

Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys: A Native American Expression of the Jesus Way
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The Messy History of Native Missions

As I searched deeper into the early European missionary history of the 1600s, which set the stage for missionary efforts among our Native people, I became extremely disillusioned and even more skeptical of current missionary endeavors among First Nations people. Scot McKnight, in his book *A Community Called Atonement*, finds the source of this tension to be

the conglomeration of Euro-American scholars, ministers and lay folk who have, over the centuries, used their economic, academic, religious and political dominance to create the illusion that the Bible, read through their experience, is the Bible read correctly.

If self-revelation is the work of Creator and Creator's engagement with people and nations, then crosscultural communication never occurs in isolation, in a cultural vacuum, but by definition occurs in a crosscultural context. Human messengers are never free from the prevailing cultural influences of their upbringing, worldview values and sociocultural/political attitudes of their day.

In 2012 I sat with some friends and acquaintances for their weekly luncheon discussion. They were all white Christian businessmen. We had been discussing "white privilege" for a few weeks, and I had been sharing a bit about bad missions theology, genocide, boarding schools and the devastating effect of colonization in our communities. A gentleman I have known for several years, a highly successful businessman and supporter of missionary work in Mexico, said, "Well Richard, don't you think it's better for your people that we, a Christian democracy, conquered your people? After all, it could have been the Nazis, Russians or Japanese. Somebody was going to eventually conquer you so don't you think your people are better off that it was us rather than someone else?"

Pure shock rattled my whole being. I, and several others, couldn't believe he actually said that. It took a few seconds for what he had just said to fully register. Then I was angry and these words came like a flood. I clearly, carefully and precisely said, "So let me get this straight. Are you saying we should be grateful that your people came here and brutally sodomized us? Are you saying we are better off for being sodomized by you and we should be grateful for the sodomizing? And we should be glad that you used the Bible as a lubricant to brutally sodomize us? Is this what you are saying to me?!" After a few moments of dead silence in the room, I then said, "The vulgarity of my words pales in comparison to the vulgarity of your words."

The images I saw when I said those words had, as a backdrop, pregnant Native women being cut open and their babies' heads smashed with rifle butts; entire villages of old men, women and children being bludgeoned to death after the women were defiled in the worst imaginable ways; forced starvation, violent imprisonment and torture; tens of thousands of



little Indian boys and girls being hauled off to boarding schools where they were plagued with sexual, physical and psychological abuse of immeasurable cruelty and enduring devastation. The gross inhumanity that crushed our people was of the most horrific and vulgar in Western history.

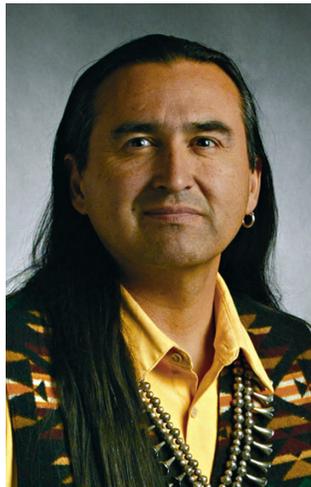
This guy is not a bad person. He has been a church-attending dude for decades and faithfully served in his church. While incredulous that someone I know, and who knows me, could hold that belief, it should not surprise me. But it did. So, old history lives on.

The missionary views the world, including the people he or she walks among, through a set of deeply embedded, culturally conditioned lenses or realities, both at a conscious and subconscious level. Starting with the missionaries who arrived to work among the Eastern tribes in the 1600s through the present, this has not changed.

What hindered or prevented the early missionaries from contextualizing the gospel? What still hinders Anglo-Christian workers and missionaries from contextualizing on our reservations today? I contend a major reason is the hegemony of Western culturally informed theologies that remain intact within religious institutions and structures. They have a commitment to produce results. There is a functional pragmatism connected to the gospel that results in the need for quantifiable conversions, economic viability and church growth in ways that make sense to them culturally, or, they might say, “biblically.” A man recently said to me that his organization supported a worker who was able to show them a “convert to dollar” ratio or track record.

