

Parliament of Religions on the Prairie: Standing Rock as Interreligious Event

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The 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago is traditionally seen as the public inauguration of formal interreligious dialogue in United States history and the history of the modern West.¹ Initiatives in interreligious encounter since that time have, with some degree of variation, followed the essential model of the nineteenth-century Parliament, organizing mass spectacles with a quasi-academic character and, despite rising levels of self-criticism, the shared ethos of a liberal Protestant ecumenical gathering and a secular educational forum. Unjustly marginalized at the original Chicago meeting, Native American leaders and groups have subsequently contributed to the modern interreligious movement in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons. Rarely, however, have Native Americans served as the principal organizers of modern interreligious events, nor have the occasions been motivated by or structured according to principles or customs emerging from Indigenous wisdom traditions.²

The phenomenon now known to the world as Standing Rock fundamentally challenged and changed this pattern of interreligious meeting on both theoretical and practical grounds. Local, national, and international media accounts have portrayed events surrounding the 2016-17 opposition of the Standing Rock Nation and its allies to Energy Transfer Partners' Dakota Access Pipeline project (DAPL) primarily in terms of a paradigm of protest. Individuals and groups associated with Standing Rock have been routinely dubbed protestors, and local parlance in the early months of the experience permanently christened Oceti Sakowin north of the Cannonball River in south-central North Dakota as the "protest camp." Consistently, and with some justification, both proponents and critics of the resistance effort have measured the No-DAPL campaign according to the record or perceived standards of the U.S. civil rights movement and the legacy of free speech and dissent in the American constitutional tradition. The profoundly religious and interreligious dimensions of the Standing Rock phenomenon, however, have been largely misunderstood or ignored.

¹ See Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Became the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: Harper, 2002).

² See Richard Hughes Seager, *The World's Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009) and Richard Hughes Seager, ed., *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism: Voices from the World's Parliament of Religions, 1893* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1994).

In this essay, I attempt to re-envision Standing Rock as an interreligious event on par with the historic 1893 Parliament and the series of interfaith meetings organized for decades in its spirit. Standing Rock, I suggest, constitutes a turning point in the history of the modern interreligious movement and as such deserves to be recognized as one of the most remarkable interfaith gatherings ever held on the North American continent. Arguably Oceti Sakowin and its related encampments represent not only the greatest Native American tribal gathering since the nineteenth century but the most extraordinary outdoor interfaith “camp meeting” in American history. Over the course of several months, individuals and groups representing Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Unitarian Universalist, Wiccan, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Old Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox traditions assembled with Native American spiritual leaders from dozens of nations and an informal coalition of Indigenous leaders from around the world, forming not only a parliament of the world’s religions on the prairie but one of the first modern interfaith events informed by Indigenous values and governed by traditional Indigenous practices.

Writing from the perspective of a sympathetic participant-observer, I trace the development of the Standing Rock interreligious experience from the spring of 2016 to the aftermath of the February 2017 camp evictions. Still marveling at its unparalleled features and its transformative impact, I seek to identify Standing Rock as a milestone in Native American history, U.S. history, and the global movement striving for interreligious engagement and interfaith friendship.

Surprise in a Land of Surprises

The Water Protector movement, centered at Standing Rock Nation on the Missouri River, had its genesis in the confluence of cause, circumstance, conviction, and a set of uniquely gifted and committed individuals.³ No mainstream pundit in the spring of 2016 anticipated such a resurgence of Native American activism or First Nations collective consciousness. No one, outside of Indian liberation and cultural renewal communities, predicted the rise of Indigenous self-determination on such a global scale. No one, especially in Euro-American circles, was prepared for the emergence of the astounding city in the flood plain called Oceti Sakowin, invoking both the name of the great Sioux nation and the massive Native encampment that preceded the Greasy Grass Fight of 1876—what Sicangu Lakota historian Joseph M. Marshall III called the greatest Indian gathering “in the era before reservation borders and square walls.”⁴ Certainly no one, in any sector of society, imagined in early 2016 that the state of North Dakota would dominate world headlines for months.

Personally I was little prepared for the cascade of events that would transform my rather conventional academic life in the fall semester of 2016. As the No-DAPL movement gained momentum, I was beginning my second year in university ministry and theology at the University of Mary in North Dakota, a small Catholic liberal arts and pre-professional

³ For information on Standing Rock Reservation, see Donovan Arleigh Sprague and Rylan Sprague, *Standing Rock: Lakota, Dakota, Nakota Nation* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2015).

