Learning from the Navajo: Rethinking Religion for a Post-Colonial Era

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ABSTRACT

This address explores the importance of generating concepts from non-Euro-American religious spaces to understand religions worldwide. As an example, it shows how the Navajo concept of *hózhǫ́* highlights the socially transformative role of experience in religious settings — something that Euro-American sociologies typically fail to grasp. It then argues that such insights are of universal rather than of parochial importance. A truly post-colonial sociology needs to put treat insights from all societies, cultures, and civilizations as potential sources of understanding.

Let me start by thanking Esmeralda Sanchez for inviting me to present this lecture. I wish I could attend the conference in person, but age, transportation, and family issues make that impossible. Still, I value international scholarly cooperation and want to do my part to support it.

The theme of this conference is "Collective Memory." That is an important topic in the sociology of religion, highlighted by Daniéle Hervieu-Léger's 1993 *La religion pour mémoire* (translated to English as *Religion as a Chain of Memory*). That book emphasized the role that memory plays in religious life, particularly what she called "authorized memories." These are the official memories that maintain each religious tradition. Sociology studies both the official and the unofficial memories that battle each other, producing religious change. Addressing both kinds of memories is crucial to understanding religions in any era.

This is also true of sociology as an intellectual discipline. In our case, our official memory identifies sociology as an outgrowth of the European Enlightenment. It sees itself as dedicated to analyzing the forces of modernity. In that official memory, the founders of our field saw religion as a holdover from the past, something doomed to fade away as humanity applied Reason to improve social and economic life (see Vásquez, 2013). As should be obvious, this official memory focuses on religion in Europe (Davie, 2002) and has trouble understanding religion in the rest of the world. The various efforts to expand its scope (e.g., Berger et al., 2008; Burchardt et al., 2015) have helped, but they still use European and North American concepts to understand religion. This makes various aspects of religion hard to see.

Much of my work over the last ten years has been an attempt to recover religious memories from

non-Western traditions, to see what they reveal about religions that are beyond standard sociology's vision. This is not just a matter of ethnographic curiosity. We no longer live in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The world has changed. I believe that sociologists need to rethink their understandings of religion for our post-colonial era.

Technically speaking, our world is not yet fully post-colonial, though the world system's wealthiest countries have given up direct political control over the periphery (Wallerstein, 2004). However, that capitalist core still maintains neo-colonial economic dominance, and it practices internal colonialism in places like Amazonia, Siberia, Xinjiang, Puerto Rico, and Wales. Our world is not "flat," to use Thomas Friedman's (2007) rather ideological term. It is in fact a rough landscape, full of barriers (de Blij, 2009). Colonialism's formal end has not changed who dominates the world.

Intellectual colonialism is still with us, as well. For example, my own discipline — the sociology of religion — almost universally treats all religions as if they were organized on Euro-American lines. Sociologists look for the equivalent of "churches," staffed by the equivalent of "clergy," and focused on "sacred texts" and "beliefs" (Spickard, 2017, pp. 21–34). This makes Western Christianity the model for religions everywhere. Numerous scholars have criticized this approach (e.g., Smith, 1982; Chidester, 1996, 2013; Masuzawa 2005) without changing my discipline's practice. As a result, mainstream sociology misunderstands religions that do not fit the standard Euro-American mold.

How can we overcome this neo-colonial situation? Some sociologists have called for developing "Southern theory" (Connell, 2007) and others for recovering lost sociological traditions (Alatas, 2006; Patel, 2010). Sadly, many of these celebrate the non-Euro-American origin of such theorizing more than they describe its insights, while others attack any "universal" theories as invalid — non-Western ones included (Park, 1988).

I think we can do better. In this address, I describe how a close examination of Navajo (Native-American) healing rituals reveals aspects of even Euro-American religious life that the sociology of religion has heretofore ignored. I then explore how the sociology of religion must engage in what I and other scholars (e.g., Mignolo 2018) call a "multi-polar universalism" if we are to understand the full breadth of human experience. I agree with Stephen Ellis and Gerrie Ter Haar that all societies' "modes of thought [...] may — in theory, at least — be of universal application" (2007. p. 386).

Navajo Rituals: Restoring HózhǪ

The Navajo Nation is one of 574 government-recognized indigenous "dependent nations" in the Unites States, each of which has some form of semi-sovereign status. It covers over 65,000 square kilometers of desert and mountains in the American Southwest. It has its own government, justice system, and politics, with an economy based largely on minerals and tourism. Poverty is high. About a third of the people live in rural areas. Some herd and farm, but few follow a fully traditional life. The Nation is religiously diverse, made up of Christians, Mormons, adherents of the Native American (Peyote) Church, and many who attend traditional ceremonies.

