

Selling the Sacred?



Interest in native spirituality continues to grow. Vine Deloria, Jr., Jamie Sams, Robert Doyle, and Ted Andrews talk about ongoing issues between and within the American Indian and New Age communities.

by Ray A. Hemachandra

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American Indians and the New Age

I am married to an Indian woman. My wife and her family are Cree/Blackfoot. I have interviewed many American Indians during the past six years. Anecdotal, at least, a touch of Indian blood even runs through my African American line of the family. I also am the editor of *New Age Retailer* magazine, where I have worked for half a decade. Together, these facts have caused numerous incongruities and tensions.

Many American Indians feel scorn, contempt, and anger toward people in the New Age community for exploiting, distorting, and trivializing native sacred spirituality and identity. Others consider the New Age — and “New Agers” — a joke. Some American Indians feel no animosity toward New Age whatsoever; sell their products to the New Age market; and look at the sharing of spiritual paths as a natural part of the progression of humanity.

Some issues that come up frequently are:

- Should retailers sell items that are considered sacred by American Indians?
- What does it mean for non-natives to be “shamans”?
- Can non-natives teach native spirituality, or offer native-styled products, in any way that has integrity?
- Are there topics even American Indians themselves should not be teaching or sharing with non-natives?

These issues are complex and sensitive, and their resolutions often seem intransigent. *New Age Retailer* will be exploring the relationship between the New Age and American Indian communities throughout 2004 to provide appropriate depth of coverage. To begin, I spoke with two natives, authors Vine Deloria, Jr., and Jamie Sams, and two non-natives, Canyon Records president Robert Doyle and author Ted Andrews, about some of these topics. Please also read the interviews of flutist R. Carlos Nakai (beginning on page 32) and Crystal Connection store owner Deborah Morningstar (starting on page 114) for further coverage of these topics.

Vine Deloria, Jr.

Vine Deloria, Jr., is Standing Rock Sioux. Deloria has served as executive director of the National Congress of American Indians;

as a member of the National Office of Rights of the Indigent; and as a professor of history, law, religious studies, and political science at the University of Colorado — Boulder. He is author of *A Native View of Religion*; *Custer Died for Your Sins*; and a seminal book on American Indian spirituality, *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion*, first published in 1972 and updated and re-released in 2003 by Fulcrum Publishing.

Ray Hemachandra: How can independent retailers better respect native spirituality in terms of selecting the products they sell in their stores?

Vine Deloria, Jr.: Well, most products today are artificial reproductions of Indian crafts. Many are modeled on previous crafts. So, while they can be used for some kinds of devotional activities, I doubt if there would be any violation of a particular tribe's spirituality — unless they were advertised as being blessed or authorized by a particular medicine man. In that case, I would check with the tribe to see if the object was really authorized by the medicine men of that tribe.

Hemachandra: What care should retailers take in presenting Indian crafts and spiritual objects?

Deloria, Jr.: Many things already have been trivialized by both Indians and non-Indians. Unless outrageous claims are made regarding an object, I think it should be up to the shop owner to display the objects in a respectful manner.

Hemachandra: Do you think there are limits to what American Indians should write or teach to non-Indians?

Deloria, Jr.: Well, that is a slippery slope. Stories and ceremonies belong to the spiritual leader and the people he works with. My rule is that if a story is told to me, I don't repeat it unless I can find that it already is in print. In that case, someone has previously told the story, so it is now public information. I don't include a story that has been told in print without asking the person if it is permissible. I often leave out material that could bolster an argument, because it is not mine to print until I am assured it is OK or that it has already been printed elsewhere.

Hemachandra: I'm always skeptical when a book about American Indian spirituality comes in for review by an author with a native-sounding name and a bio that indicates the author as “Native American” without specifying tribal affiliation. How serious do you perceive the problem of non-Indians “pretending” to be Indian and selling books, music CDs, and other products?

Deloria, Jr.: I'm always very skeptical of their claims and even more so of people alleging to be members of the Five Civilized Tribes but who know nothing about those tribes. Then there also are Indians who expand the teachings far beyond what would be acceptable to people on the reservation. It's a difficult call.

Hemachandra: How should an individual retailer of good conscience and intentions, wanting to offer information about different spiritual paths and communities, attempt to do so for her or his clientele without crossing an inappropriate line when offering products based upon native spirituality?

