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COMMENTARY

Vine and the Divine: Vine Deloria Jr. and the Holy

THOMAS J. HOFFMAN

Vine Deloria Jr., named in 1974 by *Time Magazine* as one of the twelve most important religious thinkers in the world, passed away 13 November 2005.¹ The many accolades after his death, ranging from the obituary in the *New York Times* (“Champion of Indian Rights”) to the conference held one year after his passing at the University of Arizona (“Where do we go from here? The legacies of Vine Deloria, Jr.”), attest to the monumental contributions he made during his life in so many areas (for example, law, Indian studies, spirituality, political organization, metaphysics, and history); he was a Renaissance man.²

Deloria wrote numerous books that deal with spiritual themes: *God Is Red* comes to mind as one of the first. His recent book that deals with spirituality, *The World We Used to Live In*, was published in the spring of 2006, several months after his death. Deloria and I discussed spiritual and religious themes for almost three decades (from the time I took a graduate seminar with him until the summer before his passing). We engaged in an ongoing dialogue about religious freedom (in particular the free exercise clause) as well as the role of images of God in Western and non-Western traditions.³

This commentary’s primary purpose is to begin to examine how Deloria deals with the divine in particular and the holy in general.⁴ It was only during the last year of his life (through correspondence and conversations) and the year after his death (by reading his works and an unpublished manuscript

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that he passed on to me during the previous summer) that I started to grasp where he really stood on issues such as the divine and the holy. To try to find out where Deloria stood on questions of the existence and the character of the divine and the holy we shall take several steps. First, his family background, which gives a number of clues as to his approach to spirituality, will be examined. Second, some relatively recent interactions with the author and with radio interviewer Laura Lee will help us understand what he considered the holy to be. Third, in addition to his classic, *God Is Red*, his most recent published and forthcoming works will be examined to see where Deloria stands on questions of the divine and the holy.

In order to understand his approach to religion and spirituality it is helpful to look at his family's background and traditions. Deloria discusses his family from the time of his great-great-grandfather in *Singing for a Spirit* (2000). His great-grandfather, Saswe, was born in 1816 and was in the Yankonais Band. Saswe's vision quest as a young person involved the portrayal of a decision he made that would affect four generations of the Deloria family.⁵ In a description of his vision Deloria writes, "On the left-hand road facing him were four human skeletons. . . . [H]e saw that the road appeared chalky white. . . . The road on the right was blood red. Looking down the road, Saswe saw four purification tents, small, black, and somber. . . . (In Plains Indian visions, the four skeletons and four tents would be understood to represent four generations of descendants who would be bound by this choice.)"⁶

Had he chosen it, the left-hand road with the four skeletons would have meant that Saswe would have four generations of prosperous descendants, but the people following him would be no more than skeletons with flesh who would contribute virtually nothing to the world. It would have been a safe but completely nondescript family that nonetheless would have luck and would prosper.

The red road was fraught with danger but filled with life. The four purification tents meant that Saswe would kill four men of his own tribe and have to undergo four purification rituals. He would have great powers as a medicine man, the Thunders would be his close friends, and many birds and animals would help him. He was given a special stone to make it rain.⁷

In his vision Saswe had the choice of going down the white road, a choice of safety and comfort for the next four generations, or of going down the red road, a road of challenge, and power. He chose the red road.⁸ Deloria's great-grandfather became a holy man and a Yankton chief. Over time he recognized that things were going to change in the future and saw that his people needed to adjust to survive. As part of this, he was one of four chiefs who invited the Episcopalian missionaries to begin church work on the Yankton Reservation.

Deloria's grandfather, Tipi Sapa (b. 1853), was puzzled by his father's encouragement to adopt the white man's ways.⁹ Tipi Sapa's anglicized name was Philip Deloria, and he ended up becoming a Sioux holy man and chief

and an Episcopal priest. He had such an impact within the church that “in 1936 when they were completing the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. . . . [there] were placed sixty statues entitled ‘The Company of Heaven.’ The statues included apostles, saints, and more recent heroes of the faith. Tipi Sapa was one of three Americans whose statues were included.”¹⁰

Deloria describes his grandfather’s conversion. When he was seventeen years old he was riding to the Indian agency and heard a hymn coming from the Episcopal mission. The song was “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah.” “The tune, as the Sioux sang it, was a dirge that could hardly have been comforting, but the song does remain with you after you hear it a couple of times.”¹¹ Regarding his own conversion, Tipi Sapa says,

One day—it must have been Sunday—I was following a path which led by the little church. Out of the open window I heard the sound of voices. The tune they sang was pleasant to hear. I wanted to hear it again, to learn it if possible. So I went up to the church on three successive Sundays but that tune was not sung. On the fourth Sunday, however, I was happy to hear the hymn I had longed for.

