



PART II

*Philosophy
of Religion*

INTRODUCTION

Creation, the Sacred, and the People

In the Western canon, the philosophy of religion not only examines the themes and concepts involved in religious traditions, but it also includes the investigation and assessment of alternative worldviews.* While philosophy of religion courses may entertain questions in the other general areas of philosophy (e.g., metaphysics, epistemology, and values), they most often focus on the philosophy of the Medieval period, which considers such questions as: Does a Christian God exist? Is that God all powerful? Is it better to believe in such a Being if one can never know that it exists?

Indigenous philosophy is quite different from its Western counterpart, and expectedly so. Indigenous philosophical thought prior to contact with Europeans stands in stark contrast to the worldview that develops from an organized Christian religion, such as Catholicism. This is made evident in the selections in this chapter.

The chapter opens with a collection of letters and speeches that voice the confusion and frustration from Indigenous people who are engaging with the contradiction of a religion that posits the existence of a benevolent Being whose believers are actively working to conquer Indigenous people. While the following speeches and correspondence make up only a small sample of the initial responses to contact with European settlers, missionaries, and governments, it is worth noting the similarities in the responses even though the authors come from very different communities.

The chapter continues with an excerpt from *God Is Red* by Vine Deloria Jr. Colonialism entails the eradication of the traditional Indigenous worldview. Through many governmental policies—such as the removal of Indigenous people from their land, the use of a reserve/reservation system, the mandatory attendance of Indigenous children at residential schools, and various attempts to ‘civilize’ Indigenous people—the war on Indigenous philosophy and particularly its metaphysics is conducted. Religion has played a critical role in the erasure of Indigenous philosophy, especially since many residential schools were overseen by various Christian denominations. The piece by Deloria highlights some of the fundamental differences between Christian and Indigenous religious worldviews.

* For a complete description of the philosophy of religion, please refer to Charles Taliaferro, “Philosophy of Religion,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/philosophy-religion/>.

As a result of these differences, it is reasonable to expect some misunderstandings regarding the approaches to being in the world that each worldview endorses. One of the most misunderstood concepts in Indigenous thought is the application of the term ‘sacred.’ Given the different worldviews, the term is one that does not directly translate between the Western or Christian conception. Winona LaDuke illustrates the connection between the land (to include all the nonhuman relations) and an Indigenous community’s epistemology using examples from Turtle Island. To be sacred is, at its most fundamental, a link between the knowledge, the obligations, and the practice of the people. It informs a way of being in the world, and in this way, the content of LaDuke’s article also seems suitable as a reading in other sections of this book.

The Indigenous equivalent to the philosophy of religion is quite different from its Western counterpart. Where Western philosophy, especially that found in the Medieval period, is interested in evaluating claims—such as whether God exists or whether certain features, e.g., if God is all-powerful, can be attributed to God—the Indigenous philosophy of religion is focused on how to live in the world.

2.1b

SHAKÓYE:WA:THA? (Red Jacket)

1805 Speech on Religion *

SHAKÓYE:WA:THA?, *Red Jacket* (Seneca)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born into the wolf clan of the Seneca Nation, SHAKÓYE:WA:THA? (Red Jacket) negotiated with the United States after the American Revolutionary War. During the war, the Seneca were allied with the British. Once defeated, SHAKÓYE:WA:THA? oversaw the cession of their lands through the Treaty of Canandaigua (1794). Later, he took part in the War of 1812 on the side of the Americans, assisting them in the Battle of the Chippawa. He was awarded an embroidered red jacket, which provided the origin for his non-Indigenous name. The following speech, “Religion for the White Man and the Red” has been described as one of the best examples of North American oratory. It was given as a response to a Boston Missionary Society’s request to proselytize among the Haudenosaunee settlements in northern New York. As a result of SHAKÓYE:WA:THA?’s speech, the missionary’s representative refused to shake hands, declaring that no fellowship could exist between the religion of God and the works of the Devil.

KEY TERMS

Great Spirit, God, First Contact, Early Relations, Christianity, Colonialism, Cultural Assimilation

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“Brothers of the Six Nations: I rejoice to meet you at this time, and thank the Great Spirit that he has preserved you in health, and given me another opportunity of taking you by the hand.

