

# Huston Smith

IN CONVERSATION WITH NATIVE AMERICANS  
ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



## A Seat at the Table

Edited and with a Preface by **PHIL COUSINEAU**

"A valuable and insightful book  
about a too-long-overlooked topic."

BONNIE RAITT

A SEAT AT THE TABLE



Nineteenth-century German lithograph of North American Indian ceremonial objects.

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WITH ASSISTANCE FROM  
GARY RHINE

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS  
BERKELEY LOS ANGELES LONDON

University of California Press, one of the most distinguished university presses in the United States, enriches lives around the world by advancing scholarship in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Its activities are supported by the UC Press Foundation and by philanthropic contributions from individuals and institutions. For more information, visit [www.ucpress.edu](http://www.ucpress.edu).

University of California Press  
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.  
London, England

© 2006 by Huston Smith and Phil Cousineau

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Smith, Huston.

A seat at the table : Huston Smith in conversation with Native Americans on religious freedom / edited and with a preface by Phil Cousineau ; with assistance from Gary Rhine.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-520-24439-7 (alk. paper)

1. Indians of North America—Religion.

2. Freedom of religion—United States.

I. Cousineau, Phil. II. Rhine, Gary. III. Title.

E98.R3556 2006

323.44'2'08997073—dc22 2005005290

Manufactured in the United States of America

13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF  
**REUBEN SNAKE (WINNEBAGO) AND VINCENT PARKER (COMANCHE)**



Our religion is the traditions of our ancestors—the dreams of our old men, given to them in solemn hours of night by the Great Spirit; and the visions of our sachems (medicine people); and it is written in the hearts of the people.

**CHIEF SEATTLE (DWAMISH), 1786–1866**

A very great vision is needed, and the man who has it must follow it as the eagle seeks the deepest blue of the sky.

**CRAZY HORSE (LAKOTA), 1849–1877**

If we don't change directions, we're going to end up where we're headed.

**REUBEN SNAKE (WINNEBAGO), 1943–1993**



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## PREFACE

A long time ago the Creator came to Turtle Island and said to the Red People: “You will be the keepers of Mother Earth. Among you I will give the wisdom about Nature, about the interconnectedness of all things, about balance and about living in harmony. You Red People will see the secrets of Nature. . . . The day will come when you will need to share the secrets with other people of the Earth because they will stray from their Spiritual ways. The time to start sharing is today.”

### MOHICAN PROPHECY

In December 1999 over seven thousand religious leaders, academics, and practitioners of every color and creed gathered in Cape Town, South Africa, for the Third Parliament of World Religions. The Parliament was held at the Good Hope Center in District Six, the symbol of apartheid for decades but now a potent symbol of reconciliation. During the eight-day Parliament hundreds of workshops, seminars, and performances exploring issues such as religious diversity, understanding sacred practices, practicing tolerance, and community activism were offered.

As the *Cape Town Argus* reported, a multitude of speakers shared the teachings of Bahai, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and African tribal religions, turning the city into a “crucible for believers.” Among the presenting groups was a delegation of eight American Indian leaders and the world-renowned historian of religions Huston Smith. Under the title “America’s Shadow Struggle,” the delegation offered a series of panel discussions that covered a wide range of religious freedom issues of pressing concern to Native Americans. As if evoking the Mohican prophecy, as rendered by Don Coyhis, about sharing tribal wisdom in a time of spiritual crisis, the delegation inspired the

gathering with their impassioned testimony. But they were also determined to present the seldom-heard Indian side of the story about America's much-vaunted religious freedom.

In Professor Smith they had the consummate interlocutor, to use one of his favorite terms for an interviewer. Not only is he one of the most widely respected scholars of religion in the world, he has also been a tireless advocate for Native Americans for the last twenty-five years. His life-long search for what is ultimately true in the world's religions is reminiscent of the passion the Irish writer James Stephens once described in one of his short story characters: "All desires save one are fleeting, but that one lasts forever . . . he would go anywhere and forsake anything for wisdom."

