

# For All Those Who Were Indian in a Former Life

By Andy Smith

**T**he New Age movement has sparked a new interest in Native American traditional spirituality among European American women who claim to be feminists. Indian spirituality, with its respect for nature and the interconnectedness of all things, is often presented as the panacea for all individual and global problems. Not surprisingly, many white "feminists" see the opportunity to make a great profit from this new craze. They sell sweat lodges or sacred pipe ceremonies, which promise to bring individual and global healing. Or they sell books and records that supposedly describe Indian traditional practices so that you, too, can be Indian.

On the surface, it may appear that this new craze is based on a respect for Indian spirituality. In fact, however, the New Age movement is part of a very old story of white racism and genocide against the Indian people. The "Indian ways" that these white, New Age "feminists" are practicing have little grounding in reality.

True spiritual leaders do not make a profit from their teachings, whether it is through selling books, workshops, sweat lodges, or otherwise. Spiritual leaders teach the people because it is their responsibility to pass what they have learned from their elders to the younger generations. They do not charge for their services.

Furthermore, the idea that an Indian medicine woman would instruct a white woman to preach the "true path" of Indian spirituality sounds more reminiscent of evangelical Christianity than traditional Indian spirituality. Indian religions are community-based, not proselytizing religions. For this reason, there is no *one* Indian religion, as many New Agers would have you believe. Indian spiritual practices reflect the needs of a particular community. Indians do not generally believe that their way is "the" way and, consequently, they have no desire to tell outsiders about their practices. Also, considering how many Indians there are who do not know the traditions, a medicine woman would be more likely to look into her own culture and find what is liberating in it.

However, some white women seem determined *not* to look into *their* own cultures for sources of strength. This is puzzling, since pre-Christian European cultures contain many of the same elements these women are ostensibly looking for in Native American cultures. This phenomenon leads me to suspect that there is a more insidious motive for latching onto Indian spirituality.

When white "feminists" see how white people have historically oppressed others and how they are coming very close to destroying the earth, they often want to disassociate themselves from their whiteness. They do this by opting to "become Indian." In this way, they can escape responsibility and accountability for white racism.

Of course, white "feminists" want to become only partly Indian. They do not want to be a part of our struggles for survival against genocide, and they do not want to fight for treaty rights or an end to substance abuse or sterilization abuse. They do not want to do anything that would tarnish their romanticized notions of what it means to be Indian.

Moreover, they want to become Indian without holding themselves accountable to Indian communities. If they did, they would have to listen to Indians telling them to stop carrying around sacred pipes, stop doing their own sweat lodges, and stop appropriating our spiritual practices. Rather, these New Agers see Indians as romanticized gurus who exist only to meet their consumerist needs. Consequently, they do not understand our struggles for survival, and thus they can have no genuine understanding of Indian spiritual practices.

While New Agers may think that they are escaping white racism by becoming "Indian," they are in fact continuing the same genocidal practices of their forebears. The one thing that has maintained the survival of Indian people through 500 years of colonialism has been the spiritual bonds that keep us together. When the colonizers saw the strength of our spirituality, they tried to destroy Indian religions by making them illegal. They forced Indian children into missionary schools and cut their tongues if they spoke their Native languages. Sundances were made illegal; Indian participation in the Ghost Dance precipitated the Wounded Knee massacre. The colonizers recognized that it was our spirituality that maintained our spirit of resistance and sense of community. Even today, Indians do not have religious freedom: the Supreme Court recently ruled that the First Amendment does not guarantee our right to use peyote in sacred ceremonies.

Many white New Agers are continuing this practice of destroying Indian spirituality. They have the privilege and power to make themselves heard at the expense of Native Americans and they trivialize Native American practices so that these practices lose their spiritual force. Our voices are silenced, and consequently, the younger generation of Indians who are trying to find their way

back to the Old Ways become hopelessly lost in this morass of consumerist spirituality.

These practices also promote the subordination of Indian women to European American women. We are told that we are "greedy" not to share our spirituality. Apparently it is our burden to service white women's needs rather than to spend time organizing within our own communities. Their perceived need for warm and fuzzy mysticism takes precedence over our need to survive.

The New Age movement completely trivializes the oppression we as Indian women face: Indian women are suddenly no longer the women who are forcibly sterilized and tested with such unsafe drugs as Depo-Provera; we are no longer the women who generally live below the poverty level and face an average 75 percent unemployment rate. No, we're cool and spiritual.

This trivialization of our oppression is compounded by the fact that nowadays anyone can be Indian if she or he wants to. All that is required is that one be Indian in a former life, or take part in a sweat lodge, or be mentored by a "medicine woman," or read a how-to book.

Since according to this theory, anyone can now be an "Indian," then the term "Indians" no longer refers to those who have survived 500 years of colonization and

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genocide. This furthers the goals of white supremacists to abrogate treaty rights and take away what little we have left. When everyone becomes "Indian," then it is easy to lose sight of the specificity of oppression faced by those who are Indian in *this* life.

The most disturbing aspect about these racist practices is that some of them are promoted in the name of feminism. Sometimes it seems that I can't open a feminist periodical without seeing ads promoting white "feminist" businesses—with little medicine wheel designs. I can't seem to go to a feminist conference without the only Indian presenter being the woman who begins the conference with a ceremony. Participants then feel so "spiritual" after this opening that they fail to notice the absence of Indian women at the rest of the conference or the fact that there will be nobody discussing pressing issues in Native American communities.

If European Americans are going to act in solidarity with their Indian sisters, they must take a stand against Indian spiritual abuse. Feminist book and record stores should stop advertising such rip-off products. Many have

claimed that Indians are not respecting "freedom of speech" by demanding that whites stop exploiting Indian spirituality. But promotion of this material is destroying freedom of speech for Native Americans, by ensuring that our own voices will never be heard. (Feminists have already made choices about what they will promote. I haven't seen many books by right-wing, fundamentalist women sold in feminist bookstores.) The issue is not censorship; the issue is racism. Feminists must make a choice: to respect Indian political and spiritual autonomy or to promote materials that are fundamentally racist under the guise of "freedom of speech."

Respecting the integrity of Native people and their spirituality does not mean that there can never be cross-cultural sharing. However, such sharing should take place in a way that is respectful to Indian people. The way to be respectful is for non-Indians to become involved in our political struggles and to develop an ongoing relationship with Indian *communities* based on trust and mutual respect. When this happens, Indian people may invite a non-Indian to take part in a ceremony—but it will be on Indian terms.

I hesitate to say even this much about cross-cultural sharing, however, because many white people take this to mean that they can join in our struggles solely for the purpose of being invited to ceremonies. If this does not occur, they feel that Indians have somehow unfairly withheld spiritual teachings from them. We are expected to pay the price in spiritual exploitation in order to gain allies in our political struggles.

In fact, however, we are not obligated to teach anyone about our spirituality. It is our choice if we want to share with people we think will be respectful.

It is also important for non-Indians to build relationships with Indian communities rather than with specific individuals. Many non-Indians express their confusion about knowing who is and who is not a legitimate spiritual teacher. The only way for non-Indians to know who are legitimate teachers is if they know who the *community* respects as *its* spiritual leaders. This is a process that takes time.

Unfortunately, many do not want to take this time in their quest for instant spirituality. And alas, racism and profit-making seem to get in the way of solidarity between women.

Our spirituality is not for sale. ☐

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