Book Review

Thomas M. Norton-Smith.
The Dance of Person and Place: One Interpretation of American Indian Philosophy
Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010.

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Why, in the midst of concerns about peak oil and pollution, the drain on health care budgets promised by an aging population, an alleged crisis in education, the Wall Street meltdown and, of course, the several wars on drugs, terrorism and obesity, should we pay attention to a small Indian tribe that has lived in the bottom of the Grand Canyon in Arizona since time immemorial, but which came to the attention of the outside world only in the past decade?

First, some background. In April, 2010, a six-year-long legal dispute between members of the Havasupai Tribe and researchers from the University of Arizona and Arizona State University was resolved. It concerned blood samples that had been collected from the Havasupai people. The universities had told the donors that the blood would be used for research into diabetes (a serious medical problem for these people and other aboriginal Americans). They were glad to help.

Some of the collected samples, however, also found their way into other studies, including population migration. Modern science has confirmed that human beings have a common origin in Africa, and that diverse population types (commonly known as "races") are all descendents of those original *homo sapiens*, who had, in turn, evolved from antecedent members of the genus *homo* roughly 200,000 years ago.

Whatever the scientific evidence, this theory conflicts with Native myths of origin, though it does so no more than it runs roughshod over the claims of fundamentalist Christians who, *in extremis*, believe that the Earth was created according to the tale told in the first chapter of *The Book of Genesis*. By these lights, and according to the calculations of James Ussher, the 17th-century Anglican Bishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, that set the date that God created the Earth as 23 October, 4004 BCE. Today, few cosmologists, geologists and paleontologists would agree. Traditional Native beliefs are similarly challenged.

The Indians can teach us all some lessons.

The legal matter was resolved in a settlement that provided the Havasupai people with an apology, financial compensation both in the form of a cash pay-out of $700,000, new educational and medical facilities, a number of dedicated scholarships to postsecondary educational institutions in Arizona, and a framework for a new, constructive relationship between the two parties. The universities, in turn, were given a practical lesson in research ethics. The dispute established an important precedent in controversies involving researchers who must now acquire "informed consent" from people prior to engaging them as subjects in academic studies—archaeological, biological, medical, psychological, or of any other sort.

The case also reveals a lot about the question of cultural relations in general. It is a relationship that matters.

All of the "hot button" issues today from social unrest in the Middle East to the price of gas in Peoria, Illinois and from debates about privatization of public goods and services to the curriculum of primary schools need to be addressed, and they need to be addressed by people who understand that quick repairs to parts of a system may no longer be adequate; instead, some serious rethinking of whole economic, political and social systems may be in order. Such rethinking cannot arise *ex nihilo*. We need context, and what better context is there to start considering the so-called "clash of civilizations" that confronts us, to say nothing of the impending ecological crisis that threatens civilization as a whole, than revisiting past and existing contrasts in culture and philosophy? If we face a massive and almost metaphysical shake-up in the way our species apprehends itself and its environment (and a plausible case can be made for just such a dramatic moment), then we might be well-served by attending to our recent past for clues about how to proceed. The Indians, in short, can teach us all some lessons.

The march of Western imperialism can, without total distortion, be symbolized in three iconic figures: the soldier, the merchant and the missionary. When explorers and conquerors set out from Europe in the late fifteenth century, and continued their onslaught throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth and even into the twentieth centuries, their motives may have been mixed, but they almost always showed up on "virgin" shores with guns, trade goods and Bibles. Sometimes, they almost immediately engaged in acts of out-and-out genocide, beginning with the annihilation of the Arawak Indians on Hispaniola. There the Native population declined from at least 60,000 in 1508 to about 2,000 in 1532. Sometimes the Euro-American contact initially led to mutually satisfactory trading relationships and sometimes the indigenous peoples and the newcomers displayed rudimentary mutual respect. More often, surviving documents foreshadow Rudyard Kipling, and reflect the condescending attitudes of the Europeans toward those they encountered and considered to be "half-devil and half-child."

Today, perhaps in an effort to bury memories or at least to modify settlement of long-standing land claims, the descendents of the original colonists are more "civilized." They occasionally perform ceremonial acts of contrition for the behaviour of earlier Spaniards, Portuguese, English, French, Dutch, Belgian and, latterly, German and Italian colonizers. Modest restitution in some material form and grudging respect for Native sovereignty are also occasionally available.

Typical Western reactions to traditional Native beliefs and customs range from incomprehension to romanticism, and from condescension to appropriation.

Still, problems remain, and they are most discomfiting among those Europeans and other immigrants whose political sympathies have turned to the victims of European expansion. Contemporary children of the Enlightenment—anthropologists, geneticists, social workers and other masters of the natural and social sciences—are probably more likely to observe the

niceties of liberal opinion and to embrace at least the idea of human solidarity and human rights than some of their compatriots (especially those who invest heavily in timber, petroleum and other natural resources that are often inconveniently located on or under Native soil. Moreover, generations of Marxists and other radical critics of modern social arrangements are apt to declare a political preference for the oppressed rather than the oppressors, and to add rhetorical support for Native rights. Caught between their stated morality and stubborn reality, they tussle with the problem of what to do in the genuine interest of those they purport to support. It is, however, when the analytical, empirical and doggedly rational mind of the European Enlightenment comes face-to-face with the reality of alternative cultures than matters become truly complicated. Then, what has become known as the “clash of civilizations” is most visible, and the resulting prospects and perils become most significant.

