A NUU-CHAH-NULTH PERSPECTIVE ON RELIGION, SECULARISM AND PUBLIC POLICY

Dr. Richard Atleo — a.k.a Umeek — helped create the First Nations Studies Department at Malaspina University College (now Vancouver Island University). He is Research Liaison at the University of Manitoba; Associate Adjunct Professor at the University of Victoria; and Champion to the Indigenous Adult and Higher Learning Association of British Columbia.

In ancient Nuu-chah-nulth culture, there's no distinction or essential division between the spiritual and physical domains — there's unity of the spiritual with the physical. Another feature was an awareness of the cyclical nature of birth, growth and learning in phases that apply not only to individual beings but also to nations and ages of being, which progress in phases from birth to maturity that , in turn, brings on another birth in regular cycles of being.

Dans l'ancienne culture nuu-chah-nulth, il n'y a pas de distinction ou de division essentielle entre les domaines spirituel et physique : on parle plutôt d'une unité du spirituel avec le physique. Une autre caractéristique de cette culture est la prise de conscience de la nature cyclique de la naissance, de la croissance et de l'apprentissage. Cette nature cyclique comprend plusieurs phases, de la naissance à la maturité, s'appliquant non seulement aux individus, mais aussi aux nations et aux âges de l'être.

Within a span of 133 years, from 1884 when Canada enacted legislation to outlaw the religious practices of the "Indians" of Canada, there have been radical changes. Radical, that is, for Canada. I was born at the outset of World War II, in April of 1939, the significance of which is that Canada for most of the 1940s was preoccupied with overseas issues. No time, then, to enforce the Indian Act, particularly in isolated communities like Ahousaht out on the western-most shores of Vancouver Island that remained without basic amenities like roads, electricity, indoor plumbing, and communication. Blissfully unaware of religion, secularism and public policy as this applied to Canada, I understood my world through my culture, my language, my food, and the way my ancestors viewed their world.

One day as I played outside my home as a little boy I noticed a large man stride to the summit of a local hill and make an announcement that is literally translated as "Walk, people of Ahousaht, Walk." Evidently this announcement was not unexpected but eagerly awaited, for immediately the entire community mobilized to gather for a great feast in the Big House of the Head Chief. It was the custom of the day for each family to bring their own dishes, plates, cups and utensils. We did not yet have tables for eating but rather cedar mats laid out on the floor before each family. What does this event have to do with religion, secularism and public policy? Everything!

From time immemorial to the early formative years of my life into the 1940s, my people did not view the world, did not view existence, did not see creation, as a disconnection between the sacred and profane, but rather assumed through their experiences that there is no division between the physical

world and the spiritual world. The use of the English language is problematic here because its usage is heavily biased in favor of empirical science.

It is with this understanding— that the English language, as a means of communicating spiritual things, is problematic — that I began to address the Ryerson Conference in my language and to sing a song in my language. The name of the Creator in Nuu-chah-nulth is *Kʷaaʔuuc*, meaning 'Owner of That Which Is,' or 'Owner of That Which Exists.' The song that I sang is an acknowledgement of the Ownership of creation, which means that all things come from this one source.

Existence viewed through the lens of ancient Nuu-chah-nulth did not clarify its mysteries, contradictions and conundrums, for these remain intact on a global scale. How did ancient Nuu-chah-nulth cope with the difficult issues of existence? Not perfectly, but with a good degree of tolerance as witnessed by the relatively healthy condition of religion, secularism and public policy at colonial contact. This tolerance is indicated in everyday language such as *qʷaasasa iš*, a common household saying that speaks to specific instances of disagreement, or conflict, that means "he or she is just that way" or "that's just the way things are." This common saying is directly related to the name of the Creator, who Owns What Is. No attempt is made to understand or comprehend why things are the way they are. What is understood, what is comprehended is story, which in formal ceremonies is always concluded with *ʔaḥaa uuna*, meaning "it is that long." The Potlatch system, a combined forum of religion, secularism and public policy, always began with a long oration about the host Chief and family. This Chief is distributing political goods to community and the oration is testifying to the efficacy of the spiritual practices to do this effectively.

The significance of *ʔaḥaa uuna* is that it circumscribes this ancient knowledge system beyond which there definitely is a vast universe of mystery. How this came to be must be attributed to its spiritual practices, which were universal until interrupted by colonial pressures. The *ʔuusum*, roughly translated as 'vision quest' is directly related to the story of Son of Raven's quest for the light. This story of Son of Raven has several key features, which cannot be fully elaborated in this account. From a Nuu-chah-nulth perspective, since it is a Nuu-chah-nulth story, its primary feature is the unity of the spiritual with the physical. That is, Son of Raven and community find themselves living in the dark but they know that the Head Wolf keeps the light hidden in a box. On the surface, the story reads like a community strategy for grand theft. Below the surface, when a constellation of story is examined, together with millennia of a governance system of ceremonial giving, millennia of acknowledging respectful protocols with salmon, deer, cedar tree and the rest of creation, the conclusion to the story of Son of Raven's quest for the light is always the satisfaction of noting, on any given beach, that each morning at low tide raven enjoys the fruit of his success by finding food.