Deloria, Jr.: The Northern Plains spiritual leaders recently issued a code of conduct to prevent further exploitation of ceremonies. They were immediately criticized by some Indians, who claimed they had received their ceremonies from different elders. So, not even Indians can figure out how to curb abuses. I just don't know how you solve the problem. It will take some self-discipline by Indians before resolution of the problem can be achieved.

Hemachandra: As a broad generalization, what is the perception of the New Age community among Indians?

Deloria, Jr.: I think the New Agers are regarded in a negative light, especially people who try to practice certain rituals. I occasionally find newspaper stories about people dying in the sweat lodge. They were trying to use that ceremony and didn't know how to do it. It is very sad, but those things can happen. Since the practices are so widespread, I doubt if anything can be done.

I have had people come to me to ask about spirituality. I find them a year later claiming to be of a certain tribe; starting to use phrases of the tribal language as if they knew the language; and passing themselves off as tribal

members. It's very sad. Rather than make an issue with them, I just pass the word to other Indians that the person is a fraud. Sometimes the person is thousands of miles from home and tells others that their elder commanded them to go into white society and conduct ceremonies — and they ask for payment.

Jamie Sams

Jamie Sams is half French and half four separate American Indian tribes, with the majority being Cherokee and Seneca and with a Choctaw and a Mohawk great-great-grandmother from each side of the family. Her works include *Dancing the Dream*, the Sacred Path Cards, and, with David Carson, the Medicine Cards, one of the most popular titles in many New Age stores.

Ray Hemachandra: Why do you think ill will exists among many Indians toward the New Age community?

Jamie Sams: No one wants to be looked at stereotypically, the way Indians often are. Stereotypes harm humanity by creating assumptions. And it's not just New Agers. Even people raised on reservations, who maybe were taught a tiny bit of their own creation myths and healing practices, may think they know a lot about all Native American practices, when in fact they know very little. There are 686 acknowledged tribes in the United States.

Lots of non-native people seek a spiritual discipline — not just Native American spirituality but really anything — that can make their lives better: a spiritual discipline to make them feel better, make their lives more productive, and let them contribute to humanity. But they don't realize how offensive it is for them to go to tribes thinking they know everything. They sometimes go in like these arrogant know-it-alls, and it ticks people off.

New Agers on traditional spiritual paths are just like every other group in the world. There are good people, and there are bad people. Many times people who are invited to ceremonies don't realize what an honor it is. They don't know anything about Native American etiquette. They go in; they sit on their butts; and they rarely ask what they can do to help unless they have been with a teacher for

years and around Native Americans for years. Then they would realize you don't come without asking what you can do to help prepare beforehand, to clean up afterward, or to assist in some way.

I personally believe that's why certain Native Americans resent New Agers. And, again, it's not just New Agers. It's anyone. It could be another Native American who came from another tribe where they weren't taught their own traditions, where they didn't have their own storytellers, so they didn't learn as part of how they were raised the importance of contributing to the whole of the tribe.

Hemachandra: What advice do you have for booksellers and other retailers selling American Indian titles and products?

Sams: To retailers in the general bookstores, in my opinion, they would sell more if they would take anything placed in Native American spirituality and put it in two completely different places: one under metaphysical or New Age and another under Native American or even philosophy.

I have been to 18 bookstores in the past two days — including general bookstores and the big chains — and they don't put anything Native American under philosophy. They don't even put the different lineages of Buddhism under philosophy. So, if under philosophy, they would put Native American philosophies and Eastern philosophies along with everything else, those books would be much easier for customers to find.

A lot of bookstores have strictly Native American sections, and then they have New Age sections. A lot of authors — an enormous number — fall through the cracks.

Hemachandra: So, it's a problem with labels?

Sams: In the book business and in the music business, labels can make people totally lost. If they don't find what they are looking for under the label they think it will be under, they assume it's out of print instead of asking for help. I made my publisher take the words "New Age" off the Medicine Cards, because there's nothing "New Age" about them. There were animals on this planet long before there were humans.

The Medicine Cards and the Sacred Path

Cards are archetypal Native American psychology. But they can be called divination systems, because that allows many people on spiritual paths to get it. The labels matter too much, and we've got to work that out. It's not just about my books. Musicians or authors who change genres — because life changes — get lost, and people can't find their creative efforts. More than anything, addressing that problem would help both New Age retailers and general retailers.