I stood next to a man who sang out of a book. From him I caught the words of the first verse and learned them by heart. When I left that church, able to carry the tune and sing the first verse of the Dakota translation of “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah,” I felt that I was the possessor of a great treasure. From that day on I attended the services with regularity hoping to learn other things as beautiful as that hymn.¹²

Once Deloria’s grandfather became a priest, he “saw his black clerical clothes as a physical representation of the black tipi of Saswe. There were four purification tents and so there should be four generations of the family following a religious vocation.”¹³

Tipi Sapa put a great deal of pressure on his son, Vine Deloria Sr., to study for the priesthood. Deloria Sr., at Tipi Sapa’s insistence, became an Episcopal priest. He also became a religious leader and made important contributions to his people through his ministry. Deloria Jr. writes that his father “was the first Indian to be appointed to direct a national church denomination’s Indian mission work.”¹⁴

It should be no surprise to hear that Deloria Jr. studied for the ministry. Although his father did encourage him, he did not pressure him. Deloria Sr. was willing to accept whatever path his son chose. His son did attend a seminary but chose not to become a priest or minister. The path he chose certainly was one that involved spiritual leadership. One merely has to examine his extensive bibliography of books and articles to see that many of his writings deal with spiritual themes. He carried on the family tradition, providing a fourth generation of spiritual leadership.

Deloria closes his book about his family, *Singing for a Spirit*, with the following: “There is no question that Christianity served as a bridge to enable the Sioux people to make the transition from their life of freedom to a new life confined within the small boundaries of a reservation. . . . It should be clear



FIGURE 1. *This photo is of Vine Deloria Jr. and some of his former students at the Robert K. Thomas Symposium in Bellingham, WA in July 2005. The author is second from the left. Deloria is third from the left.*

. . . that Christianity did not replace the old Sioux beliefs and practices.”¹⁵

One can now understand why Deloria’s sister Barbara had family and friends practice an old hymn in Dakota the day before his funeral. She mentioned only that it was a hymn that was special to the family. At the memorial service, presided over by a friend of the Deloria family, Episcopal priest Father Peter Powell, the congregation struggled to sing Tipi Sapa’s favorite hymn as a way of honoring this great-grandson of Saswe.

Several years ago Deloria asked me where the concept of “God” came from. As a result of that question Deloria, Steve Pavlik, and I planned a panel on notions of the divine to take place at the 2004 Western Social Science Conference. Unfortunately, Deloria wasn’t able to attend the conference that year (even though the topic of the panel was his idea). In the paper I presented, I wrote regarding the source of the concept of God: “Where did the concept of God come from? . . . It didn’t come from any where—it is experiential. If it is a concept, then it is something passed down and formalized into dogma and doctrine. Dogma and doctrine are lifeless on their own. . . . During or after a direct experience of the holy, these beliefs are frameworks by which we make sense out of our experience.”¹⁶

Because he wasn’t able to be there, I sent him a copy of the paper, asking if he wanted to coauthor a piece with me on European and American Indian notions of the divine. After a few months I received a letter (typed on an actual typewriter).¹⁷ In it, Vine shared a few thoughts about my paper:

Now, Thomas, experiencing something is not the same as getting a concept that has certain components that always appear when you mention it. To wit: “god” from the settled large civilizations has some strange connotations—the “god” is always angry about various things, has innumerable problems with relatives if there is a pantheon, and must be constantly appeased. And usually has human form.

With the tribal peoples there is nothing like what I was describing above. There is simply the mysterious energy that activates everything in the world.

Now, where did the Middle-Eastern, Central American, Indian subcontinent idea come from? The response I get is that the idea of god comes with the apprehension or experience but that is where the tribal peoples stop. How does that feeling get translated into building temples, having a priesthood, etc?

By this point, I sensed he wasn’t pleased with my paper. He followed these comments and questions by relating something he had witnessed:

While in the Black Hills this summer I ran into an over eager layman who was holding services in this little camp we go to. He insisted on the congregation reading Psalms as a part of the church service. Many of those Psalms sound like the singer is sucking up to a real live person—albeit a superior one. It would be the proper attitude of a peon flattering the hell out of his master and you ask why those Psalms are so flattering. Certainly a deity must recognize his own accomplishments and not need reassurance from creatures he has created. So I think you can’t just say experience of some other power produces cathedrals, temples, and an institutional priesthood. Put on your thinking cap and do better Thomas.

