Volume Editor’s Introduction

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As I have noted elsewhere (Ruml 2010), it is common to hear First Nations people say “There is no word for ‘religion’ in our language.” What this actually means is that no word exists to refer to what has, in the West, been called “religion”; a defined, reified system of institutionalized beliefs and doctrines separate from everyday life. Instead, First Nations people speak of “the way,” a way of life; a way of being that encompasses all aspects of a person’s life. From the Indigenous perspective, prayer and worship are not things reserved for Sunday, they permeate all aspects of life, are lived day to day. Renowned historian of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith would no doubt think it quite sensible to not have a word for religion as defined above. For Smith, “nothing in heaven or on earth” answers to the name of “religion” as it has come to be defined in the West (Smith 1981, 4). In an attempt to reject the word religion, Smith, instead, refers to “religious traditions.” Religious traditions have two components: faith and cumulative tradition. Faith is a person’s response to the transcendence. He doesn’t define transcendence because, as Smith notes, as an historian one cannot observe the transcendence but we can observe the response as expressed in the cumulative tradition.

By “cumulative tradition” I mean the entire mass of overt objective data that constitute the historical deposit, as it were, of the past religious life of the community in question: temples, scriptures, theological systems, dance patterns, legal and other social institutions, conventions, moral codes, myths, and so on; anything that can be and is transmitted from one person, one generation, to another, and that an historian can observe. (Smith 1964, 141)

Like First Nations’ understanding of “the way,” Smith defines religion as a way of life which is lived day to day. It is never static and is always in process.
The Dakota refer to this as Dakota wičoni (in Lakota, according to Arthur Amiotte, it is called Lakolya or Lakol Wicoha): “...practicing the cultural ideals as a matter of habit or automatic response with full commitment with the knowledge that by doing so one is moving, doing, and being in both a human and sacred manner as prescribed by Lakota tradition” (Amiotte 1985).” Regarding the concept of “tradition,” Raymond Bucko notes:

I asked an elderly Lakota speaker how to say “traditional” in Lakota, and she was thoroughly puzzled. She said, “We never talked about that in the past,” and then volunteered that you could say Lakota handleSubmit “do things Indian way” or lila Lakota “very Indian.” (Bucko, 100)

Recognizing the problem with the word religion, it has become common to use the word “spirituality” in reference to Aboriginal traditions.

I had long given up any thoughts of imagining Aboriginal spiritual traditions in the context of revitalization, no doubt due to the influence of Lakota professor and artist Arthur Amiotte who preferred to speak in terms of “a cultural re-emergence”; a fitting metaphor given that the Lakota Ehanni (“A long time ago”), creation stories, depicts his ancestors as emerging from the region under the surface of the earth through a cave in the Black Hills. It was not until Marc Fonda, brought up the subject while we were strolling on the grounds of the University of British Columbia campus at the annual Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences that I began to reconsider examining Aboriginal traditions in terms of revitalization. Marc suggested that we put together a panel at the next Congress related to the revitalization of Aboriginal religious tradition. We organized a series of panels, one at the Congress, one at the Aboriginal Policy Research Council conference, and one at the American Academy of Religion Annual Conference. Waugh’s, Ruml’s, and Fonda’s articles grew out of these panels.

Localizing the discussion around revitalization provides a starting point from which to understand the contemporary state of Aboriginal spiritual traditions, despite the fact that after 26 years of immersion in this “revitalization” I was never given the impression that this is how Aboriginal people at the grass roots level understood what was occurring in their spiritual life. As Jennifer S.H. Brown astutely observes in her article on the Wasitay Religion among the Omushkego (Cree): “The invoking of Omushkego memories and views of these events and of narratives about them provides a reminder that the concept of “revitalization movement” is itself emic to Social Science and is not readily translatable into Cree or other indigenous languages” (105).

Initially, I had my reservations about examining the contemporary state of

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1. See Bucko (1998) for a discussion of the concept of tradition, including the question of tradition and the reinvention of culture, whereby he references the works of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1986), Handler and Linnekin (1984), and Shils (1981).
Aboriginal spirituality from the perspective of revitalization but the more I thought about the word and not the concept the more I warmed up to the idea. The concept, as developed and expressed by anthropologist A.C. Wallace, refers to a “deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture” (Wallace, 1956, 265).