“Brothers: The person who sits by me is a friend who has come a great distance to hold a talk with you. He will inform you what his business is, and it is my request that you would listen with attention to his words.”

The missionary thereupon opened his business in the following terms:—

* From Daniel Drake, *Lives of Celebrated American Indians* (Boston: Bradbury, Soden & Co., 1843), 283–87.

“My Friends: I am thankful for the opportunity afforded us of uniting together at this time. I had a great desire to see you, and inquire into your state and welfare. For this purpose I have travelled a great distance, being sent by your old friends, the Boston Missionary Society. You will recollect they formerly sent missionaries among you, to instruct you in religion, and labor for your good. Although they have not heard from you for a long time, yet they have not forgotten their brothers, the Six Nations, and are still anxious to do you good.

“Brothers: I have not come to get your lands or your money, but to enlighten your minds, and to instruct you how to worship the Great Spirit agreeably to his mind and will, and to preach to you the gospel of his son Jesus Christ. There is but one religion, and but one way to serve God, and if you do not embrace the right way you cannot be happy hereafter. You have never worshipped the Great Spirit in a manner acceptable to him; but have all your lives been in great errors and darkness. To endeavor to remove these errors, and open your eyes, so that you might see clearly, is my business with you.

“Brothers: I wish to talk with you as one friend talks with another; and if you have any objections to receive the religion which I preach, I wish you to state them; and I will endeavor to satisfy your minds and remove the objections.

“Brothers: I want you to speak your minds freely: for I wish to reason with you on the subject, and, if possible, remove all doubts, if there be any on your minds. The subject is an important one, and it is of consequence that you give it an early attention while the offer is made you. Your friends the Boston Missionary Society will continue to send you good and faithful ministers, to instruct and strengthen you in religion, if, on your part, you are willing to receive them.

“Brothers: Since I have been in this part of the country, I have visited some of your small villages, and talked with your people. They appear willing to receive instruction, but as they look up to you as their older brothers in council, they want first to know your opinion on the subject. You have now heard what I have to propose at present. I hope you will take it into consideration, and give me an answer before we part.”

After about two hours consultation among themselves, Red-Jacket rose and spoke as follows:

“Friend and Brother: It was the will of the Great Spirit that we should meet together this day. He orders all things, and has given us a fine day for our Council. He has taken his garment from before the sun, and caused it to

shine with brightness upon us. Our eyes are opened, that we see clearly; our ears are unstopped, that we have been able to hear distinctly the words you have spoken. For all these favors we thank the Great Spirit; and HIM *only*.

“Brother: This council fire was kindled by you. It was at your request that we came together at this time. We have listened with attention to what you have said. You requested us to speak our minds freely. This gives us great joy; for we now consider that we stand upright before you, and can speak what we think. All have heard your voice, and all speak to you now as one man. Our minds are agreed.

“Brother: You say you want an answer to your talk before you leave this place. It is right you should have one, as you are a great distance from home, and we do not wish to detain you. But we will first look back a little, and tell you what our fathers have told us, and what we have heard from the white people.

“Brother: Listen to what we say. There was a time when our forefathers owned this great island. Their seats extended from the rising to the setting sun. The Great Spirit had made it for the use of Indians. HE had created the buffalo, the deer, and other animals for food. HE had made the bear and the beaver. Their skins served us for clothing. HE had scattered them over the country, and taught us how to take them. HE had caused the earth to produce corn for bread. All this HE had done for his red children, because HE loved them. If we had some disputes about our hunting ground, they were generally settled without the shedding of much blood. But an evil day came upon us. Your forefathers crossed the great water and landed on this island. Their numbers were small. They found friends and not enemies. They told us they had fled from their own country for fear of wicked men, and had come here to enjoy their religion. They asked for a small seat. We took pity on them, granted their request; and they sat down amongst us. We gave them corn and meat; they gave us poison¹ in return.

“The white people, Brother, had now found our country. Tidings were carried back, and more came amongst us. Yet we did not fear them. We took them to be friends. They called us brothers. We believed them and gave them a larger seat. At length their numbers had greatly increased. They wanted more land; they wanted our country. Our eyes were opened, and our minds became uneasy. Wars took place. Indians were hired to fight against Indians, and many of our people were destroyed. They also brought strong liquor amongst us. It was strong and powerful, and has slain thousands.

