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# What Should Christians Take from the Native American Church Peyote Ceremony?

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THEO 493: Senior Seminar

Religious Rituals in Christianity and the Native American Church:  
Healing the Divine-Human Relationship

Religions throughout the world recognize there is something lacking in our relationship with the divine. Be it ignorance, disobedience, or any other form of missing the mark, it is clear that humanity has an imperfect relationship with our Creator. Some religions claim an individual needs to solve this disharmony with God on her own. Others believe there must be divine action to bring humanity into perfect relationship with God. Both Christian theology and that of the Native American Church understand God as divine physician, healing the brokenness in our lives and inviting his children into full relationship. Religious ceremonies in these traditions offer the opportunity to put one's life in God's hands, trusting his promise of healing and allowing ourselves to be purified and transformed into living the way which God intends.

Christians understand God's ultimate act of healing as Christ crucified. The Native American Church does not claim to understand God's healing methods but simply allow healing to occur, thus avoiding any discrepancy between the two traditions. Theological stipulations aside, both religions agree on the importance of God's action in the healing process. Believers of both traditions gladly receive God's offer and celebrate it in different ways through various rituals. Every Sunday Christians throughout the world remember God's healing this broken relationship through Jesus Christ, and welcome God's healing grace into their lives. In a similar way, members of the Native

American Church welcome God's healing into their lives participating in the peyote ceremony. The Christian liturgy and the Native American Church peyote ceremony have more in common than one might suppose. Both are primarily concerned with reconciling God's fallen children to him, and celebrating God's healing and man's transformation.

To begin, it is important to stress the need for religious ceremony in any religious tradition. Though God paves the way for healing this broken relationship, healing is not accomplished yet. Martin Luther described our life on earth as an ongoing healing process when he said: "This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness; not health but healing... We are not yet what we shall be but we are growing toward it; the process is not yet finished but it is going on, this is not the end but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory but all is being purified" (Forrell/Lehmann, page 32). As God's children, we get to actively participate on this journey of healing. Whatever way we celebrate God's healing of sin or broken relationship does not matter; only that we live in a continual process of growing closer to God.

There are many parallels between the peyote ceremony and a Christian service in regards to healing this relationship. A constant in these rituals is the presence of a loving God helping individuals heal by taking away their burdens. Both ceremonies also contain a supportive community who bear each other's burdens. The rituals are about purification from whatever is causing the broken relationship: disobedience to God's law, difficult emotional baggage, or whatever the person feels is hindering his relationship with God. Both traditions hope for the outcome of transformation into a life of unity with the divine. This transformation entails letting go of anything standing in the way of a complete relationship with God and will ultimately lead to absolute surrender to God's will. Like

Christianity the Native American Church's peyote ceremony is about reconciling created and Creator, healing worshipers and helping them journey through life in a meaningful relationship with God.

Recently I attended a peyote ceremony with the Oklevueha Native American Church of Ohio at Serpent Mound State Park. It was a great experience and I noticed amazing parallels with my own Lutheran background. One of the first things I realized was the ritual provided a scapegoat for the participants, a reminder or representation of God on which people cast their burdens. Rather than God taking the form of bread and wine as in the Christian Eucharist, at the peyote ceremony we encountered God in the form of fire. This fire bore all our burdens and initiated the healing process. In the fire people were told to symbolically throw any impurities: pain, fear, guilt, regret, shame, sadness, or any other burden preventing us from experiencing life to the fullest.

Before the ceremony began every person present took a small cloth pouch, put a handful of tobacco in it, and used cloth string to tie these little sacks around our necks. We were told to place any burden we held onto in this pouch. Any sin, guilt, sadness, pain, or impurity of any kind was put into this tobacco pouch. Most burdens discussed were not anything we would label "sin" but were things like mental stresses, childhood trauma, or emotional issues. Though these are not evils, they are technically "sin" by definition: experiences where we "miss the mark" and experience separation from God. Therefore it was just as important to purify people of such things in order for them to receive God's goodness into their lives. We wore the pouches around our necks all night and at a sunrise ceremony we would literally throw these burdens into the fire.

