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God is Red

By

VINE DELORIA, JR.

Grosset & Dunlap, 1973

376 pp. \$7.95

It is a mistake to think that the campaigns against the Indians ceased with the surrender of Geronimo. The campaigns have continued although blue-shirted cavalry are no longer used; the modern day Indian fighter is typically a bureaucrat with almost no appreciation of either the special legal status of American Indians or the substance of Indian cultures. These two subjects are related in that Indian cultures are dependent upon the maintenance of the Indian's special legal status in American society. Often the attacks on Indian culture and legal status have originated from within the federal bureaucracy. The effort during the Eisenhower Administration to "terminate" the tribes even included the publishing of a bastard version of Felix S. Cohen's *Handbook of Federal Indian Law* (see the Foreword by Robert L. Bennett and the Publisher's Note in the edition published by the University of New Mexico Press). More recently, the various states have been harassing Indians by both legitimate and illegitimate means. Frequently, this harassment is premised on simple ignorance of Indian law. I have personally heard a responsible state official argue in conference that since the reservations are geographically located within the exterior boundaries of the state that transactions on the reservation should be subject to taxation by the state. Typical of such misunderstanding is a Comment published in this Journal (13 Natural Resources J. 535 [1973]). These mistaken conceptions are perhaps understandable but not excusable when it is noticed that less than one percent of all law school graduates have ever had a formal course in Indian law and many people find it hard to believe that many Indians do not want to become assimilated into the dominant crass culture. But how can a Nez Perce groove with the split-level complex when he knows that some dentist is using the skull of Chief Joseph as an ashtray? Think about it. Reading Vine Deloria's *God is Red* will help the development of your thoughts.

Mr. Deloria's book is a juxtaposition of American Indian philosophy, Christianity, and the parameters that shape religions. It is at the same time a thesis on the modern crisis of the American Indian. Deloria draws a subtle but very important distinction between the dominant motifs of Christian and Indian thought: Christian religions

are threaded with a temporal theme in contrast with the spatial orientation characteristic of the Indian's religions. One theoretical conclusion made by Deloria is that (p. 85):

If time becomes our primary consideration, we never seem to arrive at the reality of our existence in places but instead are always directed to experiential interpretations rather than to the experiences themselves.

The implications of this conclusion along with others are far-reaching and Deloria does an excellent job in their development, which leads the reader to an understanding of the modern crisis for the American Indian. The Indian way of life can be perceived as rational and sophisticated, a perception that should be unsettling to the radical chic.

The book goes beyond the Indian question, though, for Mr. Deloria's approach is too fundamental not to have implications for one's personal philosophy. For example, to become oriented primarily spatially rather than temporally can radically change the relationship between the person and nature. It appears that Deloria's thesis and Aldo Leopold's conservation ethic (31 *J. Forestry* 634 [1933]) mesh very neatly. *God is Red* is a significant contribution to the literature of conservation philosophy.

In short, *God is Red* is a book to be read, thought about, and acted upon.

CHANNING R. KURY