“Brother: Our seats were once large and yours were small. You have now become a great people, and we have scarcely a place left to spread our blankets. You have got our country, but are not satisfied; you want to force your religion upon us.

“Brother: Continue to listen. You say that you are sent to instruct us how to worship the Great Spirit agreeably to his mind, and, if we do not take hold of the religion which you white people teach, we shall be unhappy hereafter. You say that you are right and we are lost. How do we know this to be true? We understand that your religion is written in a book. If it was intended for us as well as you, why has not the Great Spirit given to us, and not only to us, but why did he not give to our forefathers, the knowledge of that book, with the means of understanding it rightly? We only know what you tell us about it. How shall we know when to believe, being so often deceived by the white people?

“Brother: You say there is but one way to worship and serve the Great Spirit. If there is but one religion, why do you white people differ so much about it? Why not all agreed, as you can all read the book?

“Brother: We do not understand these things. We are told that your religion was given to your forefathers, and has been handed down from father to son. We also have a religion, which was given to our forefathers, and has been handed down to us their children. We worship in that way. It teaches us to be thankful for all the favors we receive; to love each other, and to be united. We never quarrel about religion.

“Brother: The Great Spirit has made us all, but HE has made a great difference between his white and red children. HE has given us different complexions and different customs. To you HE has given the arts. To these HE has not opened our eyes. We know these things to be true. Since HE has made so great a difference between us in other things, why may we not conclude that he has given us a different religion according to our understanding? The Great Spirit does right. HE knows what is best for his children; we are satisfied.

“Brother: We do not wish to destroy your religion, or take it from you. We only want to enjoy our own.

“Brother: You say you have not come to get our land or our money, but to enlighten our minds. I will now tell you that I have been at your meetings, and saw you collect money from the meeting. I cannot tell what this money was intended for, but suppose that it was for your minister, and if we should conform to your way of thinking, perhaps you may want some from us.²

“Brother: We are told that you have been preaching to the white people in this place. These people are our neighbors. We are acquainted with them. We will wait a little while, and see what effect your preaching has upon them. If we find it does them good, makes them honest and less disposed to cheat Indians, we will then consider again of what you have said.

“Brother: You have now heard our answer to your talk, and this is all we have to say at present. As we are going to part, we will come and take you

by the hand, and hope the Great Spirit will protect you on your journey, and return you safe to your friends.”

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Endnotes

- 1 Rum.
- 2 This paragraph is not contained in the first edition of the speech, as published by James D. Bemis, in 1811; but I find it in the speech as given by Drake, in his *Book of the Indians*, and also in Thatcher's *Indian Biography*. Still, it appears to me to be an interpolation.

Suggestions for Critical Reflection

1. What reasons does SHAKÓYE:WA:THA? (Red Jacket) provide for keeping the Indigenous and Christian religions separate? Do you find these reasons compelling?
2. What contradictions of the Christian religion does SHAKÓYE:WA:THA? (Red Jacket) identify?
3. SHAKÓYE:WA:THA? (Red Jacket) notes that the religion is recorded in a book (the Bible). How different is this from the religion of the Seneca? Is there a marked difference between these different sources of knowledge? Is one privileged over the other in the Western worldview?
4. Is the response of the missionary's representative (i.e., to refuse fellowship with the Seneca, or the Haudenosaunee) philosophical? What other avenues might the representative take toward establishing respectful relations and philosophical engagement?

Additional Resources

For additional resources relating to this reading and its themes, visit sites.broadviewpress.com/waysofbeing/2-1b



2.1C

Ma-chú-nu-zhe (Standing Bear) 1879 Landmark Civil Rights Case Testimony*

Ma-chú-nu-zhe, Standing Bear (Ponca)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ma-chú-nu-zhe (Standing Bear), a Ponca Chief, is the named participant in a notable court case: *Standing Bear v. Crook*. The case ultimately determined that Native Americans in the United States were persons under the law and as such, entitled to certain rights and protections such as the right of *habeas corpus*. The following is part of his testimony regarding his religious beliefs. Ma-chú-nu-zhe went on to become a speaker on behalf of Indigenous rights and later was part of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show.

