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The Spirit of Immense Struggle: Oral Roberts' Native American Ancestry

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THE SPIRIT OF IMMENSE STRUGGLE

ORAL ROBERTS' NATIVE AMERICAN ANCESTRY

TIMOTHY HATCHER

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Abstract

Oral Roberts was proud of his blended white, Cherokee, and Choctaw heritage and spoke openly about it. To understand Roberts' view of his own hybridized identity better, it is necessary to consider how his parents and grandparents negotiated the issues related to their mixed ancestry. His own view changed over time from conscious pride to overt activism on behalf of his fellow Native Americans. From the early years of the ministry, the Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association engaged in a variety of creative outreaches to Native Americans where Roberts identified deeply with his brothers and sisters. Several Native American communities across the country responded positively to his work by publicly honoring Roberts in a variety of ways. During these outreaches, Roberts began his own creative exegesis that shaped his later addressing of racism during the Civil Rights era. Roberts used the words “spirit of immense struggle” to identify with the suffering his Cherokee Indian ancestors endured on the Trail of Tears.

Introduction

On a mild, late-September morning in 2009, then 91-year-old Oral Roberts made his way into Morning Star Evangelistic Center, a Native American church in the tiny town of Hectorville, Oklahoma. He told the surprised congregation, “When I entered the building, the presence of God filled my soul.”¹ Roberts had come to have a conversation with Pastor Negiel Bigpond, but at their urging, he preached what was to be his final sermon.² Prior to beginning the sermon, the congregation honored Roberts with the Warrior’s Robe, a traditional blanket they presented to people who accomplished much for the kingdom of God. Pastor Bigpond explained the reason for the robe: “It was where honor met honor. He honored us with his presence, and we honored him with the Warrior Robe.”³ Roberts spoke for more than an hour, sharing stories from his ministry and wisdom from decades of experience. After completing the sermon, he did not leave until he had laid hands on every person who asked for prayer, a tiring experience for someone of his age.⁴ While praying for people, Roberts exclaimed, “I feel like I’m back in the tent,” recalling the prayer lines from the earlier decades of his large tent revivals where he would pray for hours for those who had come seeking healing.

Oral Roberts was not looking for a place to speak that Sunday morning; many congregations would have eagerly welcomed the opportunity to host this elder statesman of the Charismatic Movement. Pastor Negiel Bigpond explained the reason for his visit. Having read Bigpond’s book, *Warrior Women*, about the role of women in ministry and Bigpond’s Native American heritage, Roberts wanted to meet Bigpond and discuss their mutual Native American ancestry. “He was proud of his blood; he kept saying ‘I’m very proud of my bloodline, my Cherokee blood,’” Bigpond said.⁵ Reflecting on the same event, Roberts’ youngest daughter, Roberta Potts, described her father as “extremely proud of his heritage as a Cherokee Indian.”⁶

While the public mostly perceived Oral Roberts as a white televangelist, he liked to emphasize that he was one-eighth Cherokee.⁷ This was a lifelong source of pride for him, which he highlighted at times when it could have been disadvantageous for him to do so. Yet,

Roberts was also proud of his Welsh roots. His navigation of these different ethnicities reveals a hybridized identity that sprang from his early experiences and his family's approaches to these issues. It was also grounded in Roberts' own creative theological reflections.

Oral Roberts' Family History

Oral Roberts told the story of the migration of his father's side of the family from Wales to Alabama, and then during Reconstruction from Alabama to central Arkansas, where they settled and built a town called Robertsville in 1871.⁸ Many Cherokee lived in central Arkansas prior to the Indian removals, and a few remained there even after the removals, primarily through intermarriage.⁹ In 1890, the Robertses and a large group of other Arkansans, including the Irwins who had intermarried with the Cherokee, headed further west, settling briefly in Texas before eventually putting down roots in southeastern Oklahoma.¹⁰ The exit of these various families from central Arkansas corresponds directly with the beginning of what Arkansas historians call the "Great Migration;" many left the state looking for more opportunities or better land.¹¹

Oral Roberts' maternal grandmother, Demaris Holton, was one-half Cherokee. Holton's family followed Native American ways of life, including maintaining a nomadic lifestyle. Demaris Holton married Frank Irwin, a white man, in spite of what was described as the "hatred of the intermarriage of whites and Indians" at the time.¹² Although the Irwin family was white, they had embraced Native American nomadic patterns; thus, Frank and Demaris Holton continued the tradition.¹³ They were among the migrants from Arkansas to Texas and eventually to Pontotoc County in southeastern Oklahoma.

