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# Rethinking Indigenous Religious Traditions with Jace Weaver: A Discussion

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## Abstract

This roundtable revolves around Jace Weaver's article '"Either the Ball is Green, or the Ball is Not Green"'. Arguing that the field of Indigenous religious traditions has been both under-analyzed and under-theorized, Weaver rejects the facile statement that such traditions are those practiced by Indigenous groups or peoples. He sets forth seven definitional characteristics that create a rubric with which to test religious traditions. He then tests his rubric against a number of traditions, including Shinto,

Mormonism, Cao Dai, the Code of Handsome Lake, and the Ghost Dance of 1889–1890. The discussion continues with responses from Graham Harvey, Bron Taylor, Marie Alohalani Brown, Suzanne Owen, and Lee-Shae Scharnick-Udemans. The discussion concludes with a rejoinder from Weaver.

**Keywords**

Indigenous, Geomythology, Polycentrism, Proselytizing, Religious Dimophism, Shinto, Mormonism, Cao Dai, Raising Up Movement

## 'Either the Ball is Green, or the Ball is not Green': Rethinking Indigenous Religious Traditions

Jace Weaver

I have been studying and teaching Native American religious traditions for almost thirty years. Recently I designed a new course entitled 'Introduction to Indigenous Religions'. The syllabus examines such traditions across both time (from ancient times to the present day) and space (around the globe). Writing that syllabus, coupled with the invitation to serve on the editorial board of this new journal, *Indigenous Religious Traditions*, has forced me to confront squarely a question about which I have been ruminating over my entire career. What is an Indigenous religion or religious tradition?

The question surprisingly is one that has been both under-analyzed and under-theorized. That statement probably strikes most readers as absurd. After all, there are classes like mine taught all over the world. Numerous scholars dedicate their lives to studying these traditions. There is a program unit of the American Academy of Religion called Indigenous Religious Traditions. Graham Harvey, a leading scholar and a member of this journal's editorial board, edited a volume entitled *Indigenous Religions: A Companion*. Yet I ask you, my readers, by a show of thoughts rather than hands, who among you can offer a single *definition* from any of them? As a way to inaugurate this new journal by spurring a conversation, I offer the definition of Indigenous religious traditions I have evolved after decades of grappling with the question.[1]

On the one hand, it is easy to assume a tautological position that Indigenous religious traditions are those religious traditions practiced by Indigenous peoples. Such a facile definition, like all tautologies is

1. I will not take up the issue of whether it is more proper to speak about the subject of our investigation as 'religions' or 'religious traditions.' I leave that question to others.

both true and singularly unhelpful. 'Either the ball is green, or the ball is not green'.

The cultural and spiritual customs and practices of Indigenous peoples are affirmed in both the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples ('UNDRIP') and the International Covenant on the Rights of Indigenous Nations ('ICRIN'), promoted by the Center for World Indigenous Studies. There is, however, a threshold question: What is an 'Indigenous people' or 'Indigenous nation'? Strategically, neither UNDRIP nor ICRIN define those terms. The definition is simply assumed.[2] It is much like the position assumed by United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart in *Jacobellis v. Ohio* regarding obscenity. He wrote, 'I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description ["hard-core pornography"], and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it…' (U.S. 1964).

It is not my purpose here to be flippant. Rather, I hope I illustrate just how easily and lightly we, as scholars, skip over or elide questions central to what we do and that are intimately consequential.

Prior to 1930, scholars maintained that the ancestors of American Indians migrated to North America about 1000 years B. P. ('before present'). From an ideological standpoint, the significance of such a claim is evident. It permits settler colonizers to contend that those considered Indigenous were immigrants much like themselves, arriving only around five hundred years before the Columbus event. The discovery in Clovis, New Mexico in 1929, with its distinctive spear point, pushing the date of human habitation back to 13,500 years B. P., was therefore most unwelcome. Today, the growing consensus is that the peopling of the Americas began around 30,000 years ago.

The years between 1000 and 1400 CE, for reasons we do not completely understand, witnessed largescale migrations and relocation of peoples in North America: the Aztecs depart Aztlan and enter the Valley of Mexico; the Cherokee say goodbye to their Iroquoian relations and migrate southward; the Navajo and Apache leave their Dene kin in what is today western Canada and move south, arriving in the desert Southwest around the year 1400. Elsewhere in the world, there were similar migrations at different times. The Celts move west from continental Europe and begin entering Ireland and Scotland about 1000 BCE. Sometime between 800 and 300 BCE, the Yayoi People move into

2. Duane Champagne (Turtle Mountain Chippewa) writes, 'UNDRIP, by avoiding a definition of indigeneity and not recognizing political self-government from indigenous nations, has redefined indigenous nations into citizens and ethnic groups' (Champagne 2013: 11).

Japan from the Korea Peninsula, becoming the ancestors of contemporary Japanese. In South America, the Taino leave other Arawak behind and sail their canoes into the Caribbean about nineteen hundred years ago. These are merely a few examples. They could be replicated many times over. The question they present is how long is it before a people becomes Indigenous and what must be the circumstances?

Having tabled these categorical puzzles and keeping them firmly in mind, I will now offer the definition I use of Indigenous religious traditions. I have developed it based on study and comparison of such traditions from around the world.

**Indigenous religions are local, not world religions.** As Graham Harvey points out, the academic study of religion has, for ease of discussion, adopted three broad categories of religions. The most familiar and studied are the 'world religions'. These faiths—Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism—have few things in common other than they have a global reach with adherents all over the planet.

The second group are 'new religious movements'. As with the world religions, entries in this category often have little in common with others lumped together with them. They arise as a movement in the modern era. Some have only a brief florescence, like many millenarian movements. Others prove to have more staying power. A few, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormonism) and Bahá'í develop structures and achieve a global reach, making the transition to a world religion.

The third grouping is Indigenous religions. While, as Harvey states, anthropologists have long studied and theorized about 'Indigenous cultures', until recently Indigenous religions have received little attention. They are local. Their scope may be as small as that of a single village in the Amazonian rainforest, or they may be as expansive as encompassing an entire modern nation-state.[3]

Obviously, as with the constituent members of the first two categories, Indigenous religions often are very different from one to the next. Perhaps this accounts for the lack of definitions, other than that which I offered at the outset—the ball is either green or the ball is not. Despite this, I believe one can identify enough commonalties to craft a definition for comparative religions purposes.

**Indigenous religions are tied to a specific ethnic group or geography**. At first blush, of the elements I limn, this might seem the most self-evident. Lakota religious practices are solely for Lakota. The Great Law of Peace is meant only for the Haudenosaunee. *Nā mea Hawai'i* ('all things Hawaiian') is available only to *kānaka maoli* (Native Hawaiians).

3. See Harvey 2000: 6.

The colonialist appropriative desire of the New Age movement (as well as other settler colonizers) obscure this simple fact.

Indigenous religions may also be site-specific, tied to a particular region or landscape. Certain ceremonies may be tied to a particular sacred site. Or the religion as a whole may be tied to a numinous geography where every geographic feature has meaning for those connected to it. There may be a link here to folk religion, manifested, for instance, in fairy wells.

Two further characteristics flow from the previous point that Indigenous religions are tied to a specific group or geography.

**Indigenous religions are geomythological**. This is simply to say that they are shaped by the environment in which they operate. One way to illustrate this is through the protologies of Native American peoples. As the late Vine Deloria, Jr. was fond of saying, American Indian creation myths are not about what happened *then* (in some remote past); they are about what happened *here*—in the homelands of a given people.[4]

**Indigenous religions do not proselytize**. Among world religions, Christianity and Islam are the two great proselytizing faiths. Mormonism puts an extreme emphasis on evangelism. By contrast, Indigenous religions do not seek new adherents. Because of the close connection between Indigenous cultures and their religious traditions, it would seem absurd to a Comanche to want to convert Cheyenne to Comanche ways.

**Indigenous religions are polycentric**. Unlike Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, for instance, these traditions have no single, central focus. This may manifest in polytheism or a dispersal of shrines or sacred sites, for example. In their seminal work, *Indian from the Inside*, philosophers Dennis McPherson (Ojibway) and J. Douglas Rabb write, 'This perspective, this polycentrism, recognizes that we finite human beings can never obtain a God's-eye view, a non-perspectival view, of reality…. Every view is a view from somewhere…. Though none is privileged, each culture's worldview, each different metaphysical system, contributes to the total picture…. We believe this notion of polycentrism to be fairly pervasive in Indigenous philosophy' (McPherson and Rabb 2011: 20, 122).[5]

**Indigenous religions are religions of ritual observance**. They are not textual meta-religions. They have no central, fixed, authoritative scriptures. Though beliefs are most assuredly involved, they are not religions of theology or dogma. Instead, they rely on the continued performance of their rituals by adherents.

4. See Deloria 1993: 78.

5. In studying Indigenous cultures, the terms 'philosophy' and 'religion' are often used interchangeably.

**Indigenous religions are solely in the hands of practitioners to define.** There is no central, hierarchical structure or body to dictate or mandate orthodoxy. For this reason, just as traditional Indigenous cultures were highly adaptive, and coupled with other factors outlined above, Indigenous religious traditions are more flexible and capable of innovation than world religions.