Go anywhere and everywhere Huston has, traveling the world for the last fifty years to "winnow the wisdom from the world's great religious traditions." At the Parliament of World Religions, in Cape Town, Professor Smith, a strong proponent of interfaith dialogue, had the chance of a lifetime to express his deepening concern over the "fate of the human spirit," especially as it relates to the primal religions of the world. "Tribal peoples," Smith told the Cape Town press, "have religions which are fully deserving of the world's attention. Unfortunately, these traditions have suffered from noncomprehending governments." Inspired by the trickster advice of his friend Reuben Snake, "Listen, or your tongue will keep you deaf," Smith urged the audience to learn how to *listen* to native people. Only then, he said, will we have the *nuanced* view of world religions on which our future depends.

His sage advice was in accord with the unusually realistic goals laid out in the Parliament's official program: "Very few religious and spiritual communities can reach consensus with one another on an extensive religious, moral, ethical, or social agenda. . . . [But] there are points of convergence—of shared interest, common purpose, or common cause—that can provide a basis for dialogue and cooperation."<sup>1</sup> For the duration of the conference the American Indian forums on religious freedom unfolded in just that spirit of common cause. The participants revealed not only the hidden history of Anglo-Indian relations but also the enduring tensions within contemporary Indian life, what Navajo author Simon Ortiz once described as the "real struggle" for Native Americans: "You have to fight it, to keep what you have, what you are, because they are trying to steal your soul, your spirit, as well as your land, your children."

Though "no one voice speaks for all," as Lakota writer Joseph Bruchac writes, sometimes many speak as one.

What Ortiz describes as the *real struggle* was evoked throughout the delegation's presentations, in which nine voices spoke as one about one of the strangest paradoxes in history. With the traditional eloquence of Indian orators going back to Tecumseh, Black Hawk, and Chief Joseph, the delegation described how the United States, founded on the ideal of freedom of expression, had routinely denied religious and political freedom to its native people. This refusal has forced the land's original inhabitants—its "First People"—to struggle again and again for an equal voice in the religious and political debates that have determined their destiny.

With this legacy of disregard for Indian participation in mind, Pawnee lawyer and author Walter Echo-Hawk set the theme for the panels that followed: "An important reason that our delegation came here," he said, "was to try to get *a seat at the table* with the recognized religions on the planet. If we hadn't come to represent the religions of the New World this wouldn't be a real *world* Parliament. We want a seat at the table to make this gathering real and complete."

In the final session sacred lands activist Anthony Guy Lopez told Professor Smith that the real reason the Apaches are banding together is to fight against the latest seizure of their land in Arizona: "*We can't allow this to happen anymore.*" The causes motivating Echo-Hawk and Lopez and so many other American Indian leaders to carry forth the fiery message about their struggle for religious freedom, like the long-distance Indian runners who used to carry messages from village to village, were the inspiration for this book.

My longtime filmmaking partner, Gary Rhine, and I were privileged to accompany Professor Smith and the Indian delegation to the Parliament in Cape Town and to film all nine sessions there. Over the next few years we augmented those conversations by taping Huston's interviews with all the participants in their own countries, as well as new interviews with two other eminent Native American leaders, Vine Deloria Jr. and Oren Lyons. Our documentary film premiered at the Amnesty International Film Festival in March 2004, under the title inspired by Echo-Hawk's *cri de coeur* at the Parliament in Cape Town: *A Seat at the Table: Struggling for American Indian Religious Freedom*.

These forums, follow-up interviews, and archival footage reveal more than just a litany of grievances. They are lively conversations that offer a unique record of contemporary American Indian voices speaking out on both history and current events. What emerges here is a terrific resolve to transform "crisis into challenge," as Iroquois journalist Douglas George-

Kanentiio says of his own nation's response to modern times. These remarkable dialogues also show a deep respect for the form itself, much in the manner described by the great Oglala Sioux medicine man Luther Standing Bear (1904–1939) as the speaking style of the old orators:

Conversation was never begun at once, nor in a hurried manner. No one was quick with a question, no matter how important, and no one was pressed for an answer. A pause giving time for thought was the truly courteous way of beginning and conducting a conversation. Silence was meaningful with the Lakota, and his granting a space of silence to the speech-maker and his own moment of silence before talking was done in the practice of true politeness and regard for the rule that, "Thought comes before speech."<sup>2</sup>

