

## Questioning Perspectives on Appropriation: When Scholarly Enquiry Becomes Theological Projection<sup>1</sup>

In contemporary America, an ongoing debate surrounds the participation in and appropriation of Indian religion<sup>2</sup> by non-Indians.<sup>3</sup> This debate entails complex interactions between a variety of religious groups, each of which is making claims regarding, amongst other things, who should be considered an Indian, who has the ability to teach Indian religion and who has the right to participate in Indian religious activities. Each of these questions points to conflicts regarding authenticity, authority and access. Often the stances taken in these interactions are the result of or supported by the moral imperatives and truth claims of the various religious traditions of those involved. Scholars are drawn to this complex web of interactions for a variety of reasons, but it is often the interchange between the groups themselves and the resulting perspectives which prove to be the most interesting.

Some scholars, regardless of methodological concerns, have gone far beyond analyzing this interaction and have chosen to enter into the debate itself. This often results in scholars offering various perspectives on the issue of appropriation of Indian religion by non-Indians. Bron Taylor presents three broad perspectives that have been offered by scholars in this regard: appropriation is tantamount to cultural genocide, and therefore, it should not be done; religious practices that are taken out of an Indian context are no longer Indian and so there is no such thing as Indian appropriation; and, borrowing is inherent to the dynamic of culture and religion and should be not seen as immoral behavior (Taylor 184). The question that arises from this activity is whether or not Religious Studies scholars have overstepped their bounds by offering their own perspectives on appropriation of Indian religion by non-Indians.<sup>4</sup>

While any of the perspectives presented by Taylor may be appropriate for religious practitioners themselves, the question must be asked as to whether any of these positions can actually be taken without making moral or truth claims and, as such, are appropriate for the Religious Studies scholar to offer or support.<sup>5</sup> The answer is that, inasmuch as these positions arise from a detailed analysis of the religious debate surrounding these groups, they are within the domain of the Religious Studies. However, when the scholar uses that analysis to support a

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<sup>1</sup> I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Greg Johnson for his useful critique of both this paper and the argument I put forward within it. The perspective he offered was invaluable in helping to develop my own.

<sup>2</sup> The term "Indian religion" will be used as an umbrella term when referring to the myriad of different religious traditions that are adhered to by the various Indian tribes throughout North America. A further exploration of this term will be presented later.

<sup>3</sup> There are many types of appropriation. Unless otherwise noted the use of the term 'appropriation' will refer to religious appropriation, whether this appropriation results from the adoption of a single component or of a religious system in its entirety.

<sup>4</sup> While this discussion takes place in other academic fields, I have chosen to focus on the field of Religious Studies. This is done for two reasons: first, academia is too large to be explored in just one paper, and second, I feel that the field of Religious Studies has a special ethical concern when it comes to interacting and analyzing religion and those that practice it, which may not be relevant to other fields.

<sup>5</sup> It must be noted that the scholarship within the field of Religious Studies contains a more varied view regarding the stances that scholars may take in regards to religion and those that practice it then alluded to here. I believe that the role of the Religious Studies scholar is to increase the understanding of a religion and those who practice it. I agree that often times this requires critical analysis on the part of the scholar. However, I hold strongly to the view that it should never be the intent of the Religious Studies scholars to change the religion observed or to work towards creation of a new religious paradigm. This standpoint is directly reflected in my presentation of the way the field should be but it is not a statement of how the field is today.

perspective which provides moral imperatives or truth claims, whether or not these support appropriation, she has moved beyond the purview of Religious Studies scholarship. In other words, when she begins to make claims of what a religious practitioner ought to or ought not to do and she enters into a realm more akin to Theology than Religious Studies.<sup>6</sup> This conclusion, and the discussion from which it is generated, suggests that it is best for scholars of Religious Studies to refrain from entering into the debate regarding the appropriation of Indian religion and let readers draw their own conclusions from the analysis which the scholars offer. Furthermore, this discussion reveals a need for the ultimate goal of Religious Studies to be made explicit and suggests that if scholars have indeed overstepped their bounds here, they may have done so in other arenas as well.<sup>7</sup>

In order to support this thesis the paper will be divided up into three distinct sections. The first section will deal primarily with working categorical definitions. This is necessary to limit the scope of the paper and to allow the reader to understand the various contentious categories used.<sup>8</sup> The second section will narrow the focus further by presenting explorations of the interactions between Indians and non-Indians as they occur around the Lakota Sun Dance. The purpose of these explorations is to give the reader a foundation upon which to place the discussion that appears in the third section regarding limitations placed upon those scholars who work within the field of Religious Studies.

### **Working Categories and Definitions**

In order to understand the debate as it will be presented in this paper, it is important to provide a brief discussion of some of the reoccurring working categories and definitions used throughout this paper. The terms religion, Indian, non-Indian, Indian religion and New Age are ambiguous and their use should be made explicit in hopes of focusing on the debate at hand rather than the terminology used.<sup>9</sup> As such, it is important to remember that these are heuristic constructions and will be assumed valid for this paper.

Since the focus of this paper deals more with religious examples of appropriation, rather than secular ones, a definition of religion should be advanced.<sup>10</sup> Religion will be understood as

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<sup>6</sup> I have chosen to capitalize the terms 'Theology' and 'Religious Studies' to further indicate that I believe that these fields should be distinct. While I realize that the scholarship in the field of Religious Studies currently does not necessarily conform to this standard, I do believe that this is the most ideal situation given the purpose of Religious Studies which I present later.

<sup>7</sup> This discussion also could have taken place under the broader rubric of descriptive versus prescriptive perspectives. As such the paper would have been both broader in impact but overbroad in scope. Therefore, I have chosen to focus on the field most important to me. However, it should be clear that I have drawn the following parallels Religious Studies is descriptive and Theology is prescriptive. Furthermore, it should be noted that my arguments and conclusions may be relevant to other fields in which there is an ongoing debate over whether descriptive perspectives are more beneficial and appropriate than prescriptive perspectives.

<sup>8</sup> The need to make my working categories and definitions explicit is informed by Robert D. Baird's discussion of 'essential-intuitional method' versus 'functional-definitional method' in Chapter One of his work *Category Formation and the History of Religions*. See Work Cited for full citation.

<sup>9</sup> Working definitions that discuss the definition and purpose of Religious Studies and Theology will be presented after looking at the Sun Dance. The discussion over the definitions and categories offered here are to give the reader some of the working conceptions in advance of the part of the paper that will deal significantly with them.

<sup>10</sup> Baird suggests that the term 'religion' is ambiguous and, therefore, must be defined given the context in which it is explored. Baird chooses to use Paul Tillich's definition of religion as the 'ultimate concern' as a starting point. However, Baird reworks Tillich's definition because he believes that it might ultimately lead the researcher into judging the validity of a religion's worldview. "By 'ultimate' I do not intend to emphasize the metaphysical or the

the ‘ultimate landscape’ of a practitioner or community. From this ‘ultimate landscape,’ a practitioner builds a system of belief that gives rise to ontological claims (i.e. truth claims) and informs values (i.e. morality).<sup>11</sup> The benefit of this definition is that it allows for both Indian religions and New Age religion to be explored equally and relative to each other without having to judge the validity of the ‘ultimate landscape’ each offers.<sup>12</sup>

For the purposes of this paper, there will be a distinction drawn between people who may be considered Indian and people who are to be considered non-Indian. Those who have some sort of tribal affiliation, whether officially enrolled in a tribe or culturally linked by background to an Indian nation, will be considered Indian.<sup>13</sup> While it may be assumed that those individuals, and the tribes they represent, are actually members of a large homogeneous culture, according to some scholars such an assumption should be avoided. As Devon A. Mihesuah’s states: “Historic tribes differ substantially in regard to religious beliefs and practices, language, dress, hairstyles, physiology, political organization, social structures, gender roles, world view and living conditions... Even though today Indians live in the modern world... Indians from one tribe are not the same as those from another...” (Mihesuah 20). In using the term Indian to refer to those individuals who meet the criteria presented above, it is not my intent to present ‘indianess’ as homogenous. Therefore, when possible, the term ‘Indian’ will be replaced by the tribal affiliation of the individual or group. Those people who do not have a cultural link to an Indian tribe and are not officially recognized as such by either a tribe or the United States government will be considered non-Indian.<sup>14</sup>

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*object(s)* of ultimate concern. At the same time I do not intend to *deny* objective reality. Neither affirmation nor denial is either necessary or desirable in historical research. By ‘ultimate’ I am referring to a concern which is *more important than anything else in the universe for the person involved* [italics in text]” (Baird 18). Baird explains that such an understanding of religion emphasizes the religious practitioner over the religious idea, conception or practice itself. Since historical research is focused on humanity, such a definition is useful because it allows for the historian to focus on the person’s belief rather than on validity of the belief itself. I agree with Baird’s understanding of religion and find it valuable. I also think that it need not be limited to a historical understanding of religion and that it can be incorporated into other methodologies not concerned with taking a historical approach. Furthermore, I wish to emphasize that religion as the ‘ultimate concern’ is the vantage point from which the religious practitioner or community observe both themselves and the world around them. Therefore, I am replacing the term ‘ultimate concern,’ with ‘ultimate landscape’. For Baird’s discussion of Tillich and the definition of religion, see pages 18-22 in the Works Cited.