To summarize then, these are the defining characteristics of Indigenous religious traditions I identify:

1. **Indigenous religions are local, not world religions.**
2. **Indigenous religions are tied to a specific ethnic group or geography**.
3. **Indigenous religions are geomythological**.
4. **Indigenous religions do not proselytize**.
5. **Indigenous religions are polycentric**.
6. **Indigenous religions are religions of ritual observance**.
7. **Indigenous religions are solely in the hands of practitioners to define.**

Having offered these definitional elements of Indigenous religious traditions, in the remainder of this short article, by way of illustration, I will briefly examine some of the potentially more nettlesome examples, testing them against my definition.

**Mormonism** is sometimes advanced as an Indigenous religion, having originated in the United States. Being 'home-grown', however, is not synonymous with being Indigenous. I will accept at face value its contention that it is a Christian denomination. This aside, it fails in most of the essential elements I set forth.

It began as a new religious movement in the 1820s and 1830s, founded by Joseph Smith. Since then, through aggressive evangelism, it has grown to a world religion. It is tied neither to an ethnic group nor a particular geography. It has two sacred scriptural texts, the *Inspired Version* of the Bible, sometimes called the Joseph Smith Translation, and *The Book of Mormon*. Far from being polycentric or in the hands of practitioners to define, it has a highly centralized church hierarchy with complex theology and dogma.

The **Longhouse Religion** began as a revitalization movement of Haudenosaunee religion and culture after the damage done by the American Revolution. In 1799, Ganioda'yo (known in English as Handsome Lake) had visions he called Gwaihwi:io (the 'Good Word') that blended traditional Haudenosaunee ways with Christian values. This grew into the Longhouse Religion, which is considered Haudenosaunee traditional religion and still practiced today.

Ganioda'yo's teachings became known as the Code of Handsome Lake. As early as the 1820s, it was proclaimed annually at Tonawanda. Originally, transmitted orally, versions began to diverge. A standardized version was written down in the early twentieth century by Edward Cornplanter. It was published by Seneca ethnographer Arthur C. Parker in 1913. Today it is proclaimed twice a year. Parker also published 'How America Was Discovered', a story told by Handsome Lake, in *Seneca Myths and Folk Tales* in 1923. It contains the prophet's moral teachings, including injunctions against liquor, cards, and fiddle music.[6]

The Code of Handsome Lake is a kind of fixed scripture. Yet the Longhouse Religion is also a religion of ritual observance. The prophet's goal in preaching was to attract new adherents. Yet the teachings are for a single ethic group, the Haudenosaunee. Also, growing, as it did, from prior Haudenosaunee tradition, there is a geomythological element to it. For me, the question of whether the Longhouse Religion is an Indigenous religion, despite being practiced only by an Indigenous people, is a close one.

The **Ghost Dance** of 1889–90 was the fourth in a chain of 'raising up' movements beginning with Neolin's vision in 1761 that inspired Pontiac's rebellion.[7] Wovoka lapsed into a coma and had a vision, meeting with the Christian God and Jesus. The message was essentially the same as that of the 1870 Ghost Dance. Indians had lost favor with the Great Spirit by adopting too many things from whites and living bad lives. If they changed their ways and performed the prescribed dance (essentially a traditional round dance), they would again find favor. Whites would be swept from the continent. All those Indians who had died since the advent of colonialism would be raised up. The earth would renew itself. It is a restoration of status quo ante.

In a population rendered despondent by confinement to reservations, it was a message of hope, and it swept through the West like a summer grassfire driven by the wind. Wovoka played a key role in the process. Different tribes sent embassies to meet with him and learn about the new religion. He taught the emissaries and sent them back to teach others. To those who did not send delegations, he sent letters.

Wovoka's Ghost Dance was thus explicitly a proselytizing religion. As with the Longhouse Religion, the evangelism was limited to targets of

6. The warnings against cards and fiddle music are examples of what in Judaism is called *chumra*, 'fencing the Torah'. Card playing was a frequent activity at taverns, and fiddling was the entertainment there. If the primary goal is to abstain from drinking, if one avoids cards and fiddle music, one will stay away from saloons, where alcohol is served.

7. The other two were Tenskwatawa's visions that informed Tecumseh's revolt and the 1870 Ghost Dance.

one ethnic group. For Handsome Lake, it was fellow Haudenosaunees. For Wovoka, it was American Indians as a whole. He did employ writing to spread his message, but these so-called Messiah letters did not rise to the level of scripture, and the emphasis on the dance marks it as a religion of ritual performance.

As the religion spread, it underwent changes, producing local variants as it went. This reflects a certain polycentric nature and demonstrates that the new religion was wholly in the hands of its practitioners to define. There was never any attempt by the prophet to enforce some sort of uniformity or orthodox interpretation of his vision.

Despite its syncretism and its pan-Indian character, I would deem the 1889–90 Ghost Dance an Indigenous religion.

**Cao Dai**, like Mormonism, is sometimes held out as an Indigenous religion. Originating in Vietnam, it was at one time referred to as the Vietnamese national religion. As with Mormonism, it began as a new religious movement based on the revelation of one man. And like its American counterpart, its characteristics set it far apart from an Indigenous religion.

In 1921, Ngo Van Chieu, a mid-level colonial administrator, began receiving the vision of Cao Dai. Then, on Christmas Eve, 1925, God identified himself to the first group of Cao Dai mediums, who receive messages through seances. In 1926, they presented to the French Governor of Cochinchina (southern Vietnam) the *Pháp Chánh Truyen* (the Religious Constitution of Caodaism), formally founding the religion in Tây Ninh.

Cao Dai incorporates traditional Vietnamese belief and morals. Beyond that, however, it is highly syncretic, combining Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and spiritualism. Caodaists believe that we live in the period of the third revelation. The most ancient period includes Lao Tse and Dipankara Buddha. The second was the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, Confucius, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed. These revelations are limited by their historical and geographic contexts and have been distorted over time. In this third revelation, one experiences direct contact with God through Cao Dai. The Tây Ninh Holy See recognizes three saints, Sun Yat Sen, Victor Hugo, and Vietnamese poet Nguyen Binh Khiêm. Other luminaries who may be contacted during seances include Joan of Arc, William Shakespeare, and Vladimir Lenin.

Like Mormonism, Cao Dai is a scriptural religion. In addition to the *Pháp Chánh Truyen*, there is the *Thánh Ngôn Hiệp Tuyển* (the Compilation of Divine Messages), a collection of messages received during seances. Orthodoxy is enforced by the Tây Ninh Holy See.

The religion is extremely hierarchical with numerous ranks and titles. The leader is known as Giáo Tông. In 1940, Caodaist accounted for per-

haps a quarter of the population of Cochinchina. Today, despite initial suppression of the religion by the Vietnamese government after 1975, estimates say there are approximately four and a half million adherents in Vietnam with around thirty thousand expatriates abroad. There have been numerous splinter movements, which are not recognized by the Tây Ninh Holy See. Ngo Van Chieu himself founded a separate organization in 1931.

**Shinto** is the national religion of Japan. On its website, the Asia Society, established in 1956 to promote knowledge and understanding of the continent, states,

> Shinto (literally 'the way of the gods') is Japan's native belief system and predates historical records. The many practices, attitudes, and institutions that have developed to make up Shinto revolve around the Japanese land and seasons and their relation with the human inhabitants. Expressions of Shinto beliefs toward nature include the recognition of a divine spirit (kami) in venerable old trees, large mountains, and tall waterfalls, as well celebrations of the highlights of each season. (Hammer 2022)

The religion is thus geomythological.

The kami are reverenced at various, diverse shrines. There are both *kamidana*, household or family shrines, and *jinja*, or public shrines. In Japan there are more than 100,000 *jinja*. The combination of these public and private shrines contributes to the polycentrism of Shinto. The religion is also one of ritual observance, having no scriptures. Most practitioners of Shinto also participate in Buddhism. This phenomenon—the practice of two forms of religion without blending them (except in the mind of each individual person)—is common among practitioners of Indigenous religions around the world. Anthropologist Joseph Epes Brown terms it 'non-exclusive, cumulative adhesion'. I prefer the term 'religious dimorphism'[8] (Brown 1989: 27; Peelman 1995: 77–79). This, too, contributes to Shinto's polycentrism.

The Meiji era (1868–1912) through the Second World War was the period of 'State Shinto'. Japan's nationalist leadership sought to centralize Shinto worship and to control the shrines. It sought to 'purify' Shinto worship by eliminating Buddhist practices and influence. The emperor was proclaimed a kami. Japanese nationalists corrupted Shinto, desiring to cover Asia under a Shinto umbrella, attempting to turn Shinto into a kind of world religion. The constitution imposed by the occupying United States armed forces after the war guaranteed freedom of religion and abolished State Shinto. Emperor Hirohito foreswore the ruler as a kami.

8. The second term is not mine, but it is that which I employ.

Shinto is a majority religion in Japan, not a minority one. And the Japanese are not the Indigenous people of Japan. Nonetheless, Shinto is an Indigenous religion. Some believe this idea stems from State Shinto. American religious historian Byron Earhart contends that Shinto has absorbed too many outside influences (such as Buddhism) and is 'too complex' to be considered an Indigenous religion (Earhart 2004: 31). Yet kami worship came to Japan during the Yayoi period around the third century BCE with the ancestors of contemporary Japanese people or emerged shortly thereafter. It grew up and developed out of the landscape of Japan. It is on all fours within the definition I offer herein.