Hemachandra: Should Indians share native philosophies with non-Indians at all?

Sams: Every Native American person who has the courage to share the beauty and simple goodness of what they have been taught by their elders is creating a bridge between cultures. The same is true of African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, different European spiritual traditions, and others. The more we experience life as experienced by different cultures, the more we can stop hatred.

According to Seneca tradition, we are at the end of the fourth world of separation and the beginning of the fifth world of peace and illumination. Each of us who embrace humanity and all our relations are responsible for letting love, peace, and illumination flow by living that path.

Robert Doyle

When Canyon Records founder Ray Boley retired in 1992, longtime employee Robert Doyle purchased the company. One of the country's oldest independent record labels, Canyon Records specializes in all types of American Indian music, with distribution throughout the world. The label has received 12 Grammy nominations, with one victory. Four of those nominations have been in the New Age category.

Ray Hemachandra: With all the questions about identity within Indian Country, what makes an artist Indian? Do you have a definition you employ?

Robert Doyle: That is a really interesting question. It also is a loaded question. We do a lot of music that's not necessarily from Native American traditions. We have released country, rock, and Christian albums by Native

Americans. The way we define it is the way the community defines Native American music and particularly whether or not the music expresses something of the community. So, if we have a rap album that focuses on Native American issues, we consider that a Native American album. But a rap album by a Native American that doesn't focus on those issues probably would not be.

We never ask to see enrollment cards. We have to go on the basis of what we know. One of the things we are strong on is traditional music — pow-wow and peyote, for example. We have a pretty strong sense of who is connected to the community and who is not.

Hemachandra: Who are your top-selling artists?

Doyle: R. Carlos Nakai has been quite successful for us. Nakai crossed out of the Native American community and into the tourist and New Age markets in the mid 1980s. The tourist market means places like gift shops at national parks, airports, and art galleries. Most of the mainstream retailers file Nakai's music under the New Age section.

Sharon Burch is very popular. We have a whole list of pow-wow groups, including Northern Cree Singers and Black Lodge Singers. In peyote, it was Primeaux and Mike. Robert Tree Cody is another flutist who has done well.

Hemachandra: Does Canyon Records get much flak from the American Indian community for marketing outside of the community, and especially to the New Age market?

Doyle: It's always hard to speak of the Native American community, because it's so diverse with many different nations and languages. Within each group, there are many different communities. The Native American community is not a monolithic community by any means.

We sometimes get questions like, "Why is Nakai playing the native flute? The Navajos don't have a flute within their current traditions," or, "Those songs should not be recorded, because they are ceremonial songs." We try to stay away from ceremonial songs, but sometimes people have different opinions about if something is ceremonial and should be recorded. We generally rely on what the artist

tells us. With some tribes we know somebody we can ask, so we're saved from responding to that criticism. Most of the music we release is not ceremonial music.

Hemachandra: You are of Filipino and Scotch-Irish descent. Do you encounter upset within native communities about your role at Canyon Records?

Doyle: No, not really. The previous owners, Ray Boley and Mary Boley, were not native. One of the advantages of being around and having worked here for a long time — I started working here in 1980 — is that the whole issue of my ethnicity has never come up. For the most part, the Native American community is very accommodating. It's not as if they are upset by it. I'm sure some people are, but it's never come up directly to me in 23 years in the business.

Hemachandra: How does Canyon Records approach the issue of non-Native Americans who play native instruments?

Doyle: A lot of non-natives are playing the Native American flute. It's my guess that there are far more non-native Native American flute players than natives, because of the relative population sizes. That's one thing Nakai really worked to create — bringing the flute out of the culture.

For the most part there is an element of respect. Most non-natives are not portraying themselves as what they are not. The ones that do are not respected. They are considered fake.

I find that if the person is part of the community in some way, the community is going to accept him. Part of the beauty of the Native American community is if you take the time to learn about the community, you will find a place. It's the poseurs who drive everybody nuts. They may read a book and think they know something about the culture, but they don't connect to the traditions or community in some way.

Part of the difficulty of ascertaining ethnicity is that definitions vary between tribes. With some tribes you can enroll with a one-sixteenth bloodline. I've seen people call themselves native who are paler than I am. You really don't know, so I try to stay away from calling someone non-native. You really can't

say they are or they are not. Our definition, again: Does the music connect to what the community is expressing?

