Book Review: Around the Sacred Fire: Native Religious Activism in the Red Power Era

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This important book details the continent-wide, including Great Plains, efforts of Native Americans in the 1970s and 1980s to revive and unify Native spirituality and bring it to terms with Christianity. The subtitle alerts us that these efforts were largely overshadowed by more militant “Red Power” movements.

James Treat’s conscious methodological decision, discussed in his prologue, to use a “discursive,” “relational,” “dialogical,” “reflective” approach rather than a “rational,” “linear” one makes for engaging reading. Sixty-three pages of endnotes provide the scholarly references.

The book is divided symmetrically into three parts. “Conversations,” the middle,
single-chapter, main focus section highlights the first “Indian Ecumenical Conference” in August 1970, at the Crow Agency in southeastern Montana. The events, personalities, and concerns leading up to the conference are detailed in the four chapters of the first section, “Contexts.” “Consequences,” the four-chapter final section, presents the conference’s results as well as accounts of the changing and diminishing subsequent annual conferences.

The “Contexts” chapters provide a history of early attempts at intertribal traditional awakenings from the 1940s to the 1960s, culminating in calls for the traditionalist movement to be grounded in intertribal Native religious unity and reconciliation with Christianity. This set the stage for Bob Thomas and eight other Native religious leaders to plan and stage the first “Indian Ecumenical Conference” described in the “Conversations” section. Spelling out the conference’s purpose, Thomas stated that “Native Indian religiousists, of all Christian and aboriginal sects, must assemble and start the painful process of conceptually sewing together their fragmented sacred world, so that Indians can once again take steps to act for their own future.”

This first conference, and the second one in 1971 at Stoney Reserve in Alberta, carried out Thomas’s intention. The 1971 conference started the “sacred fire” spiritual tradition, which became the conferences’ metaphor. The “Consequences” section traces the subsequent fifteen conferences, with hiatuses between 1983-87 and 1988-92, and their gradual decline to the “small gathering” in 1992 attended by the author. Already during the 1973 and 1974 conferences problems had arisen. Intergenerational, environmental, and political issues began to overshadow religious ecumenism. Anti-Christian and militant elements increased. In June 1974, Thomas resigned from further involvement because of this departure from the original focus. Funding eventually dried up from both church and governmental sources.

Treat’s sympathetic exposition doesn’t provide for much critical comment. One wonders, finally, whether Thomas’s original purpose for the conferences wasn’t an impossible order.

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