KEY TERMS

Removal, Testimony, Missionaries, Bible, Christian Indians, Agriculture, Indian Territory, Indian Agents/Inspectors, Great Father

At eleven o'clock that night the weary editor reached his home. The first thing he did was to call for a good "square meal." Having disposed of that he sat down at his desk and wrote out the speeches of Standing Bear and Ta-zha-but, with such other matter as made a connected history of the affair up to that time and at twenty minutes past 5 A.M. retired.

At seven o'clock he was up. Gen. Crook was to hold his council with Standing Bear at ten o'clock, and procuring a conveyance, he started for Fort Omaha. The council did not really commence until twelve o'clock, and was held in Gen. Crook's office. There were present General Crook, Colonel Royall, General Williams, Lieutenants Bourke and Carpenter, and the editor, who was somewhat astonished to see Standing Bear dressed in a magnificent full costume of an Indian chief. He had a red blanket, trimmed with broad blue stripes, a wide beaded belt around his waist, and wore a necklace of bear's claws. The other Indians were dressed in citizens' clothes. Standing Bear spoke first as follows:

* From T.H. Tibbles, *The Ponca Chiefs: An Indian's Attempt to Appeal from the Tomahawk to the Courts. A Full History of the Robbery of the Ponca Tribe of Indians, with All the Papers Filed and Evidence Taken in the Standing Bear Habeas Corpus Case, and Full Text of Judge Dundy's Celebrated Decision, with Some Suggestions Towards a Solution of the Indian Question* (Lockwood, Brooks & Company, 1879), 31-33 and 72-75.

“FRIENDS AND BROTHERS,—The Almighty created us Indians. We are as he made us. The Almighty has given to the whites a book to read, and they have plenty of things to work with. The Indian has no book. He cannot read. Here is where I am weak and you are strong. I never see a book or paper of any kind, but I think it is a good thing. It lets you know all that is going on in the world. I want my children to learn to read. I want them to go to school, my friends. A great while ago we came from the great water to the east. We kept coming, coming, coming west until we got to Dakota. I made a good living there. Then some power took hold of me, as by the arm, and made me to stand up and told us to go south. They took us to a very bad place. They took our plows and all our farming utensils and locked them up. I have never seen them since. After I got to the Territory I went to see my Great Father at Washington. When I went into his office he took me by the hand. I said to the Great Father, ‘My people are much wronged, and I hope you will do something for me. I am in an awful bad place.’ I told him before I went to the Territory that I had a good house and barn which I had built with my own hands. I had cattle and hogs and all kinds of stock, and somebody came and took all my things away, and my Great Father stood up and said: ‘How is this? I will order an inspection.’ I told him I was in a bad fix. He told me to go and see if I could find some good land near where we then were. I went back. I started to look for land. I found some land that looked good. We moved onto it, but some unseen force came down upon us and crushed us to the earth. One hundred and fifty-seven of our people died right there. A few days passed by, and an inspector came from Washington. I told him I would like to move back to my old home, that he saw we were in a dreadful place. He answered in this way: ‘I will do all I can. I will try what I can do for you.’ He didn’t say he could do anything, but that he would go back to Washington, and tell them what a bad place it was. But I was like one in haste. I wanted to save the lives of my people.”

Standing Bear then asked permission to address the officers and others present, and Gen. Crook gave him permission, and turning to them, he made the following pathetic appeal:

“MY FRIENDS AND BROTHERS,—I am now with the soldiers and officers. I want to go back to my old place north. I want to save myself and my tribe.

“My brothers, it seems to me as if I stood in front of a great prairie fire. I would take up my babies and run to save their lives; or as if I stood on the bank of an overflowing river, and I would take my people and fly to higher ground. Oh! my brothers, the Almighty looks down on me, and knows what I am, and hears my words. May the Almighty send a good spirit to brood over

you, my brothers, to move you to help me. If a white man had land, and some one should swindle him, that man would try to get it back, and you would not blame him. Look on me. Take pity on me, and help me to save the lives of the women and children. My brothers, a power, which I cannot resist, crowds me down to the ground. I need help. I have done.”