Their daughter, Claudius Pricilla, also married a white man, Ellis Roberts. She soon concluded that traditional Native American ways of nomadism were not equal to the challenges of twentieth-century America.¹⁴ While embracing modernity, Claudius also treasured her Native American identity. She prayed that her soon-to-be-born son, Oral, would have blue eyes like his father (unlike his siblings who all had brown or black eyes). Yet, she also prayed that he would look like a "full blooded Indian" like her grandmother.¹⁵ She believed that God granted her request: "Oral was exactly the little blue-eyed 'full blood' I had asked for."¹⁶

Claudius Roberts passed on her love for her Native American ancestry to her children. Oral Roberts later recounted, “When I was a little boy, my mother told me, ‘Son, you have Indian blood. I want you to be proud of it. Wherever you go, let people know it.’”¹⁷ He also described in highly positive terms his interactions with Native Americans in an Oklahoma town to which he moved while a teenager: “Atoka was full of Indians, and I felt right at home. One group I could get along with was Indians. My Indian blood showed, although I am only one-eighth Indian. It was evident I was a person of color.”¹⁸ Roberts reports having grown up in a rather multicultural setting, having worked and played with white, African American, and Native American children.¹⁹ His white ancestry appeared to be the most culturally defining for him, though he deeply prized his Native American ancestry, as did his mother.

Later when Roberts contracted tuberculosis, he appeared temporarily to resent his Native American ancestry due to his perception that the disease had been passed down to him from his mother’s side of the family. He said at the time that he “blamed my mother’s people for the germ they had passed on to me.”²⁰ On the night of his diagnosis, Roberts demanded that his mother tell him whether tuberculosis had claimed her father and two oldest sisters, as he had remembered; it had.²¹ He reflected further on the number of Indians he had witnessed enduring the disease and those he had seen die from it when he accompanied his father on his preaching tours among the Indians.²² Roberts did mention bitterness toward his ancestors as an initial reaction, but very quickly shifted blame to Satan as the source of his illness.²³

During Roberts’ courtship with Evelyn Lutman Fahnestock (later Roberts), his ancestry apparently became a brief sticking point with her parents. After meeting him for the first time, Evelyn wrote in her diary her belief that they would marry. When her mother and sister learned of her hopes, they objected noting that Oral’s mother was “an Indian.” Evelyn retorted that she had no intention of marrying his mother.²⁴

A few years after this, the Robertses’ first child, Rebecca Ann, was born. He admired her dark complexion and dark curly hair saying, “She looked like a little Indian.”²⁵ Roberts’ delight in his daughter’s Native

American appearance mirrored his mother's desire that he retain the features of their Native American ancestors.

Oral Roberts' Self-Identification as Native American

Oral Roberts' ministry began within the larger context of white, North American Pentecostalism. While early Pentecostals boasted about their racial diversity and unity in the 1910s, later Pentecostal denominations divided along racial lines.²⁶ The Pentecostal Holiness church of which Oral Roberts and his father were ministers lacked much racial diversity in the late 1940s when Oral Roberts' ministry began. There were certainly African American Pentecostal denominations like the Church of God in Christ, but that serves to prove the point: Pentecostals had segregated into racially defined groupings. This was the context in which Oral Roberts began his pastoral ministry and later his healing ministry.

Roberts did not mention his Native American ancestry in his first autobiography published in 1952, though it is not clear why. Because Roberts authored five autobiographies, it is possible to compare his various accounts of the same event across five decades. One event is recounted in similar detail in each telling—his healing from tuberculosis at a revival meeting in Ada, Oklahoma, in late July 1935.²⁷ Common to all of these accounts is something the evangelist, Reverend George Moncey, said to Roberts on that night. Moncey told him that earlier in the week, “an Indian boy with tuberculosis” had been healed instantly.²⁸ In later autobiographies, Roberts added his opinion that Moncey said this because he had probably heard about his “Cherokee Indian ancestry.”²⁹ However, in his first autobiography, while he did recount Moncey's comments, he did not relate the comment to his own Native American ethnicity as he did in subsequent accounts.