Vine

We wouldn’t be writing a paper together. I was still the student and he the teacher.

In the spring of 2005, one of my friends shared a set of interviews Deloria gave on the *Laura Lee Show* in the spring of 2003. I have been researching images of God for the past twenty-five years, ever since I was introduced to the notion in a class I took with Andrew Greeley at the University of Arizona. I also took classes with Deloria there. Greeley and Deloria ended up on my dissertation committee.¹⁸ My dissertation was about the impact of people’s images of God on their political attitudes and behaviors. Well, I about fell out of my chair when he said in one interview that when it comes to American Indians, you don’t look at images of God—it doesn’t apply. In the summer of 2005, while we were at a conference in Bellingham, Washington, I asked him about his comment that the notion of images of God did not apply to Indians, and he used the example of animals—for one tribe an animal may be a provider of good things, and for another tribe the same animal might be a trickster. Thus, you can’t make generalizations about certain images of God or spirit animals,

for example. I've gone back and listened to that radio program. In terms of animals, he says, "You can't stereotype animal spirits—because they appear differently to different tribes. Bear will go from healer to a prophetic figure. It depends on the tribe and the land they live on." Regarding images he says, "[W]e talk about our experiences rather than images of God. Your experience is how you are energized. The theologians come in and try to reduce things to a catechism."¹⁹

In trying to unpack what Deloria thinks about the divine I have reread some of his earlier works and read his book on medicine men and his unpublished manuscript on Jung and the Sioux. In *God Is Red* he wrote:

There are serious questions whether Indian tribes actually had any conception of religion or of a deity at all. Wherever we find Indians and whenever we inquire about their idea of God, they tell us that beneath the surface of the physical universe is a mysterious spiritual power which cannot be described in human images that must remain always the "Great Mystery."²⁰

There are, on the other hand, many other entities with spiritual powers comparable to those generally attributed to one deity alone. So many in fact that they must simply be encountered and appeased, they cannot be counted. In addition all inanimate entities have spirit and personality so that the mountains, rivers, waterfalls, even the continents and the earth itself have intelligence, knowledge, and the ability to communicate ideas.²¹

In the Laura Lee interview, he says, "Every tribe has a creation story. [However, when you look at the question] how does a tribe live in a practical manner?—you don't hear anything about a creator at that point. You hear about a variety of spirits: eagle spirit, buffalo spirit. You hear of all the spiritual entities necessary to live on that tract of land. . . . There is a total disconnect here."

In his medicine men book he referred to a story in which the term *gods* was used.²² "The reference to 'gods' here reflects Goodbird's acceptance of the Western notion of gods and a mistranslation or deliberate changing of words to convey the meaning of the experience. In the Indian context, of course, we are talking about spirits."²³ Deloria saw the concept of God, or gods, as a Western concept; it does not apply to American Indians.

That does not mean that there is not spirit or power or holiness in the world, far from it.

[T]here is always a continuity of spirit in the world. The real division occurs when we make distinctions based on whether the spirit is incarnate or not and assume a break in continuity. The apprehension of Waken tanka, as the spiritual energy creating and supporting the world, means there could be no discontinuity except in the manner in which we experience life. Here the presence of spirits and their participation in the ritual negates any divisions that the passage of time might have created in our minds.²⁴

All is connected in Deloria's spiritual universe. There are the two-legged, four-legged, and winged peoples. Even the rocks and the mountains have a level of consciousness. One of the last things Vine told me was that he was working on the idea that planets produce their own biospheres.

One thing seems certain: dreams, daytime encounters, and visions all consist of communications from higher powers who already know much about us and who have a specific purpose in revealing themselves to us and, at least for American Indians, appear in the form of birds and animals. . . . Sometimes this phenomenon occurs to teach the human that in spite of different shapes and talents, the universe is a unified tapestry and not a collection of isolated, unrelated entities.²⁵

Not only are two-legged, four-legged, winged, and swimming peoples alive in Deloria's world, but also

we have already seen that tribal peoples observed the world around them and quickly concluded that it represented an energetic mind undergirding the physical world, its motions, and provided energy and life in everything that existed. This belief, as we have seen, is the starting point, not the conclusion.²⁶

For Deloria, the world is alive and is spiritual: "The Indian stories of the powers of medicine men, affirmed many times by objective reports of highly skeptical outside observers, are glimpses into a world dominated by spiritual energies and concerns."²⁷

