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NATIVE SPIRITUALITY CONTRIBUTES TO AMERICAN RELIGIOUS LIFE

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In recent years, many Americans have looked to Native American religions for spiritual inspiration. Often with little or no Native American ancestry in their own family backgrounds, many Americans have been attracted to Native American religions because of the spiritual respect these religions represent for the natural world.

Some people are drawn to the nature-oriented spirituality of Native American religions as an alternative to the indifference or sense of superiority to nature they find in more mainstream religious traditions. But in many cases, Native American spirituality works more as a supplement than as an alternative by introducing new levels of respect for nature and for native peoples into mainstream religions. In recent years, Native American prayers, poems and speeches have found their way into many American churches. In this process, various forms of American Christianity have been enriched.

This new level of interest in Native American spirituality is generally agreed to be a good thing for American Christianity and for the development of American culture as a whole. But it also has created a complicated situation for Native Americans.

On the one hand, many Native Americans are happy that their religious traditions are contributing to the enrichment of other religious traditions and consequently to the betterment of the world. For Native Americans who are themselves both Christians and traditionalists, widespread recognition of the compatibility between Christianity and Native American spirituality has long been overdue.

On the other hand, there are Native Americans who resent the use of their spiritual traditions by outsiders. They criticize this borrowing (or stealing some say) of their traditions and compare it to the loss of land their ancestors suffered in the past. They also worry about the misinterpretations that will be introduced into their religious traditions; and losing control of the religious traditions that, for centuries, have defined and sustained their identity.

Out of respect for this concern, some Christian leaders are looking for elements within their own religious tradition that will support the kind of spiritual respect for the environment that first attracted them to Native American religions. In this process, native people and their religions have stimulated the discovery and growth of environmental spirituality within Christianity.