In a description of the peyote ritual *Religions of the World: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Beliefs and Practices* states: "There is no formal teaching or learning of the ritual through books, schools, or lectures....From its earliest days the ceremony has consisted of an all-night prayer meeting in a tepee, lodge, or hogan around a crescent shaped mound of earth, a sacred campfire, [or] a special peyote button" (Melton/Gordon/Baumann, page 920). There is no right or wrong way to perform a peyote ceremony and theologies behind it vary greatly. Some consider the ritual from a more Christian perspective. Others reject the idea of divine healing altogether, viewing the ritual as a type of personal healing. The only constant is that it is a spiritual healing rite with, in my experience, a scapegoat fire destroying people's impurities as Christ destroyed sin on the cross.

Though the fire was the obvious center of the ceremony, a major piece of the ritual was the peyote cactus. I often heard peyote referred to as medicine, in regards to its mental and spiritual healing properties. Peyote is a cactus with psychedelic properties that grows in the southwest United States and Mexico and has been used by Native Americans in ceremonies since before Columbus (Martin, page 102). Other sources suggest the use of the plant in religious ceremony goes back well over 1,000 years (Smith/Snake page 107). "Peyote belongs to the cactus genus *Lophophora*, of which there are two species: *L. williamsii* and *L. diffusa*" (Smith/Snake, page 106) of which only *L. williamsii* is used for religious ceremonies. Peyote contains more than fifty alkaloids, including mescaline, a psychoactive alkaloid.

Peyote is not alone as a plant crucial in religious activities. There are many naturally growing psychedelic plants which are used in aboriginal religious ceremonies.

The *echinopsis pachanoi* cactus is used in Peru in ways very similar to how American and Mexican Natives use peyote (Smith/Snake, page 107). Ibogaine, derived from the plant *tabernanthe iboga*, is an African plant used in spiritual ceremonies (Strassman, page 35). Other examples include psilocybin mushrooms which grow throughout the world; and ayahuasca, an herbal tea made by natives of South America.

Many believe these plants enable our consciousness to access areas of the brain to which we are normally unaware. At the ceremony a member of the Native American Church told me that humans should eventually be able to tap into these areas of the brain without the assistance of such substances; but until humans learn to use more than just 10-15% of our brains, we need the medicine to assist us. I researched this idea and found little research in terms of peyote, but encountered similar ideas in Rick Strassman's research on DMT, the psychedelic present in ayahuasca (Strassman, page 2).

Thus we see the significance of plants such as peyote in many religious ceremonies. As I said, the fire was the center of the ritual, but the peyote medicine was an important tool used to produce a profound religious experience. The peyote cactus is a tool making room for healing, but does no healing on its own. One church member described it this way: "The medicine creates a space for us to do the work but provides no answers on its own" (J. Scott, Rajcok interview). The medicine assists participants through the healing process and creates space for God to work.

There were obvious side-effects from the peyote medicine. The outdoor, nightlong ritual began with a ceremonial smoking of a peace pipe (with tobacco). Following this, the peyote medicine was administered. The medicine was either eaten or drunk in the form of tea. Side effects became apparent in most people after thirty to

forty-five minutes. Although peyote is labeled a hallucinogen and/or psychedelic, it does not cause hallucinations. Peyote however does give users the feeling of a heightened sense of reality, though not visually. Aside from the altered state of consciousness, the medicine's major physical side effect is that it induces vomiting. Because of this, church members normally fast on the day of a ceremony. Before the ritual began, participants were told to vomit into the fire pit when necessary. Thus the fire served as a literal place to which participants expunged impurities.

