
Pro Rege

Volume 23 | Number 3

Article 9

March 1995

Native American Voices (Book Review)

Louis Y. Van Dyke
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

Van Dyke, Louis Y. (1995) "Native American Voices (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 23: No. 3, 39 - 40.
Available at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol23/iss3/9

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.



A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

whether in church school or in the day school classroom, can benefit from reading this useful chapter.

Nevertheless, the chapter does leave us with an important and unanswered question: Just what is the relationship between gifts and spirituality on the one hand and authority on the other? The word "authority" is hard to find in this chapter. Only in the final paragraph do we get some sense of how authority relates to gifts, when Pazmiño suggests that "those with teaching gifts are empowered and given authority to teach as a means by which to serve the Christian church and the world" (76).

The next two chapters deal with two closely related concepts, namely, the authority of one's experience and of one's expertise and study. Perhaps Pazmiño could have linked the issue of expertise more closely to giftedness. The question of experience as a separate topic also raises problems: How do we differentiate between experience and other dimensions of life? At one point, for example, Pazmiño tells us that the "value of experience in Christian life and teaching must be seen in relation to faith, in relation to the content of the Christian faith that persons encounter and embrace in their lives" (89). This makes it seem as if faith and its content somehow transcend human experience.

Like the others, these chapters, too, contain a mixture of unresolved ambiguities and helpful insights. Problematic, for example, is Pazmiño's discussion of "reason." The author appears to work with a dualism between "natural—unaided— reason" and "supernatural faith," and, following Parker Palmer, seeks to overcome the dichotomy by linking "reason" to love and passion (108-112). The sort of critical analysis required at this point falls beyond the scope of this review. Helpful, however, is Pazmiño's plea for taking more seriously the teacher's task to develop "critical reasoning." Pazmiño correctly reminds us that "Christian teachers need to be aware of the tendency to provide simple, ready-made answers for students who need to think for themselves" (113).

The final chapter takes us in a new direction. It examines the "authority of truth." What Pazmiño means by

"truth" remains singularly unclear. But that is not the point of the chapter. His real interest here is to help us understand that since "all truth is God's truth," we need to be open to other religious orientations. The chapter recounts Pazmiño's own experience in a class taught by Philip Phenix at Columbia University. This course surveyed a variety of religious orientations, ranging from Buddhism and Islam to communism and existentialism. We can learn from all these faiths, Pazmiño declares. And indeed, Pazmiño rightly warns us against the sort of dogmatism that has led to many a "remnant syndrome" within the Christian church. To often schismatic groups of Christians believe that only *they* see through a glass clearly, that only *they* possess the truth, and that everyone else is dead wrong. At the same time, Pazmiño would have served us better had he also considered, in some detail, how we as Christians ought to position ourselves over against the increasingly powerful spirit of postmodern relativism.

A pervasive weakness of his work is Pazmiño's overuse of "authorities." In some way the book reads as if it were an eclectic compilation of opinion. All sorts of people are quoted and introduced. Of course, Pazmiño's extensive documentation is to be commended. At the same time, one wishes that we could read Pazmiño's own views, clear and simple, without having to distinguish continually between what someone else is suggesting and what the author thinks of it or does with it.

In spite of my critical observations, *By What Authority Do We Teach?* is, all in all, an interesting book, well worth the time it takes to read it. True, the book offers many ambiguities and unanswered questions. But the ambiguities are stimulating and thought-provoking, and can lead to fruitful reflection. At the same time, the book contains a multitude of helpful insights. Indeed, the book has much to teach us.

Teaching in the Christian community is, as the Apostle James points out, a task of colossal responsibility (James 3:1). Clearly it is the sort of calling that compels us to reflect deeply and continuously. Pazmiño's work helps us to do so.

Native American Voices, by David A. Rausch and Blair Schlepp (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994). 164 pages, bibliography. \$10.99. Reviewed by Louis Y. Van Dyke, Professor of History Emeritus.

Rausch, Professor of History at Ashland University in Ohio, and Schlepp, an MA graduate from Ashland and member of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in South Dakota, have written an historical survey of the life and culture of Native Americans in the forty-eight contiguous United States. Their purpose is to show the cultural contributions and current status of

Native Americans, and to convince the American majority (whites) that the "debilitating prejudice" against Native Americans will end only with a change of attitudes.

The survey of four regions is rather elementary and adds nothing new to what is already known about Native American history. Life before the conquerors

emphasized traditional family values, such as chastity before marriage and that all people were to maintain a balance in nature so that resources could be preserved and replenished. Living in harmony with nature required certain characteristics, such as respect for family, pride in craftsmanship, the value of working with one's hands, as well as the importance of contemplation and introspection. By contrast, the authors argue, European-oriented civilization is actually the primitive one with its pursuit of wealth, pollution, and misuse of resources. Native Americans also believed in a creator who made the earth for the pleasure of humans. Thus, "A diverse and dynamic Native American culture was present in this land before the 'conquerors' arrived" (51).

Tracing the "history of pain," the clash of cultures between Native Americans and Europeans, the authors include the topics one would expect, namely, colonial confrontations, Indian removal, the wars on the Great Plains, the General Allotment Act of 1887, and the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. Gradually but surely Native Americans were reduced from proud, independent nations to dejected and defeated wards of the United States government.

The last chapter in the book is the most compelling. Citing psychoanalyst Erik Erikson's model of eight stages of human development, the authors argue that Native American character changed from trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity, intimacy, generativity, and integrity, to mistrust, doubt, guilt, inferiority, and role confusion. One fourth of the children are separated from their families, life expectancy is about fifty years, the suicide rate is seven times the national average, and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome is thirty times higher than in whites.

At the same time, the authors argue, Indian culture anticipated and was superior to European culture in several ways. "Active parenting" has long been practiced by Native Americans. Religion pervades all of life but it is not to be argued about as European-oriented whites have a penchant for doing. Education is informal, but it is never finished. Holistic medicine,

the interaction between medicine, religion and culture, has long been the norm for Native Americans. The authors leave both Native Americans and whites with a challenge: "Native Americans must take their future into their own hands, but non-Native Americans should be educated to understand their history, their plight, and their current situation" (164).

The book does have its drawbacks, however. In *Native American Voices*, one expects to encounter people speaking to their condition instead of having an occasional quote from this or that notable Native American interspersed within the text. Thus, the title is misleading. The book says little that is new in its survey of history and life, and it veers away from objective scholarship and borders on the polemic by the use of such pejorative terms as "unconscionable," "power-hungry greed," "final stab to the heart." The book is devoid of footnotes, although it does contain an extensive and useful bibliography of white as well as Native American authors on a variety of subjects concerning Native American history and life.

One certainly cannot gainsay the fact that over the centuries Native Americans have been abused and exploited. However, to effect attitude changes, much more needs to be said than can be crowded into a relatively brief volume. The authors need to do a much more thorough-going analysis of Judeo-Christian thought and belief. For example, it is not enough simply to assert that whites equated "civilization" with Christianity, a concept which unquestionably yielded disastrous results when applied to government Indian policy. Both Native Americans and whites must understand *why* and *how* this concept was formulated in the first place if we are to learn from the past in order to prevent future errors.

In spite of its obvious biases, the book will serve as a quick, useful introduction to Native American history for those with little or no knowledge of the subject. Those who wish to pursue the topic in depth would do well to consult almost any of the works listed in the bibliography.