

# FOR ALL THOSE WHO WERE INDIAN IN A FORMER LIFE

By Andrea Smith

The New Age movement has sparked a new interest in Native American traditional spirituality among white women who claim to be feminists. Indian spirituality, with its respect for nature and the interconnectedness of all things, is often presented as the panacea for all individual and global problems. Not surprisingly, many white “feminists” see the opportunity to make a great profit from this new craze. They sell sweat lodges or sacred pipe ceremonies, which promise to bring individual and global healing. Or they sell books and records that supposedly describe Indian traditional practices so that you, too, can be Indian.

On the surface, it may appear that this new craze is based on a respect for Indian spirituality. In fact, however, The New Age movement is part of a very old story of white racism and genocide against the Indian people. The “Indian” ways that these white, New Age feminists are practicing have little grounding in reality.

True spiritual leaders do not make a profit from their teachings, whether it’s through selling books, workshops, sweat lodges, or otherwise. Spiritual leaders teach the people because it is their responsibility to pass what they have learned from their elders to the younger generations. They do not charge for their services.

Furthermore, the idea that an Indian medicine woman would instruct a white woman to preach the “true path” of Indian spirituality sounds more reminiscent of evangelical Christianity than traditional Indian spirituality. Indian religions are community based, not proselytizing religions. For this reason, there is not one Indian religion, as many New Agers would have you believe. Indian spiritual practices reflect the needs of a particular community. Indians do not generally believe their way is “the” way and, consequently, they have no desire to tell outsiders about their practices. Also, considering how many Indians there are who do not know the traditions, why would a medicine woman spend so much time teaching a white woman? A medicine woman would be more likely to advise a white woman to look into her own culture and find what is liberating in it.

However, some white women seemed determined not to look into their own cultures for sources of strength. This is puzzling, since pre-Christian European cultures are also earth based and contain many of the same elements that white women are ostensibly looking for in Native American cultures. This phenomenon leads me to suspect that there is a more insidious motive for latching onto Indian spirituality.

When white “feminists” see how white people have historically oppressed and how they are coming very close to destroying the earth, they often want to disassociate themselves from their whiteness. They do this by opting to “become Indian.” In this way, they can escape responsibility and accountability for white racism.

Of course, white “feminists” want to become only partly Indian. They do not want to be part of our struggles for survival against genocide, and they do not want to fight for treaty rights or an end to substance abuse or sterilization abuse. They do not want to do anything that would tarnish their romanticized notions of what it means to be an Indian.

Moreover, they want to become Indian without holding themselves accountable to Indian communities. If they did, they would have to listen to Indians telling them to stop carrying around sacred pipes, stop doing their own sweat lodges, and stop appropriating our spiritual practices. Rather, these New Agers see Indians as romanticized gurus who exist only to meet their consumerist needs. Consequently, they do not understand our struggles for survival, and thus they can have no genuine understanding of Indian spiritual practices.

While New Agers may think they are escaping white racism by becoming “Indian,” they are in fact continuing the same genocidal practices of their forebears. The one thing that has maintained the survival of the Indian people through 500 years of colonialism has been the spiritual bonds that keep us together. When the colonizers saw the strength of our spirituality, they tried to destroy Indian religions by making them illegal. They forced

Indian children into white missionary schools and cut their tongues if they spoke their native languages. Sundances were made illegal, and Indian participation in the Ghost dance precipitated the Wounded Knee massacre. The colonizers recognized that it was our spirituality that maintained our spirit of resistance and sense of community. Even today, Indians do not have religious freedom: In a recent ruling, the Supreme Court has determined that American Indians do not have the right to sue under the American Indian Religious Freedom Act. They have also determined that if Indian religious freedom any compelling United States interest, then government interest always supersedes Indian people's freedom of religion.

Many white New Agers continue this practice of destroying Indian spirituality. They trivialize Native American practices so that these practices lose their spiritual force, and they have the white privilege and power to make themselves heard at the expense of the Native Americans. Our voices are silenced, and consequently, the younger generation of Indians who are trying to find their way back to the Old Ways becomes hopelessly lost in this morass of consumerist spirituality.

These practices also support the subordination of Indian women to white women. We are told we are greedy if we do not choose to share our spirituality. Apparently, it is our burden to service white women's needs rather than to spend time organizing within our own communities. Their perceived need for warm and fuzzy mysticism takes precedence over our need to survive.