However, we define 'Indigenous religious traditions', I believe we can agree that the term is preferable to older terms such a 'primal' or 'primitive' religions, which follow an old-style evolutionary theory in a 'history of religion' approach in which the primal or primitive are left behind in the past in favor of more 'advanced' monotheistic religions. Australian religious historian Carole Cusack is one scholar who has offered a definition of Indigenous religions. For her, 'they are typically this-worldly, orally transmitted, non-proselytizing, folk-oriented, expressed in myth and traditional law, and pluralist' (Cusack 2016: 153–167). Her definition is similar to mine, but I believe it is too limited. The brief descriptions I give of religions in this article are too short for nuance. I believe, however, that Shinto provides an example that Indigenous religions need not be limited to those practiced by Indigenous peoples.

## Tinkering with Jace Weaver's Rethinking of Definitions

Graham Harvey

I am honoured to be quoted in Jace Weaver's rethinking of the category 'Indigenous Religious Traditions' or 'Religion(s)'. More importantly, I am in broad agreement with his list of defining characteristics—and completely agree to rejecting older terms and the attitudes and approaches they encourage. Many of us interested in improving academia by including the study of more religions—and especially by advancing decolonization through encouraging the study of Indigenous religions—have, like Jace, been ruminating on the question: What is an Indigenous religion or religious tradition? This and related questions began to exercise me only in a phase of my career after serendipitous events shifted my focus from research among and/or about Jews, Judaism(s), Pagans and Paganism(s) to research among Indigenous people(s) and, if we can agree about the usefulness of the terms, their 'religions' or 'traditions'. I think that this trajectory offers a perspective well suited to reflecting on what distinguishes one possible category of religious traditions from

others. Or, more usefully, it incites me to contest such categories even as I continue to deploy one ('Indigenous religions') for critical and strategic purposes. Or so I think, despite struggling with the use of colonial or colonized terms (including 'religion', and the contrast 'Indigenous / non-Indigenous') in the pursuit of efforts to expand the possibilities of the study of religions.

Put differently, my CV *could* be structured around work focused on a 'world religion' followed by work focused on a 'new religion' and then on 'Indigenous religions'. Since this happened over a time span in which the term 'world religions' became notoriously entangled with disciplinary struggles not only against Theology but also against colonialism, it has been interesting. Similarly, the discipline shaping expansion away from theological obsessions with 'world religions' (or, more honestly, from obsessive comparison of a few religions with peculiarly abstracted versions of Christianity) to embrace more social-scientific interests in 'new religions' has been revolutionary. It has, recursively, improved the study of those putative 'world religions'. And yet, the religious lives of Indigenous people have been marginal in the study of religions—either being left to anthropologists or serving only to introduce putative pre-histories of religion(s). Or, now that I think about it, the religions of Indigenous people have served as primary exemplars of 'syncretism'—allegedly a mistake when it occurs among 'world religionists' and a defining characteristic of the folly of some 'new religions', i.e., the thing that makes them 'new' versions of 'world religions'.

Happily, much has changed. More changes are afoot. Importantly, a 'turn' to lived religion is liberating teachers and students from the tired, colonial 'world religions' characterization of religions. Diverse critical approaches from across the humanities and social sciences (and sometimes from other sciences) have enriched methodologies and debates. Scholarly engagement with Indigenous religious traditions have contributed significantly to these and other transformations. Nonetheless, it remains necessary to ruminate on the question: What is an Indigenous religion or religious tradition? (It is similarly true that colleagues continue to ponder what 'religion' and 'tradition' mean—and whether these terms are themselves hopelessly colonial.) Jace provides fine leadership here. His clear setting out of seven definitional characteristics, arising from career-long reflection, model possibilities of considerable potential for other researchers and teachers. That he tests these in relation to religions that, he concludes, fit or do not fit the label 'Indigenous religious traditions' exemplifies the kind of care necessary in this venture.

So, while repeating my opening statement of broad agreement with Jace's definitional elements, I want to worry about them. In brief, I wonder if each of them is true, completely or to some degree, of most

other religions in real life. Perhaps they direct attention to matters that are more explicit among Indigenous people than they might be in other communities. Perhaps Indigenous people are more resistant to alternatives to these characteristics—i.e., to the elite formation of abstracted pure forms.

Expanding that thought leads to suggestions that further pursue Jace's testing of his proposal:

1. All religions are lived and performed locally—and rarely fit the globalized ideal of colonial 'world religion' approaches (an expansion of elite Protestant Christian ambitions towards universality);
2. Many religions are tied to specific groups or geographies;
3. All religions are geomythological, shaped by the places where they are lived, and deploy talk about origins to propose perspectives and practices relevant to contemporary life;
4. Few religious communities proselytize through organized missions;
5. All religions are polycentric because none of them are monolithic but are always diverse;
6. Religions are all about ritual observance (even if some religionists imagine believing, preaching and teaching to be something other than ritual), and dogmas are ritual declarations rather than defining lived reality;
7. All religions are in the hands of practitioners to define, whether leaders or scholars like the results.

But there are other contraries:

1. Indigenous people often share at least aspects of their traditions with others, expecting them to be respected and informative of good ways for anyone to live;
2. While Indigenous religions belong to specific groups and geographies, they are not immobile or static, and at least elements of them can be performed 'elsewhere';
3. Because Indigenous people are mobile, dialoging with other people, their geomythologies can also embrace new locations and environments. (This is going to be increasingly important as Climate Disaster requires more migrations and transformations.);
4. While proselytism might be too strong a word, Indigenous elders and teachers often expect others (including academics) to learn from, not just about, their traditions;
5. Indigenous religionists are not always committed to polycentrism: they are capable of rejecting those who live or ritualize in the wrong place (e.g., in urban centres);

6. Some complex philosophies and ontologies underlie Indigenous ritual observances, requiring significant teaching / learning by at least some adherents, and sometimes having uncontestable authority;
7. Indigenous people can get into trouble for not abiding by tabu rules and protocols; and practices are often policed (e.g., on gender lines).

Some of my 'contraries' are clearly more flimsy than others. They do not undermine Jace's proposal but only do the easy job of tinkering. And I chose the word 'contraries' to resonate with William Blake's uneasy imagination of the 'marriage of heaven and hell' in which 'opposition is true friendship' and dualities are collapsed. Certainly, I do not think Jace is wrong, only that each of his characteristics is evident elsewhere than among Indigenous religious traditions.

Jace is clear that he has sought to 'identify enough commonalties to craft a definition for comparative religions purposes'. It that arena, it does not really matter whether his 'characteristics' help us compare one Indigenous religious tradition with another or whether they help us compare any wider range of religious phenomena. They are useful to the project of studying religions—Indigenous or otherwise. They draw attention to features that deserve and reward further debate. However, the project in focus at the moment is about seeking clarity about what makes a religious tradition 'Indigenous'. To that end, it is as a *package* of characteristics that Jace's proposal works best. These seven matters are emphasized more strongly and more consistently among Indigenous people than they are among other communities. There is less ambition to pursue the alternatives (universality, dogma, mission) among those most often considered to be 'Indigenous' than among *some* other religionists. So, while I think some of them fit perfectly with religions that, like Jace, I would not include in a course about Indigenous Religions, I see great value in these seven characteristics, especially if they (and the religions that interest us) are envisioned relationally, interactively, fluidly, and sometimes troublingly.

Before I end, a brief thought arose while thinking about ethnic and geographic specificity and about proselytism. Isaiah Wilner's (2018) encouragement to 'rediscover' Franz Boas as a person transformed by learning from Kwakwa̲ka̲'wakw 'transformation philosophers' reinforces my understanding that researchers should be guests seeking to learn what others already know. It has taken many years for (non-Indigenous) scholars to be willingly changed, proselytized perhaps, by Indigenous knowledge-holders or teachers. If Wilner is correct, the transformation of our disciplines away from colonial modernism began in their inception, under the deliberate influence of Indigenous

teachers. The prevalence of debates about 'relationality' and 'ontology' indicates a fuller transformation and Indigenization of some scholarly pursuits is flowering now.

If, as I think is the case, Jace's seven characteristics work not only in relation to Indigenous religious traditions, but also for many or all other religions, this does not diminish their value. The conclusion is not that Indigenous religious traditions cannot be defined, categorized, or compared, but that they ought to be included alongside the currently more familiar topics of our teaching, learning and research. Indeed, what Jace's seven characteristics show is that Indigenous religious traditions are more properly included in Religious Studies curricula than the fantasy phenomena labeled 'world religions'. The fact that scholarly approaches to such traditions are more critical, more dialogical, and more careful than those typically applied to 'world religions' is of inestimable importance. Happily, while avoiding tautologies, we (scholars interested in Indigenous religious traditions) will continue transforming the study of religions.