Fully cognizant of the fact that the concept is not readily translatable, I tried to think of an appropriate word for revitalization in the Dakota language. The word sičų immediately came to mind. As one of the four souls in the Lakota concept of multiple souls, sičų refers to an individual’s spirit power. In attempting to express sičų, Arthur Amiotte (1985) identifies several English words that might be used to understand the concept of sičų, including vitality, energy, wisdom, charisma, power, spirit power, and shamanic power. Amiotte notes that sičų can be added to or negated, transferred and imparted. At one level, it can be thought of as a rechargeable battery that can be drained and recharged.

The revitalization of Aboriginal spirituality is widespread, extending beyond First Nations’ boundaries to the non-Aboriginal population. In a general sense the influence is superficial, expressed in terms of the purchase and display of dream catchers, star blankets, or art. On another level the influence is felt through its impact on the environmental movement as environmentalists look towards Aboriginal philosophies and worldviews for an environmental ethic. Unfortunately, the result has in many cases been a romanticizing of Aboriginal people as environmentalists concerned with the well-being of Mother Nature. Certainly, if one looks to the philosophies and worldviews one can find an environmental ethic and a deep concern for the well-being of Mother Nature and indeed the universe and ones relatedness to all of creation, but it is a romantic stereotype to imagine that all or even most Aboriginal people are environmentally conscious. As the negative impacts of colonization are reversed and the philosophies and worldviews are revitalized, an ever increasing number of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are gaining an understanding of the perennial wisdom inherent in the Indigenous worldviews.

A deeper and more profound influence is revealed by the many non-Aboriginal people who have sincerely “converted” to Aboriginal spirituality; forming strong interpersonal, familial and community relationships, receiving an “Indian name,” participating in ceremonies, engaging in personal development, and struggling to live their life in a manner consistent with the values taught to them by the Elders; values which in many ways are consistent with their own Christian upbringing. Naturally, there are problems associated with such conversions. The charge of cultural misappropriation is justifiably levelled against those non-Aboriginal people who have attended a few sweatlodge ceremonies or listened to a few teachings by an Elder and
then go on to hold ceremonies in which they charge others to attend, sometimes with tragic consequences such as the deaths of three people at a sweatlodge type event led by new age self help guru James Arthur Ray. For the Three Fires Society Midewiwin, they have guarded against potential cultural misappropriation and misuse by not allowing non-Aboriginal people to join the society or attend certain ceremonies. Aboriginal people are sometimes criticized by other Aboriginal people for allowing non-Aboriginal people into the ceremonies. In one instance, Arvol Looking Horse, the nineteenth generation keeper of the sacred pipe brought to the Lakota people by White Buffalo Calf Woman, issued a “Protection of Ceremonies” statement on March 13, 2003 followed by a second part on July 7, calling, in part, for non-Aboriginal people who are currently sundancing to stop and non-Aboriginal pipe carriers to give up their pipes (http://www.dlncoalition.org/dln_issues/protection_of_ceremonies.html). As one would expect, although there were supporters, this statement created a great deal of opposition. Many Lakota Elders and ceremonial leaders argued that the non-Aboriginal people at their ceremonies have been adopted into their tiyošpaye (extended family) and are, in effect, Lakota. Others maintained that in their Lakota tradition they do not have a “Pope”; an individual who dictates what they can or cannot do in their ceremonial life.

Unexpectedly, Vine Deloria Jr. concluded that it was in the activities of what he calls the “Aboriginal missionaries/entrepreneurs” that true liberation can arise (Deloria 1996, 109).

In some cases, the revitalization of Aboriginal spirituality is energized by social and political action. Certainly the American Indian Movement, emerging alongside the cultural revolution in 1960s America, opened space for cultural and spiritual revitalization as a new-found sense of pride in cultural heritage rippled across “Indian country.” Along with the exposure to ceremonies, teachings, and language comes a pride in cultural heritage, a positive self-image, identity formation, and a sense of belonging. The significance of these impacts is massive in a population still fighting the intergenerational impact of residential schools and colonization. It is common knowledge that the Canadian government was engaged in cultural genocide through the residential schools and a clause added to the Indian Act outlawing the practice of religious ceremonies. Many residential school survivors reflect upon how they were taught to be ashamed of their parents and who they are as First Nations people. They were punished for speaking their language and separated from the teachings of their Elders. Compound this with sexual, physical, and emotional abuse, and the shame and self-loathing ends up in alcohol and substance abuse, family violence, and other negative behaviours. Of course, not all Aboriginal people have been impacted in the same way. Many have been