<sup>11</sup> It may also give rise to numerous other phenomena. However, since the current debate at hand focuses upon truth claims and moral claims, whether they are the scholars own or that of the practitioners studied, they will be emphasized.

<sup>12</sup> It might be argued that this definition would encompass other ‘non-religious’ perspectives, such as those informed by scientific or secular worldviews, which offer perspectives which give rise to ontological claims and truth values. Hence, my definition of religion is invalid because such perspectives are essentially not religious. My response would be to say simply that such perspectives are religious insofar as they refer to ‘ultimate landscapes’ which give rise to, among other things, ontological claims and moral imperatives. The ramifications of this statement cannot be further developed in this paper.

<sup>13</sup> The choice of this definition is due to the fact that within the debate itself these seem to be the guidelines used by Indians to define themselves as a community. However, this definition has its limitations and cannot adequately deal with those that self-identify as Indian without communal or cultural ties. The issue of self identifying oneself as Indian without having cultural links or being officially recognized by either the United States government or an Indian Tribe is an issue that remains unresolved in the debate being explored. Therefore, for now, the issue should be recognized but not specifically addressed.

<sup>14</sup> As in the discussion of Indian religions that follows, it may be argued that these categories are overly broad and that they present a rigid dichotomy that does not actually reflect the reality of the relationship between those that may be grouped as Indian or non-Indian, nor of the groups themselves. For instance, these categories do not reflect either those that are members of both the Indian and non-Indian communities nor do they adequately allow for self-

The working categorical definition of Indian religions must first take into account the nature of the term ‘Indian’ as it has been presented above.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, rather than defining Indian religions according to a specific grouping of beliefs or practices, it might simply suffice to say that Indian religion is the religion to which an Indian practitioner or her community adheres. This seems to follow the approach of several other scholars such as Bron Taylor and Cynthia A. Snavelly, who, while using the term ‘Native American Spirituality’, leave Indian religion largely undefined. Inherent in these assumed definitions is the fact that the religious practices, regardless of their specific manifestation “address the needs of present-day Native communities” and, as such, the Indian community is essential to Indian religious practice (Snavelly 91).<sup>16</sup>

The last category that needs to be explored before looking at the specific interactions between Indians and non-Indians is the New Age movement.<sup>17</sup> The use of the term “New Age” may, just like Indian religion, be thought of as an umbrella term used to point to a specific group of non-Indian religious practitioners, some of whom appropriate Indian religious practices. Sarah Pike states “New Agers say that divine power dwells in as well as outside humans and the natural world. Understanding the interconnectedness of all things makes it possible to heal some aspects of human lives and the culture that are fragmented by false dualities” (Pike 23). The interconnectedness of reality gives the New Ager the ability to draw from a variety of sources when practicing their religion. As Pike states:

New Agers are committed to the transformation of both self and society through a host of practices including channeling, visualization, astrology, meditation, and alternative healing methods... They share with other Americans an interest in angels, miracles, and psychic phenomena... but they combine such beliefs with

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identification. As previously mentioned, it is not the author’s intent to homogenize the whole of North American Indian culture, (or the non-Indian culture for that matter). Rather, the use of this dichotomy reflects the current debate surrounding appropriation and, therefore, definitions for the categories of both Indian and non-Indian must be presented and defined.

<sup>15</sup> There is some controversy over whether or not the term ‘religion,’ as it is commonly used is relevant when discussing Indian traditions. Sometimes the term ‘spirituality’ is used instead of ‘religion’ simply because it has connotations that seem more useful when discussing Indian belief, such as the distinction between organized and non-organized religions. However, the categorical definition of religion offered above does not offer any specific schematic for religious organization, the dichotomy which is usually setup when contrasting the terms religion and spirituality. Therefore, the term ‘religion’ will be used when discussion Indian belief.

<sup>16</sup> Given the definition of Indian religion presented here, both pan-Indian movements and Christianity may be considered Indian religions regardless of whether they are condemned, condoned, or omitted by various players in the debate. Pan-Indian movements are movements that usually present a more homogenized viewpoint of Indian religion and have a tendency to draw from a variety of Indian traditions regardless of the tribal affiliation of specific practice. This blurring of the boundaries between tribal traditions is sometimes seen as destructive to Indian identity. Christianity may also be considered a type of Indian religion inasmuch as contemporary Indian communities adhere to it. However, Indian Christianity does not seem to be appropriated much by non-Indians, especially New Agers and, therefore, will not be directly addressed in this paper. Furthermore, as Dr. Greg Johnson pointed out to me, Indian individuals, like all individual, often wear multiple ‘hats’ given the context of the situation in which they are. Therefore, it may be possible for an Indian individual to have a religion which is tribally affiliated with his own, belong to a pan-Indian movement, and to be a Christian all at the same time.

<sup>17</sup> The use of the term ‘movement’ here does not mean that New Age is not religious in nature. On the contrary, the New Age movement fits the working definition of religion and, therefore, will be treated as such. In the entry for ‘New Age’ in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* the author looks at the critics of the New Age movement, and states: “Despite the wide range of beliefs and practices that might fall under the rubric of “New Age,” as a religious perspective, New Age is no less a shared attempt to understand what constitutes the world, humanity and the supernatural and the relationships between them in ways that give meaning to participants’ lives and help them determine what is valuable within some sort of workable framework...” (1194). See Works Cited for full citation.

other elements such as Asian religious traditions, the human potential movement, American Indian beliefs, and holistic practices. (Pike 23)

The working definition of New Age will need to remain something of an umbrella term which encompasses those beliefs mentioned above. Furthermore, the New Age movement will be categorized as a non-Indian movement. Still, the movement itself may be too broad to work with as a whole and, therefore, there will be a special emphasis upon those New Agers who seek understandings of and participation in Indian religion in hopes of facilitating healing or some other spiritual process embraced by New Age belief. While the approach to Indian religion by the New Ager can range from simply participating in a tribal religious ceremony to teaching religious principles that are founded in some way upon Indian religious practices, they are the most likely of the New Agers to enter into the debate surrounding appropriation of Indian religion.

### **Case Study: The Lakota Sun Dance**

There are many ways one might approach the debate surrounding the appropriation of Indian religion. Even the briefest of surveys reveals that issues concerning authority, access to, and appropriation of Indian religions are as contentious as they are complex. It seems that there cannot be a claim made that *all* Indians think that non-Indian involvement in their rituals is wrong nor that *all* non-Indians, including some New Agers, believe that they should always be able to participate in religion that is informed by Indian religious practices. Therefore, it may prove beneficial to focus on one example of Indian religiosity that non-Indians commonly take part in or appropriate into their own traditions: the Sun Dance.

The Sun Dance has been a religious ceremony practiced by a variety of Indian tribes including “the Arapaho, Arikara, Assiniboine, Cheyenne, Crow, Gros Ventre, Hidatsa, Sioux, Plains Cree, Plains Ojibway, Sarsi, Omaha, Ponca, Shoshone, Kiowa, Blackfeet, and in the late nineteenth century, by the Utes” (Wood 269). The performance of the Sun Dance amongst these tribes varies according to both religious and cultural concerns. A prime example of this is the difference between Sioux and Ute practices of the Sun Dance. While the Sioux ceremony culminates in the piercing of the dancers, the Utes practice the Sun Dance by “forgoing the self-torture aspects of skewering their chests with leather thongs attached to the center pole. For them it was enough to fast and dance for three days and three nights, at a time when the moon was fullest and the sun the hottest” (Wood 268-269).

Oftentimes, scholarly understandings of the traditions themselves also vary according to the methodological concerns of the scholar. For instance, Joseph G. Jorgensen describes the Sun Dance it as a ‘Redemptive Movement’ amongst the Utes and Shoshones. As such, the Sun Dance ... aims at a total change in the individual by supernatural means and human effort, provides a loose code of conduct (obligations and responsibilities) for each adherent, rejects and castigates the evils of white society, and helps resolve the conflict between Protestant ethic individualism preached by whites, and the collective ethic preached by Indians (Jorgensen 7).