### Family Resemblances & Indigenous Religious Traditions

Bron Taylor

One of my first encounters with Jace Weaver was in 1993 when I gave a paper at the American Academy of Religion meeting exploring 'Deep Ecology's Appropriation of Native American Spiritualities'. I had been studying radical environmental movements and their alliance with indigenous people in resistance to telescopes under construction and planned at Mt. Graham (Dził Nchaa Si An) in Southeastern Arizona.[9] I gave a presentation about the religion-related tensions I had witnessed that on some occasions had fraught the alliance. Professor Weaver was my respondent. To a room including many indigenous scholars, he began by graciously stating, 'We always need to listen to Bron'. Then, before voicing his critique, he wryly added, 'Now let me tell you why he is all wrong'. I attempted a rejoinder. The respectful exchange began a friendship during which I am sure I learned more from Professor Weaver than he from me. I would not be surprised, this said, if in response to the following reflections, he will again do his best to set me straight.

9. This research led to two articles, Taylor 1995 and 1997.

**Family resemblances and Indigenous religious traditions**

As Weaver well knows, I am not a specialist in indigenous traditions. For decades, however, I have explored the role of *Homo sapiens* in biocultural evolution, with special attention to ways that emotional and spiritual perceptions have contributed to humankind's transformation of Earth's socioecological systems. This has included an effort to understand what if any essence there might be to societies construed as indigenous. I wrestled with this term, Weaver provided early guidance (Weaver 2000). And in his introduction to this inaugural issue of *Indigenous Religious Traditions*, he has provided a superb trailhead for a deeper exploration of indigenous religion.

Before focusing on indigenous *religion*, however, one must wrestle with the broader category of indigenous traditions and consider how to demarcate such societies. This became obvious to me when I orchestrated a comprehensive review of research exploring religion and environmental behavior.[10] When summarizing the relevant research about indigenous societies I began by noting the difficulties inherent in any effort to identify and make meaningful generalizations about indigenous peoples, given that they constitute approximately 5% of the global population, in 5,000 distinct societies, that are spread widely around the world.[11] That indigenous peoples have often converted to the religions of invading and settler societies, or blended their perceptions and practices with the religions of the colonizing societies, further complicates efforts to understand what if any essence there might be to indigenous societies and their religions. Making the effort all the more fraught is that definitions can be and have been used to denigrate colonized people, and definitions about indigeneity include or exclude people from this category, which has and still can influence the conferral or denial of social and environmental goods and rights.[12] These are among the reasons why, as professor Weaver noted, many people, including participants in international organizations, such as the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, have resisted formal definitions of indigeneity.

Nevertheless, participants in international venues where representatives of indigenous societies are (increasingly) engaged have, by

10. See Taylor, Van Wieren, and Zaleha 2016 upon which I draw here.

11. This estimate is from Cultural Survival, which also itemizes six characteristics that 'tend to be common among indigenous peoples'. Online: http://www.culturalsurvival.org/who-are-indigenous-people.

12. David Chidester illuminated the way E. B. Tylor's coining of the word animism reflected and reinforced racist beliefs about the superiority of European peoples. Given this legacy, Chidester argued, scholars should eschew using the term. See Chidester 1996; 2005; 2011.

necessity, specified characteristics they consider typical of such societies. In 'The Concept of Indigenous Peoples', The Secretariat of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues stated,

> Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop, and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system.[13]

The document also mentioned other important markers of indigenous identity, such as historical continuity with such society's culture, religion, language, dress, and lifestyle. Importantly, as Kyle Whyte has observed, contemporary discussions of indigeneity typically stress voluntary self-identification as a critically important marker of indigenous identity, as did this document (Whyte 2015). Such self-identifications, as scholars of indigenous traditions well know, are sometimes controversial and contested.

What these demarcating efforts do not attempt to do is what Professor Weaver has sought to provide, namely, the central traits that characterize indigenous *religious* traditions. I appreciate his forthrightness when, based on decades of research, he proffered seven defining characteristics of indigenous religious traditions. By offering (as he put it) his rubric, and through his subsequent analysis of specific cases, which show how complicated applying his rubric can be, Weaver indicates that he considers it provisional. In this light I shall offer several comments and suggestions.

First, rather than stating (as he does six times) that indigenous religions 'are' local, geomythical, polycentric, ritualizing, ethnically or regionally bounded, and solely practitioner defined; or, that they 'do not' proselytize, I suggest, it would be better to put these claims less categorially, to speak, for example, of general tendencies. This would recognize and cultivate alertness to exceptions and complications. A sentence beginning 'Generally speaking', or a statement beginning 'Indigenous religions tend to be characterized by…', would better reflect the possibility of exceptions and complications that Weaver recognized when attempting to apply his rubric to specific cases studies.

13. For the full report see Online: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/517063?ln=en ; for a factsheet based on it see Online: https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf.

Graham Harvey's response to Weaver's effort seems to raise similar qualms. He noted that many obviously non-indigenous religious individuals and groups share one or more of the seven characteristics that Weaver seems to suggest represent the sine qua non of indigenous religion. Harvey further argued that among indigenous peoples, there are exceptions to each of the seven characteristics that Weaver asserted are distinguishing markers of indigenous religion. Although Harvey agreed that Weaver's rubric had explanatory power, he also averred that Weaver's rubric would work best as a '*package* of characteristics' that are found 'more strongly and more consistently among Indigenous people than they are among other communities'. I surmise based on this statement that Harvey would agree with me that it would be better to speak of tendencies because this would more clearly recognize and cultivate alertness to the complexities and exceptions.

My second comment raises a different question, namely, whether any of the traits that *tend* to be associated with indigenous religions are *essential* to such religious phenomena.[14] This question is, of course, related to the broader question as to whether there are any traits that are essential to religion itself. Put simply: Are there any traits that, if absent, exclude a specific perception or practices as religious, and are there any other characteristics that, if absent, would indicate that a given indigenous perception or practice is not religious?

In the Western academic tradition, the most common test of religiosity has been a belief in, or perception of, some sort of (usually) invisible (and typically divine) spiritual agent(s) or forces of some kind (Smith and Green 1995). As one who has studied diverse phenomena within the global environmental milieu as well as indigenous societies, however, it has long been apparent to me that traditional religion definitions focusing on supernatural agencies are unduly restrictive, at least if we wish to understand and compare human emotional lives, ultimate concerns, and worldviews.

This conclusion has led me to my third comment, or contention, which is: When seeking to understand and compare human emotional lives, ultimate concerns, and worldviews, it is valuable to take what has become known as the 'family resemblances' approach.[15] With it, one deploys the lenses of the sciences and humanities when examining the wide array of traits and characteristics that are typically associated with religious perceptions and practices, without trying to demarcate the boundary between what does and does not count as religion.

14. Efforts demarcate the boundaries of indigenous peoples and communities raises a related conundrum.

15. For the seminal articulation and rationale for the approach see Saler 1993. I built on Saler's work when developing an expanded list of traits in Taylor 2007.

This approach has an important analytic advantage that is relevant to the present inquiry: It enables us to illuminate social phenomena that do not involve perceptions of non-material beings or forces, as well as to compare them with social phenomena that fit traditional Western definitions of religion. This is advantageous because not all indigenous people have beliefs or perceptions regarding invisible beings or forces (divine or otherwise); nevertheless, many of these individuals engage in cultural practices that are distinctly religion-resembling, such as (and to cite just two examples), when such individuals participate in community festivals and ritualizing, or harvest or use plants, including with traditional ceremonies, for healing. Given such complications, it is difficult and sometimes impossible to demarcate where indigenous religion ends and non-religious indigenous philosophy begins.

The family resemblances approach side-steps the problematic quest to establish the boundaries around religion. Instead, with this approach, the effort is to illuminate the ways that perceptions about the human place in cosmos affect human behavior and Earth's socioecological systems. I commend this approach to those interested in the comparative analysis of religion-resembling social phenomena, indigenous and not.

The preceding reflections are necessary prologue to remaining comments and this suggestion: Why not take the seven characteristics identified by Weaver as the common characteristics of indigenous religious tradition and add some additional elements for consideration? Like Weaver's seven-fold rubric, we could understand any additional proffered suggestions to be provisional, as not-necessarily exclusive to indigenous peoples, and perhaps (but not-necessarily) as common as the characteristics that Weaver identified.

Consider, for example, Kyle Whyte's reflection on the notion of indigeneity, which he concluded is typically 'used to express intergenerational systems of responsibilities that connect humans, non-human animals and plants, sacred entities, and systems' (Whyte 2016: 145). I have learned enough about indigenous and other societies to think that this is a good expression of some traits that, generally speaking, are not only common in indigenous societies, but that they are *more* common in indigenous than non-indigenous societies. But I have also argued that, with the right lenses, we can see some of these perceptions and values growing with alacrity around the world. Moreover, these contemporary nature spiritualities often involve animistic perceptions (which sometimes fit traditional religious definitions while at other times they are entirely naturalistic), and they are being expressed in a host of new and creative ways.[16] Such creativity includes the work of scholars who, ex-

16. See especially Taylor 2010. Since its publication I have examined the animistic nature spirituality depicted in James Cameron's 2009 blockbuster film, *Avatar* (Taylor

plicitly or implicitly, express respect for and affinity with such spiritualities.[17] Indeed, in recent decades, there has been an explosion of individuals, indigenous and not, who see themselves as animists, or who are otherwise expressing and promoting kinship with non-human organisms; not incidentally, these people are often engaged with or otherwise linking their spiritual sentiments to indigenous peoples.[18]

I have arrived at the view that increasing numbers of non-indigenous people share some of the perceptions, values, and practices, that appear commonly among indigenous peoples. I am *not* saying that indigenous religious traditions are the same or nearly so to the nature-focused spiritualities of individuals and groups who are not indigenous. But I do wish to underscore the refrain often expressed by indigenous people, that theirs are living traditions that continue to adapt and change. Indeed, they do so much like all cultures, and often through their encounters and cultural exchanges with other societies. No one has more brilliantly analyzed such process than Jace Weaver in *The Red Atlantic* (Weaver 2014). So in conclusion, when thinking about what might be the most common elements of indigenous religious traditions, although I value and consider insightful Weaver's seven-fold rubric, I think it is best to consider these, and possibly additional characteristics, to be tendencies, only some of which inhere exclusively to indigenous people. Moreover, we ought to think more about, and be especially alert to, additional and even new traits and characteristics that might also characterize

2013), by Richard Powers in his Pulitzer Prize winning arboreal novel, *The Overstory* (Taylor 2019a), by cultural creatives within the Walt Disney empire (Taylor 2019b), and at museums and exhibitions around the world in Taylor 2021.