Vomit was not the worst thing people needed to get out of their systems however. Many participants came with emotional burdens and sought spiritual healing from the ceremony. Remembering that the peyote ritual is about healing our broken relationship with ourselves and God, the focus of the ceremony was purification and casting burdens into the fire. Participants needed to be cleansed of their impurities, being purified by God with the help of the medicine.

The medicine seemed to enable church members to delve deep inside themselves and focus on their problems. This is in stark contrast to other mind altering substances (alcohol being one example) which make people forget problems or deal with them in inappropriate ways. More important than any other side effect was the mental and spiritual state the medicine provided. Participants felt a heightened perception of reality and connection with themselves, the community, nature, and the divine. The leader of the ceremony told us to surrender control, let go of all expectation, and allow healing to happen.

The way Native American Church members cast their burdens in the fire reminded me of a scapegoat theology of atonement. These burdens are not just our

wrongs, but anything separating people from a perfect relationship with God. In Christian theology it is believed that Jesus Christ bore the burdens of the world when he was crucified. In his letter to the Romans St. Paul summarizes the Christian view of Jesus as divine scapegoat saying that humanity is “justified by God’s grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement” (Romans 3:24-25 NRSV).

Christian theologians have spent their lives trying to understand how Christ’s death reconciles humanity to God. Though I do not claim to understand the mind of God anymore than they did, it is clear that the cross of Christ is a healing mechanism for Christians in a way similar to the Native American Church’s sacred fire.

Like Christians, the Native American Church recognizes the lingering presence of sin in our lives. Thus both traditions provide a scapegoat on which to cast those things which separate us from God. Aside from there being similar theologies expressing the need for a scapegoat, both rituals also include purification, cleansing worshipers as they invite God’s healing into their lives. The act of vomiting in the fire and mentally throwing away burdens and impurities is what cleanses members of the Native American Church. In contrast, the Christian tradition has two major rituals of purification: the rites of Baptism and Confession.

Although Christians believe God purified humanity through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; the act of accepting this purification comes through a ritual called Holy Baptism. Many Christians believe that without the purifying waters of Baptism one cannot be saved. While it is interesting to consider why some claim a



human action is necessary for salvation, it will not be debated here. The important thing to consider here is Baptism as a purification ritual.

In the Christian tradition, the Sacrament of Holy Baptism is both an initiation rite and a rite of purification. Baptism purifies new Christians as they enter the church, symbolically washing away sin. St. Paul suggests that in Baptism initiates are essentially killing the old sinful self in order to be raised again, purified from sin. “Therefore we have been buried with him [Christ] by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4 NRSV).

In a book on the Christian liturgy Dom Virgil Michel describes the newly baptized as having “put off the old man of sin and put on the new man in Christ. He has received a share in a new life through his birth in Christ” (Michel, page 229). Edmund Schlink explores the Lutheran interpretation of Baptism and writes that “Baptism is liberation from death. Even though the baptized in their earthly life are still moving toward death, they are delivered from death” (Schlink, page 149). Baptism not only cleanses Christians from sin but also delivers them from the consequence of sin, which is death.

Christians apply the purifying effects of water to Holy Baptism; whereas members of the Native American Church utilize the purifying effects of fire. Discussing purification rituals, Richard DeMaris writes: “Purification rites could and often did use inanimate instruments like fire or water to achieve or restore purity” (DeMaris, page 99). Although members of the Native American Church would be hard pressed to say the fire is inanimate, it is important to notice that both fire and water have a strong connection to

rites of purification. DeMaris shows that even in cultures outside of Christianity and the Native American Church fire and water are recognized as powerful symbols of purification.

For Christians, Baptism is a ritual which once and for all frees them from living a life apart from God. Even with this assurance however, most Christians maintain a feeling of disunity with God. Thus, as DeMaris notes, “Having baptism as a rite of entry created a problem for the early church over time [because] purification rites are typically repeatable” (DeMaris, page 28). The purification of Baptism is only received once and only needed once. Yet believers still desire rites of purification to provide cleansing from the burdens which plague them in their daily lives.