Though Jorgensen’s conclusion is useful, it is an exploration of Utes and Shoshones may not necessarily be relevant to all tribes. Other scholars, such as Bruce Lincoln, allow for the Sun Dance to be considered something of an initiation ritual, at least historically, amongst the Sioux.

“In earlier times, piercing was understood to be part of a warrior’s training, steeling him to hardship and enacting a drama of capture by enemies, bondage and torture at their hands, and, finally, escape” (Lincoln 8). As such, the Sun Dance does not appear to be not a response to non-Indian culture. (Lincoln 8).<sup>18</sup>

While it may prove interesting to cross reference all the various ways in which the Sun Dance is thought of and performed by various tribes, it would ultimately distract from the focus of this paper. Therefore, this paper will focus on the Lakota Sioux Sun Dance.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the purpose of this exploration is not to provide an in-depth description of the religious ritual or concepts surrounding the Sun Dance as they are practiced by either Indians or non-Indians.<sup>20</sup> Nor is the purpose of this presentation to somehow bring to the forefront a need for reconciliation of any of the groups or call for a change in any of their stances. Rather, the purpose is simply to present and explore the various perspectives offered by both sides in regards to participation in or appropriation of these religious practices so that the reader has an indication of the complexity of the issues surrounding this debate.<sup>21</sup>

According to Bruce Lincoln, the Lakota Sundance is perhaps the most recognizable to the non-Indian population. With its use of piercing and other forms of flesh offerings, it is often the most visible representation offered of Lakota religious tradition and of the Sun Dance itself. The ritual itself takes place over four days. Throughout these days, dancers dance around a sacred tree erected in the middle of a circular enclosure with a lone exit to the east. The tree is seen, amongst other things, as a conduit for the power of the Sun. Attached to this tree are various cloth banners of colors that represent not only the cardinal directions but also the four human races. Suspended from these poles are ropes which will be attached to the piercing on the dancers’ flesh. According to Lincoln, the most intense part of the ritual, and its culmination, is the latter part of the ritual when the individuals try to pull the tongs out of their flesh in hopes of obtaining the power which they sought from the ritual (Lincoln 4-5). How they do so appears to be dictated by the vows which they made when asking to perform the ceremony.

Thomas E. Mails offers several historical reasons as to why a Lakota may vow to participate in the ritual. According to Mails, “... in most instances the promises [to participate in the Sun Dance] were associated with the desire for revenge, with the carrying out of a raid, or with a crisis during battle” (Mails 37). Contemporary reasons may include a wish on the part of practitioner to counter the effects of alcohol or to help cure or deal with illness and poverty. One of the more interesting reasons which Mails offers for the participation is “... it serves political expediency to do so” (Mails 37). The purposes for the Sun Dance reveal that, for the Lakota, the Sun Dance gives them access to power. This power seems to be drawn from both the vows which they make and from their ability to carry them out.

Lincoln suggests that the Sun Dance is not solely an individual activity but it is also the high point in the yearly practices of the Lakota and represents the time of the year when the Lakota may have gathered together in large groups to hunt buffalo (Lincoln 4). While the

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<sup>18</sup> Here I have chosen to focus specifically on Lincoln’s comments about the historical practice of the Sun Dance. When he discusses the contemporary form of the Sun Dance, it may be argued that his conclusions are closer to Jorgensen’s conclusions than my presentation suggests.

<sup>19</sup> The Lakota have been chosen specifically due to the amount of material which they have put out in regards to the debate surrounding appropriation.

<sup>20</sup> For an in-depth exploration of the Sun Dance see J. R. Walker’s section entitled “The Sun Dance of the Oglala.” in “The Sun Dance and other ceremonies of the Oglala Division of the Teton Dakota.” *Anthropological Papers, American Museum of Natural History* 16 (1917): 60-63, 102, 105-119.

<sup>21</sup> In this section the voice of the religious practitioner will be emphasized.

historical symbol of the buffalo may not exist any longer on the plains, Lincoln argues that the Lakota still perform the Sun Dance itself in order to “assert a connection to their past by celebrating their rituals on the same schedule as did their ancestors, but also it is one of the participants’ chief goals to reconnect themselves with the energy and the power that are manifest in the sun at that time of year when it stands the highest” (Lincoln 5). Mails mirrors this and argues that while the piercing involved in the ceremony is inevitably the most sensational and therefore the most reported part of the Lakota Sun Dance, it should be emphasized that, “The Sundance is a profound celebration of thanksgiving, growth, prayer and sacrifice. It is the full of significance, full of power, and full of drama for the Sioux and for all of mankind” (Mails 2).

While at first Mails statement may not appear to be a contentious one, the latter part of his statement ‘for all of mankind’ does not appear to have the support of some of the Lakota themselves. For instance, Ward Churchill argues that, in fact, the Sun Dance is not ‘for all mankind’.<sup>22</sup>

The Sun Dance is both culturally and geographically specific, and thus totally misplaced in the Black Forest amongst Germans. By extension, of course, this makes the series of Sun Dances conducted by Leonard Crow Dog in the Big Mountain area of the Navajo Nation, in Arizona, over the last few years equally misplaced and sacrilegious. A culturally specific ceremony is no more a “Pan-Indian” phenomenon than it is transcultural in any other sense (Churchill 257, 1994).

This statement is supported by one of Mails’s Lakota informants, Standing Bear, who says, “I have read many descriptions of this dance, and I have been to different tribes which claim they did the ‘real thing,’ but there is a great difference in their dances from the Sun Dance of the Sioux” (Mails 14). This conflict amongst separate Indian groups and individuals within them shows that the debate surrounding religious appropriation is not simply an Indian/non-Indian issue, even though it is sometimes portrayed as such.

When turning to the issue of non-Indians’ place within the Lakota Sun Dance, whether as participants or simply as observers, numerous sources give some indication of where the line may be drawn. One of the sources that is likely to appear in a search for information on this issue is the “Declaration of War Against Exploiters of Lakota Spirituality”. Ratified by the Dakota, Lakota and Nakota in 1993, it is exactly what its title suggests it would be. This document declares:

... WHEREAS for too long we have suffered the unspeakable indignity of having our most precious Lakota ceremonies and spiritual practices desecrated, mocked, and abused by non-Indian ‘wannabes,’ hucksters, cultists, commercial profiteers, and self-styled ‘New Age Shamans’ and their followers; and...

... WHEREAS sacrilegious ‘sun dances’ for non-Indians are being conducted by charlatans and cult leaders who promote abominable and obscene imitations of sacred Lakota Sun Dance rites; and ...

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<sup>22</sup> It is unclear as to whether Churchill is speaking as a scholar or as a religious practitioner. This ambiguity is mentioned specifically by Taylor. Of it he states, “Despite Churchill’s problematic status, his views have been influential and deserve serious consideration. To do otherwise would be to succumb to an ad hominem or genetic reasoning fallacy” (211-212, Endnote 61). Therefore, his ambiguous status will be allowed to stand.

... WHEREAS individuals and groups involved in the 'New Age Movement,' the 'Men's Movement,' in (other) 'neo-pagan' cults, and in 'shamanism' workshops all have exploited the spiritual traditions of the Lakota people by imitation of our ceremonial ways and by mixing such imitation rituals with non-Indian occult practices in an offensive and harmful pseudo-religious hodgepodge... (Churchill 277, 1994).

The statement continues on to discuss several other abuses which the authors state have been perpetuated against their people.

This declaration also lays out a plan of attack against those religious practitioners who may be found guilty of appropriating Lakota religious practices and leaves little doubt as to the perspectives held regarding appropriation of Indian religion. It is interesting to note that while the decree is aimed mainly at non-Indians, it does have a clause that reads: "We assert a posture of zero-tolerance for any 'white man's shaman' who rises from within our own communities to 'authorize' the exploitation of our ceremonial ways by non-Indians; all such 'plastic medicine men' are enemies of the Lakota, Dakota and Nakota people" (Churchill 276-277, 1994). This statement seems to exclude the possibility of the participation of non-Indians in Indian ceremonies even if the ceremonies are led by an Indian, rather than a non-Indian.

While the decree above presents a firm perspective against appropriation, there are other sources which show that there are less antagonistic views on the relationship between Indian religious practices and non-Indian observation, if not participation. According to the website for Rosebud Indian Reservation:

Disrespect of Lakota ceremonies is NOT acceptable. The Lakota People believe it is important to emphasize, to non-Indian and Indian alike, the respect and protection of sacred ceremonies. The Lakota People were given seven sacred rites by which they live. The Sun Dance ceremony is one of these, with its own laws.<sup>23</sup>

The tone of the website suggests a sort of stern neutrality when it comes to the issue of non-Indian observation or participation. While it states that the dates and times of the Sun Dances will not be made public and that the Sun Dances themselves are not 'spectator entertainment,' it does suggest that there are occasions when tourists may observe the Sun Dance ritual. This leaves the reader with the feeling that a non-Indian would be welcomed if they were both invited and followed the proper code of conduct.

