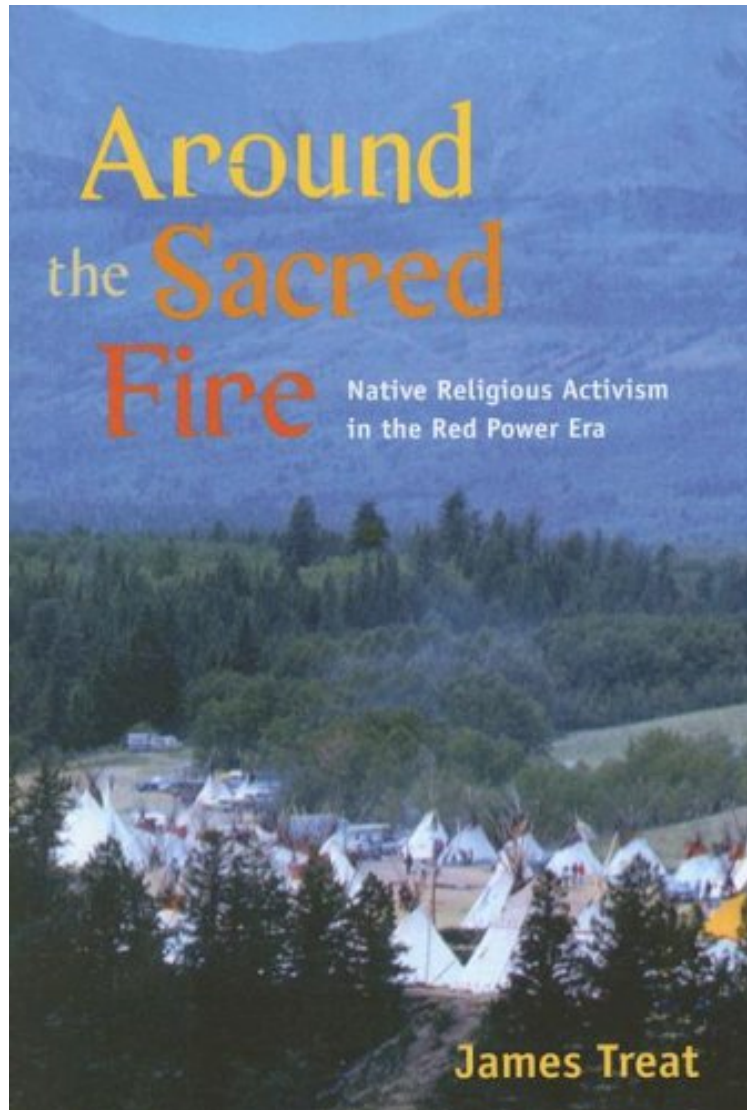


(Free download) Around the Sacred Fire: Native Religious Activism in the Red Power Era

# Around the Sacred Fire: Native Religious Activism in the Red Power Era

*James Treat*

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**James Treat : Around the Sacred Fire: Native Religious Activism in the Red Power Era** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Around the Sacred Fire: Native Religious Activism in the Red Power Era:

4 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Informative and inspiring...!By Laura GibbsThe author calls this book a "narrative map" of the Indian Ecumenical Conference - and reading this book really does make you feel like you have traveled on a journey, crisscrossing the map of Canada and the US, hearing stories about so many