The spirit of deliberation and respect for religious freedom for everyone permeates the first two chapters, featuring conversations with Vine Deloria Jr. and Walter Echo-Hawk. Together, they reveal what poet Joy Harjo calls "a heart for justice," while giving an unflinching view of the roots of religious intolerance in the New World. Chapters 3 and 4, with Winona LaDuke and Charlotte Black Elk, eloquently portray the inextricably connected relationship between human beings, nature, and religion—or what Peter Matthiessen calls "the religion before religion," nature itself as the "Great Mysterious." In chapter 5 Douglas George-Kanentiio explores another aspect of the indigenous idea of the web of life, the intimate relationship between language and religion, and in chapter 6 Frank Dayish Jr. offers a humble and triumphant view of one of Indian country's most dramatic success stories, the regaining of legal rights to worship in the Native American Church.

Chapters 7 and 8 concern two of the harsher struggles for religious freedom: prisoners' rights, as represented by the courageous spiritual counselor Lenny Foster, and the protection of indigenous peoples' rights to "informed consent" with scientific researchers, as presented by lawyer Tonya Frichner. In chapter 9 sacred lands activist Anthony Guy Lopez shares his impassioned ideas about the enduring Indian struggle for access to sacred lands, the vital connection between ecology and spirituality, and healing ceremony. The final two chapters of the book feature tribal leader and college professor Oren Lyons and Vine Deloria Jr., who reveal their strong convictions about the depredations of the past, and where we can look for signs of the spiritual and cultural renaissance that is under way in Indian country.

Each conversation with Professor Smith displays the grit of those engaged in the "good fight," not only the struggle against religious injustice

but also the fight to achieve a very valuable goal: it is exceedingly difficult to reach understanding with a culture whose understanding of you is either nonexistent or heavily influenced by the gauzy world of stereotypes, archetypes, old movies, or modern advertising. As Walter Echo-Hawk explained it at a question-and-answer session at the end of the Parliament, the problem is that “most Americans have never even met a native person and wouldn’t even recognize one if they saw one.” The forums at the Parliament, and this book, are an effort on the part of contemporary Native Americans to resist the double bind of romanticism and racism that endures in Indian country.

### THE TRAIL OF BROKEN PROMISES

When the hulls of the first European ships scraped the shores of Arawak Island in the Caribbean, they were landing in a vast New World several times larger than the one they had left behind. This land, called Turtle Island by its original inhabitants, was populated by an estimated 12 million people who comprised some five hundred nations. The People, as most tribes referred to themselves, spoke over six hundred languages, as distinct from one another as Icelandic and Tibetan.<sup>3</sup> They created imaginative artworks and beautiful crafts, built complex cities, and explored the land from coast to coast. They knew more about the healing properties of the native herbs and plants than most Europeans knew about theirs. Many of their foods—tomatoes, squash, potatoes, chocolate, and tobacco—are now a part of everyday life around the world.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the combination of war, famine, conversion at sword point, the appearance of railroads, and Indian removal programs had conspired to destroy entire tribes and to decimate the rest. The mosaic of proudly independent tribes was reduced to less than 300,000 people surviving on a crazy quilt of reservations. To many contemporary Americans and Europeans, the bathetic statue *The End of the Trail*, featured at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, was not symbolic art; it was the literal truth, proof that the Indians had been conquered and removed from the land—and from sight. The Plains Indian slumped over his horse represented the inevitable result of a “century of progress,” as the Fair proclaimed. And though the World’s Fair also featured the First Parliament of World Religion, not one group of indigenous people was invited, though millions of visitors filed past Sitting Bull’s log cabin, which had been installed as a tourist attraction.

Yet despite the trail of over eight hundred treaties broken by the U.S.

government and all the “broken promises” reported by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Native Americans are living in a time of tremendous transition and vitality. According to the 2000 Census Bureau report, there are now 567 federally recognized tribes in thirty-three states (Alaska alone has 226 tribes), with 1,300,000 living on reservations, out of a total Indian population of 2,476,000. Indians are the youngest and fastest-growing minority in the United States. While America’s indigenous people still confront serious levels of diabetes, cancer, and heart disease, and many still struggle under what the Commission on Civil Rights called the “quiet crisis of discrimination and poverty,” many believe that the corner has been turned.