Of the rules presented, perhaps the most interesting of them may speak directly to the issue of appropriation of Indian religious belief, at least as they may be seen by non-Indian, such as New Agers:

12. The Sun Dance is not a place to validate dreams or to seek a vision and power.
13. Don't bring medicine bundles, crystals, etc. into the arena.
14. Don't leave the Sun Dance believing you are a medicine person.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See 'Rosebud Reservation Website' entry in Works Cited for full citation.

<sup>24</sup> See 'Rosebud Reservation Website' entry in Works Cited for full citation.

These rules seem to speak of the perspective that should be taken by those observing the ceremony itself and seem to be saying simply that observation does not make one a religious practitioner and they appear to specifically target the religious practices of New Agers.

Among the Lakota, there are those who offer a perspective which seems to allow for the participation of non-Indians within the ceremonies as long as the ceremonies are conducted by Indian religious practitioners. One such Lakota is Chief Arvol Looking Horse. He states in “Letters to the People: Protection of Ceremonial Ways of Life”:

I have asked the non-Indigenous Nations to please understand our need to protect and maintain our sacred 'way of life' and not to conduct our Sacred Ceremonies. This request still allows the non-indigenous people to 'attend' and support our ceremonies by taking part in healing ceremonies, and to offer prayers for their families in our sacred inipi (sweat lodges), to support our First Nations that hemblec'ia (vision quest) and Win Wang wac'ipi (Sun Dance). This participation also depends on the person that is sponsoring these ceremonies, as some do not allow this.<sup>25</sup>

It appears from Looking Horse letter's that he would allow for non-Indians to both attend and participate within Indian ceremonies. Whether or not simply attending or taking part in those religious ceremonies would equate to a form of religious appropriation is unclear.<sup>26</sup>

However, other letters shed light on Looking Horse's idea of the connection of Indian religion to that of other religions. In another “Letters to the People: We are at a Crossroads,” he seems to suggest that all religious traditions are somehow linked (or that their distinctness is irrelevant) when it comes to the relationship between Mother Earth and humankind:

In times of disasters it is sad to say that it is the only time that we unite spiritually, but we must not taint it with anger and retaliation...I ask you to join me on this endeavor. Our vision is for the Peoples of all continents, regardless of their beliefs in the Creator, to come together as one at their Sacred Sites at that sacred moment of what is known as the Summer Solstice of June 21st, to pray and meditate and commune with one another, thus promoting an energy shift to heal our Mother Earth and achieve a universal consciousness toward attaining Peace...<sup>27</sup>

What is even more interesting about Looking Horse's perspective is that it seems to point to an interconnection between people of various cultural backgrounds.

This perspective is mirrored by one of Lincoln's informants who he calls ‘Francis Strong Bear.’ According to Lincoln, Francis always allowed both Indian and non-Indians to take part in the Sun Dances which he held.<sup>28</sup> Francis believed that he was called to ‘become a religious practitioner, to stage the Sun Dance, and to help all people. For ‘we are all together on this

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<sup>25</sup> See Looking Horse in Works Cited for full citation.

<sup>26</sup> The quotes above the word “attend” lead me to assume that there are no observers to the Sun Dance. Merely attending the Sun Dance means that you are taking part in it. However, it is unclear as to whether these ‘attendees’ either dance or take part in the ritual piercing.

<sup>27</sup> See Looking Horse in Works Cited for full citation.

<sup>28</sup> Lincoln refers to Francis Strong Bear repeatedly by his first name. I am unsure of the reason for this so I have followed his lead and also refer to him simply as Francis.

earth” (Lincoln 10). Francis’s stance resulted in non-Indians both observing and taking part in the Sun Dance. Francis regarded the Sun Dance as:

... a place where all peoples can meet, where non-Indians can gain respect for Indians, their practices, and their values. He views it in an almost utopian fashion, a place and a time where harmony can be established among people who have too long remained ignorant of and hostile to one another, he expects that this harmony can spread out from his dance like the ripples of a stone in water or the beat of a drum (Lincoln 10).

The interconnectedness of humanity espoused by both Looking Horse and Francis when discussing the Sun Dance is remarkably similar to that which is often used in order to defend the appropriation of Indian religion by non-Indians such as New Agers. According to Pike, some “New Agers believe that spiritual practices are universal, share common origins, and are not specific to particular cultures, and are thus available to everyone” (Pike 166). This suggests a fundamentally different view of those presented above and seems to indicate that cultural appropriation is morally okay because you cannot steal what cannot be owned.<sup>29</sup>

Another perspective that may be found in relation to ‘ownership’ issues is that Indians are more concerned with the possibility of exploitation of either the non-Indian practitioner or the tradition from which the teacher draws. This perspective seems to say that the concern is not with the individual practitioner but rather with the system which gives rise to it, namely the buying and selling of Indian beliefs to non-Indians. Taylor refers to such a standpoint offered in a letter to Earth First!, “Sincerely practising [sic] Native religious beliefs on an individual bases [sic] is not wrong, but exploiting Native religious beliefs for personal gain whether it be for money, or to get the pants off some naïve new age wanna be is fucking wrong” (Taylor 194).

However, sometimes what arises in the discussion of appropriation is that, while some Indians see their religious practices being appropriated, the non-Indian practitioner does not believe he is doing so. For instance, Taylor describes meeting a non-Indian practitioner, Lou Gold, who was touched by some interactions and experiences which he had after participating in sweat lodges with Ed Little Crow, an Indian friend of his. Taylor argues that, “Gold was not practicing Native American religion but was influenced and inspired by it; yet he did not do so lightly” (Taylor 196). It is later revealed, after more prodding from Taylor, that Gold seems to hold a new age understanding of the connectedness of all things and, as such, if Indian religious symbolism was the best way to communicate such an understanding, he would do so. He states of such symbolism:

I use them and try do so in ways that will be of service to those listening... I don’t consider myself a follower of Native American religion, my spirituality is soup, its stew... but when its time to find the right metaphors, I find (Native American) Metaphors come easily to me (and have become) a source of genuine religious experience... [They] give me access to what I call ecological consciousness... feeling the relationship to all this magnificent stuff we call creation (Taylor 197).

The discussion above gives some indication of the various perspectives offered by various religious practitioners regarding the use of the Lakota Sun Dance by non-Indians. These

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<sup>29</sup> Such an understanding of Looking Horse’s words may be incorrect given the statement made by Matthew King, another Lakota Elder, “Each part of our religion has its power and its purpose. Each people has their own ways. You cannot mix these ways together, because each people’s ways are balanced. Destroy balance is a disrespect and dangerous. This is why it is forbidden” (Churchill 2003).

perspectives vary widely from stances which see appropriation as outright wrong to stances which allow for at least a limited amount of participation.<sup>30</sup>

### **Discussion of Goal of Religious Studies and Difference between it and Theology**

With the above discussion in mind, it becomes apparent that the perspectives which Taylor presents can all be found to have merit within the debate itself (Taylor 184). However, the question at hand is not whether these positions have merit but rather which, if any, of the perspectives offered is appropriate for scholars of Religious Studies to endorse or whether such an endorsement would result in a Theological project. In order answer to this question, the goal of Religious Studies must be made explicit.<sup>31</sup> Hopefully, this will give a clear indication of where the line should exist between Religious Studies and perspectives which lean more toward Theological concerns. Once such a line has been described, the perspectives mentioned by Taylor can be returned to and judged accordingly.

Before presenting my understanding of the goal of Religious Studies, it should be clear what it is not being discussed here. When looking into the field itself, there might at first appear to be a myriad of interpretations as to what the goal of Religious Studies is. It seems that oftentimes, when a scholar is asked to discuss the goal of Religious Studies, or to give a definition of it, they present their methodological approach as the purpose itself.<sup>32</sup> Simply put, methodologies are a means to an end (i.e. tools) and should not be considered ends themselves. Furthermore, their usefulness and appropriateness must be judged in regards to the goal of Religious Studies. The failure to make this distinction has lead to the current state of the field itself where academic presentations to theological treatises are presented side by side.

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<sup>30</sup> It is worth noting that there is at least one perspective that has not been strongly looked at by academia, the perspective of the non-Indian religious practitioner which exists within this debate concerning Lakota religious appropriation. There is simply little data available in which their perspective may be heard.

