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Jesus the Trickster?

Controversy about the role and effects of colonialism seem to be with us even towards the middle of the 21st century. Most recently, a book by British professor of Moral Theology Nigel Biggar, *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning*¹ has been the occasion for a spurt of reactions, both in favour of and against his thesis that the colonizing efforts of the British Empire were, in general, not morally wrong, they just did not know better: “we should forgive our ancestors for not perceiving some moral truths quite as clearly as we do, just as we shall surely need forgiveness from our grandchildren for our own moral dullness.”² As an ethicist, Biggar’s focus is on moral, not theological “truth”; however, as British colonization could not be divorced from the concomitant Christian missionary efforts, it is reasonable that post- and decolonial theology³ has also been undertaking a reappraisal of Western, colonial Christian theology.

This is how Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley and George Tinker explain the reason for writing the book entitled *A Native American Theology*:⁴ “Our intent is to challenge the traditional categories of Christian theology ... American Indians and other indigenous peoples have a long-standing confidence that our cultures have much to teach Europeans and North Americans.”⁵ Hence, in the book the authors take as their starting point the usual categories of traditional Christian theology, such as hermeneutics, creation, Christology, sin and ethics, eschatology, etc. However, they add two chapters that one would not find in a conventional book of systematic theology: “Trickster” and “Land.”⁶ “Trickster discourse” is such a significant, universal and ancient category in – not only American – indigenous tradition, and has such interesting echoes in Christian theology that in the following I will examine what Jace Weaver calls a possible “new category from native thought-worlds”⁷ for Western systematic theology.

¹ Nigel Biggar, *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning* (William Collins, 2023).

² Biggar, *Colonialism*, 23.

³ The difference between “postcolonial” and “decolonial” is in part about the academic discipline, but there is also a different geographical, and a stronger epistemological focus – which, however, I am not going to investigate in this paper.

⁴ Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley and George E. “Tinkb” Tinker, eds., *A Native American Theology* (Orbis Books, 2001).

⁵ Kidwell et al., *A Native American Theology*, ix, 4.

⁶ Kidwell et al., “Contents,” vii.

⁷ Kidwell et al., 113.

*Trickster, “The Sacred Fool”*⁸

Although the figure of the “Trickster” is present and plays a significant role in diverse cultures around the world, there are some characteristics that it has in common in many of these different cultures. In his book *Trickster Makes this World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*, Lewis Hyde suggests that tricksters are “the lords of in-between. ... A trickster is the spirit of the doorway leading out, and of the crossroad at the edge of town.”⁹ As his name implies, the trickster is also a mischief maker; at the same time “selfish buffoon and culture hero.”¹⁰ Jace Weaver notes that although a trickster is most often referred to as *he*, “Trickster can easily switch gender,” has strong sexual appetites, and is “an eraser of boundaries. He moves between heaven and earth, between deity and mortals, between the living and the dead. He is also the ultimate symbol of the ambiguity of good and evil.”¹¹ In almost all cultures the Trickster appears in the form of an animal and often plays a role in the creating and shaping of the world and of the community of humans. For example, Raven, the trickster figure of the North-West Coast of America, is a thief who through trickery – out of his own interest – steals the Sun, Moon, Stars and water from Eagle, thus also making it possible for humans to survive in this world.

Another scholar of trickster figures, William J. Hynes notes that “the trickster is often the official ritual profaner of beliefs. Profaning or inverting social beliefs brings into sharp relief just how much a society values these beliefs.”¹² The precise role and characteristics of trickster figures varies according to the culture in question; the trickster as “culture hero” is, in many cultures, also some kind of a “sacred clown”; he safeguards that “social life can depend on treating antisocial characters as part of the sacred.”¹³

Finally, Jace Weaver suggests that the animal nature and often lewd sexuality of the Trickster in the often also enacted stories underline and teach “the naturalness of humanity, including human sexuality. ... Natives traditionally do not see themselves as separated from the rest of the created order but as part of it.”¹⁴ She adds that this was one of the features of the trickster figure that shocked Christian missionaries and led them to associate the Trickster with Satan, thereby subverting and undermining “traditional Native concepts of deity” – this was, however,

⁸ Kidwell et al., 113.

⁹ Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes this World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 6.

¹⁰ Michael P. Carroll, “The Trickster as Selfish-Buffoon and Culture Hero,” *Ethos* 12, no. 2 (Summer, 1984), 105.

¹¹ Jace Weaver, “Trickster,” in Kidwell et al., *A Native American Theology*, 114–115. (The editors of the book note that “Jace Weaver is primarily responsible for this chapter.”)

¹² William J. Hynes, “Mapping the Characteristics of Mythic Tricksters: A Heuristic Guide,” in *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms*, ed. William J. Hynes and William G. Doty (University of Alabama, 1997), 37.