It is not clear why Roberts avoided the topic of his Native American heritage in his earliest autobiography. He may have viewed it as irrelevant to his audience. It is also possible that he was seeking to avoid being the victim of prejudice himself. This latter explanation seems less compelling in light of his subsequent handling of the topic soon after his first autobiography had been published.

Only two years later, the ministry published an article detailing how Roberts gained his middle name “Oral” through a cousin who did not originally know what the word meant. In this telling of the story, the article incidentally emphasized Roberts’ “Indian features,” his long black hair and dark skin, which were evident as a baby. It elaborated that his native ancestry was specifically Cherokee and Choctaw.³⁰ This is the earliest public acknowledgement of his Native American heritage in print. It is clear that the ministry was quite comfortable with talking about Roberts’ blended ethnicity.

The audience for the ministry’s magazine at the time was overwhelmingly white evangelicals, many from the south. There was some risk in Roberts revealing his mixed heritage. While he might have been less aware of the risk because of his mother’s celebration of their hybridized identity, the members of his staff would have been very aware of potential drawbacks. His decision to highlight his Native American ancestry reveals the importance Roberts placed on this part of his personal history. It demonstrates well what biographer David Harrell described as Roberts’ “conscious pride in his Indian heritage.”³¹

A mere three years after publishing that first autobiography in which he did not mention his Native American ancestry at all, Roberts placed his blended heritage on center stage. The occasion was his first “all Indian” healing service near Hardin, Montana. The meeting was held at the beginning of the annual fair of the Crow Tribe in order to attract greater interest. In his introduction at the service, Roberts could not have been more forthright about his Native American identity. He offered a rather typical initial greeting to the tribe and all of those who had gathered before identifying even more deeply with them: “I bring you greetings from the Cherokee and Choctaw tribes of Oklahoma from whom I’m proud to say I descend.”³²

If Roberts had made such comments only at a meeting of fellow Native Americans, it could be argued that he was simply using his heritage as a ministry tool to appeal to a particular audience. This was not the case. A few months later, the November 1955 edition of *America’s Healing Magazine* (then the official periodical of the Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association) featured the Montana meeting as the cover story with the title, “Crow Indians Find a Brother in Oral

Roberts.” The cover photograph showed Roberts seated on horseback in a traditional headdress flanked by similarly attired Crow Indians also on horseback. The article included his confident self-introduction of his Native American ancestry.

In 1960, the ministry published E. M. and Claudius Roberts’ book that was part autobiography of their own ministry and part biography



of their youngest son, Oral. Claudius spoke fondly of her Native American heritage and her desire that Oral look like a “full blooded Indian.”³³ Oral Roberts’ second autobiography, also published by the ministry in 1960, similarly spoke openly and positively about his lineage.³⁴ It is important to note that these first four accounts (1954, 1955, 1960, and 1960) predated Native American activism’s becoming mainstream in the United States. Oral Roberts mentioning his ancestry to his mostly white audience this early in his ministry offered no discernable benefits and posed more than a few potential challenges to his continued popularity. The most plausible explanation for Roberts’

public fronting of his Native American identity is the importance he and his family personally placed on it. In his final autobiography, he spoke in even greater detail about this part of his story, saying that he had “always been proud” of being a “person of color.”³⁵

In the years that followed, Roberts took an increasingly activist stand about the injustices committed against Native Americans in previous generations. In a report on the revival campaign among the Navajos in 1958, *Abundant Life* magazine described the various tribes this way: “These people live where their ancestors lived after being pushed to the fringe of civilization to eke out a livelihood on the desert wastelands.”³⁶ This mildly confrontational tone was greatly intensified in Roberts’ 1967 autobiography. There, Roberts focused attention on multiple genocides committed against native peoples by white Americans.

The history of the white man’s behavior toward the Indians is a story of broken promises, mistreatment, and hardship. Driven for the most part to arid desert lands, the Red Man was left to poverty, disease and spiritual degradation. The trail by which several tribes reached Oklahoma (which translates Red People) has gone down in history as “The Trail of Tears.” Of Indian descent myself, I have a deep compassion for the Red Man.³⁷

Roberts used this as an introduction to a description of his ministry among Native American communities, but such a tone was not essential to communicating his narrative of outreach to a culturally unique group. It was also a move that risked alienating some white donors of that time who did not view history with the same perspective of empathy and sensitivity.