17. See Abram 1996; Apffel-Marglin 2011; Harvey 2005, 2006, 2013; Hornberg 2006; Ingold 2006; Jensen 2000; Kohn 2013; Quinn 2005; Shepard 1998. This footnote and the previous one demonstrate that for many religionists and scholars, Animism is not a pejorative term but rather, it provides a helpful way to signify spiritualities involving profound respect if not also reverence the personhood, value, and the exotic intelligences of the living world. I have borrowed the 'exotic intelligences' notion from another writer who expresses animistic perceptions, the bioregionalist L. Freeman House (House 1999).

18. Regarding kinship spiritualities, which have many affinities with animism and are often expressed or inspired by indigenous thinkers, consider the popularity of indigenous botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer. Her many essays, interviews, and bestselling book (Kimmerer 2013), has led to her increasing prominence and influence, as shown by her book's translation into several non-English languages, and her 2022 MacArthur Fellowship, which popularly known as a 'genius grant' (Online: https://www.macfound.org/fellows/class-of-2022/robin-wall-kimmerer). She also recently co-edited a multi-volume book series expressing and promoting kinship spiritualities, which included many indigenous voices, including Whyte 2021.

indigenous religious traditions, as well the spiritualities of those who, in some ways at least, are walking along similar paths.

## Accepting the Limits of Scholarly Discourse: A Response to Jace Weaver

Marie Alohalani Brown

The points I touch upon in this response are not new to scholars who study Indigenous religious traditions, but they bear reiterating, especially given the venue in which this discussion takes place, the inaugural issue of *Indigenous Religious Traditions* (IRT). IRT is the first academic journal dedicated exclusively to the study of Indigenous religious traditions, and not Indigenous studies generally. This fact is a telling reminder that our field—despite its advances—is still in formation. The first move towards establishing Native American and Indigenous religions as a distinct field in the U.S. can be traced back to when the Department of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara hired Inés Talamantez 'in the late 1970s to develop the field of Native American religious traditions' (Avalos and Talamantez 2016: 154). In 2016, Talamantez described her 'current field of study' as 'Native American and Indigenous religious traditions' (155).

How we understand and discuss Indigenous religious traditions is first and foremost predicated on and driven by deliberations about what constitutes indigeneity—who or what counts as 'Indigenous'. It is important to remember why and when the term 'Indigenous' first gained traction. According to Paulette F. Steeves, Tier II Canada Research Chair in Healing and Reconciliation at Algoma University,

> The term Indigenous was not used to identify human groups until recently. Indigenous people are often identified as the First People of a specific regional area. Indigeneity as applied to First People came into use in the 1990s, as many colonized communities fought against erasure, genocide, and forced acculturation under colonial regimes. (Steeves 2018: n. p.)

Steeves makes plain the harm colonialism has caused to Indigenous peoples. Historically, research is the means by which colonialism achieves its agendas.

One of the major issues with terms and their definitions is the harm they can cause. The language scholars use to discuss Indigenous peoples and their religious traditions has had and continues to have real-life consequences. Western disdain for the other is reflected in the language that Western scholars have historically used to describe the other(s) and their religious traditions. Because many scholars aspire to rectify this

problematic history, they strive to use terminology that is free from negative connotations, hence the widespread use of 'Indigenous'. While the term is now widely accepted, it has its shortcomings. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021), who has traced the connections between 'research' and 'European imperialism and colonialism' (1) observes, 'The term 'Indigenous' is problematic in that it appears to collectivize many distinct populations whose experiences under imperialism has been vastly different' (6). Although Smith critiques the term, she nonetheless uses it 169 times. Clearly, the need for a collective noun such as 'Indigenous' is inescapable.

There is no circumventing the theoretical issues that arise when attempting to define terms used to designate broad categories such as 'Indigenous' and 'religion', but we cannot perform comparative religious studies without them. Jace Weaver's careful considerations about the seven fundamental characteristics of Indigenous religious traditions, which he has identified based on nearly thirty years of study and teaching, reminds us that the question of what constitutes an Indigenous religion or religious tradition is one that has not yet been satisfactorily resolved. Jace's careful consideration includes a statement about how settler colonizers can use assumptions such as 'the ancestors of American Indians migrated to North America about 1000 years' before present time to argue that 'those considered Indigenous were immigrants much like themselves' reminds us about the ways that scholarly discourse can inform ideology. Jace also models a self-reflexive approach for grappling with the question of 'what is an Indigenous religion or religious tradition'. After offering his list of seven definition elements of Indigenous religious traditions, he discusses the ways that some of them are 'potentially more nettlesome'.

The question of 'what is an Indigenous religion or religious tradition', Jace notes, 'has been both under-analyzed and under-theorized'. He acknowledges that this revelation 'probably strikes most readers as absurd'. Jace explains, 'After all, there are classes like mine taught all over the world. Numerous scholars dedicate their lives to studying these traditions. There is a program unit of the American Academy of Religion called Indigenous Religious Traditions'. As I see it, the question is the proverbial elephant in the room for our field. I appreciate Jace's excellent deliberation and his willingness to address the elephant in the room.

Why do we avoid answering the question? One obvious reason is the question is rife with political pitfalls. Another is that it is a challenging question to answer, especially given that the individual words comprising this compound noun are difficult to define satisfactorily. The definitional conundrum arises from attempting to account for

considerable difference within a broad category. There are more than 5,000 Indigenous groups in the world (United Nations n.d.; UNESCO n.d.; Amnesty International n.d.). Given their great number and the countless ways they might differ from each other, is it even possible to come up with a definition that is valid for more than 5,000 distinct Indigenous groups? Similarly, religion, one of the oldest and most pervasive human activities, has had myriad manifestations across place and time, and therefore, the fact that there is no scholarly consensus on how to best define 'religion' is to be expected.[19]

Where do we go from here? Perhaps the value in attempting to define our area of study is not solely a question of a finding satisfactory definitions to account for many Indigenous religious traditions but finding better approaches to studying and discussing them. We can begin by accepting the limits of scholarly discourse. The most ethical thing to do is to acknowledge not only the limits of definition but also the harm that terms and their definitions have caused Indigenous communities, and then proceed from there. The study of specific Indigenous religions—including how they understand their indigeneity and calculate belonging, how they understand their own religious traditions, whether they have a word for what in English is termed 'religion'—can help us broaden our discussion on these topics, and advance our field of study. I would like to participate in a large-scale collaboration between scholars who have carried out long-term studies of specific Indigenous peoples, perhaps a forum where we can share our answers to questions such as those I have just posed.

## Indigenous Religion and Resistance: A Response to Jace Weaver

Suzanne Owen

The first time I attended the American Academy of Religion was in 2009 when it was held in Montréal on its own without the Society of Biblical Literature. The location in Canada drew me, otherwise I might not have considered it. It turned out to be significant for my development as an academic.

I had two papers accepted—one based on part of my PhD research on the sharing of ceremonies among the Mi'kmaq in Newfoundland, which was for the Native Traditions in the Americas unit, and the other arguing for the separation of defining 'indigenous religion' from 'indigenous

19. For a critical discussion on the challenges of defining 'religion', see Taylor (2005).

people' in the case of Druidry in Britain for a panel co-sponsored by the Indigenous Religious Traditions and Contemporary Pagan Studies programme units, chaired by Chas Clifton. In my paper, I offered this definition of indigenous religion 'as that which relates to the land, the people and that which has gone before' (Owen 2013: 92).

The respondent was Jace Weaver, who made two critical comments on my paper. One was about whether contemporary Druidry had any continuity with pre-Christian forms or was, rather, a 'new' tradition. This I countered with the question about whether an indigenous religion had to be old or to pre-exist something else. The other comment, about Druidry lacking community, I've been pondering ever since. Although Druids, and similar groups, might argue that there is a community of participants, I think this is different from being 'in community' like I'd experienced on the Miawpukek Mi'kamawey Mawi'omi First Nation Reserve in Newfoundland. Weaver had also made some very nice comments about my paper and during the business meeting that followed had invited me to be Co-Chair of the Indigenous Religious Traditions unit.