If you haven't guessed it yet, the Head Wolf who owns the light is the Creator, and in ancient Nuu-chah-nulth culture each head chief will own a wolf dance, called *hinkiic*, which literally means "gift bearing." At each great feast, the chief's dance, hinkiic, is performed in anticipation of a distribution of gifts, political goods, to community. Along with these performances of dance and song will always be lengthy prayers, which not unexpectedly sound very much like wolf howls.

Since the Nuu-chah-nulth Creator is portrayed as a Head Wolf who lives in a wolf community, and since no distinction or essential division is made between the spiritual and physical domains, then the interactive nature of this unified creation is expressed in a *λuukʷaana* down in the Nuu-chah-nulth community. *λuukʷaana* means "remember reality we." The reality that is being remembered is related to *ʔaapc̓iiuk*, meaning, going the right way, and wiikc̓iiuk, going the wrong way, which, in turn, is related to *Kʷaaʔuuc*, the Creator. What is being remembered is the reality of the Creator and the teachings about what 'going the right way' means and what 'going the wrong way' means. Since the *λuukʷaana* was performed in cycles of time on a regular basis, and since the *λuukʷaana* was always performed by the Head Chief of the community, this meant that any blame for going the wrong way was always taken by the Head Chief. In fact, the Head Chief during this ceremony was publicly taken to task by wit wok, a form of national security, and humiliated. Children of the Head Chief are absconded by wolves and this is evidence that the Head Chief is guilty. After a suitable period of time, the children of the Head Chief are secretly taken to a place of seclusion and taught, or re-taught, the right way. Finally, there is an enactment of conflict between the community and the wolves where the children are contested for by the wit wok, who finally succeed in their rescue. Once back in community, there is a great feast celebration. Today the *λuukʷaana* is very rarely performed but its principles that reflect the nature of existence, that reflect the nature of being, indicate that there are ways of living that are judged to be good and ways of living judged to be bad.

In the unity of creation, the unity between the spiritual and physical domains, these opposing ways of living are articulated in teachings such as "a spirit sits one on each shoulder." The one on the right shoulder gives good advice and the one that sits on the left shoulder gives bad advice. In the ancient Nuu-chah-nulth worldview and through the practice of the *ʔuusum*, the world of spirits was common experience. Each household had great numbers of stories, some of which were common to all, and some of which were family legacies. Many of these stories could thematically be described by *iḥaa*, a word that has been translated as ghost, but can also be translated as referring to any mysterious spiritual power. The etymology of the word is philosophically interesting. Since it is a word that refers to a spiritual mystery that escapes human

comprehension, the syllable *i* is used in the word for knife *ima*, and means "cut." The second syllable *haa* means "what is there" or "that which is there." In translation then, *iḥaa* could mean a cut, or a breach, that has been made in an otherwise unified creation. This word suggests that ancient Nuu-chah-nulth were aware of the contradictions and oppositionalities presented by creation but chose not to complain about these contradictions and oppositionalities, nor attempt to use these apparent contradictions against the Owner of creation.

Rather ancient Nuu-chah-nulth accepted their human condition and periodically made adjustments and corrections by performing a *λuukʷaana*.

Quite naturally, the question arises whether these ancient Nuu-chah-nulth ways are sufficient to cope with the modern issues we face today on a global scale. The answer must obviously be no. Although Nuu-chah-nulth cultural ways survived every attempt to eliminate it by legislation, policy and practice, its resurgence has proven to be beneficial only in part. A study of the language and some of the practices, like the *λuukʷaana* and the *ʔuusum*, indicate an approach that, for me, is the most useful or appropriate. Approach to what? First, ancient Nuu-chah-nulth had a clear understanding of their limitation of being in the phrase, *ʔaḥaa uuna*. Within the bounds of this limitation were contained a great deal of knowledge and skills, which were then made insignificant with the practice of the *ʔuusum* that unveiled vast mysteries both within the physical universe as well as its spiritual component.

Another feature of ancient Nuu-chah-nulth culture was an awareness of the cyclical nature of birth, growth and learning in phases that apply not only to individual beings but also to nations and ages of being. Just as a child is born, grows into toddlerhood, and progressively learns in phases into childhood, adulthood and old age, so too do nations, and ages of being progress in phases from birth to maturity, which then brings on another birth in regular cycles of being. Thus, in Nuu-chah-nulth story, the first age of being is represented by Son of Raven and a diverse community that is of one language and culture. Once this age has matured, then story has it that a prophetic word is given to warn, and put on notice, the created beings like Son of Raven, that a new age will soon take effect. There is resistance to this warning and notice of change, so the Transformer utilizes the resistance to effect the change. This second age of being is the one described as biodiversity. Once all beings spoke one language and now the degree of difficulty in cross-species communication becomes a necessary challenge. It seems that growth and progress is expected from one age of being to another, in the same way that children in school are expected to grow and make progress.

The third age of being from this Nuu-chah-nulth perspective is the recent colonial age, which brought even greater challenges to living. Although many Indigenous people view the colonial age as a purely negative evil since it destroyed so many lives, it is not inconsistent with the challenges of ancient life ways. What is written here can be abused but it is the view of one Nuu-chah-nulth author who takes a position of faith in the benevolence of the Creator. Yes, the colonial age appears, from an Indigenous experiential perspective, to be an evil one, but the degree to which some ancient practitioners of the *ʔuusum* abused their bodies would be considered unusual and cruel punishment today. The principle involved in the *ʔuusum* in these cases of profound self-abuse is the expectation that the rewards far outweigh the pain and suffering of the process.