As strong as this statement had been, Roberts was only beginning. In a national television special, Roberts featured an interpretive reenactment of the Trail of Tears by a group of fellow Cherokee actors and dancers. The televised drama was introduced by then Oklahoma governor David Hill, who emphasized the need to “remind Americans” of the “heartbreaking westward journey” of the Cherokee. Roberts offered this editorial in an extended description of the drama in the

ministry's national magazine: "I share in the spirit of struggle conveyed by this great drama . . . the struggle of the Cherokee people . . . for I too am Cherokee. I too have known tremendous struggle." He also took time to introduce his "little Cherokee mother" to the television audience.³⁸ This represented Roberts' strongest and most visible identification with his Native American ancestry. He used it not simply as a point of commonality with Native American audiences, but as a means to confront the comfortable world of white evangelicalism with the sins of America in hopes of provoking compassion and justice toward his own people. These moves carried potential risk, but this was a part of Roberts' history to which he was strongly committed.

Oral Roberts' Outreach to Native Americans

In the 1955 Crow Indian Reservation crusade, Roberts spoke on the topic of "The Place of the Indians in God's Program," a sermon that sought in part to validate native peoples and bring reconciliation between races. This was coupled with his desire to express salvation through the cross and the healing power of God. Roberts saw these as different aspects of the same message. The sermon was based partially on Acts 17:25–26, a passage that would later become central in his broader message of racial reconciliation.³⁹ God had created every race from "one blood," Roberts asserted; the only real differences between races, according to Acts 17, was between skin color and physical location. It was now through the "one blood" of Jesus Christ that all races could be saved, healed, and reconciled.⁴⁰ He viewed a common creation and the work of the cross as the great equalizers and unifiers in any discussion of race. Following the meeting, he was honored with a "buffalo barbecue held on the reservation."⁴¹

This was the beginning of Roberts' outreach to Native American groups across the country. Another "All-Indian Crusade" was held in Phoenix, Arizona, on February 28, 1958. Roberts preached and prayed for many Native American attendees during the one-day meeting, including 7-year-old Harold Patterson, who suffered from epileptic seizures every month. In the years preceding the service, Harold's parents, Edward and Mary Patterson, tried many things to bring relief

to their son. Various injections from the nearby clinic had not served to alleviate his condition. On six different occasions, the family turned to traditional Apache healers who employed various rituals to drive away the spirits who were believed to cause the illness. None of the rituals proved effective, though they had cost the Pattersons five head of cattle in payment to the Apache religious specialists. *Abundant Life* magazine contrasted Roberts' powerful healing meetings with the ineffective non-Christian traditional ceremonies and described these rituals in strongly negative terms.⁴²

A friend told Mary Patterson of the upcoming All-Indian Oral Roberts meeting in Phoenix, and she made plans to take her family.⁴³ Roberts prayed for little Harold and hundreds of other Native American seekers. Mrs. Patterson reported feeling "God's spirit go through my body" and was assured that her son had been healed. In early 1960, the ministry interviewed Mrs. Patterson, who reported that her son had not had any further seizures in the two-year period since Roberts prayed for him.⁴⁴

In another part of this ministry's outreach to Native Americans, they launched a literature distribution campaign in 1957 in Sheridan, Wyoming, and Gallup, New Mexico. The initiatives were synchronized with large regional festivals in an effort to reach as many tribes at one time as possible.⁴⁵ The attention paid to Native Americans in this region did not go unnoticed. The Navajo Tribal Council headquartered in Window Rock, Arizona (not far from Gallup, New Mexico), invited Oral Roberts to hold an all-Indian crusade in 1959.⁴⁶ The previous literature campaigns in the area laid the groundwork for this unique invitation. Reports in the ministry's magazine about the meeting listed nearly a dozen tribes present at the meeting—Blackfeet, Shoshones, Apaches, Pimas, Papagos, Mericopas, Hopis, Zunis, San Domingos, Utes, and Navajos—and again highlighted Roberts' own Native American heritage for the national audience. Hilliard Griffin, the director of Indian outreach for the Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association, described Roberts' preaching during those meetings as uniquely enthusiastic: "I have heard him preach many times . . . but this far exceeded the great moments of the past as Oral Roberts ministered with a heart of understanding and love to

these needy Indians.” He went on to recount numerous miraculous healings of deafness, paralysis, and other illnesses.⁴⁷