This was my first leadership role, which involved putting together a call for papers, organising panels and twice writing the five-year review for the renewal of the unit. When the meeting was in Baltimore in 2013, I'd invited many past Co-Chairs of the unit for a panel on 'Reflections on "Indigenous Religious Traditions"'. I was nervous chairing people like Jacob Olupona, Inés Talamantez and others; however, they were all passionate speakers, and the panel was well attended. I was Co-Chair for two terms before rolling-off and serving in the steering committee for another few years.

I am ever grateful for Jace Weaver's encouragement and trust in me at the start of my career, especially as I was a non-indigenous researcher of indigenous traditions. Nevertheless, I was acutely aware that there were, and still are, criticisms of non-indigenous scholars of indigenous religions, which I first came across reading Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), who critiqued the colonisation of indigenous knowledge by non-indigenous scholars. Rather than discontinue my research in this area, I welcomed scrutiny and thoughtful discussion of the kind fostered by Jace Weaver in the Indigenous Religions Traditions unit.

In his present paper, Weaver, too, is wary of simply defining indigenous religions as the religions of indigenous people. He mentions that the colonial view prior to 1930 was that indigenous people of the Americas, thought then to have only arrived 1000 years earlier, were immigrants like themselves, which reminds me of debates in Newfoundland about the status of Mi'kmaq there, thought to have arrived around the same time or even after European settlers. These ideological standpoints serve

to further colonial interests and to obstruct the recognition of indigenous people. However, what is an indigenous religion among contemporary First Nations and Native Americans? Nearly all Mi'kmaq are Catholic, though many also participate in indigenous 'traditions', in distinction to (in their perception) a coloniser-religion. Equally, colonisers also reported that indigenous people had no 'religion', a matter discussed extensively by David Chidester in *Savage Systems* (1996).

Leaving aside the problem with 'religion' itself, the definition of indigenous religion I provide (see above) aligns with some aspects of Weaver's definition, particularly the argument that they are geomythological. However, I would reject any ethnic criterion, for obvious reasons in the case of British Druidry, but this is also problematic in indigenous contexts. In the US, identification is based on a blood quantum method designed to reduce numbers who can claim recognition and thus any federal aid; yet many groups would rather apply a community-recognition criterion because the blood quantum issue is so divisive. As for the categorisation of indigenous religions as 'local' and not 'world' religions, I think this is not always the case, depending on what counts as 'local' for groups that are nomadic or have migrated (sometimes forcibly) to a new location. It might be better to contrast 'localising' with 'globalising', which would not be exclusive modes but rather a tendency.

As for whether they proselytize, I would leave this out as a criterion. Not every so-called world religion or new religion does so either; one might consider the Ghost Dance, as Weaver does later in his paper, as an indigenous case of proselytization, which could also be regarded as a 'new religion', sharing many features with others in that category such as a focus on the future. The next criterion offered by Weaver, that indigenous religions are polycentric is important, because it would be difficult to remain localised if they weren't. This leads to the next one, that indigenous religions are ritual-based, or 'imagistic' as opposed to 'doctrinal', if using the terminology of anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse in his *Modes of Religiosity* (2004).

Weaver's final criterion, that 'Indigenous religions are solely in the hands of practitioners to define' means it is up to each group to decide who they are and what they do. Although, within a group, they may disagree on how a particular ritual ought to be conducted, they either reach an accommodation or go their separate ways, but if they stray from accepted protocols or commodify their traditions, they may be condemned and ostracised. This final criterion also relates to the non-proselytising and localising aspects in Weaver's definition. It is also in their hands to define themselves in resistance to colonial and governmental categorisations, as well as our own scholarly ones. This resistance to settler-colonial knowledge has emerged more frequently in the past

decade in works by indigenous authors, such as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) writing on Nishnaabeg theories and methods.

All definitions arise to separate and distinguish phenomena from other phenomena and are human creations. How much they help us to understand the world around us determines their usefulness. I think Jace Weaver has provided useful characteristics for understanding indigenous religions but, as it appears to be based on observations of already defined groups of indigenous religions, it can run the risk of either being too imprecise, too broad or too exclusive. For the most part, Weaver avoids these pitfalls when all the characteristics are taken together as most of them hinge on each other—because they are local, they are geomythological and ritual-based, and because of this they are polycentric, which means they are not proselytising. Equally, many other religions have some of these characteristics, to different degrees, which Graham Harvey points out in his response. The ethnic criterion is controversial and may be important for some groups to use to bar others from participating, but as a strategy and not as a characteristic of an indigenous religion.

## Erasure, Exclusion, and Engagement: The Politics of Knowledge Production in the Study of (Indigenous) Religions

Lee-Shae Scharnick-Udemans

Jace Weaver's timely and thoughtful reflection on the rudiments that might constitute a working, albeit limited, definition of 'Indigenous religious traditions' provides a stimulus for thinking critically and creatively about the politics of knowledge production in the study of religion. African scholars from various disciplines have long carried the burden of legitimating their work through an intellectual oeuvre which at best ignores and at worst erases, the intellectual contribution of African scholarship, especially that which is produced by African scholars located on the continent and working in local academic institutions. This condition affirms the ongoing ontological, epistemological and material, Eurocentric Western dominance of the global academy and perpetuates what many decolonial thinkers have theorized as the coloniality of knowledge. The sidelining of African scholarship is of course incongruent with Africa's status as a favored site of ethnographic inquiry for scholars located in the Global North. Yet it sustains Eurocentric, Western patterns of knowledge production wherein Africans have typically featured as research subjects and not as highly skilled and cherished producers, theorists and analysts of knowledge about their own lives, communities and contexts.

Unfortunately, I am not describing a historical phenomenon; this is an ongoing concern. It is necessary to clarify that whether the inequality and inequity described above is intentional or not, it should not be dismissed as innocent despite the absence of nefarious intent from individual scholars. On the contrary, it reflects many of the unspoken and unresolved power dynamics that colour the politics of knowledge production in the academy and societies in which the study of Indigenous religious traditions are located. The study of religion in general and the study of Indigenous African religions[20] in particular reflect these patterns of erasure and exclusion and reveals embedded and taken for granted systemic issues in academia, that inordinately affect non-White women, Indigenous people, people living with disabilities, the economically-vulnerable and otherwise marginalized.

Given how the dual legacies of colonialism and apartheid flagrantly orchestrated the South African religious landscape to reflect and support their racist imperialist predilections, calls from university students and black academics to decolonize[21] universities, transform curriculums, and foreground social justice as research and teaching imperatives have demanded both careful scrutiny and dramatic overhaul of taken for granted disciplinary assumptions. For scholars of religion, the political and intellectual imperative to decolonize the academy and transform the discipline requires recognition and critique of Religious Studies' racist and dehumanizing genealogy as well as urgent widespread attention directed towards unveiling and responding to the ongoing effects that these systems of conquest have on the possibilities and impossibilities for the study of Indigenous religious traditions.

Although I am not a scholar of Indigenous religions, as a decolonial, African feminist scholar of religion, studying religious diversity and

20. I acknowledge that the expressive formulation and conceptualization of this term which includes its origins, application and meanings remains a debated and contested issue in the study of religion in Africa. For the purposes of this essay the collective noun 'Indigenous African religions' is used as a heuristic device and to refer to the various religious beliefs, practices and sacred orientations that are expressed through specific ethno-cultural groups whose geographical ties to lands, precede the arrival of the t settler colonizers. It is also important to note the religious formations known collectively as African Indigenous churches. These churches were started by Africans and not missionaries and 'It has been argued that AICs should be viewed as both African and Christian since they are innovations that draw on the elements of Christianity, African religion, Western culture as well as African culture and tradition' (Masondo 2014: 2).

21. This refers to 2015/2016 student protests which took place in South Africa, wherein free decolonized education was demanded by students. For more on the events that transpired and how it changed the higher education landscape please see Booysen 2016.

difference in South Africa, with a special interest in the ways which issues of diversity are mediated and mediatized, my work includes serious reflection on issues of religious representation and marginalization whether in the media or academic canons. I am grateful to Weaver and the editors of this newly inaugurated journal for the invitation to respond to and participate in what is an important and illuminating conversation. I take for granted that Weaver has intended that the seven attributes he suggests contribute to a working definition of the term 'Indigenous religious traditions' are necessarily provisional. In that spirit I have chosen to respond to three of his points, selected for their salience in surfacing how Indigenous African religions, against histories of suppression, oppression, demonization, continued marginalization and surveillance function and feature within the landscape of a multi-religious, albeit Christonormative multiracial constitutional democracy.

**Indigenous religions do not proselytize**

Indigenous African religions were classified as witchcraft and prohibited under both British and apartheid rule. The criminalization of Indigenous African religions spanned a period of over one hundred years and resulted in large scale conversions while producing clandestine communities of practice. According to leading scholar of Indigenous African religions, Professor Nokuzola Mndende (1998: 116), 'Christianity and western schooling that came with missionaries and civilisation were synonyms. The African traditional religious practices were condemned and forced to go underground and into internal exile… Africans had to pretend that they were Christians during the day and go underground as African religionists'. After the dissolvement of apartheid, full religious freedom[22] was secured in the 1996 Constitution, effectively decriminalising African Indigenous religions and providing the impetus for long-term national, local and personal efforts to undo the decades long denigration and demonization of African traditional religion by the state and Christian churches.