There is an obvious need for a repeatable purification ritual in the Christian tradition. Christianity fulfills this need with the rite of Confession. This ritual is performed differently depending on denomination, but the concept is one of confessing sins to God and being purified by God’s forgiveness. And Christian Confession is not simply about admitting wrongs, but releasing any burden that hinders a perfect relationship with God. In essence, the Christian rite of Confession is a purification healing ritual.

In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “The Brief Order of Confession and Forgiveness” is the particular means of cleansing believers from sin. In the liturgy the presiding minister prays: “Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name through Jesus Christ our Lord” (ELW, page 211). The congregation responds with a

confession of sin and repentance. The minister then responds saying that by God's authority their sins are forgiven and the people are thus purified.

At its core, Confession is about releasing burdens and receiving healing. Although Christians believe the atonement of Christ paid the price for sin once and for all, "The Brief Order of Confession and Forgiveness" serves as a reminder of God's forgiveness and leaves people again purified.

Just as the fire of a peyote ritual purifies those in attendance, Confession cleanses worshipers from their burdens. While the Native American Church may not have as strong of a guilt based confession for forgiveness, it is clear that both traditions recognize the need for healing by surrendering burdens to God. Whether the ritual kills the former self as in Baptism or is believed to purify an individual from sins or harmful burdens, these rituals are about cleansing people from whatever is hindering a complete relationship with God.

On the affect of purification rituals Catherine Bell writes: "It can involve freeing a person from demonic possession, disease, sin, or karmic consequences of past lives. While some purification rites focus on personal problems and faults, others attempt to remove impersonal forms of contagion that generally afflict the human condition" (Bell, page 118). She notes the purification and healing power of rituals similar to peyote ceremony, specifically citing Ghost Dance as an example. Whatever the reason behind performing purification rituals- possession, disease, sin, karma- a cleansing of the human spirit is the goal of all. Though Christian purification is obviously different from the peyote ceremony, there are striking similarities and a single purpose.

God is always listening and ready to purify his children. Yet many people hold on to their burdens, both in the Native American Church and the Christian tradition, and are unwilling or afraid to take their troubles to God. Christians often feel ashamed or guilty and do not trust or feel worthy to accept God's forgiveness. Some Native American Church members also struggle to release burdens into the fire. When an individual is struggling to throw his burdens in the fire or cast her sins on the cross, communities in both traditions are present to assist in this process of letting go.

The need for a supportive community is expressed by St. Paul in his letter to the church in Galatia when he writes: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2 NKJV). Both the ideal Christian community and the community at the peyote ceremony I attended "fulfilled the law of Christ" by bearing each other's burdens and supporting those in need.

Though I did not talk much at the peyote ceremony, I listened as people discussed problems and others offered advice and emotional support. I felt a deep empathy for my brothers and sisters and shared their pain. It became obvious to me that one of the effects of the medicine was the heightened sense of other's pain and overwhelming compassion for them. I often found myself praying for those vomiting or those discussing hardships. Many people shared personal issues and stories they wanted to vent, and the community gladly listened as people expressed their concerns and in essence allowed us to help them cast their burdens in the fire.

One young woman experiencing pain in her life asked others to pray around her while she lay on the ground. I placed my hand on her, as did many others, while we prayed. The unifying effect of the medicine allowed members of the community to be so

in touch with one another that we couldn't help but sense each other's hardships and sympathize with those in pain. Though unaware of her background and the cause of her distress, together we bore her pain in a way I have never experienced elsewhere.

One of the most powerful instruments of healing and community building was that of song. As we sat around the fire together, one young woman in particular sang in a way which proved healing for members of the community. Several months after the ceremony she told me: "I was told that when I sang, the others could feel it in their hearts, rather than hear it with their ears. I can think of no other way to become closer or more open to someone, and it was astounding...It made me fully appreciate what I've been given, and also yearn to share this gift with others" (K. Strong, Rajcok interview). By using her gifts she helped the community and also reports that it "strengthened [her] own resolve and belief in [her]self, God, and Mother Earth" (K. Strong, Rajcok interview).