The Appeal of Oral Roberts and Pentecostalism to Native Americans

Pentecostal Christianity has spread among people living in traditional religious contexts worldwide as the result of a kind of accidental contextualization. Contextualization is the process of adapting arts, ceremonies, and concepts from a host community to communicate the gospel in culturally appropriate ways. This process often looks for points of commonality between host community forms and concepts and the Christian faith as ways to form links to convey scriptural truth. Pentecostal ministers and missionaries, Oral Roberts included, apparently made only limited attempts to contextualize their message or methods for various audiences. Roberts often talked about how God had not forgotten Native American communities in an effort to make the message more relatable.⁴⁸ The spread of Pentecostalism and Roberts’ success in traditional religious contexts, including Native American societies, is due to what might be called unintentional contextualization. Neither Roberts nor Pentecostals intentionally sought to contextualize local arts, ceremonies, or concepts in an effort to communicate with their audiences. Nevertheless, Pentecostals, including Roberts (like many other Pentecostals), preached a message and practiced a spirituality that proved highly relevant to people from folk religious traditions. Emphases on the spiritual gifts, stylized preaching, and lively worship distinguished Roberts’ meetings (as well as other Pentecostal outreaches) from other Christian groups. These unique emphases also made Pentecostals like Roberts more relatable to Native American audiences who often valued similar religious expressions.

Sacred Healing in Pentecostal and Native American Traditions

Historian Cecil Roebeck notes that Native Americans, along with many other ethnicities, were present at the Azusa Street revival that spawned

global Pentecostalism.⁴⁹ Indeed, the spread of Pentecostal Christianity in traditional religious contexts is a well-studied phenomenon; it is no surprise, then, that it has been attractive to some Native American audiences. Native American spirituality has long emphasized physical healing as central to their belief systems, but many Christian traditions have not historically emphasized divine healing. More broadly, missiologist Paul Hiebert described how Christian traditions that have deemphasized the supernatural have failed to address the issues that are of the highest relevance to people from traditional religious backgrounds.⁵⁰ Historian William McLoughlin identified “the three great stumbling blocks” of Christianity for Native Americans: “its failure to address the basic issues of corporate harmony, bountiful harvests, and sacred healing.”⁵¹ Pentecostalism in general, and Oral Roberts in particular, offered a profound emphasis on divine healing as an integral part of gospel presentations. Native American historian Angela Tarango notes that while Pentecostals⁵² were not the first to teach about divine healing, “they heavily emphasized its embodied, miraculous form and made it a centerpiece of their belief.”⁵³ Native American psychologist Joseph P. Gone goes so far as to identify Oral Roberts as one of the two⁵⁴ most renowned Native American healers of the twentieth century.⁵⁵

This is not to say that Roberts made any deliberate attempt to incorporate Native American forms into his presentation or theology; his contextualization was unintended. Rather, Native American listeners likely saw points of connection between the emphasis on healing within their own traditions and the healing ministry of Oral Roberts. By all accounts, Roberts’ ideas were shaped primarily by his Pentecostal roots and his own personal study of Scripture as illuminated by the Holy Spirit. However, Native American listeners would have encountered something not entirely unfamiliar when they heard and saw Roberts’ ministry. Chief W. W. Keeler of the Cherokee Nation described Roberts’ teachings about the “whole man” and God listening to people as similar to several Cherokee concepts.⁵⁶ Such points of continuity between Native American spirituality and Pentecostalism have served to lower the sense of the foreignness of Christianity. Oral Roberts’ emphasis on his own Cherokee and Choctaw heritage would likely have only strengthened this.

Sacred Speech and Sacred Singing

As a part of healing and spirituality, Native American traditions often emphasize the spoken word and singing. In Navajo spirituality, for example, ritualized singing is believed to be the mechanism through which healing occurs.⁵⁷ Oral Roberts' preaching, and that of other traditional Pentecostal ministers, may have been viewed as a kind of ritualized speech form. Roberts' own theology emphasized that his sermons were not simply prepared speeches but anointed messages from God. Tarango observed that the "loud, boisterous music, singing, and ecstatic dance" were forms that marked both Native American traditional religion and Pentecostalism.⁵⁸ Once again, the enthusiasm in Roberts' meetings would likely have felt more natural to Native American audiences than did other forms of Christianity.