Whereas Weaver invokes the example of Mormonism to show how this aspect of the proffered definition may be contested, I suggest that labour of African Indigenous 'sacred specialists' especially in the democratic era requires more expansive and nuanced lenses than what a conventional understanding of proselytization may provide (Chidester 2012: 8). I venture that sacred specialists contest limited notions of proselytization through their still relatively newly granted public visibility. While they are not calling for converts, given the effects of Christian

22. The 1980 Constitution made nominal provision for religious freedom.

mission conquest on the religious lives of black South Africans in particular, these religious leaders are promoting the public recognition and return of religious knowledge that had been suppressed and silenced through a number of interconnecting and intersectional socio-political factors. Furthermore, in line with Weaver's assertion that 'Indigenous religions are tied to a specific ethnic group or geography', sacred specialists are not approaching those without ancestral ties to a specific collective, urging them to convert.

Under the aggressive missionary strategies of the British and the violent religiopolitical theology of the apartheid government, there was large scale conversion to Christianity that was not magically undone after the dismantlement of legalized systemic racism. When observing Indigenous African specialists in mainstream and social media, one is able to discern an upsurge of advocacy aimed at younger generations to 'return' or 'revive' practices that may have been neglected, avoided and erased due to their families' distance from Indigenous religion and their commitment to Christianity. Enhanced public visibility refers to various forms of public pedagogy including television and social media interviews, newspaper articles, opinion pieces as well as self-presentation through the use of platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok. Larger scale national projects includes the deliberate provision of air time for Indigenous African religions on public broadcast television and radio.

Recently the national public broadcaster, commissioned the production talk-show formatted production called Ingono Yomsamo.[23] According to a representative of the broadcaster, 'The [programme] enables the channel to engage on spiritual matters that often lead to many conversations. These are often unsupervised conversations that tend to see people being misdiagnosed or led astray. We are excited to collaborate . . . on the offering to educate viewers on sensitive spiritual matters' (Madibogo 2022: n.p.).

This new visibility has provided a level of social esteem that was vehemently denied to Indigenous African religions in the past and for which projects like Ingono Yomsamo provide some level of redress. The changing contexts wherein Indigenous religious traditions are located

23. There is no direct translation to English. Umsamo refers to the location of the sacred for each clan or family. Ingono literally means nipple. This term refers to the sacred or spiritual nourishment that one might expect from communing at the sacred locations of one's family or specific clan. In the context of the name of the television program we can accept the reasonable conclusion that it refers to 'the center of learning about the sacred of your family.' Special thanks to Professor Sibusiso Masondo from the University of Kwazulu Natal for the WhatsApp exchange that provided much clarity and more confusion in this regard.

allow for us to consider how foundational concepts in the study of religion may be reconfigured in order to respond to these fluctuating circumstances. In the context of heightened visibility, the absence of legal suppression, and a national commitment to the promotion of Indigenous spiritualty, perhaps the long-held position that Indigenous religions do not proselytize might be reconsidered or perhaps even reconfigured to account for this new turn.

**Indigenous religions are religions of ritual observance**

While ritual practice remains a significant feature of Indigenous African religions, this aspect is often over-emphasized in scholarship. Furthermore, when the primacy of ritual is emphasized a caveat should accompany since this contention reinforces a binary that separates ritual from belief. Colonial administrators, settlers, missionaries and later Religious Studies scholars considered ritual knowledge and practices to have far-less ontological density than matters related to religion and the sacred, expressed through subjective belief and textual output. The absence of tangible sacred places and sacred texts were weaponized in the hands of settlers who concluded that the Indigenous peoples were without religion, godless and sub-human. These factors were used to legitimize their seizing of Indigenous lands and the exert the cruel custodianship of Indigenous people.

Weaver relates the ritual aspects to the absence of text, which in turn invokes the importance of orality. The work of sacred specialists and practitioners requires that this definitional element be held up for further scrutiny. The work of Nokuzola Mndende, a scholar, sacred specialist, practitioner, and prolific author is revealing in this regard. Her academic career and public service have been directed toward producing an archive of information about Indigenous African religions that can be used for both informational and instructional purposes. She is the founding director of the Icamagu Heritage Institute.[24] A centre dedicated to the training of young Africans who want to learn about their Indigenous religious heritage and train as traditional healers. In addition to regularly producing academic texts, she has written a number of children's books which explain African cosmogony and philosophy.

The overlap of social media and Indigenous religion also reveals a 'new wave of sangomas' (Moreotsama 2019: n.p.). A media article explains,

24. The centre is located in the small rural town of Idutywa Eastern Cape, South Africa. Online: https://www.facebook.com/icamaguheritageinstitute/.

> *Traditional healers are no longer the elusive figures they used to be. Many are modern young women with day jobs, who practise their craft with a passion to heal people. Some are using social media to reach people*…. Perceptions of traditional healers have often been misinformed, judgemental and backward. It is a topic that has been sensationalised and the practice is still not seen as a reputable healing form in its own right. When you think of narratives created about African spirituality, it is almost impossible to think of it outside of the stereotype of the evil witch who helps you enchant lost lovers or stop the success of those you're envious of…. But today's traditional healers are modern, passionate, tech-savvy and focused on healing people. (Moreotsama 2019: n.p.; emphasis original)

These young practitioners are producing archives of knowledge about Indigenous beliefs, practices, ethics, and philosophies that do not follow the course of sacred textual development in Christianity or Islam, but in years to come may serve a pedagogical function that extends beyond the immediacy and temporality of ritual practice.

The status of Indigenous religious traditions as primarily religions of ritual observance and predominantly oral in nature is increasingly challenged by modern religious experts and practitioners, who seek to preserve knowledge of their beliefs and practices for present and future generations. The forms and affordances of digital media allows for the availability, circulation and recording of ritual knowledge. While ritual observance remains paramount, there is now a growing archive of mediated textual materials, produced by a variety of sacred specialists.

### Indigenous religions are solely in the hands of practitioners to define

Unfortunately, I find this definitional rudiment unsalvageable for a number of reasons. While Indigenous religions do not function with the same hierarchies and centres of power as so called world religions and even some new religious movements, there are indeed a number of religious leaders, chiefs, elders and even Indigenous legal experts that act as central figures of knowledge, dispensers of advice, and vessels of sacred mediations. The dispensing of customary law through traditional courts are examples of places and procedures in which knowledge of Indigenous religious practices is authoritatively defined and wielded by authoritative collectives.

Scholar of African Christianity, Sibusiso Masondo, explains how Indigenous African religions are continually defined by outsiders, including media, law enforcement, politicians, civil service workers along with the general public. Masondo shows how the auras of suspicion along with practices of suppression that characterised the treatment of

Indigenous African religions during colonial and apartheid times, are still prevalent in South African society despite legal and social efforts to shift this narrative. Masondo (2017: 8) hauntingly concludes, 'African religio-cultural practice are always treated with suspicion. They are evaluated harshly as the focus is always on the perceived negative aspects and never on the potential benefit that these practices would bring to society'.

Moreover, the idea that Indigenous religions are solely in the hands of practitioners to define neglects to acknowledge the ways in which coloniality[25] which refers to the construction, circulation, and control of the so called 'universals' that constitute the Western modern enterprise and uphold Western Eurocentrism and global capitalism and has fundamentally shaped the study of Indigenous religions and continues to restrict the access of Indigenous people and scholars from full participation in the processes of knowledge production. In light of the persistence of coloniality, it is necessary to acknowledge that Indigenous religions have been inordinately affected by the brutality of coloniality, and that the study of the Indigenous religions has been appropriated predominantly by non-Indigenous scholars, or scholars of Indigenous origins who have converted to world religions.

The entire process in which we are participating, including Weaver's proposal and our responses, is an exercise in defining Indigenous religions through a plurality of voices and lenses. In light of the decolonial turn, the production of knowledge about religion first requires that the racialised and racist orientation of the discipline's genesis be foregrounded. Thereafter, a considered reflection on the positionality and structural location of the researcher and their commitment to coproducing scholarship that is reparative and justice oriented should be prioritised. These are important ontological and epistemological implements that should both precede and shape the study of Indigenous religions in the future. Furthermore, an evaluation of the current, overlapping and intersectional power dynamics that define the possibilities and impossibilities for the contemporary study of Indigenous religions must be given urgent attention. As I have alluded to throughout, the work of defining and reshaping the field, is a collective socio-political and scholarly endeavour that requires reflexive action directed at redressing the historical and on-going power differentials that define the politics of knowledge production and exchange the study of religions in general and Indigenous religions in particular. I hope that this reflection will encourage others to consider the challenges that their own contexts pose in the pursuit of the decolonial study of Indigenous religions.

25. See: Mignolo and Walsh 2018.

## Rejoinder

Jace Weaver

When I first discussed my article as a possibility for the inaugural issue of *Indigenous Religious Traditions* with editor Seth Schermerhorn and we ran around the idea of a roundtable, I think both of us envisioned a fairly conventional format. That is to say, a group of scholars would respond individually to my piece, and I would write a rejoinder. Things evolved, however, somewhat differently. Graham Harvey completed his response first. Instead of sending it only to Seth and myself, he also sent it to his fellow respondents. Bron Taylor completed his next and reacted not only to me but to Graham as well. Seth and I saw that a richer conversation was developing and decided to let the conversation take its course.

I feel fortunate to have such thoughtful and generous *compagnons de route*, who while offering their critiques also model scholarly humility. Their responses make me hopeful that my little provocation might actually move the conversation along.