We are entering the era of postcolonial Christianity. This is making it possible for young leaders to experience wisdom, empowerment and knowledge resulting from increased cultural integrity, access to the emerging global hermeneutical community and a reframed narrative for life in Christ as an Indigenous story among Indigenous people. It’s as I heard a man say from an Indigenous framework, “Wisdom is knowledge experienced relationally.”

—Taken from chapter two, *“The Colonization, Evangelization and Assimilation of First Nations People”*



Richard Twiss, author of *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys: A Native American Expression of the Jesus Way*

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“An Irreplaceable Voice for All Peoples”

Richard Twiss (1954–2013) was the founder and president of Wiconi International, a nonprofit that works for the betterment of Native people and communities by advancing culture, education, spirituality and social justice in the spirit of Jesus. A member of the Sicangu Lakota Oyate from the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in South Dakota, his native name was Taoyate Ob Najin, or “He Stands with His People.” He is the author of *One Church, Many Tribes*.

A widely traveled speaker, activist, educator, author and networker within the Native North American community, Twiss led Native American performing arts teams and addressed issues of spirituality and justice in hundreds of venues worldwide. He served as a local pastor for thirteen years, worked as national director of Native ministries for the International Bible Society and was the US representative for the World Christian Gathering of Indigenous People Movement. A board member of CCDA (Christian Community Development Association), he was a cofounder of NAIITS (North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies) and Evangelicals for Justice.

“Richard was enigmatic,” wrote Ray Aldred, Adrian Jacobs, Terry LeBlanc and Randy S. Woodley in the foreword of Twiss’s final book, *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys*. “On the one hand, as he made clear in the closing years of his life, he was a common man. Yet undoubtedly in many ways, he was not. He became, for many in the wider Indigenous community, ‘the voice of one crying in the wilderness,’ inviting believers to make straight paths for people to find Jesus. Denominational and doctrinal competition that encroached on his early experience of faith set Richard up to return to the simple message of Jesus—a highly-energized story of a Jesus stripped of colonial baggage. And Richard used his unique style and affable sense of humor to communicate this like no one else ever could.”

Twiss provides in this book a contextualized Indigenous expression of the Christian faith among the Native communities of North America. He surveys the painful, complicated history of Christian missions among Indigenous peoples and chronicles more hopeful visions of culturally contextual Native Christian faith. For Twiss, contextualization is not merely a formula or evangelistic strategy, but rather a relational process of theological and cultural reflection within a local community.

About *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys*, Tony Kriz, author of *Aloof*, said, “Dr. Richard Twiss is an irreplaceable voice for all peoples. His work is academically astute. His prose is inspiring and articulate. This work stimulates the mind, woos the heart and ultimately transforms faith.”

Twiss was committed to serving the local Native community in Portland, Oregon, as a

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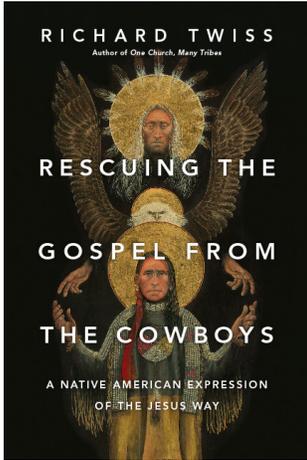
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AUTHOR BIO



respected spiritual leader with his wife Katherine, who continues his vision today. He was a member of the Portland Indian Leadership Roundtable and was a board member of the city's Native American Youth and Family Center. He also taught at Portland State University, Warner Pacific College and Sioux Falls and George Fox Seminaries.

As a writer, Twiss contributed to *The Justice Project*, *Holy Bible: Mosaic*, *Jamestown Remembered*, *Coming Together in the 21st Century* and *Common Prayer* by Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove and Enuma Okoro. He was a contributing editor for *Cultural Encounters* and wrote a bi-monthly column in *Charisma Magazine* called "Smoke Signals." He earned a doctorate of missiology in intercultural studies from Asbury Theological Seminary.

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