Native American Architecture in American Revivalism

One of the great ironies of American religious history is the association of the brush arbor with American revivalism. Native Americans across the United States traditionally used brush arbors for both sacred and secular use for centuries prior to the adoption of the structure for Christian use.⁵⁹ The style of brush arbors used by American revivalists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was borrowed from Native American tribes in the southeastern United States.⁶⁰ This form was first borrowed by the "invisible institution" of independent African American churches, with non-Christian Native Americans sometimes aiding in the construction of the brush arbors for the Christian worshipers. The Second Great Awakening similarly utilized the brush arbor for revivals conducted by itinerant preachers.⁶¹

Pentecostal evangelists made great use of brush arbors on the revival circuit. Having been saved in a brush arbor meeting himself, Oral Roberts' father, Ellis Roberts, relied on quickly constructed brush arbors for the revival meetings he held across southeastern Oklahoma.⁶² Oral Roberts specifically identified Native Americans as part of the audience,⁶³ speaking of his father's "preaching tours among the Indian people."⁶⁴ There was almost certainly not an intentional effort by

Roberts' father to use a Native American structure in order to identify better with his audience. By the time Ellis Roberts was constructing them, brush arbors had become synonymous with evangelical revivalism and Pentecostalism in particular. Thus, Ellis Roberts and other Pentecostals probably did not associate the structure with Native Americans at all, and if they did, they probably saw them as being strictly pragmatic.

If the elder Roberts did not recognize the connection, his wife, Claudius, or Native American neighbors might have pointed it out. Whatever the case, the connection would have likely been more apparent to Native American audiences than it would have been for Pentecostal evangelists like Ellis Roberts. Because Native Americans continued to use brush arbors for ceremonial purposes, they could possibly have seen a Pentecostal religious service set in a brush arbor as natural and familiar. It could have very possibly created positive associations that made it more likely for Native Americans to participate. Oral Roberts may have even seen tent revivals as an extension of the brush arbor revivals he had witnessed as a child.

Early American Pentecostalism and Oral Roberts' ministry retained multiple features that would have potentially held appeal for Native American audiences. The emphasis on charismatic gifts (especially healing), the use of stylized speech and enthusiastic singing, and the early use of Native American brush arbors very likely created some small sense of familiarity among some Native American audiences. These form a kind of unintentional contextualization that is common to Pentecostal and Charismatic missions. Pentecostals and Charismatics like Roberts did not intentionally seek points of commonality with their audiences. Instead, they emphasized things that happened to be highly relevant to traditional religious groups globally, including Native American communities.

Questioning Oral Roberts' Native American Heritage

Native American psychologist Joseph P. Gone questioned Oral Roberts' Native American ancestry based on reports that the Cherokee Nation rolls did not maintain any record of Roberts or his ancestors. In the

end, Gone does acknowledge that there are other evidences that do support Roberts' self-description as a Native American, though he does suggest that there is a question based on the Cherokee rolls.⁶⁵ It is not clear which members of Roberts' family were researched in the rolls. Claudius Roberts⁶⁶ described her grandmother as a "full-blooded Indian,"⁶⁷ but this grandmother's maiden name is not reported in any of Roberts' autobiographies, though we do know that her married name was Holton. As a result, it may not have been possible for Gone or others to research her ancestry thoroughly due to the Roberts family's not detailing their genealogy more thoroughly. Roberts' great-grandmother was from Arkansas and may or may not have avoided the Indian removals through intermarriage to a white man, though it is unlikely that that was their primary motivation for marriage.

Fortunately, there are several other verifications of Oral Roberts' Native American heritage, some of which Gone acknowledged and others to which he likely did not have access during his research. The annual American Indian Exposition in Anadarko, Oklahoma, has historically been one of the largest gatherings of Native Americans in the country. In 1963, they selected Oral Roberts to receive the honor of Outstanding American Indian of the Year.⁶⁸ Gone mentions this honor as bolstering the case of Roberts' Native American ancestry.⁶⁹

The leader of the exposition, President Kharghar, said the following in honor of Roberts:

We appreciate your Indian descent, Reverend Roberts. We honor you as an Indian. We are a minority group, but through you we have gained prestige in the world. We thank you. We know that you are a man of God. And we share the blessings that go with you. Because of you, I know that the minds of the people are thinking about God—if only for this day.⁷⁰

The honor recognized Roberts' Native American ancestry but also seemed comfortable with his blended heritage. Roberts himself seemed to grapple with the ambiguity of his hybridized identity during the event. Roberts described that during his childhood, his "father preached to the Indian people all around here." This sort of sociolinguistic construction appears to orient Roberts as an outsider to the Indians that he worked

with in the cotton fields and met during his father's evangelistic meetings.