One important locus of cultural stress concerns the elusive matter of “spirituality.” Typical Western reactions to traditional Native beliefs and customs range from incomprehension to romanticism, and from condescension to appropriation. (In living memory, for example, “hippies” and other questers came in droves to Native communities seeking to partake of their ancient “ways”; Carlos Castenada gained an enormous following; and newly fashionable Indian traditions and folklore temporarily improved local tourist industries, though some tribal elders were not impressed and others were not even amused.)

In the interest of full disclosure, I was the editor of a science and technology magazine for Canadian elementary and secondary school teachers about twenty years ago. It featured on its masthead a famous quotation attributed to Chief Seattle: “We do not inherit the land from our ancestors,” it said, “we borrow it from our children.” It was a nice sentiment that suggested respect for the environment and an overall level of ecological consciousness that was, I thought, slightly ahead of its time. Nonetheless, I shudder to think of it now, for the people who came up with the quote had no idea who Seattle was, what his words meant to his people, and whether they had anything in common with a publication conjured up by middle-aged white men in a major modern metropolis. So much my own declaration of white man’s guilt.

Norton-Smith performs an important service for citizens and scholars, Natives and non-Natives alike. He is equipped to do this. A self-described “mixed-blood Shawnee,” who is “well schooled in the concepts and methodologies of Western philosophy of mathematics and logic …”

Those of us who are more enduringly interested in the historical cultural contact and the continuing connections between Native and non-Native Americans, who wish to better understand the relationships among religions, philosophies, sciences and technologies as they are practiced in diverse American cultures, have more to think about than guilt and resentment, exploitation and restitution. In *The Dance of Person and Place*, Thomas M. Norton-Smith performs an important service for citizens and scholars, Native and non-Native alike. He is equipped to do this. A self-described “mixed-blood Shawnee,” who is “well schooled in the concepts and methodologies of Western philosophy of mathematics and

logic," Norton-Smith is quietly poised at the fulcrum of cultural difference. He is also politically astute.

While members of non-Native societies fall all over themselves in an effort to find language that will properly respect the "other," Norton-Smith embraces the word "Indian." With his implied permission, I will now do so too. He says frankly, that it is a "name imposed by colonial powers that recalls the disease, depredations, and dispossessions Native peoples have suffered at their hands." He intimates that euphemisms often hypocritically adopted to deflect embarrassment are no substitute for justice. He also points out that the *Constitution of the United States* and the many treaties between the USA and the sovereign Indian nations employ the term to identify parties to those agreements. Given the diplomatic history of US-Indian relations, it is not hard to imagine efforts to abrogate those treaties if, as he says, "all of the Indians [are] gone—*replaced by Native Americans*." He is right to say that this is not a trivial point.

Norton-Smith is also quick to remind us of a crucial but often neglected fact of Indian life: namely, that there is no such thing as Indian life. American Indians do share at least one characteristic—an unhappy relationship with the non-Americans who arrived from Europe to seize their lands and undermine their cultures, where they did not kill or enslave them from the outset. They do not, however, share all others. There is no monolithic Indian society within the United States, much less in Canada, Mexico, Central and South America. Indeed, the diversity within Indian cultures is surely greater than the diversity among the Europeans who migrated to the Western Hemisphere, mainly after the initial voyages of Christobal Colon a little over 500 years ago. After all, the Europeans mainly shared the common (if internally fractious) religion of Christianity. They partook, to various degrees, in the political economy known as mercantilism. And, although there were a number of vernacular languages, many among their more educated leaders—lawyers, classicists, scientists, diplomats and the like—were familiar with the overarching language of Latin. Such uniformity was nowhere evident among the Indians of the Pacific Northwest, the southwestern desert, the plains and the eastern woodlands.

Norton-Smith is also quick to remind us of a crucial but often neglected fact of Indian life: namely, that there is no such thing as Indian life.

Nonetheless, despite diversity in symbolic culture, material culture and political economy, Norton-Smith does build his construction of Indian philosophy upon a plainly stated thematic foundation. Common to Indian thinking or, as he prefers, "a dance of person and place," are concepts of "relatedness and circularity as world-ordering principles, an expansive conception of persons, and the semantic potency of performance."

By relatedness is meant something akin to what the more sensible of contemporary ecologists understand and study. It is also found in the basic beliefs of aboriginal peoples everywhere. It is chiefly premodern. It crops up in some Eastern religions and philosophies. Despite their variety, they can all be seen as examples of premodern thinking.

In the alternative, radical divisions among human beings, between human beings and other animals, and between animals and their physical environments are generally the product of an empirico-analytical mentality that prefers separation, difference and allocation to categories as against connection, similarity and holistic appreciation. They seem to have emerged in something called the European Enlightenment, when science began to trump religion as the best way to understand the world. They are commensurate with modernism.