Hemachandra: Is there anything else you would like to add, Robert?

Doyle: Nakai maintains that anyone born here is a Native American. He maintains a kind of reverse assimilation is taking place. Native American culture is assimilating European and other cultures into it. One of the things I find interesting is how many people, when I meet them, the first thing they say is, "Oh, I have Native American bloodlines." It's almost like the new aristocracy — almost like, "I had ancestors on the Mayflower" — which is an interesting turnaround from 40 years ago. I think the music has had a lot to do with changing those stereotypes and attitudes.

Ted Andrews

Ted Andrews is the author of more than 30 books, including the best-selling *Animal-Speak*, about a wide array of spiritual topics. Andrews' *The Animal-Speak Workbook* and *Spirits, Ghosts, and Guardians* won a total of six 2003 COVR Visionary Awards at the International New Age Trade Show — West.

Ray Hemachandra: Especially with such books as *Animal-Speak*, *Animal-Wise*, and *How to Meet and Work With Spirit Guides*, how important are American Indian traditions — particularly regarding vision quests and spirit animals — to your work? And what is your personal background: Are you full or part Indian?

Ted Andrews: I am not Native American. Well, I am only in the sense that I was born in the United States. I have done some extensive genealogical exploration of my family, and I have yet to find a Native American connection. On the other hand, I heard a theory once that anyone whose family has been in this country five or more generations probably has some Native American heritage somewhere. So, how do we really know?

In none of my books and none of the thousands of workshops on animals that I have taught over the years have I ever presented myself as Native American. I have taught side by side with truly wonderful and

powerful Native Americans, but I do not ever present myself as such. That mistake is often made, though, probably because of the artwork on my book covers, my own long hair, and sometimes the mistaken assumption that anything to do with spirit animals has its origin only in the Native American traditions. My writings draw on my hands-on work with wildlife for more than 20 years and the teachings found in many traditions around the world.

There is what I call the “phenomena of common threads.” Common teachings are found in most societies and traditions around the world. When we find these common threads running through most, if not all, traditions, it should make little bells go off. The common threads tell us there is something truly wonderful going on, something truly universal that we should be paying attention to. Every tradition upon this planet at one time or another taught that the only way the divine could speak to humans was through nature, and the only way humans could understand the divine was by studying nature, particularly if animals crossed their paths.

My undergrad work was in literature, with a focus on ancient writings, folklore, and mythology. What I describe in my books, such as *Animal-Speak* and *Animal-Wise*, comes from those common threads from around the world and my experience working and teaching as a naturalist. The early shamans of all indigenous peoples were scientists as well as mystics. They studied nature. They looked to it for healing, for spirit, and for life itself. When the science is combined with the mystical, then the true power of nature is experienced.

Because many people assume that teachings about spirit animals and totems are exclusive to Native Americans, it often is assumed that I must be Native American. Yes, in this country the Native Americans are traditionally the keepers and stewards of the natural world. Among Native Americans, the core belief is they are brothers and sisters to everything in nature. Animals are their companions, allies, teachers, guardians, spirit messengers, and even younger siblings needing

protection at times. And it is in these beliefs that I am most similar to Native Americans.

So if I am not a Native American, what does define me? Although I do consider myself a naturalist, this doesn't quite define my relationship to nature, either. If I must be classified — which, honestly, is something I have always tried to avoid, enjoying the idea of being enigmatic and all — I am what some traditions would call an animist or, more preferably, a spiritist.

Animism, or spiritism, is the belief that all parts of nature — the elements, the plants, and the animals — have spirits. At its core is the recognition that everything in the phenomenal world is truly alive and has spirit — not only humans, animals, and plants, but also nonbiological expressions of the natural world, such as stones, rivers, and cultural artifacts. We do not have to believe that everything in the world has a creative intelligence, but we should at least be able to recognize that there is some spiritual force associated with, or connected to, everything.

Hemachandra: Some Americans Indians say that New Age retailers selling American Indian — or American Indian-like — products are “stealing the sacred,” or trivializing beliefs they don't understand. From your own experiences, how should New Age retailers respond to such criticisms?

Andrews: Native American products or products that are Native American-like are going to become increasingly popular. In times when society is a bit more chaotic and unsettled, people look to find ways of reconnecting to something substantial, both in spiritual guidance and in daily life. Native Americans incorporate the spiritual within their daily lives to guide and help them, and so, at this time, their traditions have increasing appeal. In this country the Native American roots are the oldest and thus still the strongest. In times of discord, people subconsciously seek out older wisdom.