One man discussed his childhood and how he never felt loved growing up. He said that the words "I love you" were seldom used in his family, and hugs were non-existent. I sympathized with him and remembered my own family and the loving home I was raised in. I felt tremendous love for my family and great sadness that my friend grew up lacking such an environment. We listened to this man talk and supported him with our own love. I never told so many strangers I loved them- and I actually meant it. The setting of the ritual, combined with the medicine and the Spirit, allowed us to love one another and bear each other's burdens in a very familial manner. The strong community bonds we developed helped individuals who sought healing and empowered them to let go of their burdens and throw them in the fire.

In regards to the community aspect of ritual healing Catherin Bell writes: “Both scholarly and popular theories concerning the therapeutic properties of ritual have inspired many other attempts to employ ritual methods of building community, exploring identity, and evoking a sense of moral direction” (Bell, page 239). She does not have peyote ritual or the Christian liturgy particularly in mind when she writes this; however it is obvious that both traditions sense the need for a strong community which helps individuals grow and heal. Aspects from this type of ritual environment, Bells states, are what therapists try to emulate in community counseling sessions, particularly in family therapy.

A strong community is clearly important to Christianity and the Native American Church. Specifically we see how a supportive community can help heal individual members and cleanse them from impurities. St. Paul calls the church of Corinth to be one unified body: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body though many, are one body, so it is with Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12 NRSV). Paul goes on to discuss a variety of spiritual gifts to be shared with the community. This way of sharing gifts is present in religious communities throughout the world and is one of peyote ritual’s key components. Much like a Christian community, the Native American Church responded to God’s call to bear one another’s burdens using gifts of prayer, song, listening, and advice. This supportive community helped those struggling and encouraged everyone, filled with love and the desire to help in whatever way possible.

Tremendous community bonding and the purifying acts of casting burdens into the fire helped to truly transform individuals during the ceremony. Of course as one

church member reminds us, transformation is not simply a side-effect of the medicine but a personal choice to live according to the divine plan. “One has to process the experience with Native American ceremony and medicine; the event itself is not a purification in the sense that one only needs to take the medicine...It is not the medicine that causes a transformation but the person taking the medicine” (J. Scott, Rajcok interview).

Nevertheless peyote ceremony provides a powerful avenue for transformation, in much the same way that hearing the Gospel and celebrating the Eucharist offer to transform Christians.

The transformation of the Christian liturgy climaxes with the celebration of the Eucharist. This sacred meal is about inviting Jesus to live in the believer and transform him or her into the being God intends. On the purpose of Holy Communion, Bell writes: “Early Christian ritual emphasized doing the things Jesus had done. The Eucharistic meal was a celebratory repeat of a historical event in time, an anamnesis of the deeds by which Jesus had signaled the ritual founding of his community of followers, his legacy to them, and how they should understand him when he was gone” (Bell, page 213). Bell iterates the importance of Christian transformation saying that the Eucharist is generally becoming what you eat and learning to live a Christ-like life.

Yet receiving the body and blood of Christ is different from living a transformed life afterwards. Jesus’ call is complete surrender and devotion to fulfilling God’s purpose in one’s life. This transformation means “a change in the forms or structures of one's religious being...changes in a person's religious worldview, beliefs, practices, and/or lifestyle” (Dowling/George, page 455). Responding to God’s call means a change in the way you live; living not for oneself, but for God.

There are many examples of the transformative effect of the Gospel throughout history. The church is filled with powerful conversion experiences and transformations. Church fathers like Paul, Augustine, and numerous others went through incredible spiritual transformations. A personal favorite is the story of John Newton, former slave trader and author of the hymn “Amazing Grace”. This is a man who was truly transformed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He was apparently a so-called Christian his entire life; but when he truly grasped God’s grace and love for him, and understood the real meaning of the Gospel, he was transformed and changed his life.