⁴ Joseph M. Marshall III, *The Day the World Ended at Little Bighorn: A Lakota History* (Penguin Books, 2007), 34.

institution founded by Benedictine sisters in 1959. Just south of Bismarck, the state capital, the university is set on a wind-swept prairie bluff overlooking the Missouri River. The high-modernist, Bauhaus-style architecture, with its pressed concrete and severe right angles, turns off some visitors, but students consistently refer to their “beautiful” campus, mainly because of the view from campus, which especially at sunset is quite stunning.

In her best-selling spiritual memoir *Dakota*, Kathleen Norris speaks eloquently of “a land of little rain and few trees, dry summer winds and harsh winters, a land rich in grass and sky and surprises.”⁵ By mid-September 2016, plenty of surprises were on their way. I was teaching my survey of U.S. religious history, assigned a classroom on the western wing of the University’s School of Business generously appointed with tall and wide-angle windows. The view from my lectern offered a glorious panorama of the Missouri River valley. Normally I would concentrate on the awe-inspiring flight patterns of thousands of geese and their beautiful cries of direction and perhaps even aspiration. This September, as chatter about the mounting No-DAPL protest on the airwaves and in the faculty lounge intensified, drum beats, horses’ hooves, the untethered speech of dogs, the cries of playful children, the chopping of wood and the hammering of nails, the clatter of security helicopters, and smoke from a thousand open fires sixty miles south on State Highway 1806 began to transform not only my classroom experience but my sense of personal and academic vocation as well.

A Unique Coalition of Leaders

The Oceti Sakowin experience means many things to people who lived there, to the Water Protectors who placed themselves on the front lines of direct action, to the diverse population of Standing Rock Reservation, to the residents of Bismarck and Mandan and surrounding towns, to those who observed from afar, and to those who today continue to try to communicate its meaning in newsroom, classroom, barroom, boardroom, and courtroom. Individuals who were associated with the movement, as leaders, advocates, or sympathizers, attempt to summarize its significance with a word or short pregnant phrase: a critique of economic addiction to oil, an expression of First Nations sovereignty, a quest for alternatives to predatory capitalism, a warning of ecological disaster, a prophecy against systemic racism, an exposure of historical trauma, a bold step toward decolonization, a vision of what historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz has called “life after empire.”⁶ For many, the best way to capture its essence is simply: *Mni wiconi*—“Water is life.”

For me, Standing Rock points to all of these realities, but it especially stands out as a one-of-a-kind experience of interreligious cooperation and celebration. Spontaneous, Native-led, holistic, nonviolent, documented by drones and a thousand cell phones, monitored and threatened by militarized law enforcement, intergenerational, and profoundly shaped by the exigencies of the outdoor environment (by January 2017, we had nearly five feet of snow), Standing Rock must be seen as one of the most unusual

⁵ Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), 2.

⁶ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 235.

interreligious events of all time. Speaking from personal experience, it was unlike anything I had ever witnessed before.

The leadership of the interreligious movement contributed especially to its uncommon character. The result of a rare mixture of grassroots democracy, organic collaboration, non-Native deference to Native priorities, a “listen first, act second” philosophy, and the “showing up” of an unpredictable set of persons, the camp experience wove the talents, passions, insights, and survival skills of many people into a seemingly improvised patchwork quilt of prayer, mutual respect, and spiritually infused resistance. Quickly, however, particular individuals emerged as singular leaders in the movement.

Chief Arvol Looking Horse set the stage for Oceti Sakowin’s collective sense of spiritual mission. The Nineteenth Generation Keeper of the Sacred White Buffalo Calf Pipe Bundle, he is perhaps the best-known living spiritual leader of the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota peoples. Born on the Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota, he is the great-great grandson of the Minneconjou Lakota chief and Ghost Dance leader Big Foot (Spotted Elk), murdered along with his people in the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890. Author of *White Buffalo Teachings*, frequent columnist for *Indian Country Today*, founder of the Big Foot Riders, and longtime proponent of a globally recognized World Peace and Prayer Day,⁷ Chief Looking Horse was the principal architect of the camp’s great December interfaith meeting, one of the unforgettable moments of the entire No-DAPL experience.