<sup>31</sup> It may be argued or suggested that a singular goal of Religious Studies may be too limiting for its scholars. While this may ultimately turn out to be true, I have seen very little discourse on the goal of Religious Studies itself and how such a goal would make it unique amongst other disciplines that look at religion such as Anthropology, Sociology or History, just to name a few. It is often suggested by both my professors and my fellow grads that the uniqueness of the field itself lies in its ability to draw from a variety of fields and to make use of both their methodologies and the information that is obtained by them. While I do not disagree with this assessment, I still find the question “to what end?” unaddressed. Therefore, I find that approaching the goal as if it were a singularity more beneficial for the context of this paper.

<sup>32</sup> A good example of the way a methodology is offered as the goal of Religious Studies can be found in Robert A. Segal’s “All Generalizations are Bad: Postmodernism on Theories.” He offers a critique of postmodernism and suggests that the field of Religious Studies is essentially based upon a modernistic outlook as opposed to a postmodern one. While I agree with many of Segal’s critiques of postmodernism, he goes too far in suggesting that the goal of Religious Studies is to theorize about religion. He seems to give little credence to the possibility that postmodernism has anything to offer Religious Studies. Interestingly, Ebrahim Moosa’s response to Segal’s critique is to point out that many of the defenses he offers are informed by postmodern perspectives and concerns. Therefore, I believe it would be more beneficial to see modern and postmodern methodologies as relating to one another in a creative tension rather than calling for a complete abandonment of one for the acceptance of the other. A firm goal for Religious Studies, one not based on methodological concern, but rather on the project of Religious Studies, would allow scholars to move between these perspectives in regards to how useful they are to the project at hand.

The goal of Religious Studies is to provide a holistic understanding<sup>33</sup> of religion(s) that allows for a better comprehension of its worldviews, beliefs, practices, ethics, etc. without relying upon truth or moral claims.<sup>34</sup>

For the discussion at hand, the latter parts of this goal statement, the parts referring to the use of truth and moral claims, are the most relevant at the discussion at hand and, therefore, will be expounded upon briefly. It is important to understand that truth claims and moral claims are two different things. Truth claims are ontological statements regarding what is really 'real'. Hence, this statement calls for the Religious Studies scholar to refrain from judging whether or not a religion has a true understanding of reality. This stance is reflected by Rita Gross when she states, "Scholars may debate about alternative hypotheses about information being studied, but debating truth or falsity of the religious ideas is irrelevant to the study of religion as a descriptive discipline" (Gross 8). On the other hand, moral claims refer to statements of what one ought or ought not do. Therefore, this statement calls for the Religious Studies scholar to refrain from judging the ritual, belief or action of the religious practitioner being studied as right or wrong. As Robert A. Orsi puts it, "Religious Studies is not a moralizing discipline; it exists in the suspension of the ethical, and it steadfastly either refuses to deny or redeem the other [those being studied] (Orsi 115)".

For some, the goal of Religious Studies presented here is ultimately unobtainable. How can the Religious Studies scholar ever do away with their own truth claims and moral imperatives? The answer is not for the Religious Studies scholar to deny that she has them but to be honest and reflective in their research and to strive to withhold such claims as much as she is able.<sup>35</sup> The benefits of doing so are self evident. As Orsi states:

This is where the pleasure, excitement, and risk of Religious Studies are, its delights as well as its dangers. The space [created when suspending judgment] is dangerous because one cannot, after all, simply abandon one's deepest held values or tolerate the intolerable, even though something is awful and intolerable

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<sup>33</sup> It should be made clear from the discussion that the use of the term 'understanding' here does not refer solely to those approaches that emphasize an objective 'description' of a religion. Rather, it is used simply to refer to a presentation or analysis given by a scholar. The type of information focused upon, explored and analyzed ultimately depends upon the methodology that the scholar uses.

<sup>34</sup> The goal presented here is not necessarily unique within the field; similar goals have been offered elsewhere. For instance, Gross offers the following statement, "What is the academic study of religion? At the most basic level it is a descriptive discipline that gathers and disseminates accurate information about a variety of religious beliefs and practices people have entertained and engaged in throughout time and space (Gross 8)." However, it should be mentioned that Gross adds to this 'basic level' with a feminist methodology which ultimately leads her to focus on changing those religious beliefs that don't meet her agenda. For a critique of Gross along these lines see Young, Katherine K. "Having Your Cake and Eating It Too: Feminism and Religion." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67.01 (2004): 167-184.

<sup>35</sup> It might be suggested that there are other alternatives that may be taken in regards to the inherent truth and moral claims that any researcher has. One of these paths is to allow the reader to have access to these in the course of an academic study in hopes of making the reader aware of the biases that the scholar might have. Another is to let the reader have access to why the scholar chooses to focus on a specific thing over another or to let the reader know the scholars reactions to what might have been observed during research, which may color the analysis offered. I consider these two approaches very honest and reflective. Furthermore, I feel that both of these may fall within the rubric of the goal of Religious Studies which I have offered, although they may not be compatible with some methodologies. However, my fear remains that it has been all too common in the field of Religious Studies that statements which condemn (or condone) religious practices are continually put forward as scholarly work when in reality they are Theological attempts to do away with or change a religious tradition which the scholar feels is untrue to reality and morally bankrupt.

might make sense in someone else's world; it is delightful because by staying in the space between – indeed, prolonging one's stay there by refusing the initial opportunities for closure – one comes to know something about the other and about oneself through relationship with the other. (Orsi 114 -115)

Another way to approach the goal of Religious Studies is to see it in comparison to the goal of Theology.<sup>36</sup> The Theological approach to religion is sometimes described as the flipside of Religious Studies. The goal of the Theological approach is two pronged, to offer a description of a belief system *and* to provide a judgment regarding how it should, or ought to, be according to specific truth claims and moral judgments. This is supported by Tariq Ansaar Aquil, Sr., when he states, “The ecclesiastical leader's [theologian's] search has oftentimes been motivated by desire to validate the foundational principles upon which the belief system is predicated in order to substantiate the decision to surrender to faith” (Aquil 30). Therefore, theological scholarship uses truth claims and moral judgments to analyze and describe a religion.<sup>37</sup>

The goals of Religious Studies and Theology presented above shows that they have much in common. Therefore, it might be argued that each seeks to provide a description of religion that can complement and inform one another.<sup>38</sup> Many times this appears to be the case. Religious Studies scholars often can, or at the very least should, talk to the participants of the religions that they study. It must be remembered that the Religious Studies scholar never has first hand access to the ultimate landscape of the religious practitioner, rather the scholar only has access to it through observable phenomena, whether it be a speech, action or other sort of communication offered by the religious practitioner.<sup>39</sup> This means that the information available to the scholar should never be equated with direct experience and that such information may itself be a

<sup>36</sup> The comparison between Religious Studies and Theology, one that I feel is both useful and necessary, is not always so finely drawn or considered relevant to the current state of the field. Ellen T. Armour argues that the line between Religious Studies and Theology has begun to blur because academia has begun to question the modernity upon which it is founded. She suggests that the focus be moved away from discussions regarding descriptive and prescriptive stances and focus on the scholarship to which both stances give rise. In regards to her discussion, I should make it clear that I do believe that Religious Studies and Theology can offer much to each other in the form of data and conclusions. However, their goals and how they use such scholarship are ultimately incompatible. See Works Cited for full citation of Armour's work.

<sup>37</sup> The Theological approach does not limit the theologians to looking at just the tradition to which he or she adheres. As such, it may often happen that the beliefs and practices of one religion are judged according to the truth claims of another. This may result in some interesting, if skewed, descriptions of the religion being presented. Furthermore, these descriptions are often used to promote either change within a religious tradition itself or a conversion away from the tradition on the part of its practitioners.

<sup>38</sup> Gavin Flood discusses some of the benefits that Theology may offer the field of Religious Studies. He argues that Theology provides, or would if it were wholly incorporated into Religious Studies, a more hospitable atmosphere in which to hold discussion and add a level of legitimacy to those scholars who were also religious practitioners. While I find some of Flood's comments interesting, I am apprehensive in regards to his statement, “In that public discourse scholars should not be too hesitant, perhaps, in making claims about what they perceive to be the human good” (Flood 48). Again, who decides the ‘human good’? He also suggests that postmodernism positions would allow for Theology, and, when understood from a postmodern perspective, would be capable of “creatively reading across traditions” (Flood 49). He suggests that this would allow for a viable alternative between universalism and area specific study of religion. I find Flood's argument unconvincing. See Works Cited for full citation.