Participants at peyote rituals feel transformed in ways very similar to the effect of a powerful Christian transformation. Though there were transformations following the ceremony I attended, nothing can be said of their long term effects at this point. Therefore it is important to consider the work of the late JS Slotkin, a University of Chicago professor who observed several peyote ceremonies in the 1950s and recorded participants’ experiences.

Slotkin writes that one Menomini Indian told him: “This Peyote has done me a world of good. It put me on the right road. It has caused me to put aside all intoxicating liquor...I have no desire for tobacco. If I keep on using this Peyote, I’m going to be an upright man towards God” (Slotkin, page 615). The man’s claim that peyote had a profound effect on his life is supported by his actions. He gave up drinking and smoking and devoted his life to God. He not only felt transformed after the ceremony, but lived a life of true transformation.

Slotkin also reports a Menomini woman in her seventies saying: “When I started eating this Medicine I began to see everything. I no longer quarreled with anyone...



When I started to eat this Medicine I began to think of the Great Spirit always, every day” (Slotkin, page 636). This too is evidence of a person transformed by the peyote ceremony. She speaks of her efforts to quarrel less and describes how the medicine increased her spirituality.

Professor and author Huston Smith has also worked with members of the Native American Church and records the story of a Winnebago who after a period of extensive vomiting said, “This accumulation of filth represented all the sins I had ever committed. With its expulsion I became pure and clean in the sight of God, and I knew that by the continued use of Peyote I would remain in that condition. I was transformed- a new man” (Smith, 124).

Though true transformation in any religious experience is rare, both the Christian tradition and the Native American Church have members who testify to God’s transformative effect on their lives. After a deeply moving Christian service or peyote ceremony, participants feel called to live a better life and transform into the creatures God intended them to be. They come away with a new zest for life and are awakened to a side of themselves they never knew existed.

Transformation may even go beyond spiritual health. There are thousands of accounts of peyote helping alcoholics overcome addiction and various physical healing testimonies (Slotkin; Smith/Snake). Though this essay’s focus is spiritual healing, it is important to note that physical health is intricately connected to all the above.

Whitewolf, or Kevin, the medicine man facilitating our ceremony explained “the medicine aligns body and spirit in a way which consequently leads to both physical and spiritual health” (K. Driggers, Rajcok interview). Kevin’s personal experience can testify

to peyote's physical healing benefits, in that he has had both HIV and Hepatitis for over twenty-five years and has survived taking only natural medicine and nothing prescribed by doctors because of their adverse side effects.

Physicians are finally beginning to take herbal medicine seriously as healers of illnesses greater than coughs and stuffy noses. The *Encyclopedia of Religious and Spiritual Development* says: "While certain spiritual dimensions of human health are gaining acceptance in medical practice and research, medicine is a long way from recognizing the spiritual healing beliefs and practices central to dominant and non-dominant cultures and religious communities" (Dowling/George, page 194).

A discussion arose at the ceremony considering the state of chemical drugs versus natural medicines. We noted how it is ironic that naturally growing plants like peyote and mushrooms, which people claim have drastically changed their lives, are generally illegal; while drugs created from altered molecular structures of processed chemicals, such as anti-anxiety or anti-depressant pills, are prescribed to hundreds of thousands of Americans each year.

There is still much for medical professionals to learn about the medicinal properties of the peyote cactus and similar medicinal plants. While doctors and medical researchers begin to explore the physical and mental healing properties of herbal medicines, so too should ministers and theologians study the spiritual healing brought on by natural medicines like peyote.

The ritual concluded with an incredible sunrise ceremony. This included drumming, chanting, dancing, and the burning of our burden pouches. I found myself running around the fire, dancing full of joy and excitement after a night spent in both

literal and figurative darkness. Afterward our medicine man said to me: “See, the sun always rises: S-O-N or S-U-N. The Son always rises” (K. Driggers, Rajcok interview). His statement recalls the beautiful imagery of light shining in the darkness conveyed in the first chapter of John’s Gospel. Kevin reaffirmed to me that just as the sun shines to enlighten the earth, so the Son shines to enlighten all mankind. It is truly a beauty of the English language that “the sun” and “the Son” are homonyms.

