

## **VST: North American Indigenous Spirituality and Christianity**

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### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course is an examination of North American Indigenous spirituality and Christian perspectives. The course seeks to provide an alternative paradigm to Western Christian spirituality by creating opportunities for contributive learners to gain perspective through participation in Indigenous North American spiritual exercises and discussions.

Contributive learners will be exposed to the spirituality of America's First Nations through readings, shared experiences and various media. We will examine the roots, approaches and results of missionary efforts among First Nations. The values associated with the Indigenous American harmony concept will be explored along with an understanding of Indigenous North American theologies of the land. Contributive learners who are Christians will be challenged to incorporate these values and theologies into their own authentic North American, Jesus-focused spirituality.

### **COURSE DESIGN**

This is a five-day course is designed to create time and reflective space for the contributive learners preparing for ministerial leadership, spiritual direction or those who wish to explore other alternative spiritualities. The subject matter is chosen to enable the leader to give particular attention to those areas where his or her spirituality and leadership responsibilities meet. This course does not require the writing of research papers or the taking of examinations. However, contributive learners are expected to bring a level of diligence of preparation and investment to this course commensurate with their other academic courses. The course is experientially based and will meet only five times during the summer. Any additional work required may be done online. This course follows a commitment to pursue diverse program offerings taught from other ethnic perspectives by providing opportunities for co-learners to dialogue about issues of diversity.

### **COURSE RATIONALE**

The colonization of North America by Europeans beginning with Christopher Columbus has a very different meaning for North America's Indigenous peoples than it does for the dominant culture. One of the unfortunate outcomes of colonization in North America was the suppression of Indigenous spirituality and religion. On a popular level Indigenous North American spirituality has been mischaracterized in various ways, including being represented as polytheistic, nature-worshiping and somewhat "spooky." Indigenous North American spirituality has also been made a commodity by pseudo-shaman and the New Age Movement. Phillip Jenkins in *Dreamcatchers: How Main Stream America Discovered Native Spirituality* (2004) wrote:

Though the romanticized, environmentally sensitive Indians of *Dances With Wolves* or *Pocahontas* are much more attractive figures than the primitive savages of Victorian fantasy, their ideas and actions are still presented according to the taste of the mainstream non-Indigenous audience, and are not necessarily any closer to any objective reality. The newer image may constitute a socially positive stereotype, but it is still a stereotype, defined according to non-Indigenous and

specifically Euro-American interests. While it is a much more benevolent dream, it is, nonetheless, a dream, shaped by its consumers, the dream catchers (19).

Throughout this course co-learners will hear the North American Indigenous story, as related to Indigenous North American spirituality, told by Indigenous North Americans. Primarily, this perspective will be represented by the readings, experiences at Native events (as possible) and through Keetoowah Cherokee professor Randy Woodley, a legal descendent of the *United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians in Oklahoma*.

As contributive learners begin building a theology of the land, understanding the spiritual implications of ethnic and cultural genocide, gaining exposure to Indigenous religious practices and how this all relates historically to the Christian faith, they will begin to understand the implications of these events and how they bear on all our worldviews and spirituality. Since most contact between Christians and First Nations people came/and comes through missionary contact, an Indigenous North American holistic view of creation will be compared to what is often characterized as Western cultural dualism that resulted in the missionary system's rejection of all religiously significant Indigenous practices and cultural artifacts.

#### **DESIRED LEARNING OUTCOMES**

It is hoped that each contributive learner will:

- Demonstrate more clearly how one's worldview is related to one's spirituality
- Come to know the socio-history of their own land and the land of others
- Differentiate between abstract truth and local truth
- Identify the differences in traditional and Pan-Indian religious practices
- Be exposed to the spiritualities and giftedness of Indigenous North Americans
- Explore how new possibilities may exist for personal and corporate experiences as a result of exposure to Indigenous North American spirituality
- Integrate through opportunities for Indigenous American spirituality to help form one's own spirituality

#### **TEACHING STRATEGIES**

- Course lectures and discussions on key ideas and concepts via course sessions, shared experiences PowerPoint and group discussions
- Course participation in Indigenous North American spiritual exercises and activities
- Involvement in spiritual exercises or activities assigned for outside of course
- Video presentations
- Quick feedback loops
- Periodic ritual to bring us back to the reality that we are spiritual-physical beings
- Narrative/story
- Organic, impromptu discussions
- Recognition of the dialogue as a sacred space that is unique, never to be repeated again.
- An emphasis on Decolonization and Indigenization for all people
- Humor and jibbing which may go both ways
- Utilizing space in creative ways as a teaching tool
- Colorful language to drive a point
- Playing "devil's advocate" to engage critical thinking skills

A Personal Admonition from the Professor: I fully believe that the primary agent of learning is the learner, not the teacher. Therefore, contributive learners should participate fully and be ready to engage during each session, realizing that God is present among us at all times and meaning all our activities are sacred. As your professor I will bring my expertise (experience, knowledge and wisdom) to each session, laying out a “framework,” if you will, for you to build upon through your engagement with the subjects presented. Your feedback throughout the course is sought by me and appreciated. I solicit your suggestions, via email or in person, in order to create the best learning environment and the most enjoyable experience possible for us all. The more I know about you, the better I will be able to relate the course content to your context.

### **ABSENCE POLICY**

Full participation in course discussion is essential. Scheduled course sessions and events require attendance and assignments must be done on time. Contributive learners who miss assignments may make up by the next day.

### **COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND ASSIGNMENTS**

1. Meet Monday through Friday at the required times.

2. Reading Reflections/Journal Responses:

Contributive learners will participate in all course activities including all readings assignments,\* events, the **Initial Summary** and the **Group Discussion Forum**.

Contributive learners will read the assigned readings from the texts and any additional assignments. You will view and reflect on all events, video and reading assignments in a daily journal.

3. Creative, Complex Question

Come to class each day with one question. Your creative, complex question of importance should foster a group discussion. It should employ critical thinking skills, awareness of context, creativity, complexity and above all, honesty. Do not ask a question that you are not really interested in. Some common issues that will lower the standard and quality of the questions are:

- Closed questions (requiring simple yes/no answers).
- Rhetorical questions (asking as if you expect common agreement on the answer).
- Missing the key point (people sometimes focus on whether or not the author is right in their own view. (Your opinion on the issue is not asked for at this time).
- Speculative questions (out of context, off the point, detracting from the assignment at hand).
- A good question is one in which theory and application can be applied and tested

\* There will be five reading assignments numbered 1-5. Co-learners may read them all before the start of the course and simply review the appropriate reading each night prior to the date it will be discussed or simply read them each night prior.

**Reading #1 is due prior to the first day of class.**