<sup>39</sup> This perspective is informed by discussions with Dr. Greg Johnson during the writing of this paper, as well as, information presented by him during a course in American Indian Religion in the Fall of 2005 for which I was a teaching assistant. His perspective presents an interesting epistemological understanding which calls into question the ability for the researcher to have access to the foundations of religious practice. However, it should be mentioned that while he suggests that the Religious Studies scholar should never address the beliefs of the religious practitioner directly, I believe that this stance may go too far by dismissing belief altogether.

conglomeration of a multitude of expressions and conclusions offered by both the practitioners themselves and those that have previously studied them.<sup>40</sup> While academia may give the scholar a more expansive understanding of the religion studied, whether this entails a more objective reading of its holy texts, how the religion may relate historically to other religions or a variety of other information not available or is of little concern to the religious practitioner, the Religious Studies scholar can never walk in the practitioner's 'ultimate landscape'. Ultimately this means that the Religious Studies scholar can never be considered more authoritative than the religious practitioner when it comes to explaining the religion to which the practitioner adheres.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, Theologians themselves, as the comment from Aquil earlier presented suggests, may use information provided by Religious Studies to help affirm their belief. As such, these two different approaches to religion may complement each other.

However, there is a fundamental difference in the way that the Religious Studies scholar and the Theologian look at, address and think about religion. As Aquil states, "Deeper insight reveals that they though twins [Religious Studies and Theology] each has distinct personality traits" (Aquil 30). This difference in approaching religion often results in Religious Studies being understood as describing the 'is' of a religion, while theology is often thought of dealing with the 'ought.'<sup>42</sup> In other words, the Religious Studies scholar presents descriptions as perspectives characterized by what is happening within a religion given the information gathered by the scholar and according to the methodology he or she embraces. Ideally, such a description is not based upon the truth claims of the scholar and moral judgments are put aside in an attempt to present a description that will meet the ultimate goal of Religious Studies. Therefore, there is never a time in which it is appropriate for the Religious Studies scholar to advocate a change in the stance of the religious practitioner. On the other hand, the Theologian, while also presenting a description of a belief system, does so according to a moral standard and/or foundational truth claim against which the description is judged. Hence, while the Theologian also seeks inform, she also strives to uphold or deny a specific Religion and its moral perspective or truth claims. As such, they are free to make claims on what religious practitioners may and may not do.

With the goal of Religious Studies made explicit and with the distinction between Religious Studies and Theology laid out, the question of where the line is drawn for the Religious Studies scholar becomes clearer. As such, it becomes apparent that if entering into the debate surrounding appropriation requires the Religious Studies scholar to judge any of the religious practitioners or their practices according to truth or moral claims, then they must

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<sup>40</sup> This outlook poses a specific dilemma for the scholar/practitioner. As such, it needs to be addressed in more depth. However, such a discussion is outside the boundaries set for this study.

<sup>41</sup> I realize that a stance such as this is in complete opposition to scholars, such as Segal, who equate Religious Studies scholars with doctors and religious practitioners as sick patients. Such an understanding of the relationship between the scholar and religious practitioner suggests that the religious practitioner is nothing more than a passive participant in religion. I find this perspective on religious practice to be unsupportable. Furthermore, as Moosa suggests, the scholar must rely on the information provided by the religious practitioner in order to understand the religious practice to which he adheres. For instance, while the Religious Studies scholar may be able to read sacred texts in their original language, even if it is one that the practitioner himself cannot read, can never truly understand its 'religiously' without the input of the religious practitioner. As Moosa states, "The patient's history is critical to any treatment regime. Without knowledge from the patient about family history or even allergies, expertise in itself could be catastrophic" (Moosa 173). For full discussion, refer to authors in the Works Cited.

<sup>42</sup> As mentioned, this is a very common description of the difference between describing a religion and teaching it. For those that are interested, Katherine K. Young uses this to a very interesting effect when critiquing Rita M. Gross's article on page 170 of the work cited.

inevitably cross the boundary that separates Religious Studies and Theology. As such, their resulting research and the description which they provide is, at best, a quasi-Theological one.

### Discussion of Taylor's Perspectives

The first perspective on appropriation presented by Taylor is one which looks at the historical interaction between Indians and non-Indians and sees that appropriation is just the continuation of an attitude that will ultimately lead to genocide (Taylor 184). Of those who embrace this perspective, Taylor says, "...many of these activists express concern about cultural imperialism and strenuously object to any profiteering associated with borrowing Indian religious practices – and still others object to any borrowing whatsoever" (Taylor 198). From this standpoint it becomes morally wrong for religious practitioners who are not Indian to appropriate Indian religion into their own beliefs and ritual practices because it ultimately leads to cultural genocide.<sup>43</sup> As suggested by Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao, this perspective may arise from several different critiques of appropriation. In the section of their work entitled, "A Search for Values" they state:

When concerns about cultural appropriation arise within various domains, several claims tend to emerge. One is that cultural appropriation harms the appropriated community. This claim is therefore based on a concern for the integrity and identities of cultural groups. A second complaint focuses on the impact of appropriation on the cultural object itself. The concern is that appropriation can either damage or transform a cultural good or practice. A third critique is that cultural appropriation wrongly allows some to benefit to the material (i.e. financial) detriment of others. A fourth argument is that current law fails to reflect alternative conceptions of what should be treated as property or ownership in cultural good. This is a claim based on sovereignty (Ziff 8-9).<sup>44</sup>

From the examples offered above, it is clear that this position has the support of some Indians.

When addressing the question of whether or not it is appropriate for the Religious Studies scholar to hold or support this perspective, it quickly becomes clear that there are two interconnected statements inherent within this perspective. The first statement argues that religious appropriation continues the historic process of cultural genocide against the Indian and/or that religious appropriation itself is a fundamental part of a process which leads to cultural genocide. The second statement presents a moral claim that, given its place in the process of

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<sup>43</sup> It should be noted here that Taylor seems to find serious flaws with this perspective. He states: "Generally speaking, I have not found comprehensive attempts to appropriate Native American religious practice but rather a piecemeal borrowing from such practices and rhetoric. The activists engaged in such borrowing do not presume that they are actually practicing *Native American* religion [italics in text]. Rather, they tend to believe that they are developing their own tradition, that their 'tribe' is different from but has spiritual affinity with what they take to be the spiritual perceptions of traditional Native Americans, namely, a sense that the land and all its inhabitants are sacred, related as kin, capable of communicating and worthy of defense (Taylor 198.)"

<sup>44</sup> These are presented to allow the reader to have a more in-depth understanding of the variety of ways that have been put forward to support the claim mentioned by Taylor. It should be noted that Ziff and Rao's scope is larger and their use of 'cultural' rather than 'religious' reflect that. However, these will not be addressed separately but will be considered to fall under the scope of Taylor's first perspective. It is also noteworthy that Ziff and Rao have included these concerns under the heading presented.

cultural genocide, appropriation is morally wrong and, therefore, religious practitioners should stop misappropriating religious practices from the Indian.<sup>45</sup>

The first statement is appropriate for the Religious Studies scholar to hold, especially if it is founded upon sound academic scholarship. For instance, when looking at the history of interactions between Indians and non-Indians, there appears to be a history of ongoing appropriation of Indian identity, whether actual or imagined by non-Indians. The term often used for this is “playing Indian.” The issue of “playing Indian” has been well documented and explored by various scholars. For P. Deloria, the New Ager has continued the American tradition of “playing Indian” in order to create an American identity. However, he argues that New Agers go one step further and often try to become actual Indian religious practitioners. In other words, the New Ager, as a representative of a postmodern individual, “may simply echo the familiar toying with meaning and identity we have seen in the long tradition of Indian play” and, as such, there is continuity between the contemporary New Age movement and other historical instances such as the Boston Tea Party (P. Deloria 157).<sup>46</sup> Given this scholarly foundation, the claim can be made that the history of “Playing Indian” has been detrimental to the Indian culture and that religious appropriation is just another way to “Play Indian”. However, while P. Deloria sees this cultural interchange as “Intricate relations between destruction and creativity – for both Indian and non-Indian Americans – are themselves suspended in an uneasy alliance,” he stops short of calling the result cultural genocide (P. Deloria 191). According to Taylor, scholars such as Ward Churchill argue that, “... however well intended, such borrowing represents a form of cultural genocide, either by destroying such traditions [Indian traditions] by syncretistically transforming them as they [the appropriators] selectively borrow from them, and/or directly threatening Indian survival by assuming that native spiritualities are dead and in need of resuscitation by whites” (Taylor 184).<sup>47</sup>

While suggesting that religious appropriation will result in genocide based upon the historical analysis of the interaction between Indian and non-Indian people may be appropriate for the Religious Studies scholar, stating that it is morally wrong for non-Indian religious practitioners to appropriate Indian religion is not. Such a statement is clearly based upon moral imperatives and, as such, is beyond the scope of Religious Studies. To make such a statement clearly falls within the purview of the theologian because it makes claims upon what the religious practitioner ought to do.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> It is interesting to look at the use of the terms ‘appropriation’ and ‘misappropriation’ as they occur in texts. It often seems to be the case that ‘appropriation’ is used by others that are either neutral or pro-appropriation, while those that are against appropriation use the term ‘misappropriation’.