Unlike Christianity, Mormonism, and so on, traditional Navajo religion lacks formal organizations. It has no clergy, in the Christian sense, though it does have religious specialists — *hataa*łii, or "singers" — who are adept at leading one or more of the dozens of "chantways" that constitute the traditional religious system (Wyman, 1983). These chants are not like Christian texts, in that they are not meant to instruct or to direct thinking. They are, instead, designed to bring health to those who are

ill or who are in supernatural danger. Performed over two, five, or nine nights and days, their recitation combats disorder and restores the world to its original harmony, health, and beauty. The Navajo term for this is *hózhǫ́*. It is the goal of life. To "walk in beauty" *(h*ózhóogo *naasháa)* is to be secure, peaceful, accepting, and grateful for what life brings. Navajo rituals overcome disorder (*h*óchx*ǫ́ǫ́*) so that individuals and the community can walk in beauty again.

Different chantways are used to repair various disorders. Enemyway, for example, is sung for those returning from war, who may be haunted by the ghosts of those they have killed or seen killed. Hailway and Waterway, now dormant, were used to restore people injured by water, frost, or snow. Big Starway counteracts witchcraft. Mountainway cures arthritis and mental disturbances. Shootingway addresses troubles attributed to thunder and lightning, snakes, and arrows. Leland Wyman (1983, p. 544) wrote that these correspondences were "extremely loose"; all the chantways restore order, either by driving away evil or by welcoming good. All also include portions of Blessingway, the most famous of the positive *h*ózh*ǫ́*-restoring chants, whose name in Navajo means "the way to secure an environment of perfect beauty" (Gill, 1987, p. 19). Here is an English version of its most well-known passage:

> *In beauty I walk*
> *With beauty before me I walk*
> *With beauty behind me I walk*
> *With beauty above me I walk*
> *With beauty around me I walk*
> *It has become beauty again*
> *It has become beauty again*
> *It has become beauty again*
> *It has become beauty again*

This is clearly a prayer, but it is neither a supplication nor a recitation of belief. It is an action. It narrates what is happening, and, for the Navajo, it creates that happening by means of the narration. It is what linguistic philosopher John Austin (1962) called "performative" language. Like the sentence "I nominate John Smith for Governor" or the priest's statement at a wedding ceremony, "I now pronounce you man and wife," it creates the very situation that it seems to describe. When looked at from the point of view of its participants, Navajo rituals

> evoke and structure the images ... in such a way that they create the power that can expel malevolent influences and that can reorder, and hence restore to health and happiness, a person who suffers. (Gill, 1987, p. 110)

As the linguist Gary Witherspoon put it, Navajo

> ritual language does not describe how things are; it determines how they will be. ... It commands, compels, organizes, transforms, and restores. It disperses evil, reverses disorder, neutralizes pain, overcomes fear, eliminates illness, relieves anxiety, and restores order, health, and well-being (1983, p. 575).

It does this simply by being spoken. This grows out of the Navajo view of the relationship between language and reality (Witherspoon, 1983). Language does not simply describe the world; it creates it. Thus tradition-oriented Navajo are very careful about what they say, lest that saying make it come to pass.

The Blessingway is a prime mythic example. Navajo myth says that the ritual was first performed when the first beings, Long-life Boy and Happiness Girl, emerged from a medicine bundle and made the

world. To the Navajo, they are personified thought and speech, so after talking and thinking about how the world should be, they smoothed the sand floor of their ceremonial dwelling and painted the life forms of all living things, along with the months of the year, the stars, and the landscape. Then they sang through the night. At dawn, the painting was transformed into the world we know.

Put together, Long-life Boy's and Happiness Girl's names form a common Navajo blessing: *'są 'áh naaghái bik'eh hózhǫ́*. Literally, this means "may you have a long happy life", but it means more than that because the prefix *hó-*

> refers to the general as opposed to the specific, the whole as opposed to the part, the abstract as opposed to the concrete, the indefinite as opposed to the definite, and the infinite as opposed to the finite (Witherspoon, 1983, p. 572, see pp. 570–573).

This blessing thus goes beyond individuals to the communal well-being of Navajo families, to the health and harmony of their communities, and, indeed, to the right ordering of all creation. Like other Navajo ritual language, the blessing brings about the state that it names. And it does so with thought and speech, which were the same means by which the world was begun.