¹³ Hyde, *Trickster Makes*, 9.

¹⁴ Weaver, “Trickster,” 118.

“calculated or not, a misrepresentation”¹⁵ because “the Devil is an agent of evil, but trickster is *amoral*, not *immoral*. He embodies and enacts the large portion of our experience where good and evil are hopelessly intertwined.”¹⁶ Weaver, however, ends her analysis of the character of the Trickster with the conclusion that the missionaries who denounced the tricksters they encountered as evil were “blind to the tricksters in the biblical tradition.”¹⁷ What might she be alluding to, and how could that contribute to the intent of *A Native American Theology*? In the following I will proceed from Weaver’s comment by examining two examples of the possible presence of trickster-qualities in Christian theology.

“Trickster God”

In his essay “The Old Testament of Native America” Steve Charleston, native Alaskan Episcopal priest and former bishop, contends that “the religious worldviews of ancient Israel and ancient Native America have much in common.”¹⁸ He mentions various reasons to demonstrate this view, one of which being that Native Americans tied their identity “to the land given to them by God”; furthermore, the Native heritage “embodies the collective memory of an encounter with God ... which was transmitted through all of those channels that make up any Old Testament – through stories, histories, poetry, music, sacraments, liturgies, prophecies, proverbs, visions, and laws.”¹⁹ In his chapter Charleston does not mention the figure of the trickster; but, as noted by native minister Rachel K. Haber-Hamilton, at least one story in the Old Testament definitely seems to imply trickster-like behaviour; “the Book of Genesis portrays the character of Jacob as a brazen trickster.”²⁰

Even more intriguing, however, is that a well-known – Western – Old Testament theologian, Walter Brueggemann, should, in a different context, talk about “trickster God.” In his essay “Why the Old Testament Must Not Go Away” Brueggemann asks: “What is it that makes the Old Testament so problematic?” and his answer is that “it is the God who inhabits the text that generates all of these problems and possibilities. It is this inhabiting God who causes the Old Testament to be problematic ... it is this inhabiting God who causes us embarrassment.”²¹ He then goes on to expound on

¹⁵ Weaver, 120.

¹⁶ Hyde, *Trickster Makes*, quoted in Weaver, “Trickster,” 120.

¹⁷ Weaver, “Trickster,” 120.

¹⁸ Steve Charleston, “The Old Testament of Native America,” in *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada*, ed. James Treat (Routledge, 1996), 77.

¹⁹ Charleston, “The Old Testament,” 77.

²⁰ Rachel K. Taber-Hamilton, “A Fool’s Journey to Easter,” *Godspace*, April 1, 2018, accessed April 13, 2025, godspacelight.com/a-fools-journey-to-easter/.

²¹ Walter Brueggemann, “Why the Old Testament Must Not Go Away,” *Word & World* 35, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 262, wordandworld.luthersem.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/35-3_James/Why%20the%20Old%20Testament%20Must%20Not%20Go%20Away.pdf

the identity of this God, whose defining characteristic is holiness, “that irreducible otherness of God ... that defies our formulations, that refuses our domestication, that bespeaks a commanding morality but then rushes beyond morality in power or in pathos.”²² Indeed, Brueggemann has the audacity to suggest that thus “holiness is inexplicably irascible, arbitrary, and variously absent, neglectful, violent, disruptive, eruptive, and provocative. It is this trickster God who dispatched lying prophets and true prophets who sound like they are lying.”²³ He also identifies concrete trickster components of the God of the Old Testament; referring to Isaiah 56, the welcoming of eunuchs and foreigners into the community of Israel, he suggests that “that welcome is a dramatic counter to all of the old rules of purity.”²⁴ This welcome is, then, he suggests, extended into the New Testament’s “there is no longer Jew or Gentile, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”²⁵

Jesus the Trickster?

Jace Weaver, as already noted, also recognizes tricksters in the biblical tradition. She, too, connects the Old and New Testaments when concluding that “not only is there an ancient Israelite trickster in the person of Jacob, but there are aspects of trickster evident in Jesus himself.”²⁶ She even assumes that early Christian authors already recognized trickster qualities in Jesus, for example in Luke’s narrative of the boy Jesus at the Temple. This incident, she contends, “though meant to illustrate Jesus’ messianic mission from an early age ... is also a trickster story. Jesus stealthily evades his parents and goes to the temple. ... When found out, his answer to his mother’s question ... plays upon the term ‘father,’ his father being Joseph, and also Yahweh.”²⁷ But, Weaver adds, there are several other aspects of Jesus’ career that point to his affinity with the Trickster. Not only is he “the antisocial disrupter of religious norms,” but just as they do in the Trickster, in Jesus indigenous people “see the ultimate boundary-crosser, erasing the boundary between heaven and earth, life and death. In the resurrection, he becomes the *pontifex maximus*, literally the great bridge builder, building a bridge between life and death.”²⁸

Rachel K. Taber-Hamilton identifies yet other trickster-like features of Jesus as she reflects on the story of the Holy Week. She suggests that “in keeping with the characterization of Tricksters as ‘foolish,’ even those closest to Jesus wish he would

²² Brueggemann, “Why the Old Testament,” 263.