<sup>46</sup> P. Deloria argues that the participants dressed as Indians in order to obtain an identity and anonymity which they otherwise would not have access to.

<sup>47</sup> Although Taylor seems to support the idea that appropriation presents a danger to Indian ‘cultural decline and survival,’ he finds that “The most serious threats, however, continue to be found in the relentless Euroamerican thirst that for land... which threatens to further erode the land base upon which Indians depend for their cultural survival and free religious practice. (Taylor 206)”

<sup>48</sup> It may be argued that Religious Studies inherently gives support and authority to the elite of the religion and neglects the ‘popular’ religion because scholarship has focused on theological and other concerns which are of little interest or have little impact on non-elite practitioners. While I understand that the field has often found most of its informants amongst the elite and has often focused solely upon their concerns, I do not find that the field of Religious Studies must ‘inherently’ do so. Rather, scholarship must learn to explore those aspects of religious practice that may have been deemed unimportant by past scholarship, whether they are found in ‘popular’ religion or other neglected groups such as women, or new religious movements. Regardless, while the Religious Studies scholar may understand the information provided by his informants, this only gives him the ability to talk about them but never for them. As such, that authority eternally rests in the hands of the religious practitioner, whether

Given the above exploration, it appears that the first perspective addressed by Taylor is appropriate only if the Religious Studies scholar limits his discourse to supporting his theory that appropriation leads to or is a form of cultural genocide and does not say anything about the appropriateness of its practice amongst religious practitioners. While this stance is correct given the understanding of the goal of Religious Studies offered above, it might appear to be too limiting to some scholars. For instance, it might be argued that scholars need be able to say something of the practices of the people whom she studies, especially if she sees that their practices are ultimately harmful, either to practitioners themselves or to the communities with which they interact. One may say that there can be no more pressing time as the present when the misappropriation of Indian traditions by non-Indians endangers the very Indians from which they are taken.

There are two difficulties which arise from this ‘need.’ The first, and most obvious, is that within the debate being explored, the Religious Studies practitioner must inherently chose to devalue at least one of the parties involved. In so doing, she has passed judgment upon which religion is good and right and which is bad and wrong.<sup>49</sup> As such, her work will be quasi-theological at best. The second issue which arises from this need is that the Religious Studies scholar inevitably places her own moral claims above those of both parties involved and makes them a centerpiece of her work. In other words, instead of simply being aware of her own moral bias and taking into account how they may influence her work, she holds them up and uses them as a tool or as the tool in research. Any conclusions presented with such a focus in moral imperatives fit soundly into the domain of Theology.<sup>50</sup>

The second perspective explored by Taylor argues that appropriation of Indian religion is impossible “since the resulting phenomenon is no longer Indian” (Taylor 184). Such a conclusion seems to be drawn from a very specific understanding of categorical definitions. One which holds that categories refer to an ontological reality. In other words, when dealing with the issue of what is and is not Indian, there is a categorical definition of ‘Indian’ which corresponds to things in reality that are Indian.<sup>51</sup>

In order to answer the question of whether or not this perspective is viable for the Religious Studies scholar, a brief examination of the way categorical definitions may be used is in order. There appear to be at least two distinct ways that categorical definitions may be seen. The first viewpoint, as presented above, is that a categorical definition has an ontological referent. This perspective seems to be the one that many of the religious practitioners within the debate hold. One example of this standpoint is offered by Russell Means when he is discussing Sun Bear’s use of the Indian religion when teaching non-Indians: “Since when is the sweat not an Indian Ceremony? ... It is not ‘based on’ an Indian ceremony, it is an Indian ceremony. So is his so called ‘vision quest,’ the pipe, his use of the pipe, sage and all the rest of it” (Churchill 26,

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they are elite or not.

<sup>49</sup> It is clear that Taylor reaches the same conclusion in his work when he states, “Such condemnations would inevitably privilege one form of religion over another (Taylor 184).

<sup>50</sup> Numerous examples of this can be found throughout Religious Studies. One of the most prominent forums in which this occurs is within the feminist study of religion (feminist as distinct from gender studies). For an example of this see Rajan, Rejeswari Sunder. *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Post Colonialism*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

<sup>51</sup> For the purpose of this paper issues of ‘authenticity’ will be considered an issue of category. Taylor discusses this question in terms of the debate over what is and is not ‘authentically’ Indian. While his exploration is useful, it relies upon an in-depth exploration of syncretism which in the end would distract from the discussion at hand and can be better dealt with in a discussion of how categorical definitions are used by religious practitioners and scholars. For his discussion on authenticity and syncretism, see Taylor 198-206.

2003). Such categorical definitions are inherently founded upon truth claims and they give rise to distinctions between Indian and non-Indian that are seen as unquestionable and inherently true.

The second viewpoint on categorical definitions is that they are tools which allow analysis and understanding of the data. This viewpoint may claim that there is a category 'Indian' but this category and the attributes required for inclusion in it are defined by their usefulness to the project at hand. As Baird illustrates in his discussion of categorical formation:

The categories of longitude and latitude do not guarantee that the geographer will understand the cartographical features of the earth, but they enable him to discuss those features. The categories are valid to the extent to which they enable him to do so. If the categories make it impossible for him to relate to the phenomenon he finds, then they are inappropriate and ought to be changed (Baird 15).

In other words, the categories presented by the scholar of Religious Studies are not ontological statements, such as those described above, but rather propositional statements that are open to reconsideration and omission given the methodological approach taken and the goal of the researcher.

The answer to the question of whether or not the second perspective offered by Taylor is appropriate then lies in what is exactly meant by using the category Indian. If the statement involves a categorical definition which is in essence an ontological claim, then it is inappropriate given the definition of Religious Studies offered above. However, it is appropriate for the Religious Studies scholar to come up with a definition which is useful for the project at hand even if it may exclude or include phenomena that may not be included either by other methodologies or the religious practitioners themselves.

It might be argued that the distinction between 'category as ontological claim' and 'category as tool' is that the link between religious practitioners' usage of category as ontological claim and Religious Studies scholars' usage of category as tool does not reflect reality in either the debate at hand or Religious Studies in general, and is, therefore, useless. This argument is a valid one in that the distinction is not necessarily true to reality, but it is by no means useless. The point is that it is wholly appropriate for religious practitioners to base their categories upon ontological claims because they, as religious practitioners, have the authority to do so. They are in essence seeking to define themselves. However, given the fact that Religious Studies scholars always encounter religion second hand their categories should never be considered either as completely defining a group of believers or as 'truth' (read, based upon ontological claims), given the nature of the discipline.<sup>52</sup> They should always be propositional and open to change when new data is found or new methodologies arise.<sup>53</sup> The fact that this does not reflect the state of current scholarship may simply point to the fact that the field of Religious Studies needs to reexamine and reaffirm its purpose.

The third perspective presented by Taylor is that cultural and religious appropriation is a "central characteristic of cultural and religious evolution" and, therefore, it should not be

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<sup>52</sup> This viewpoint on definition and its use is informed both by Baird's work and by conversations I had with Sam Gill during his class Religion and Play which was taught at the University of Colorado at Boulder in Spring 2005.

<sup>53</sup> It should be noted that this distinction proves problematic in cases where the scholar is also a member of the religious group that he or she is studying. This dilemma does arise quite often within the discussion of the appropriateness of appropriation. This subject needs to be looked at more closely by those scholars individually and the scholastic community as a whole. It may simply come down to the scholar/practitioner choosing whether or not he wished to write as a religious practitioner or as a Religious Studies scholar.

categorically condemned (Taylor 184).<sup>54</sup> It may easily be argued that this perspective is diametrically opposed to the first perspective explored. It too can be broken down into two statements. The first is that cultural and religious appropriation is the normal route by which cultures change and adapt. The second statement is that because it is normal for religious interchange to take place, those religious practitioners that do so are not morally wrong.

Taylor finds support for the first statement throughout various studies that have taken place on the interchange of religious practices. Of these, he states:

The academic study of religion has focused significant attention on the syncretism process. The emerging consensus suggests that syncretism (the blending of elements of two traditions) and bricolage (the amalgamation of many bits and pieces of diverse cultural systems) are prevalent in the production of religion, and often that these processes are contested and open to negotiation. (Taylor 198)

The interesting part of Taylor's presentation is that his support for it seems to come from the second statement of this perspective, that appropriation is not condemned. As previously mentioned, of all the perspectives put forward by Taylor, it is only this one that he feels is appropriate for Religious Studies to support because "such condemnations would inevitably privilege one form of religion over another" (Taylor 184).