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As much had been said about these Poncas being savages. Standing Bear was asked to state his religious belief. Without a moment's reflection, he spoke as follows:

“There is one God, and He made both Indians and white men. We were all made out of the dust of the earth. I once thought differently. I believed there were happy hunting-grounds, where there were plenty of game, and plenty to eat, no sickness, no death, and no pain. The best of the Indians would go to these happy hunting-grounds. I thought that those who were bad would never live any more; that when they died that was the end of them. But I have learned that these things are not so, and that God wishes us to love Him and obey His commandments, follow the narrow road, work for Him on earth, and we shall have happiness after we die. I am told His Son died for us, died that we might live. I want to try and do something for Him, to be like Him, follow in His footsteps as nearly as I can. I think there is but one God. I need help to do right, and I pray to Him that he will help me for His Son's sake. I do not wish to do anything wrong. I wish to follow the narrow road. It is the road of happiness. God never does anything wrong. He knows what is best for me. No man can understand God, or know why He deals with us as He does. Sometimes what we think is the worst is the best for us. When I was arrested by the soldiers and brought down here, I thought for a little while that God had forsaken me, but now I see that, perhaps, it is the best thing for me and my people. If they would only hearken to His word, they would find that all is for their good. He sees me all the time. He watches over me, and knows all I do. He knows my thoughts. He knows when I think wicked thoughts. He knows it all. If He did not watch over me, and take care of me, I should die. I want Him to watch over me, and take care of me, and I believe He always will. He helps me. I can do nothing without His help. I love His truth. I hate lies. I wish to follow the truth always. God has control of the whole earth, and everything is in His power. He sees over all things at once, every man, woman, and child, and knows their thoughts and actions, and everything they do. He watches over me wherever I go. He sees me here to-day. He has been with me through all my wanderings, and has taken care of me. He has seen how I have been taken away from my land. Through all this He has been close to me. When I have felt that I had no friends, I remembered that He

was my Father. His people have been good to me, but the people of the devil are trying to send me to hell. They have tried to make me believe that God tells them what to do, as though God would put a man where he would be destroyed, and they have destroyed many already, but they cannot deceive me. God put me here, and intends for me to live on the land they are trying to cheat me out of.

“I pray to God every day for Him to help me to regain my rights, if I am worthy of it. For His Son’s sake I have asked it. He made me and the whites, and although we are of a different color, I think men’s hearts are all alike. If I were to go back to my land to-day, the first thing I would do would be to fall down on my knees and thank God for it. I think in the future, as I grow in years, I will try to love Him more and more every day, do that which is right, and be afraid to do that which is wrong.”

He was asked how long he had held these views, and he replied, “Since the missionary came up from Omaha Agency, about eight years ago, and told me the right way.”

“How many of the tribe think the same way on this subject that you do?”

“Only a few. It is a hard thing to say, but I will tell you the truth. Some of these have died since we went down to the Territory. We had no missionary down there, and no one to talk to us about God. My boy, who died there, would get a few in a tent and talk to them sometimes and tell them the right way the best he knew how. He used to pray with me very often, and read to me out of the Testament. Some of the people who were sick prayed all the time when they were dying. They asked God to take them away from there if it was His will, or to end their sufferings speedily. When any one came to our old reservation to talk of God, I would always find a place for him to speak, and get the people to come.”

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Suggestions for Critical Reflection

1. Ma-chú-nu-zhe (Standing Bear), like SHAKÓYE:WA:THA[?] (Red Jacket), notes the differences in God’s treatment of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Those differences made SHAKÓYE:WA:THA[?] question the benefits of religion, but it did not have the same effect for Ma-chú-nu-zhe. Do you find one’s statements more compelling than the other’s? Why or why not?
2. At the time of Ma-chú-nu-zhe’s court case, Indigenous people were considered wards of the state and subject to the care of the federal government. Given that the Ponca were Christian farmers (with homes,

barns, livestock, and tools), what were the reasons for the continued removal to Indian Territory?

3. In describing his beliefs before and after converting, Ma-chú-nu-zhe presents a difference between Indigenous and Western religious worldviews: an emphasis on the afterlife instead of the now. What might be some of the implications associated with each?

Additional Resources

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