outstanding and memorable people who were the shakers and movers behind the IEC. The focal point of this movement was a summer conference that took place every year, starting in 1970 and carrying on up into the 1980's - these are the meetings around the "sacred fire" of the book's title, a coming together of people seeking a dialogue between tribal religious traditions and Christianity. These are not people who are famous... with one possible exception - if you have read Margaret Craven's *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*, you might remember "Gordon", a character based on a real person, Ernie Willie, a Kwakiutl Indian who (as I learned from this book!) became one of the main leaders of the Indian Ecumenical Conference. The life stories of the people in this movement, like John Snow and Andrew Ahenakew and Bob Thomas, provide a really illuminating perspective on the lives of Indian peoples in the 20th century, as played out in many different parts of the United States and Canada (living in Oklahoma, I was really glad to learn about Oklahoma connections to this movement). Before I read this book, the word "ecumenical" to me mostly just meant Protestants and Catholics in dialogue. The Indian Ecumenical Conference was something much more radical, with Christian ministers and tribal medicine men finding ways to understand and respect and support one another. From the start, the theological questions were connected with social and political issues - these conferences naturally became a place where the youth movement and the environmental movement found expression throughout the 1970's, along with the Red Power movement that was unfolding at the same time. There are some great books about the American Indian Movement that have become required reading for people who want to see beyond the self-deception and hypocrisy of mainstream society - and this book would make a great companion piece, showing a different kind of effort in the late 60's and 70's to find answers to hard questions about being Indian and being white in America. Like one of the movement's leaders, Ernest Tootoosis, said: "I believe us Indians, as custodians of North America, will have a contribution to make to white society. We have to go back and take some very fine things about our culture, about our teaching and our way of praying to God, take these good things and try to find something good about the white man, the way they are living now, and piece these two things together for survival." The Indian Ecumenical Conference was built on that hope for survival, piecing things together. And this book tells the story of that movement in abundant, loving detail. Highly recommended!

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A story worth telling, but also worthy of richer analysis

By Arthur Digbee

Treat tells the story of an annual intertribal ecumenical conference in the 1970s. It began among religious leaders, seeking to improve relations among Christian denominations and between native religions and Christianity. It was dominated by male elders (and by Canadians). Over a few years, it became a more strongly traditionalist and anti-Christian movement. It gained substantial participation by urban youth, who unrealistically expected to learn traditional religious and cultural traditions in a few days of gathering. Coinciding with other Red Power movements, the IEC also became more political, anti-colonial, and anti-white. Increasingly, participants described it in both traditionalist and (oddly) environmentalist terms, as a critique of the harm that white society did to both humans and to nature. Treat clearly has strong opinions about this movement (in which he participated), about both traditional religions and Christianity, and about whites' internal colonization of Native peoples. Unfortunately, he never presents those strong opinions as a coherent whole. Instead, he presents his views as obiter dicta at the end of paragraphs, a comment here and a comment there. This approach all too often becomes name-calling instead of analysis. Treat will dismiss something he doesn't like with a comment such as "Of course, colonialism often does X." Obviously we are meant to believe that "colonialism" is a bad thing. But more problematically, statements such as this are generalizations but completely unsupported ones. They are not grounded in any theory that he cites, not backed up by qualitative or quantitative evidence in any recognizable research design, and not amenable to evaluation - - if colonialism often does X, then logically it often does not do X. When and why does colonialism do either X or not-X? We do not learn this. Many of these statements are plausible, and worthy of more systematic treatment, but by failing to treat them systematically they are labeling and not analysis. The overall story is an interesting one, however. Treat argues that the main impact of the IEC came in the way it changed people as they interacted with one another, but that kind of impact is extraordinarily difficult to document. In the end, it has to be taken on, well, faith.

Around the Sacred Fire is a compelling cultural history of intertribal activism centered on the Indian Ecumenical Conference, an influential movement among native people in Canada and the U.S. during the Red Power era. Founded in 1969, the Conference began as an attempt at organizing grassroots spiritual leaders who were concerned about the conflict between tribal and Christian traditions throughout Indian country. By the mid-seventies thousands of people were gathering each summer in the foothills of the Rockies, where they participated in weeklong encampments promoting spiritual revitalization and religious self-determination. Most historical overviews of native affairs in the sixties and seventies emphasize the prominence of the American Indian Movement and the impact of highly publicized confrontations such as the Northwest Coast fish-ins, the Alcatraz occupation, and events at Wounded Knee. The Indian Ecumenical Conference played a central role in stimulating cultural revival among native people, partly because Conference leaders strategized for social change in ways that differed from the militant groups. Drawing on archival records, published accounts, oral histories, and field research, James Treat has written the first comprehensive study of this important but overlooked effort at postcolonial interreligious dialogue.

"Treat has rescued an important area of Indian activism that has gone virtually unnoticed--the Indian Ecumenical Conference. Gathering scattered documents and conducting personal interviews, he presents an exciting history of efforts by traditional people to offer their own solution to modern social problems. Incisive and precise, this book opens additional vistas for the reader."--Vine Deloria, Jr., author of *God is Red* and *Custer Died for Your Sins*