Do such rituals objectively restore people to health? Do they actually cure? Many Navajos would say "yes," though they recognize that ceremonies neither cure cancers nor make tumors disappear. Instead, they reinstitute the world's original perfection, of which the patient's long life and happiness are a part. They reorder a disordered universe. Navajo philosophy is realistic: we are all going to die. "The goal of Navajo life in this world," wrote Witherspoon (1983, p. 573),

> is to live to maturity in the condition described as *hózhǫ́*, and to die of old age, the end result of which incorporates one in the universal beauty, harmony, and happiness described as *'są 'áh naaghái bik'eh*.

Navajo rituals thus do something much more important than curing patients. They restore the world's original perfection. I have elsewhere described in detail how they accomplish this and some of the mechanisms they use (Spickard, 1991; 2017, pp. 181–203). I lack space to do so here, other than to say that they operate on at least two levels: the symbolic and the experiential.

On the symbolic level, the rituals reframe the original illness as the result of disorder. As the anthropologist Thomas Csordas (1994) noted, the rituals set the patient's illness within a culturally meaningful story about an originally perfect world that has decayed, then been restored to its pristine significance (see Milne and Howard, 2000). On the experiential level, they work by leading the patient through a multi-day event that recapitulates that perfect world's creation. They guide the participants' flow of attention from one element to another, first diving deeply into the underlying disorder, then rebuilding order out of chaos. In experiencing this restoration moment-to-moment in time, the patient experiences the restoration of her or his health. Simultaneously, the community experiences the restoration of *hózhǫ́* (beauty, harmony).

This kind of religion is not unique to the traditional Navajo; it appears in other religions as well. In my book, *Alternative Sociologies of Religion* (2017, pp. 205–23), I showed how weekly house-Masses at a radical Catholic commune in California similarly restore a sense of harmony and rightness to a group that spends it days serving homeless people — the poorest domestic victims of the American empire. The ritual greets them in their state of despair, reconnects them symbolically

and experientially to their community, and brings them to a euphoric sense of rightness about their lives. I spent 13 years doing fieldwork with this community, and only when I became familiar with Navajo ceremonies did I fully understand what was going on. I could not have done so, had I been limited to the sociology of religion's standard concepts. Instead, I would have asked people about their beliefs, looked at how they organized themselves, and charted individual life courses. I did all this, too, but the Navajo taught me to focus on the flow of ritual experiences and their consequences for participants' lives. This is why non-Western insights are important. They show us aspects of religion that standard sociological approaches do not easily see.

Towards a Post-Colonial Sociology of Religion

Navajo rituals are not, of course, the only non-Western source for potential sociological inspiration. I have also explored ideas from traditional Confucianism and from the writings of the 14th-century Arab polymath Ibn Khaldūn (Spickard 2017). Other scholars have found other inspirations. Here are four examples:

1. The Nigerian sociologist Akinsola Akiwowo (1983, 1986) highlighted concepts from indigenous Yoruba philosophy that he hoped would create a sociology that better describes the issues facing African societies than does the sociology invented in Europe and America. He particularly focused on the contrast between *aṣuwada,* or "purposeful community," and *aṣuwa*, mere "coexistence." The former requires *alájobí*: complex and deep interconnections that bind people to a sense of common mission. The latter manifests *alájogbe*: attenuated bonds that imply mere co-residence. The *alájobí/alájogbe* contrast is different from the 19th-century sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies' contrast between "community" and "society," in part because Northern sociology sees the shift from the former to the latter as inevitable. The Yoruba terms emphasize human agency, which opens up different possibilities.
2. The Venezuelan-American sociologist Otto Maduro (1993) drew on the ancient Nahuatl word *texcoatlaxope* ("she will crush the serpent of stone") to describe the process by which the indigenous residents of central Mexico blended the Christian image of Mary of Nazareth with the *Mexica* goddess Tonatzin to create the famous Virgin of Guadalupe. In doing this, these indigenes surmounted both the invaders' claim to own the former "goddess" and the destructive potential of the latter. The result was a "symbolic reconciliation of opposites [by which *la Virgen*] actively takes the side of the oppressed through the creative agency of the oppressed themselves" (p. 5). The Liberation Theology notion that God is on the side of the oppressed does not, therefore, come just from Catholic Christianity; it is embedded in indigenous *Mexica* theology.
3. The Ghanaian sociologist Michael Okyerefo (2020) is currently exploring the nuances of how the Bakpɛle people of Ghana conceptualize things that Euro-American sociologists would identify as "citizenship," "leadership," "race," "engagement," "deliberation," and "restorative justice." These ideas seem to be differently constellated in Bakpɛle thought than they are in standard Northern thinking (Okyerefo, 2018).
4. Returning to African scholars, Chammah Kaunda has proposed using "elements from

> Bemba and Shila cultural heritage in order to re-conceptualize contemporary African Christian ecotheology" (2016, p. 177). Jehu Hanciles uses the African experience of migration to rethink how religious transmission works in our transnational, multi-polar world (2008). In my judgment, he does a better job of this that any current sociologist of religion. Both scholars are worth reading.