At first it may appear that only the third perspective can be presented as wholly appropriate for the Religious Studies scholar to hold. However, just as in the first perspective where there is a moral component which calls for condemnation of appropriation, the third perspective may call for support of those who appropriate Indian religious practices. This may not at first be clear because the moral imperative which exists within the second statement may never arise within academic discourse. It may be misinterpreted as neutrality on the part of the scholar because he is never asked to take sides but rather to present appropriation wholly as a phenomenon which is studied rather than being asked whether or not he agrees with its practice.

On the other hand, it becomes something quite different when used by scholars that enter into the debate. For instance, this perspective may be presented as the basis for statements that condone or uplift those religious traditions that religiously appropriate. In other words, there may be an implicit moral judgment being made on the part of the scholar who enters the debate and defends non-Indian religious practitioners' uses of Indian religion. Based on the viewpoint that religions are essentially syncretic or dynamic, the claim may be made that religious practitioners who appropriate other traditions are simply not morally wrong for doing so or that they are the epitome of religious practice because they embrace the creative and destructive processes which

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<sup>54</sup> In his article Taylor does offer a forth perspective which he does not discuss in great depth but feels which he feels is relevant. "Finally, I add a forth suggestion, that it may be (and my own research provides some evidence for the proposition) that at least some of such borrowings promotes respect for and concrete political solidarity with Native Americans. Such a dynamic may play a role in mitigating the possible negative impacts of appropriation from Native American religions" (Taylor 206). While I think this is an interesting proposition I don't think it adds greatly to the discussion at hand. He offers no exploration of this so I cannot see it as anything more than a mid-point between the first and third perspectives which he offers. However, it should be noted that the argument which suggests that those who appropriate religious traditions are thereby honoring them. However, I could find no sources which explicitly allowed non-Indians to speak to this.

are inherent to religion.<sup>55</sup> Such a claim is just as much a moral one as those that condemn religious appropriation.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, it too is outside the bounds of Religious Studies.

The discussions above offer some valuable insights into both where the line between Religious Studies and Theological enterprises may be drawn. It becomes clear that the perspectives presented by Taylor are supportable, whether appropriation is seen as little more than a continuation of the colonial mindset or as an inherent component of religious practice. However, they are only relevant to the field of Religious Studies inasmuch as they can be stripped of foundational truth claims and moral imperatives regarding the practice of religion. Whether what remains of these perspectives, once stripped of such foundations, is truly useful to Religious Studies will be determined by time, by scholarly debate, and by the insights which they provide to academia.<sup>57</sup> These perspectives, along with a clear goal of Religious Studies, should help to shed more light upon the ongoing debate surrounding religious appropriation of Indian religion by non-Indians.

Regardless of the utility of the positions presented above, the question of whether or not the Religious Studies scholar should enter into the debate itself remains. When a scholar enters into the debate regarding appropriation, he moves from addressing an audience to another: from academic to theological. He moves from being asked to refrain from making truth and moral claims to being asked to make and support exactly such claims. In the debate currently being explored, it becomes apparent that regardless of the position a scholar chooses to take on appropriation, he inherently ends up making demands upon at least one group of religious practitioners. If he claims that religious appropriation is colonial, wrong and, therefore, needs to be stopped because it is nothing more than stealing from Indians, then he is also telling non-Indian groups, such as New Agers, that their beliefs are wrong, morally and otherwise. If on the other hand the scholar believes that religion is inherently a process of assimilation and acculturation and appropriation is inherently part of this process, not wrong and needs to be defended, then he is also telling Indian groups that they are wrong for holding a religious perspective that denies this. Regardless of which one of these positions, or any combination thereof, a Religious Studies scholar chooses, he ends up telling at least one group of religious practitioners what they ought or ought not do. As such, he has become a Theologian.

Furthermore, it must also be remembered that while only religious appropriation is being discussed here, there are also other types of appropriation whether it be of art forms, governmental style or any other sphere, which arise when two cultures come into contact with one another. Ziff and Rao's collection of essays demonstrates that there are

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<sup>55</sup> Given the extent to which some others have gone to condemn those religions which appropriate Indian religions, it is quite likely that a mirrored perspective exists given the fact the first perspective and the third perspective offered by Taylor.

<sup>56</sup> It might be claimed by the scholar who enters into the debate surrounding appropriation that there are different way in which something can be considered moral or immoral. In other words, what about the possibility that some forms of appropriation are more moral than others. In answering this I must still ask who gets to decide how moral it is and what is the foundation they use to make such claims? Furthermore, if a scholar is allowed to make moral statements given a specific instance then what is stopping him from doing so at other times?

<sup>57</sup> This is one of the reasons why ongoing discussion on the part of scholars, whether in the field of Religious Studies or otherwise. It also needs to be made clear that I see no difficulty in scholars critiquing each other. This is a valuable, although not always comfortable, endeavor. Furthermore, it should be clear that I am not saying that it is outside the bounds of Religious Studies for the scholar to try and argue for a methodology which seems to fit his or her own perspective, I am myself presenting such an argument here. My ultimate concern is that scholarly critique stays within the sphere of scholarly debate and that it should not overflow into a critique of those that we study.

many types of appropriation and that in many ways they interconnect. Of appropriation, they state:

... given the array of processes that can fall under the rubric of an appropriation, and the communities it can affect, we can see that cultural appropriation is a persuasive phenomenon. If we conceive of the letters of the alphabet used in the English language as a cultural artifact belonging to the ancient Phoenicians (to whom its origins are attributed), we can appreciate how much latent traffic can occur in just this one cultural good [object]. Acts of appropriation happen all around us in a vast number of creative domains as cultural influences blend, merge, and synthesize. The illustrations set out previously [in their work] are about various creative realms (music, narrative, art, science), but many more domains exist (dance, philosophy, theology) (Ziff 4-5).

Therefore, it is relevant to ask if the scholar makes the claim that religious appropriation is wrong does this also mean that other types of appropriation are wrong? Or, on the other hand, if religious appropriation is a valid practice, what about other types of appropriation, such as land appropriation?

While the focus here was on the Lakota Sun Dance ceremony, it could have just as easily focused upon the appropriation of the Medicine Wheels, such as the Bighorn Medicine Wheel or the one located in Sedona, Arizona.<sup>58</sup> Such a focus would have revealed an ongoing debate amongst Indians and non-Indians in regards to sacred space and who should have access to it. If the Religious Studies scholar argues that appropriation is wrong, is he also arguing then that non-Indians shouldn't have access to land which is deemed sacred by Indian groups, whether or not it is publicly held? In so doing, is he not also telling specific groups, such as New Agers, that their metaphysical viewpoint, where access to religion and sacred space, are not correct?<sup>59</sup>

It becomes clear then that the Religious Studies scholar should refrain from entering into the debate surrounding the appropriation of Indian religions by non-Indians. Regardless of the stance taken, the result is that the scholar moves from simply exploring and providing an understanding of religion to taking part in the process of affirming or denying it. In other words, he makes a fundamental transition in his approach to religion and moves beyond the sphere of Religious Studies.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>58</sup> For an exploration of the Bighorn Medicine Wheel see Jenkins's *Dream Catchers: How Mainstream America Discovered Native Spirituality*. For an expansive exploration of the Medicine Wheel at Sedona see Adrian J. Ivakhiv's *Claiming Sacred Ground: Pilgrims and Politics at Glastonbury and Sedona*.

<sup>59</sup> For a broader perspective on appropriation, one dealing with cultural, artistic etc., see Ziff and Rao's collection of essays. For full reference see works cited.

<sup>60</sup> It should be clear from this paper that I have strong feelings about the purpose of Religious Studies and the limitations such a purpose places on such scholarship. However, I am willing to concede that some of my conclusions or the support that I use is limited by my level of experience in the field. Furthermore, the exploration offered here is limited solely to the written sources which were available to me at the time of my research and I am aware that this may limit my understanding of the interactions between Indians and non-Indians. The reader should also be aware that, while I have had contact with both Indian and New Age practitioners and have often engaged them concerning numerous topics, including this one. However, I have never done so as a scholar and therefore, it would be unethical for me to allow these discussions to have a direct impact upon this paper. Furthermore, it must be emphasized that this paper is not written for, nor is it attempting to address, the religious practitioner, whether Indian, New Age or otherwise. It will also hopefully become clear, that I think the two groups, religious practitioner and scholars, are distinct and, therefore, the claims I make upon the scholar are not appropriate or relevant to the religious practitioner or his community.



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