Johnnie Aseron also played an indispensable role in molding Oceti Sakowin’s interfaith character. A Lakota Hunka teacher, artist, composer, and writer, he came to the camp with a long history of community organizing and a rich experience of working with Indigenous leaders around the world. Director of the International Indigenous Peoples Village in Australia and founder and executive director of the Inter-Nātional Initiative for Transformative Collaboration, Aseron served as Wellness Initiative and Interfaith Coordinator at Oceti Sakowin. Perhaps one of the media’s most sought-after people in the camp experience, he functioned as one of the principal bridge figures in the movement, articulating contemporary Native values and aspirations in terms that non-Native people of faith could understand and appreciate.

According to witnesses, an early turning point in the movement was a conversation among elders and allies, including Aseron, in the camp’s central meeting tent during which a Native leader scanned the assembly and asked, “Where are the Bismarck faith communities?”⁸ The question was appropriately pointed and tragically on target. From beginning to end, most Bismarck clergy and congregations were silent and inactive during the No-DAPL experience. The well-publicized upper Midwestern “nice” syndrome explains the failure to act to a degree, but a striking lack of prophetic self-consciousness also permeates the religious leadership of the state (which can be roughly divided into three unequal segments: part Roman Catholic, part Lutheran, and part evangelical, Pentecostal, and non-denominational). A “land of strong churches,” as historian David Danbom has noted, North Dakota is not particularly known for its religiously driven social

⁷ See Chief Arvol Looking Horse, *White Buffalo Teachings* (Dreamkeepers Press, 2001). See also Jerry Friedman, ed., *Earth’s Elders: The Wisdom of the World’s Oldest People* (Earth’s Elders, 2005).

⁸ Interview with Rev. Karen Van Fossan, 29 September 2017.

consciousness. “White North Dakotans,” he admits, “show relatively little interest in the travails of Native Americans.”⁹

A conspicuous exception to this pattern is Rev. Karen Van Fossan, the Illinois-born Euro-American minister of the Bismarck-Mandan Unitarian Universalist Fellowship and Church. The only Unitarian Universalist clergy person in the entire state of North Dakota, she is a licensed counselor, writer, humanities scholar, activist, and artist. Her 2017 film *Standing Rock: The Clean-Up That Didn't Make the News* was featured at both the Standing Rock Film Festival and the North Dakota Human Rights Film Festival. Van Fossan was not only deeply involved in daily life at Oceti Sakowin; her congregation was the only local religious community to declare itself in solidarity with the Water Protector movement, regularly supplying camp participants with food, clothing, and other forms of support, tangible and intangible. In a statement that fast made the rounds in social media during 2016-17, she spoke provocatively of Standing Rock as “the center of the world right now.”¹⁰

A fourth individual notable in this unofficial leadership circle is Rev. John Floberg, supervising priest for three Episcopal congregations at Standing Rock Sioux Nation and canon missionary for the Episcopal Diocese of North Dakota. The Euro-American Christian minister from the Reservation most active in camp life, Floberg merits attention especially because of his role in calling the historic clergy gathering in the fall of 2016—the first of the major episodes in the memorable interfaith story of Standing Rock.

A Chronicle of Uncommon Moments

Four main events, displaying the influence of these leaders and their collaborators, define the interfaith dimension of the Standing Rock phenomenon. Some drew the attention of local, national, and international media. Others never appeared on the radar screen of the mainstream press.

The clergy gathering at Oceti Sakowin, November 2-3, 2016, underscored what Native leaders had been saying all along: the No-DAPL protest was at heart a spiritual and nonviolent movement of prayer. Floberg issued his Facebook call to “stand with Standing Rock” on October 22, expecting, as he confessed, about one hundred fellow ministers to participate. Less than two weeks later, over 500 clergy from all across the country descended on south-central North Dakota, negotiating, many for the first time, isolated rural roads in the dead of winter, and competing with white-tailed and mule deer hunters for seats on flights in and out of Bismarck’s four-gate airport. Many denominations were represented. The Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., and the United Church of Christ were particularly successful in rallying their pastors. The Unitarian Universalist Association accounted for over a tenth of the ministers, which included its president, Rev. Peter Morales. The dramatic moments of the event included Floberg’s

⁹ David B. Danbom, “North Dakota: The Most Midwestern State,” *Heartland: Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States*, ed. James H. Madison (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 111, 121.

