

James Treat, *Around the Sacred Fire: Native Religious Activism in the Red Power Era* (University of Illinois Press, 2008), 376 pp., \$30.00 (pbk), ISBN: 978-0-25207-501-8. Review doi: 10.1558/jsrnc.v4i4.502.

James Treat (Muscogee Creek), Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, offers a compelling account of a neglected dimension of post-World War II Native life: the role of spiritual leaders in galvanizing Native activists across a wide spectrum of political and religious backgrounds as well as across the U.S.–Canada border. Treat examines the origins and impact of the influential Indian Ecumenical Conference (IEC), one of several important pan-tribal gatherings of the 1960s and 1970s. Like the 1962 American Indian Chicago Conference, which brought together Indian activists from across the United States, the Indian Ecumenical Conference furthered the movement of Native self-determination in the United States and in Canada. Treat notes that the IEC was the beginning of a series of inter-religious and cross-border conversations but also the culmination of a decade of similar gatherings, organized by Iroquois and Hopi traditionalists intent on preserving Native spirituality in the face of Cold War-era assimilation policies known as Termination. An understanding of modern Indian activism is incomplete without this story of religious revitalization. Red Power activists embraced traditional spirituality deadened by urban living and coercive government policies; as Treat demonstrates, they were influenced by the grassroots organizing of American and Canadian Indian religious leaders, whose models of pan-tribal conventions and continental caravans helped to shape the events of Alcatraz, the Trail of Broken Treaties, and others.

The first Indian Ecumenical Conference was held on the Crow Reservation in Montana in August 1970 but found a permanent home at the Stoney Indian Park in Alberta the following year. Treat details the experiences and ideas shaping the IEC, especially those of its chief organizers: the Cherokee intellectual Bob Thomas; the progressive Anglican priest Ian McKenzie; and Wilf Pelletier (Anishnaabe), the director of the Toronto-based Institute for Indian Studies. Organizers sought to create common ground for Native people coming from mixed religious traditions, Native and Christian, and inter-faith conversations with American and Canadian church officials to secure their support of Native rights threatened on both sides of the border by government efforts to diminish Native lands that were crucial for the maintenance of ceremonies, of 'the old way-of-life religions' based on the interrelationship of spirituality and environment. Thus religious leaders, Treat emphasizes, united politics and religion via a model of grassroots organizing that both reenergized Native groups and helped to create 'clerical activists'.

The IEC enjoyed increasing success during its first five years, but after 1974 its gatherings became less dynamic, affected by declining financial support from churches ambivalent about supporting religious self-determination, declining attendance, challenges both from women protesting the IEC's all-male leadership and from Native youth deploying 'anti-church rhetoric', including members of the American Indian Movement (AIM). But the Conference survives today, the 'sacred fire' is still burning. The IEC succeeded in engendering what the late Vine Deloria, Jr. called 'modern traditionalism', a powerful spiritual and political force in Native peoples' efforts to sustain their cultural identity and practices.

In addition to employing a wide selection of published primary sources, Treat

mines a range of archival sources, including Anglican Church and United Church collections, and makes good use of interviews he conducted with movement leaders. Treat worked to avoid writing a traditional narrative, asserting instead a 'relational, dialogical, and reflective' (p. 5) approach to exploring the 'intersections of religion, culture, and politics' (p. 6). This methodology generally works well, though he could have combined Chapters 2 and 4 to create a more coherent account of the origins of the IEC. Later chapters contain interesting but peripheral stories of institutions and documentaries that detract from the larger story.

One of Treat's main contributions, other than detailing this important history of spiritual revitalization, is to follow Native activists across the United States into Canada to document inter-tribal interactions and to explore the impact of American Red Power activism on Canadian Indian groups. Scholars interested in environmentally important issues of self-determination that transcend political borders would profit from employing this international and transnational approach.

Paul C. Rosier
Department of History
Villanova University
Paul.rosier@villanova.edu