Oddly, it is the second collection of attitudes and ideals that fulfill the ancient promise of *The Book of Genesis*. In addition to the Abrahamic myth of origin, God admonishes humanity to "be fruitful and multiply," to "subdue" the Earth, and to exercise "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." That perception, arguably the Abrahamic God's biggest mistake, is at the root of the Western ideology of mastery. It doesn't seem to have taken a dominant place in Western society until the extraordinary advances in science and technology that, not coincidentally, took place at about the same time as European adventurers took off to conquer the peoples of the world. Such beliefs seem to have little place in Indian philosophy.

By circularity is meant something similar to what ancient civilizations such as the Greeks might have recognized and what an abundance of preliterate societies around the globe would find congenial—a world constructed on eternal verities, moving mainly according to the wheels of life and the changing seasons that always recur. It is opposite to the Western linear logocentrism that implies not a time's eternal circle of life and death, but time's arrow, propelled aggressively onward and progressively upward with no sense of measure, no limit and no final destination, but only the restive, sometimes lethally impatient quest for novelty and improvement (and often the confusion of the one with the other). "The perfectibility of man," cried D. H. Lawrence, "ah heaven, what a dreary theme! The perfectibility of the Ford car!" Circularity does not admit of infinite progress, but it does admire excellence and encourages lives well-lived within a world well-made, and fully within the boundaries and with all the possibilities and constraints of life as it is.

An expansive definition of persons betokens a vital connection among all elements in nature. Norton-Smith quotes ethnographer J. W. Powell, writing in 1877, who marveled that the Indians "do not separate man from the beast," but suppose humans "simply to be one of the many races of animals." Powell thinks, he says, that Indians reduce humanity to the status of brutes, whereas Norton-Smith insists that, for the Indians, "all human and non-human beings are raised to the ontological and moral status of a *person*."

Finally, by the semantic potency of performance, Norton-Smith follows in the tradition of those who have understood that human experience and understanding depend upon the mode of social communication through which people apprehend and share their perceptions and interpretations of events and patterns of events.

Oral cultures are different from cultures in which the written word replaces oratory, in which learning is individualized and isolated, and in which the intimacy of sound and gesture are reduced to marks on a printed page or, contemporarily, to pixels. Socrates understood this difference and was appalled by literacy. McLuhan understood this difference and looked forward with decidedly mixed feelings to the superseding of writing by instantaneous,

disembodied electronic media. We can all look forward to the next and perhaps more intrusive method of conducting human relations with technological prostheses as we "morph" according to at least a few dystopian futurists, into cyborgs.

In Native religion and culture, however, performance remains primary. Songs, dance, prayer and the declamation of speeches and legends express a worldview in symbols; but, these signifiers do not so much "stand for" or "represent" something else in the allegedly "real world," in the same way that acronyms (IBM, WMD or S&M) betoken entities and actions that are more awesome or more sublime than the written word itself. Instead, the line between the sign and the signified is blurred, and the telling of a story is part of the story itself.

He admits that he is saying nothing new, for the many parts of the complex narrative he presents can be found elsewhere. What he does accomplish is the building of bridges between modes of understanding, and he does it under very difficult circumstances indeed.

As with other parts of his perspective Norton-Smith readily acknowledges his debt to his teachers. He has learned deeply from mathematician-philosopher Nelson Goodman (1906-1992), upon whose work in "mereology" much of Norton-Smith largely depends. He also pays tribute to Indian author and activist Vine Deloria (1933-2005), to Sam Gill (whose ongoing work at the University of Colorado at Boulder informs Norton-Smith's treatment of performativity in Indian culture), and others. Straddling two cultures, he readily acknowledges that the value of his "one interpretation" does not arise from its uniqueness, for it is largely derived from the thought of others. He admits that he is saying nothing new, for the many parts of the complex narrative he presents can be found elsewhere. What he does accomplish is the building of bridges between modes of understanding, and he does it under very difficult circumstances indeed. He weaves together the emic and the etic perspectives in an engaging application of theory to experienced reality in "a culturally sophisticated constructivist perspective." It is as impressive, but not as daunting as it sounds.

Professionals experienced in philosophy and cultural anthropology will find that this book adds substantially to their understanding of fundamental approaches to the subject matter. At the same time, readers unused to the sometimes arcane interests and opaque language of the intellectual elite (broadly defined), will find that Norton-Smith is also an excellent communicator. He wants to and succeeds in reaching a wider audience than can be found in dusty university libraries and faculty offices. He explains clearly what needs to be explained in order to grasp the fundamental issues and concepts that he has gleaned from Western thought, but his special gift is applying them to the understanding of Indian and Western cultures so as to illuminate both the differences and the similarities, and to bring the benefits of good, respectful conversation to each side.

About the Author:

Howard A. Doughty teaches in the Police Studies and Public Safety program at Seneca College as well as in the Bachelor of Social Work and Bachelor of .Science in Nursing programs at Seneca and York University in Toronto.