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successful in their own personal and professional life, independent of cultural and spiritual influences. But, even among this group many are turning to traditional ceremonies and teachings for psycho-spiritual healing and development; they are beginning their journey on the Red Road. The Red Road is a term used to refer to a way of life participating in ceremonies, listening to the teachings of the Elders, incorporating the traditional teachings into their life, and living drug and alcohol free. The Red Road is contrasted with the Black Road, a life lost in drugs, alcohol, violence, depression, despair, loneliness, self-hatred, etc. It would seem that the healing work that takes place on the Red Road is easily relatable to Carl Jung’s “process of individuation” (Jung 1923, 561–563). Healthy people well along the Red Road or the process of individuation are in a much better place to act as role-models and helpers for those young people and not so young people searching for identity or struggling to be free from the inter-generational impact of residential schools. Those who are able to internalize the traditional teachings, such as the natural laws discussed in this journal, and live their life according to these values while working on their own psycho-spiritual development are well on their way to achieving what Anishinaabe people call Mino-bimadiziiwin (Good Life), the ultimate goal. From the Indigenous perspective, the more that this revitalization occurs, the better off we will be as a society. The final two articles were edited and included in this volume by Editor-in-Chief Earle Waugh and fit well with the general theme of revitalization. Leta Houle examines contemporary Aboriginal women's issues. Drawing upon her experience in Cree culture, Houle discusses how some Aboriginal women are using Western feminism to assert their rights within their own Aboriginal cultural contexts and the resulting tension between them and those Aboriginal women who assert their rights from a Traditional approach. Finally, Professor Emeritus David E. Young focuses on a petroglyph located on an island off the west coast of Canada which is believed by Aboriginal people in the area to have miraculous healing powers. Young uses the petroglyph as a touchstone from which to examine traditional healing.

The revitalization has internal struggles as well. There exists a great deal of tension between Fundamentalist Aboriginal Christians and Traditionalists, especially in Northern Canada. I have heard many stories expressing this tension and have met people from the North who secretly sundance and attend other ceremonies in Southern Canada and the Northern United States for fear of persecution from their not so tolerant Christian community members. They explained that if people in their community found out, they might lose their job. Recently, in Ouje-Bougoumou, a Cree community in Northern Quebec, Cree Christians (Pentecostal) dismantled a sweatlodge in their community and Chief and Council passed a resolution declaring that “the sweat
lodge, along with any form of native spirituality practices and events such as pow-wows, rain dance, etc., do not conform with the traditional values and teachings of our elders” (Peritz 2011). This is not an isolated act of First Nation Christians suppressing traditional ceremonies and oppressing Traditionalist. The opposition from Christian fundamentalists likely poses the most serious threat to the comprehensive revitalization of traditional Aboriginal spirituality at the community level.

The authors in this special edition of the *Journal of Religious Studies and Theology* explore the contemporary expression of Aboriginal spirituality in various contexts. Clifford Cardinal introduces the reader to his first hand experience of the issues related to integrating a traditional healer and traditional healing into an urban medical environment. Referring to the revitalization as a “renaissance,” Earle Waugh examines three recent initiatives in Alberta, including Clifford Cardinal’s efforts that demonstrate how Aboriginal law and traditional healers and medicine have been incorporated into the academy, the medical field, and the wider public. Mark F. Ruml introduces the reader to two Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) Elders/Traditional Teachers/Traditional Healers/Ceremonial Leaders, their revitalization efforts, and their teachings related to *Gagige Inaakonige*, the Eternal Natural Laws. Marc Fonda sifts through the statistical information found in the 1991 and 2001 Census’s in Canada, the 2002–2003 Assembly of First Nations Regional Health Survey, the *Tenuous Connections* report for the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, and, cross tabulations from a 2008 oversampling, conducted by Reginald Bibby and colleagues, of students attending Aboriginal run schools across Canada. Fonda notes the significance that the revitalization of Aboriginal spiritualities has from a public policy perspective, given the positive impact that cultural continuity has on individual and community well-being. Dennis Kelley examines the revitalization of traditional maritime cultures among Aboriginal peoples of the western coasts of Canada and the United States. Focussing on the maritime revitalization process of the Chumush and Makah nations, Kelley argues for the significance of cultural performance in the development and maintenance of a religious identity.

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