¹⁰ Interview with Van Fossan. Carol Kuruvilla, “Something Extraordinary Happened at Standing Rock a Few Hours before Victory,” *Huffington Post*, 6 December 2016 (https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/interfaith-prayer-standing-rock_us_5845c7d0e4b055b31398a38d).

peaceful but direct confrontation with law enforcement officials on the highway's contested Backwater Bridge, the ritual burning of church documents advocating the sixteenth-century Christian "doctrine of discovery," and, later, acts of civil disobedience initiated by some of the ministers at the state capitol—unapproved by either Floberg or the Native leaders of Oceti Sakowin.¹¹

A week and a half later, on the Sunday following the historic 2016 U.S. presidential election, Johnnie Aseron and Karen Van Fossan convened an interfaith prayer service at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Bismarck. Held on the front lawn of the church, facing the state capitol, the event included representatives from Native American, Atheist, Hindu, Muslim, Protestant, Quaker, Unitarian Universalist, and Roman Catholic traditions. Participants read from world scriptures, recited prayers and poems, and offered songs. My personal contribution was the interfaith "Prayer for Our Earth" from Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical letter on creation care, which includes this series of timely petitions:

Bring healing to our lives,
 that we may protect the world and not prey on it,
 that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction.
 Touch the hearts
 of those who look only for gain
 at the expense of the poor and the earth.
 Teach us to discover the worth of each thing,
 to be filled with awe and contemplation,
 to recognize that we are profoundly united
 with every creature
 as we journey towards your infinite light.¹²

Local television covered the event, and the atmosphere was a curious blend of joyful community and rising anxiety. Eight days later, in severe winter conditions, police and National Guard forces executed their now infamous nighttime assault against unarmed Water Protectors with water cannons, tear gas, and rubber bullets. By this time, as temperatures dropped and snow accumulated, many in the movement were drawing eerie parallels between No-DAPL 2016 and the attack on defenseless Native people by the Seventh Cavalry at Wounded Knee in December of 1890.

Without a doubt, the Interfaith Day of Prayer at Oceti Sakowin on Sunday, December 4, was the high point of the Standing Rock interfaith experience. Called by Chief Looking Horse, and orchestrated largely by Aseron and Van Fossan, the event drew thousands of supporters to camp in snow and sub-freezing temperatures. "The hearts of all people's faiths," Looking Horse, declared, "must now unite in believing we can change the

¹¹ See Gregg Brekke, "Hundreds of Clergy Gather in North Dakota to Support Indigenous People Blocking Pipeline," *Christian Century*, 11 November 2016 (<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2016-11/hundreds-clergy-gather-north-dakota-back-indigenous-people-blocking-pipeline>).

¹² Pope Francis, *Laudato Si', Praise be to You: On Care for Our Common Home* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015), paragraph 246.

path we are now on.”¹³ The day’s schedule included a sunrise water ceremony, a midmorning interfaith prayer service, a communal lunch, and afternoon interfaith conversations. African-American philosopher-theologian Cornell West offered supportive remarks during the prayer service, decrying white oppression of Native peoples and cultures as America’s “original sin,” and Native veterans marched in dramatic procession down the camp’s long Flag Row. Later in the day, when Standing Rock tribal chairman David Archambault II announced that the Army Corps of Engineers had denied Dakota Access an easement to cross under the Missouri River, the interfaith gathering turned into an extemporaneous outdoor winter celebration. Again, the vast majority of the events were held outside around Oceti Sakowin’s central sacred fire.

After the forced closing of the camp, a second interfaith prayer service was held at the Unitarian Universalist Church on Friday, March 10—curiously indoors, despite rising temperatures and melting snow. The event coincided with the Native Nations March in Washington, DC, and constituted Bismarck’s response to the invitation to “take peaceful action at home.” Matthew Lone Bear, a Hidatsa man affiliated with the congregation, initiated the program as a demonstration of support for the march, and Van Fossan served as principal organizer and officiant. Native American, Hindu, Latter-day Saint, Protestant, Quaker, Unitarian Universalist, and Catholic speakers offered prayers and meditations. This time I contributed one of the best known prayers from the medieval mystic—and now truly interfaith saint—Francis of Assisi: the “Canticle of the Creatures,” honoring Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Sister Water, Mother Earth, and Sister Bodily Death.

