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Review of *A Seat at the Table: Huston Smith in Conversation with Native Americans on Religious Freedom* By Huston Smith

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A Seat at the Table: Huston Smith in Conversation with Native Americans on Religious Freedom. By Huston Smith. Edited and with a preface by Phil Cousineau. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. xxi +232 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95.

As Native American religious traditions have reached new visibility and vitality over the last forty years, it is clear that constitutionally protected religious liberty has not extended to Native American communities. This is no mere matter of a tragic past; it is of currency today as a human rights concern. Indeed, two landmark cases by which the Rehnquist Court shrank the reach of constitutional protection for religious minorities generally involved Peyote practices of the Native American Church and management of sacred sites on federal lands.

A Seat at the Table explores the wide range of these contemporary issues, from protection of sacred lands like South Dakota's Bear Butte and Arizona's Mount Graham to sweat lodges in American prisons to endangered Native languages to the ethics of genomic research. But more than a series of case studies, the book is a testament to the firm resolve of contemporary Native communities to protect sacred places and practices against the odds. It presents a compelling dialogical glimpse into the distinctive religious worlds of various Native peoples as revealed by Native voices in contemporary struggles.

Although a companion volume to a documentary film by the editor and the late Gary Rhine, the book stands alone as an important collection of conversations between Huston Smith, a senior scholar of comparative religions, and eleven prominent Native American spiritual leaders, advocates, and intellectuals, among them the late Vine Deloria Jr., Oren Lyons, Charlotte Black Elk, Winona LaDuke, and Walter Echo-Hawk.

More than wooden interviews, the conversations are genuine exchanges, deepened by the wealth of

Smith's comparative insights from religious studies and the compassionate rapport he clearly has with his interlocutors. If the Native voices are at times steered by Smith's questions, there is a manner in which these exchanges are closer to the ground of Native idioms of advocacy and expression than would, say, a collection of scholarly essays penned by the same participants. That the conversations were staged in sessions for the Third World's Parliament of Religions in Cape Town, South Africa, gives them a further sense of immediacy and shared purpose. Of particular interest to readers of *Great Plains Quarterly* will be the interviews with Charlotte Black Elk on sacred sites in the Black Hills/Paha Sapa and with Vine Deloria Jr.

Less compelling in my view were editorial efforts to preface each interview and supplement it with scattered side-bar quotes by the likes of Geronimo and Chief Seattle: taken out of context these are more distracting than enriching. Still, the work of organizing and transcribing these conversations offers fresh, accessible, and important material to scholars, activists, and general interest readers alike on matters of great moment for Native communities today.

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