Graham lists seven suggestions that further pursue testing of my definitional proposal. Though he does not use the term, he wants to deal with 'lived religion'. He notes that '[a]ll religions are lived and performed locally' and that '[a]ll religions are polycentric because none of them are monolithic but are always diverse'. Of course, all religion is socially mediated. As Leonardo Boff reminded us of Christianity, the gospel is never naked. It is always culturally clothed (Boff 1991: 31; see also Weaver 2001: 247).

In his essay 'Circling the Same Old Rock', Vine Deloria wrote:

> Marxism, Indian traditions, and Christianity all share a common fate, in that they represent not clear channels of thought but broad deltas of emotion and insight so that attempting to articulate one in order to compare it with another involves con-siderably hazard. Whichever tributary of thought one might choose for comparative analysis is almost immediately disclaimed by adherents of the respective faiths in favor of the interpretation that appears most similar to the positive interpretation which they wish to give, with the result that virtually no comparison takes place. (Deloria 1984: 136)

Graham quotes me as seeking to 'identify enough commonalties to craft a definition for comparative religions purposes'. Then he writes, 'In that arena, it does not matter whether his 'characteristics' help us compare one religious tradition with another or whether they help us compare any wider range of religious phenomena. They are useful to the project of studying religions…. They draw attention to features that deserve and reward further debate'. He is precisely correct.

Graham, Bron, and Suzanne in their generous readings all intuit something I intended but did not state explicitly: my seven definitional characteristics are meant to be taken as a *group*. Graham calls them a 'package'. Bron calls them a 'rubric'. Viewing them as a rubric, the vertical axis is the seven characteristics. The horizontal axis would be something like 'Strongly True' (or evident), 'Somewhat True', and 'Not True'. Suzanne says they 'hinge' upon one another.

Bron's response demonstrates why 'we always need to listen to Bron'. I am concerned about his repeated use of the term 'essence' in its various forms. It is not my intention to contribute to an essentialist quest. Bron's concepts of 'family resemblances' and 'general tendencies' are, I believe, fruitful ones.

This project has forced me to return to the work of figures I thought had been left behind—figures like Edward Tylor (2018), Robert Lowie (1924), and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1985). Lévy-Bruhl, without any field work or first-hand knowledge, posited two basic mindsets in humankind, 'primitive' and 'Western'. His major book was translated into English as *How Natives Think*. It is, however, more instructive to look at its original 1910 title in French, <<*Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*>>. All my interlocutors agree that labels like 'primitive' and 'primal' need to be discarded. Lest one think, however, that the 'West is Best' thinking is a product only of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that person need look no further than Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard's 2008 monograph *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry: The Deception Behind Indigenous Cultural Preservation*. In it, the authors contend First Nations persons have a 'Neolithic' mentality.[26]

Regarding the proper nomenclature of 'religions' or 'religious traditions', I worry that there is a danger of subtly preserving the 'West is Best' mentality. Indigenous peoples traditionally don't have 'religions', they have 'religious traditions'. In the same way, they don't have 'laws' or 'legal systems'. They have 'law ways'. Deloria, in his seminal text *God Is Red*, uses 'religion'. Yet he reduces both Christianity and diverse Native traditions to monoliths, and by Native religion he means predominantly Souian traditions (Deloria 1994). Traditional Indigenous cultures and the religious that undergird them are totalizing systems in which it is difficult to tease apart what is religious from what is political, artistic, economic, or otherwise.

In her response, Alohalani points this out, noting there are more than 5,000 Indigenous groups worldwide. Their cultures can differ as

26. See Widdowson and Howard 2008. This incredibly racist and nearly universally reviled text was published by one of the most respected university presses in Canada.

radically as the culture of France differs from that of Tibet, and their religious system can differ as much as Christianity differs from Hinduism. She asks, 'Given their great number and the countless ways they might differ from each other, is it even possible to come up with a definition that is valid for more than 5,000 distinct Indigenous groups?' She concludes, 'Perhaps the value in attempting to define our area of study is not solely a question of finding satisfactory definitions to account for many Indigenous religious traditions but finding better approaches to studying them and discussing them'.

I concur. And I believe Alohalani would agree with Graham that the utility of my definitional characteristics is that they are useful for studying religions because they point to 'features that deserve and reward further debate'. Elsewhere, I have used the analogy of a kaleidoscope. We look through the lens and we see a pattern. Then we shake the cylinder and see an entirely different pattern, even though the bits of glass that form the picture are unchanging. Our task as scholars is learn as much as we can not only about a given pattern but also about the individual bits of glass, so that when the cylinder is shaken we know something about the new image when it forms (Weaver 1997: 33).

Suzanne's response touches upon an important point in discussing the Mi'kmaq with whom she has worked. She notes that almost all of them are Catholic, although they may also participate in 'tradition'. She points to a phenomenon common among Indigenous peoples around the globe. It is what religious historian Joseph Epes Brown calls 'non-exclusive cumulative adhesion' (1982). I prefer the term religious dimorphism. As the appellation itself implies, it is the practice of two forms of religion. It is not syncretism. There is no blending of religions, except perhaps within the person of the practitioner. Rather, it is simply a case of 'This is what I do when I go to church, and this is what I do when I go to ceremony'. Missionaries have hated the phenomenon. They expected converts to completely swap Indigenous religion for Christianity, leaving the prior form behind and, in the process, convert to Western culture, as well.

This religious dimorphism brings me to Lee-Shae Scharnick-Udemans, who focuses on three of the elements I set forth, beginning with my contention that Indigenous religions do not proselytize. She notes that the British criminalized Indigenous African religions for over a hundred years. In keeping with my last point in the previous paragraph, she quotes Dr. Nokuzola Mndende: 'Christianity and western schooling that came with missionaries and civilization were synonyms. The African traditional religious practices were condemned and forced to go underground and into internal exile… Africans had to pretend that they were Christians during the day and go underground as African religionists'

by night. The phenomenon brings to mind the crypto-Judaism and crypto-Islam following the conquest of the Iberian Peninsula by the Catholic Monarchs and the Inquisition in its wake. Scharnick-Udemans notes that, in the wake of the post-apartheid constitution, enshrining religious freedom, sacred specialists of Indigenous traditions have been inviting people back.

This mirrors, of course, processes here in the United States. From 1883 until 1934, the Bureau of Indian Affairs banned American Indian religious traditions and other cultural practices through what was officially called 'Rules for the Courts of Indian Offenses', but which were colloquially known to Natives as the Religious Crimes Codes. (In Canada, similar bans were in effect between 1884 and 1951.) Following the lifting of the suppression, the resurgence of Indigenous traditions was widespread. The process accelerated during the Red Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s, when figures like Muscogee medicine man Phillip Deere invited young people to his stomp grounds and Henry and Leonard Crow Dog revived the Ghost Dance as a political statement during the occupation of Wounded Knee.

In neither the South African nor the North American cases, however, was the return to tradition what one would call evangelization. As Scharnick-Udemans acknowledges, religious specialists were 'not approaching those without ancestral ties to a specific collective, urging them to convert'.

Regarding Indigenous traditions being religions of ritual observance or practice, Scharnick-Udemans correctly notes that scholarship has sometimes over-emphasized ritual, creating 'a binary that separates ritual from belief'. Of course, there are beliefs behind and underpinning rituals. I never meant to imply otherwise. As I state, Indigenous religions are not textual. They are not religions of theology or dogma. She notes the work of Mndende, who, through her Icamagu Heritage Institute, has sought to create an archive of information on Indigenous traditions that can be used to train religious practitioners. Similar things have again occurred here. There is an irony that, given governmental suppression and the fraught relationship between Natives and anthropologists, that nineteenth-century ethnographies have often permitted revival of lost traditions.

Finally, Sharnick-Udemans deems my final criterion—that Indigenous traditions are solely in the hands of practitioners to define—'unsalvageable'. She notes there are 'a number religious leaders, chiefs, [and] elders…that act as central figures of knowledge, dispensers of advice, and vessels of sacred mediations'. All of these actors are practitioners themselves. She concludes, 'The entire process in which we are participating, including Weaver's proposal and our responses, is an

exercise in defining Indigenous religions through a plurality of voices and lenses'. Game, set, match!

Perhaps the problem here is the imprecision of my language—two separate senses of the word 'define'—that leads to a kind of incommensurate discourse between us. We are writing as scholars *studying* religion. As an outsider, I would never presume to tell a practitioner that he or she was doing it wrong, let alone dictate or prescribe to him or her. That is the essence of being wholly in their hands to define.

Alohalani has recently joined Seth as co-editor of this new journal. She concludes her reflection, 'I would like to participate in a large-scale collaboration [among] scholars who have carried out long-term studies of specific Indigenous peoples, perhaps a forum where we can share our answers to questions such as those I have just posed'. To that end, the editors and editorial board invite not only submissions of articles, but we want to create a space too often lacking in scholarly journal—that for letters to the editor, short reactions (no more than 250 words) not only about this roundtable but about any piece in the journal. I am buoyed by this interchange and what it says about the health of our field. I thank my conversation partners. As scholars, our entire stock-in-trade is ideas. As long as one keeps it on the level of ideas, it's all fair game. I look forward to much more dialogue.

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