Since the March service, interreligious work in the spirit of Oceti Sakowin has continued to move forward in North Dakota. Representatives from Nonviolent Peaceforce, based in Belgium, offered interfaith reconciliation workshops at the Unitarian Universalist Church and Bismarck’s United Church of Christ, at a meeting of my University’s Christian Leadership Center and at the Benedictine monastery associated with the University. An interfaith group for truth and reconciliation, meeting periodically at area churches and the local United Tribes Technical College since the spring, is currently organizing congregational learning circles focused on issues such as historical racism and an educational tour of Native reservations in North and South Dakota. For several months, an informal coalition of local residents, representing multiple faiths and coordinated by the Unitarian Universalist congregation, has provided court support for the scores of Water Protectors and allies facing legal charges and incarceration. Most recently, local clergy and lay people, inspired largely by the experience of Standing Rock, offered a Cultural Competency Seminar at the state Heritage Center featuring facilitators Rev. Sunitha Mortha of the Global Mission Unit of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and Dr. Cheryl Ann Kary, executive director of the Sacred Pipe Resource Center in Mandan, North Dakota.

Cautious hope is in the ascendancy, but the racism and injustice that sparked the No-DAPL movement—the same “contempt for Indians” that Kenneth Tilsen, founder of the Wounded Knee Legal Defense/Offense Committee, condemned decades ago—

¹³ “Indigenous Chief Calls Religious Leaders to Standing Rock,” *Uplift*, 5 November 2016 (<http://upliftconnect.com/religious-leaders-standing-rock/>).

continue to lurk barely beneath the surface of Midwestern “nice” like oil under the Missouri.¹⁴ John Floberg received an honorary doctorate for his contributions to the movement but today remains an isolated priest on a Reservation battling the all too familiar issues of despair and isolation. Chief Looking Horse, revered at the United Nations and meetings of the Parliament of the World’s Religions, is a marginal spiritual figure in his own land. Johnnie Aseron’s Inter-Nātional Initiative for Transformative Collaboration, a sign of great hope for many in the movement, is little known outside a small but growing circle of supporters. Karen Van Fossan, a rising star in her own denomination, is no stranger to hate mail at home. Matt Lone Bear is currently in the news again, now because of the unexplained disappearance of his sister, a tragedy not uncommon in North Dakota. And meanwhile, every day brings new evidence of dangerous leaks in Dakota Access Pipeline.

The Unknown Future of Oceti Sakowin’s Legacy

After the historic 1893 World’s Parliament of the Religions, the extraordinary “White City” of Chicago’s Columbian Exposition, held to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Columbus’s alleged discovery of the American continents, was destroyed—intentionally, of course, as are most of the grand monuments associated with the World’s Fairs of triumphalist modernity. Today, the site where a spontaneous parliament of the world’s religions arose on the North Dakota prairie, in part as protest to the effects of European Christianity’s “doctrine of discovery,” appears nothing like it did a year ago—not by the design of its loving architects and builders, but by order of the highest levels of U.S. authority.

When you cross Backwater Bridge on Highway 1806, you really have to slow down or you will miss it. Facebook Hill, the only place you could get reliable cell phone service during the nearly 200 days of the camp, is now barely recognizable. Given the right vantage point, the discerning eye, informed by memory and the natural contours of the landscape, can recreate the size and shape and scope of Oceti Sakowin at the height of its existence—just as Lakota holy man Black Elk nearly a century ago remembered the “very big village” of 1876, whose tepees “you could hardly count.”¹⁵ Now, nearly a year since its forced closing, no roadside marker points to the place where for three intense seasons prayer and protest coalesced on the American high steppes, known, according to the author of *Dakota*, for the seemingly unending contest between “open hearts and closed minds.”¹⁶ For the few motorists who pass by, a spray-painted message on concrete barriers, blocking what were once roads for a fleet of cars and trucks, for horseback riders and marching warriors, for extended families and fearless activists, and for vested clergy in solemn liturgical procession, offers mute testimony to an unscripted and perhaps unrepeatable meeting of the world’s religions in a land of unforgiving winters, rich in surprises: “We are still here.”

¹⁴ Peter Matthiessen, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse: The Story of Leonard Peltier and the FBI’s War on the American Indian Movement* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 261.

¹⁵ John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, Complete Edition (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 65.

¹⁶ Norris, 7.