Interestingly, Deloria hints at the possibility that there can be more than one road to follow. In discussing two stories—one in which the Christian approach is accepted and another in which the "old ways are chosen"—he writes,²⁸ "they raise the question of whether in the spiritual realm there is not an interchange of possibilities offered us by compatible spirits working in different traditions."²⁹ It does not have to be an either/or situation. This is perhaps a reason that religious wars are absent in Indian country.³⁰

Deloria felt that the notion of "God" was a Western European one. He states, "Indians generally do not stress divinity because it does not make sense to them. A 'mixture' of divine and animal qualities would be absurd in the Indian context because all entities have this mixture as a matter of course. While there are many spirits found in the Indian experience, divinity in the Western sense is glaringly absent."³¹ The sacred, as distinct from the profane, is a Western dichotomy. The so-called sacred and the so-called profane are both part of one tapestry. The notion of religion is a foreign one to Indians. The sacred infuses and underlies everything. He put it this way with regard to his own people: "Although they did not use the concept of 'god', the Sioux base all their beliefs on the overwhelming presence of Wakan tanka in everything."³² Rather than god, they speak of the Great Mysterious that underlies everything. This notion of the holy was multidimensional.

The Sioux had sixteen different concepts describing distinctive demonstrations of energy that they experienced. The most familiar idea was that of *Wakan tanka* and it implied a sense of family relatedness and intimacy, a caring intelligence. The physical energy that gave locomotion to physical things, they called *skan* or *Taku skan skan*. This concept is usually translated as “something that moves”—akin to the energy fields of quantum physics. *Skan* seems closer to some of the Jungian ideas that suggest the unity of mind and matter, spirit and instinct, in a certain kind of intelligent existence.³³

According to Deloria, experiencing the holy, rather than belief, is what characterizes the American Indian experience (in contrast to belief in doctrine or dogmas as in Western Christianity).³⁴ “[T]ribal peoples, taking a purely empirical approach to the world and their experiences in it, reached the conclusion that the ultimate entity in the world was the mysterious energy they could perceive and occasionally apprehend.”³⁵ Where did Deloria personally stand in all this? Huston Smith interviewed him in 2000, and the following exchange took place:

SMITH: Let me ask you about the Great Spirit. Is that a personal God?

DELORIA: It’s personal because the universe is personal. That’s the way we say things. . . . There seems to be a personal energy underneath all this, which is what physics is saying now.³⁶

Did he perceive and perhaps apprehend this mysterious energy? He doesn’t state this directly, but says, “I would agree that symbols are necessary to the initial stages of belief, that symbolic representations are necessary to knowing. If there is going to be adequate and permanent maturation, however, people must come to know in their experiences, they remain children if they only believe.”³⁷ I doubt that he would categorize himself as a child. Thus, he did not only believe; he must have come to know in his experiences.

In conclusion, it is possible that Deloria represents the fourth generation of Saswe’s vision. He was the fourth tent down the red road. Deloria spent much of his life speaking on, writing about, and puzzling over the spiritual dimension of life. Perhaps his notion of the holy can be summed up:

We can begin with the recognition that the fundamental reality in our physical world is a strange kind of energy that is found within everything—stars to humans to stones to quantum energy fields. This energy is personal or can be experienced personally. It is mysterious but so potent that it is useless to explore all the possible ways to define it. If we say anything about this power or energy, we say that the world we live in is sustained by this power, is ultimately spiritual and not physical.³⁸

Given this, although Deloria clearly sees the notions of God and the divine as Western ones, there is little question that he has a clear and definite sense of the holy.

NOTES

1. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Vine Deloria Jr. Indigenous Studies Symposium, Northwest Indian College, Bellingham, WA, 29 July 2006, and at the annual meeting of the Western Social Science Association Denver, April 2008.

2. Videos of the “Where do we go from here? The legacies of Vine Deloria, Jr.” conference sessions can be accessed at <http://www.arizonanativenet.com/news/captcha/mediaInfo.cfm?sect=med&seriesID=7> (accessed 19 February 2009).

3. This dialogue is elaborated on in ch. 2 in Steve Pavlik and Daniel Wildcat, *Destroying Dogma: Vine Deloria Jr. and His Influence on American Society* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Press, 2006).

4. Theses and dissertations could, and should, be written on this topic. This commentary is a brief attempt to contribute to that inquiry.

5. These comments on Vine’s great-grandfather and grandfather are based on Vine Deloria Jr., *Singing for a Spirit* (Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishers, 2000).

6. *Ibid.*, 17.

7. *Ibid.*, 18.