Most religions and sacred traditions have believed that others have stolen their sacredness or trivialized their beliefs at one time or another, but the truth is that most people only take what they can personally use from any religion or tradition. It doesn't make it right or

wrong, but problems usually arise when people think that one aspect contains the whole.

It is not realistic to believe that retailers would stop selling Native American products altogether. Nor should they. Independent retailers are educators, or at least they should be. They should be able to answer questions about the items sold and direct the buyer to books and other sources of information to help the individual understand the item more fully.

Hemachandra: Do you think there are limits on what even American Indians themselves should write or teach to non-Indians? Do religious and spiritual beliefs “belong” to anyone?

Andrews: Any truly living tradition should fulfill certain purposes. First, it must be understood, at least in its basic form and conception. Second, it should open the doors to new awarenesses and potentials without overwhelming the individual. Finally, and most importantly, it must be a living and growing tradition that allows itself to adapt to each individual, while holding its basic form and content.

In my studies, I have not seen a truly unique spiritual belief. Various traditions have their own twists and their own unique rituals and ceremonies, but similar and sometimes identical spiritual truths run through all traditions. Exclusiveness is what often kills a religion or a tradition. It's what keeps it from breathing and growing.

There should always be discretion and responsibility in what is taught and to what degree. All religions and traditions, including Native American traditions, have teachings that should not be readily available to just anyone. Even in biblical tradition is the idea of not “casting pearls before swine.”

People in the modern world often do not value something that is just given away freely. We live in a fast-food society, and people often want their spiritual enlightenment the same way: by driving up to the window, getting it handed out to them, and then moving on. There are many rituals and sacred ceremonies that are quite intricate and powerfully transforming. They need great knowledge and experience to succeed without dam-

aging or stressing the psyche. In most spiritual traditions and religions there are certain levels of achievement that cannot be achieved without proper preparation — in knowledge and in practiced training. And to teach such to the unprepared is irresponsible.

We live in an age of information and sometimes an age of misinformation. It is not reasonable to assume that any teachings can be held completely secret anymore. Problems arise, though, when individuals teach practices without mastery of it themselves. They ultimately hurt their tradition, and they can endanger the well-being of those they teach.

Hemachandra: How should non-Indian retailers, wanting to offer native spiritual paths to their customers, approach doing so?

Andrews: We must begin by recognizing that the interest in the Native American roots of spirituality in this country is just beginning. Research the products. Retailers should learn something about the source of the product — not only its spiritual origin or application but who makes it and what qualifies them to make the product. The quality of the product ultimately will reflect on the retailer. Is the product made in a traditional manner, or is it an unschooled company or individual just trying to make a quick buck on a current trend?

Education is the answer to many problems. Retailers can sell books by knowledgeable experts on the items to help customers better understand them. Native American authors and teachers can be brought in to speak about the culture and the items. Many stores bring authors in, but there are many Native American teachers who, although they may not have written any books, can be powerful resources for educating the public or even the employees.

Check the backgrounds of individuals teaching in this field. I have taught thousands of workshops across the United States, Canada, Europe, and parts of Asia over the years. I have encountered, met, and worked with many teachers. Many of them are well-qualified, but I also have met some who read a book or two and then decided to hang their own teaching shingle out. This happens most

often when individuals try to take advantage of a trend.

Retailers selling Native American products should carry a wide variety of books on Native American traditions, especially books by Native American writers — stories, mythologies, and more — for children and adults. Is there an employee who has an interest in this area? Have that person become the store's expert, helping other employees answer questions and do research. Having employees research an area and then teach the other employees about it is a good way of building a knowledgeable staff.

Finally, we should look to the positive results from interest in, and work with, Native American spirituality. Anything that helps us take back our innate responsibility as stewards of the Earth is beneficial. Native Americans have always fulfilled this role in this country. Our intention is tremendously valuable. If the interest in Native American items and beliefs by non-Native Americans helps people develop a new relationship with the Earth and form a new perspective on their relationship to its creatures and plants, then great benefit ultimately will come from it. But the items that draw people to it are just the first step. These items should never be looked at as the ends in themselves. They are but tools to help us reconnect with what we have lost.

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