The final act of the ceremony was to solemnly watch our fire die out. The fire had gotten us through the night and played a major role in the healing of many people. Though the fire went out, the true light of the world had not. This true light burned in our hearts as we left, calling us to let it shine.

We experienced much more that night than described in this essay. We had journeyed through a timeless night together, heard each other’s stories, borne each other’s burdens, and been each other’s family. The night was not fun, but was certainly transforming. For some, it is fair to say, the night was emotionally painful. Thus when streams of pink and blue light finally spanned the horizon, anticipation for dawn consumed our inner darkness.

That morning I was overwhelmed with feelings of peace, joy, and a deep sense of God’s love. Realizing the parallels to my own faith, I considered the scapegoat theology of the fire, the purifying elements in the ceremony, the community bonding experiences, and how transforming this could potentially be. I felt cleansed from all my burdens and felt the love of God flowing through me. Long after the peyote medicine’s physical effects wore off, the spiritual effects remained. I am still amazed at how the ceremony allowed me to see the wondrous love of God and the beauty in everything around me.

My closeness to others, God, nature, and myself had never been so strong; and any distinctions between these faded, while oneness and unity were magnified.

I have never felt such a sense of divine unity as I did that morning. Participating in this Native American tradition broadened my religious perspective as well as strengthened the connection I have with my own faith. Despite many obvious differences, the peyote ritual has some very important similarities with the Christian tradition; the most important being an overall theme of healing mankind's broken relationship with God.

Like Christian theology, the Native American Church believes in the importance of a scapegoat to serve as a means of purification. Both traditions also maintain the importance of a supportive community to bear the burdens of one another. The goal of any religious ceremony is to get close to God and ultimately unite Creator and created into a perfect relationship. The Christian message and that of the Native American Church recognize this and allow for the transformation of participants into living a life according to God's will.

Recognizing these parallels is important, but is merely the first step in comparing religious traditions. The next step is to develop interfaith dialogues and consider what these faiths have to offer one another. In doing so it becomes clear that the Native American Church and Christianity can not only coexist, but actually compliment each other's religious perspective.

The Christian tradition can add the story of Jesus Christ to the Native American peyote ceremony. Many Native American Church members have already accepted the Gospel and incorporate Christian theology into their experience. Though the peyote

ritual is not strictly Christian, those who are Christian experience the ritual in a different, and I would argue more powerful, way. Christian Native American Church members have the background of knowing a loving God and are likely to have less difficulty surrendering control of the experience if they trust the One in control. Christians see Christ in the fire, cast their burdens in, and placing their trust in a personal and loving God, grow closer to him.

On the other hand it is also important to see what the Native American Church can add to Christianity. Many people feel spirituality is lacking in churches today. Christian services leave worshipers untransformed and as a result, church attendance is falling throughout the country. The peyote ritual offers Christians the chance to experience God in a far more intense way than possible on Sunday mornings. The ritual can serve as a reminder of God's love and grace, and provide a transformative experience which leaves participants with a genuine desire to live according to God's will. I can personally attest to the purifying and transforming effects of the peyote ritual, and this experience is open to all.

An experience like the peyote ceremony will almost certainly leave participants with a deeply intensified connection to the divine. This can rarely be said about even the most powerful Christian worship service. Incorporating a peyote ceremony into Christian life, even just once a year, would do wonders for those who feel that God is distant in their lives. Peyote ceremony may not be necessary for increasing spirituality in everyone; but to whomever accepts the call it will show there is more to this world than meets the eye while nourishing his relationship with God.

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I have neither given nor received nor have I tolerated other's use of unauthorized aid.

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