.

I close with one more brief narrative that situates the Church between two experiences of an indigenous person. Dominic Eshkakogan was an

Ojibway from Sagamok, a reserve in the Georgian Bay area of Ontario. He was one of those dozen or more deacons ordained between the late 1970s and the early 1990s. Having experienced both the good and the bad of Catholic residential school life, Dominic emerged with his native language intact, if not his aboriginal religious practices. With the developments following the Second Vatican Council, he slowly came to appreciate the old spiritual ways and especially aboriginal symbolism, and employed many symbols in his Catholic ministry, despite criticism from some of his own people who considered him a Johnny-come-lately to his traditions. In 1984, after consultation between church leaders and Ojibway Catholics, Dominic was chosen to bestow the “smudging” blessing on Pope John Paul II at the time of his visit to the Canadian Martyrs’ Shrine in Midland, Ontario. In this simple ritual, Dominic sprinkled the traditional incense of sage, tobacco, sweet grass, and cedar over hot coals and then, using an eagle feather, wafted the smoke over the pontiff, who obediently followed Dominic’s instruction on how to receive the blessing.

There was, of course, criticism of this ceremony by more “traditional” native persons who opposed the syncretism of native and European Christian practices. Some Christian natives called the ritual a shallow practice—and they were quite correct: it could serve only as a beginning of the Church’s work of “inculturation.” However, the pope’s visit set in motion a campaign of dialogue that has continued to the present, eventuating especially in a 1997 meeting in Rome, entitled “The Synod for America and Aboriginal Peoples of North America.” I have discussed this synod in a previous article,¹⁰⁴ but I mention here two interventions at that synod that expressed hope for a dialogue that might lead to an authentic Native Church. One of these came from Bishop Donald Pelotte of Gallup, New Mexico, himself an Abenaki from Maine.¹⁰⁵ Bishop Pelotte began by lamenting two tragic results stemming from previous dealings of both church and state with the Amerindians—the loss of cultural identity entailed in church mission methods, and the terrible conditions of poverty consequent upon government policies. But his speech was for the most part a passionate and hopeful appeal to the delegates to work against elements destructive to native communities, not to say to humanity in general. He especially denounced militarism and unbridled materialism, but then moved on to the positive recommendation of extensive dialogue between bishops and indigenous communities. He called above all for a careful development of liturgical inculturation practices, and pleaded with the synod to encourage

¹⁰⁴ See Carl F. Starkloff, S.J., “The Synod for America and Aboriginal Peoples of North America: A Review and an Appraisal,” *Mission: Journal of Mission Studies* 5 (1998) 51–68.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 59–61.

a dialogue among all Christian native peoples, thus to overcome the foreign-made divisions between the churches. In sum, Bishop Pelotte challenged all Christians to carry inculturation to greater depths than a few isolated rituals.

The other intervention of great moment came from Harry Lafond, the chief of the Muskeg Lake Cree Band of Saskatchewan.¹⁰⁶ Addressing his comments directly to the “Grandfather,” Pope John Paul II, he pleaded for a removal of the imbalance created by colonization and flawed missionary methods, especially in the hurt committed in residential schools. He advocated a deeper sharing by the Church and native peoples in the Circle of Life dialogue, mutual sharing of knowledge, a shared campaign to save Mother Earth, and a general willingness to take risks. As Pelotte put it, “The indigenous peoples of America are in a crisis which demands an authentic response based upon Christian values. The crisis they now face is, first of all, due to injustice. The remaining aspects of the crisis can be addressed in relation to their essential cry for justice and our genuine response to it: reconciliation, inculturation, leadership, catechesis and communication. We must act responsibly so that the Risen Lord can be fully embraced by indigenous peoples.”¹⁰⁷

By the time this conference was held, Dominic Eshkakogan was hearing its testimonies from a better vantage point—he died from diabetes in 1994. His death was a witness to the deepest inculturation one can imagine as embodied in one person. He had become too sick even to take food and gave orders that he not be fed artificially and that he be left to die at home. For some two weeks Dominic preached from his deathbed pulpit to any who came to visit him, including myself some two days before he died. I did not have the privilege to witness Dominic’s last moments, but his wife, Gladys, and others of his family, spoke of how, with his final breaths, he kept raising his hand, holding his eagle feather, to heaven. In this final act of symbolic theology, this Ojibway Christian, whose tribe’s proper name is *anishinabek*, or original people, had come in touch with the divine-human *originaire* that lay deep beneath his aboriginal and Christian symbols.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 61–62.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 61, cited from *Origins* 26 (1997) 445–60, at 456–57.