There are other examples, but these stand out to me for their creativity and for their willingness to challenge standard sociological ideas. I encourage my colleagues worldwide to do the same.

We must, however, be clear about what I and others are trying to do. We are not arguing that Euro-American sociology helps us understand religions in Europe and America but nowhere else. Nor do we argue that each society, culture, or civilization needs its own indigenous sociology, suitable for understanding its own religions but no other. The first of these is demonstrably untrue, while the second erects a hermetic view of "society," "'culture," and "civilization" that has never matched reality. "Societies," "cultures," and civilizations" have always been nodes connected by networks. They have at most been ringed by permeable borderlands or *fronteras* across which people, goods, and ideas flow (Brunet-Jailly, 2005). This is especially true in our post-Westphalian era (Beyer, 2016, 2020; Gauthier, 2020). Now, as in all previous historical epochs, the world's various peoples influence each other, for good or for ill.

It is equally true that no society, culture, or civilization has a monopoly on scientific progress. The Congolese-French philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe (1988, p. 15) defined "epistemological ethnocentrism" as "the belief that scientifically there is nothing to be learned from 'them' unless it is already 'ours' or comes out of 'us'". More viciously, Northern powers used 'epistemicide' — the deliberate destruction of other people's knowledge (de Sousa Santos, 2014) — to erase other societies' knowledge so that those Northern powers could claim the right to them. The 13th through 15th century burning of Muslim libraries during the Christian conquest of Spain and the 16th century burning of indigenous American "codices" during European colonization are just two examples (Grosfoguel, 2013).

De Sousa Santos, Grosfoguel, and others have argued that these events cleared the way for European and later American scholars to claim that their knowledge was universal. Those scholars claimed that other people's knowledge might be relevant to their corners of the world, but it could not compete with the Global North's universalism. As Mudimbe put it,

> From that moment on the forms and formulations of the colonial culture and its aims were somehow the means of trivializing the whole traditional mode of life and its spiritual framework (1988, p. 4).

Talk about erasing collective memories!

Unfortunately, sociology's founders contributed to this trend by seeing Europe and its settler societies as the future that all parts of the world would one day share. Recent scholars have denied that conceit. Raewyn Connell (2007, 2018), for example, showed us how several recent versions of that sociological "universalism" are built on intellectual sand. Other scholars (Akiwowo, 1988; Sanda, 1988; Park, 1988) have equated universalism with colonialism *tout court*. I have treated their work elsewhere (Spickard 2017, pp. 237–241), so here I shall only note that Park's argument — the strongest — is an effective take-down of sociological positivism but not of universalism *per se*. Both Euro-American and other sociologies can produce concepts that apply beyond

their social, cultural, and civilizational borders (Reiter 2018).

This brings us back to Navajo ritual. The point is not that Navajo religion provides a tool that lets us understand all religions. The point is that understanding something about how Navajo religion works gives us sensitizing concepts that we can use in our analyses of religions anywhere. We see that all people's rituals unfold in time and guide their participants' attention. We see that in doing so, they produce particular emotions and experiences. This does not invalidate symbolic analysis of rituals (e.g., Turner, 1967, 1969); it just tells us that there is something else to look for. Once we do so, we realize that rituals are more than just strings of meaning. They also carry people from one experiential/emotional state to another, transforming them. Some rituals, indeed, accomplish something akin to the restoration of what the Navajo call *hózhǪ.* Others undoubtedly lead people elsewhere. Yet this process of guiding experience through time is universal enough that I used it to create a sociological phenomenology of religious rituals (Spickard, 2012), which I illustrated with an analysis of the house-mass ceremonies in a radical Catholic activist commune (Spickard 2005; 2017, chapt. 8). The potential for experiential transformation through ritual is not limited to the Navajo world.

I learned from the Navajo how to see religion in a new way. By studying Navajo ritual as potentially universal, not particular, we can see our own societies' rituals in a new light. This is not a matter of cultural appropriation. It recognizes both the particular origin of the Navajo concepts and their potential universality. It moreover recognizes that universality does not come from just one direction, as Euro-American sociology has often claimed. Instead, universality is multi-polar (Mignolo, 2018).

The sociology of religion will not overcome colonialism until it can use insights from every society to understand religions everywhere.

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