The New Age movement completely trivializes the oppression we as Indian women face: Indian women are suddenly no longer the women who are forcibly sterilized and are tested with unsafe drugs like Depo provera. We are no longer the women who have a life expectancy of 47 years; and we are no longer the women who generally live below the poverty level and face a 75 percent unemployment rate. No, we're too busy being cool and spiritual.

This trivialization of our oppression is compounded by the fact that now a days anyone can be Indian if he/she wants to. All that is required is that one be Indian in a former life, or take part in a sweat lodge, or be mentored by a "medicine woman," or read a how-to book.

Since, according to this theory, anyone can now be "Indian," then the term Indians no longer refers specifically to those people who have survived five hundred years of colonization and genocide. This furthers the goals of white supremacists to abrogate treaty rights and to take away what little we have left. When everyone becomes "Indian," then it is easy to lose sight of the specificity of oppression faced by those who are Indian in this life. It is no wonder we have such a difficult time finding non-Indians to support our struggles when the New Age movement has completely disguised our oppression.

The most disturbing aspect about these racist practices is that they are promoted in the name of feminism. Sometimes it seems I can't open a feminist periodical without seeing ads promoting white "feminist" practices with little medicine wheel designs. I can't seem to go to a feminist conference without the only Indian presenter being the woman who begins the conference with a ceremony. Participants then feel so "spiritual" after this opening that they fail to notice the absence of Indian women in the rest of the conference or the fact that there will be nobody discussing any pressing issues in Native American communities. And I certainly can't go to a feminist bookstore without seeing books by Lynn Andrews and other people who exploit Indian spirituality all over the place. It seems that, while feminism is supposed to signify the empowerment of all women, it obviously does not include Indian women.

If white feminists are going to act in solidarity with their Indian sisters, they must take a stand against Indian spiritual abuse. Feminist book and record stores should stop selling these products, and feminist periodicals should stop advertising these products. Women who call themselves feminists should denounce exploitative practices wherever they see them.

Many have claimed that Indians are not respecting “freedom of speech” by demanding that whites stop promoting and selling books that exploit Indian spirituality. But promotion of this material is destroying freedom of speech for Native Americans by ensuring that our voices will never be heard. Feminists have already made choices about what they will promote (I haven’t seen many books by right wing, fundamentalist women sold in feminist bookstores, since feminists recognize that these books are oppressive to women). The issue is not censorship; the issue is racism. Feminists must make a choice to respect Indian political and spiritual autonomy or to promote materials that are fundamentally racist under the guise of “freedom of speech.”

Respecting the integrity of Native people and their spirituality does not mean that there can never be cross-cultural sharing. However, such sharing should take place in a way that is respectful to Indian people. The way to be respectful is for non-Indians to become involved in our political struggles and to develop an on going relation with Indian communities based on trust and mutual respect. When this happens, Indian people may invite a non-Indian to take part in a ceremony, but it will be on Indian terms.

I hesitate to say even this much about cross-cultural sharing, however, because many white people take this to mean that they can join in our struggles solely for the purpose of being invited to ceremonies. If this does not occur, they that Indians have somehow unfairly withheld spiritual teachings from them. We are expected to pay the price in spiritual exploitation in order to gain allies in our political struggles.

When non-Indians say they will help us, but only on their terms, that is not help, that is blackmail. We are not obligated to teach anyone about our spirituality. It is our choice if we want to share with people who we think will be respectful. It is white people who owe it to us to fight for our survival, since they are living on the land for which our people were murdered.

It is also important for non-Indians to build relationships with Indian communities rather than with specific individuals. Many non-Indians express their confusion about knowing who is and who is not a legitimate spiritual teacher. The only way for non-Indians to know who legitimate teachers are is to develop on-going relationships with Indian communities. When they know the community, they will learn who the community respects as it’s spiritual leaders. This is a process that takes time.

Unfortunately, many white feminists do not want to take this time in their quest for instant spirituality. Profit making often gets in the way of true sister-hood. However, white feminists should know that as long as they take part in Indian spiritual abuse, either by being consumers of it or by refusing to take a stand on it, Indian women will consider white “feminists” to be nothing more than agents in the genocide of their people. Our spirituality is not for sale.

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