8. “Lakota medicine men. . . They invite people to walk the virtuous and traditional Sacred Red Path.” William Stolzman, SJ, *The Pipe and Christ: A Christian-Sioux Dialogue* (Chamberlain, SD: St. Joseph’s Indian School, 1986), 118. More extended comments on Saswe’s life are found in *Singing for a Spirit*.

9. Tipi Sapa can be translated as Black Tipi or Black Tent.

10. *Ibid.*, 83.

11. *Ibid.*, 42.

12. *Ibid.*, 42–43.

13. *Ibid.*, 69.

14. *Ibid.*, 83.

15. *Ibid.*, 216.

16. Thomas J. Hoffman, “Western and Non-Western Notions of the Divine.” Paper presented at the Western Social Science Convention, Salt Lake City, 22 April 2004.

17. Personal correspondence, letter from Vine Deloria Jr., 18 July 2004.

18. Andrew Greeley originated the empirical study of images of God, based partially on some of John Shea’s work. This research asks people how they think of (picture) God: as father, mother, friend, judge, master, etc. . . . Studies have been conducted using data gathered by the National Opinion Research Center in several waves of the General Social Survey. Although the original studies were of Catholics and former Catholics, later surveys include people of all ethnicities/races and of any religion or of none.

19. Vine Deloria Jr., “Indigenous World View,” *The Laura Lee Show*, Spring 2003.

20. Deloria would properly use the phrase *Great Mystery* as a translation for Wakan tanka. Wakan tanka had been mistranslated from the Lakota for generations as Great Spirit. Frances Densmore in *Teton Sioux Music and Culture* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992) (originally published as “Teton Sioux Music,” Bulletin 61, Bureau of American Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution, 1918) clarifies this in an extensive note on p. 85, pointing out that “the word Wakan’tanka is composed of

wa'kan (mysterious) and tan'ka (great)." Furthermore, there are some who contend that Wakan tanka should be translated as "the power to give life and to take it away." This argument appears to be based, at least in part, on Albert White Hat Sr., *Reading and Writing the Lakota Language*, ed. Joel Kampfe (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1999), 98.

21. Vine Deloria Jr., *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion, 30th Anniversary Edition* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2003).

22. Vine Deloria Jr., *The World We Used to Live In* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2006).

23. *Ibid.*, 12.

24. *Ibid.*, 86.

25. *Ibid.*, 107.

26. *Ibid.*, 197.

27. *Ibid.*, 214.

28. "Minnie Enemy Heart. . . . She says that she fasted and prayed, and Jesus came to her in a vision. One side of his body was dark, like an Indian; the other was white, like a white man. In his white hand he carried a lamb; in the other, a little dog.

"Jesus explained the vision. 'My body,' he said, 'half dark and half white, means that I am as much an Indian as I am a white man. This dog means that the Indian ways are for Indians, as white ways are for white men; for Indians sacrifice dogs, as white men once sacrificed lambs. If the missionaries tell you this is not true, ask them who crucified men, were they Indians or white men?'" *Ibid.*, 41–42.

29. Deloria, *op. cit.*, 40.

30. Deloria wrote the following in "Vision and Community: A Native American Voice," in *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada*, ed. James Treat (New York: Routledge, 1996), 105–14: "The belief has always been that the Great Spirit and/or the higher spirits are also watching others and they will provide the proper religious insights and knowledge to others. Therefore it behooves Indians to obey the teachings of their own traditions and hold them close. If they were meant for other people, the other people would have them" (111).

31. Vine Deloria Jr., *Carl G. Jung and the Sioux Traditions: Dreams, Visions, Nature, and the Primitive* (New Orleans, LA: Spring Journal Books, 2009). This book is still in press, so the citations are based on the original manuscript Deloria sent me in 2005 (ch. 2, p. 11).

32. *Ibid.*, ch. 13, p. 13. For more on this see James R. Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, ed. Raymond J. Demallie and Elaine A. Jayner (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991).

33. Deloria, *op. cit.*, ch. 7, p. 15.

34. For a discussion of the contrasts between Christianity and Native American traditions and for an example of the formulation of an indigenous theology see Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley, and George E. "Tink" Tinker, *A Native American Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).

35. Deloria, *op. cit.*, ch. 5, p. 13.

36. Phil Cousineau, ed., *Huston Smith in Conversation with Native Americans on Religious Freedom: A Seat at the Table* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 20.

37. Deloria, *op. cit.*, ch. 13, p. 9.

38. *Ibid.*, ch. 13, p. 2.