Dramatic reversals have been won in areas such as health, education, and the recovery of lost land. Great social strides have been made with the passing of the Repatriation Act, protection for the Native American Church, and the Native Land trust. And the efforts continue at an electrifying pace. Moreover, according to an editorial in the *New York Times* in September 2004, some \$3 billion dollars of restitution are at stake for the “profound cultural and symbolic legacy of America’s indigenous peoples”:

[There is] a continuing lawsuit, whose purpose is to restore to the Indians assets and revenues that are rightfully theirs. Specifically, the suit seeks a proper accounting of a huge trust established more than a century ago when Congress broke up reservation lands into individual allotments. The trust was intended to manage the revenues owed to individual Indians from oil, timber leases and other activities. Yet a century of disarray and dishonesty by the federal government, particularly the Interior Department, whose job it is to administer the trust, has shortchanged generations of Indians and threatens to shortchange some half million more—the present beneficiaries of the trust.<sup>4</sup>

Along with the recovery of lost land and revenues comes the revitalizing of what many elders call the “Good Red Road,” the spiritual path that emphasizes the community and the great web of life. The return to this ancient way of life, the way of native ceremony and oratory, of ethics and morality, has helped build a sense of hope about a future that weaves together the best of the two worlds in which native people find themselves. But even this effort to walk in both worlds, Indian and Anglo, is difficult if the inhabitants of these worlds don’t share a language. “The fundamental factor that keeps Indians and non-Indians from communicating,” wrote Vine Deloria Jr. in 1979, “is that they are speaking about two entirely different perceptions of the world.”

## NO WORD FOR RELIGION

In the eleven conversations that comprise this book it becomes evident that no Native American language has a word for “religion,” at least the way that Westerners conceive of it, as institutionalized spirituality. Traditionally, Indians had no institutions, no dogma, no commandments, and no one idea about how to worship, or even what to call the great force at the heart of all life that was perceived by all the tribes in their own way. Instead, there was what sociologist Duane Champagne (Chippewa) calls “religiousness,” rather than a belief system, a *way of life* that encompassed a rich variety of ceremonies, a mosaic of myths, legends, and poetry, together forming a complex heritage and a deep spiritual force.

In this animating spirit revered medicine man Lame Deer spent his life resisting claims of superiority made by organized religion, writing later, “I carried church within me . . . and wanted to see with the eye of the heart. . . . All nature is within us and all of us is in nature.” Likewise, Ohiyesa (Charles Alexander Eastman) wrote a hundred years ago, in *The Soul of the Indian*, “We believed that the spirit pervades all creation and that every creature possesses a soul in some degree, though not necessarily a soul conscious of itself. The tree, the waterfall, the grizzly bear, each is an embodied force and as such an object of reverence.”<sup>5</sup>

Although there was never one word for God, for art, for the spiritual path, and most assuredly no one voice for all Indian people, there was what Huston Smith calls a “wisdom tradition” that is recognizable among primal cultures the world over. No one word for God, but many for the Great Mystery—*Wakan-Tanka*, *Awoawilonas*, *Tirawa*, *May Wah-Kon-Tah*, *Tatanga Mani*, *Usen*, *the Great Spirit*, *Grandfather*, *the Creator*—sacred names for the great force in the universe that connects all living beings in the circle of life. And for the Hopis, ultimate reality is simply, numinously, *a’nehimu*, “a mighty something.”

No word for “religion,” but innumerable metaphors for the spiritual path, luminous expressions for the right road to take in life, such as Oglala Sioux holy man Nicholas Black Elk’s description of his Great Vision: “Behold the circle of the nations’ hoop, for it is holy, being endless, and thus all powers shall be one power in the people without end. Now they shall break camp and go forth upon the Red Road, and your Grandfathers shall walk among them.”<sup>6</sup> This earnest search has been echoed for generations in ceremonial songs, such as this one: “Wacho ney ney ney ney wacho ney, ney,” “I am searching for the road of life.” And this one, from