²³ Brueggemann, 263.

²⁴ Brueggemann, 273.

²⁵ Brueggemann, 274.

²⁶ Weaver, “Trickster,” 121.

²⁷ Weaver, 121.

²⁸ Weaver, 122–123.

shut up about his ... preoccupation with his impending death. ... For many of his followers, Jesus is potentially an insane embarrassment.”²⁹ Just like the Trickster, who, by shape-shifting, often shares the knowledge of possible transformation in a way that brings about social change, “Trickster Jesus broke the hearts of those who followed him, because those hearts needed to be broken [but] ... Trickster Jesus winks at those who thought him dead once and for all” and, Taber-Hamilton adds, “He winks at corrupted power every time we help someone one need”; in the end, “the Trickster is all about liberation.”³⁰

For Jace Weaver, however, “Jesus as Trickster” is not just an interesting idea of Native American Christians – more than that, it is a challenge to “Mainstream Christianity.”³¹ Those Christians who acknowledge and celebrate Jesus’ healings and compassion and affirm his life and his Passion, “Can they also embrace and revel in his humour and his passions? Can they believe in God as both constant and capricious? Can they recognize deity for the trickster that it is?”³²

Conclusion

The discussion about colonialism is here to stay; history, ethics, politics, literary studies, ethnography, etc. have had their postcolonial and decolonial rewritings and counter-rewritings. Theology is no exception, though, at least in academia, “Mainstream Christianity” is still the dominant discourse. However, with a wider acknowledgement of the existence and legitimate rights of pre-colonial, indigenous peoples, theology must also take into account the now “ongoing debate among native Christians over the nature of religious identity” as more and more native Christians have “chosen to be theological subjects, not the objects of mis-siological or anthropological or any other form of colonial or neocolonial domination.”³³ This is not only about Native Christians, however; the importance of a closer examination of different Christian identities is, as noted by Weaver above, also an important challenge to “traditional categories of Christian theology.”³⁴ One way to challenge these categories is an examination of Native spiritual beliefs and by suggesting “links among categories that Christian theology has traditionally separated.”³⁵

Of the different Native spiritual beliefs in this paper, I have considered one that, I am convinced, has interesting repercussions for the identity of both God

²⁹ Taber-Hamilton, “A Fool’s Journey”

³⁰ Taber-Hamilton, “A Fool’s Journey”

³¹ Weaver, “Trickster,” 125.

³² Weaver, 125.

³³ James Treat, “Introduction: Native Christian Narrative Discourse,” in *Native and Christian*, 3.

³⁴ Kidwell et al., *A Native American Theology*, ix.

³⁵ Kidwell et al., 20.

the Father and Jesus the Son. Having first briefly outlined some of the typical characteristics of the Trickster, one of the most widespread Native spiritual characters, I introduced the way different native and non-native theologians see a link between the Trickster, God, and Jesus. The title of my paper, “Jesus the Trickster?” conveys my view that this question, shocking though it may sound, deserves further thought and investigation – as do many other Native spiritual beliefs and their links with traditional Christian categories.

Abstract

The figure of the Trickster is a universal cultural hero, a significant character also in Native American spirituality. After colonization most Native Americans adopted Christianity, and recently they have been making it their task to reconcile their ancient beliefs with Christianity and enrich traditional theological categories with those of their native ones. In this paper I consider one of these categories, that of the Trickster, and, based on the ideas of both native and some Western theologians, examine ways of linking this character with the person of God and Jesus.

Keywords: Trickster, native American, Jesus, God, theology, colonization

Rezümé

Jézus, a trickster?

A trickster-karakter egyetemes „kulturális hős”, az észak-amerikai őslakosok spiritualitásának is jelentős alakja. A gyarmatosítás után az amerikai őslakosok többsége felvette a kereszténységet, és az utóbbi időben feladatuknak tekintik, hogy kapcsolatot keressenek ősi hiedelmek és a keresztény teológia között, és a hagyományos teológiai kategóriákat saját kategóriáikkal gazdagítsák. Ebben a dolgozatban az egyik ilyen kategória, a trickster szerepét vizsgálom, akit mind őslakos, mind egyes nyugati teológusok Isten és Jézus személyével is összekapcsolnak.

Kulcsszavak: trickster, amerikai őslakosok, Jézus, Isten, teológia, gyarmatosítás