Later that same day, while formally receiving the honor, Roberts said the following, which reveals a closer identification with his Native American identity: "Wherever I have gone, this Indian heritage has been a blessing. It has been a great help to me to know that I'm Indian. It makes me love all people."⁷¹ The article further described Roberts as "at home with his Indian brothers." Using this language of identification, calling himself an Indian—rather than a descendant of Indians or one who related well with Indians—indicates a deliberate shift in the way Roberts described himself. It appears that after receiving this award, Roberts was more likely to identify himself simply as a Cherokee Indian rather than as one with some percentage of Cherokee blood. In his 1972 television special, he calls himself a Cherokee rather than descended from the Cherokees, as he had previously.⁷²

Roberts always celebrated his Native American ancestry, as he had been instructed by his mother to do. Yet, he was also comfortable with his hybridity. Many Native Americans in Oklahoma and elsewhere embraced Roberts as one of their community. The 1972 Oral Roberts prime time television special, which included the "Trail of Tears" drama staged by actors from the Cherokee Heritage Center, served to raise the profile of the Cherokee Heritage Center and their regular performances of the play in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. Later during the program, the Principal Chief of the Cherokees presented Roberts with a citation from the Cherokee Nation.⁷³

This citation is important because it is an official written acknowledgement by the Cherokee Nation of Roberts' Cherokee ancestry and his contributions to the Cherokee people. Gone does not report the citation in his discussion of Roberts' Native American ancestry, but it is unlikely that he could have gotten access to this information through reasonable efforts. While the presentation of the citation was broadcast nationwide to 416 stations on a primetime network television special in 1972,⁷⁴ and it was reported in the *Abundant Life* magazine,⁷⁵ it was not widely reported in the press. Unless he happened to have watched that broadcast, it would have been very difficult for Gone to have been aware of Roberts' having received this honor. The citation itself is on display in a museum on the campus of Oral Roberts University. There are few ways

that any researcher could have been aware of this citation without going to this museum or doing extensive archival research. This is more a failure on the part of the Oral Roberts museum for not making this information more widely known to the public.

These official honors from Native American institutions are important. Roberts was invited by the Navajo Tribal Council to hold a crusade in eastern Arizona in 1959, an honor not accorded to any other Christian minister. The American Indian Exposition recognized Roberts as “Outstanding American Indian of 1963,” illustrating broad support for Roberts from within the Native American community. The Cherokee Nation’s honoring of Roberts with a citation of the Cherokee Nation in 1972 indicates their official written acknowledgement of his Cherokee ancestry. In a 1983 article describing Roberts’ Cherokee heritage, *The Saturday Evening Post* reported that he was on the board of trustees for the Cherokee Foundation.⁷⁶ Taken together, these honors indicate the degree to which many Native Americans recognized and honored Oral Roberts’ Cherokee and Choctaw ancestry.

It is also necessary to revisit Roberts’ own self-identification as a Native American. His public description of himself as being of Cherokee and Choctaw descent began at a time (1954)⁷⁷ when it offered no discernable advantage for him describe himself in those terms. It long predated positive shifts toward Native Americans in popular culture and posed some risk with his mostly white audience of the time. Roberts’ claim was rooted in his deeply held pride in his Native American heritage, even though he was aware that publicizing it could have had negative consequences for his popularity.

Conclusion

Oral Roberts prized his Native American heritage and celebrated it on many occasions when it could have done little to further his cause and could have easily proven disadvantageous for him. Leveraging his hybridized identity, he later confronted evangelicals with the sins of white America against Native Americans and spoke more generally against the injustices of segregation and racism. Yet, he did this without bitterness or rancor; Roberts was an exceptionally positive individual. He valued highly his ministry’s outreach to Native American communities. Native American communities reciprocated

with multiple honors in recognition of Roberts and his advocacy on behalf of Native Americans.

The continuing relevance of Roberts' ministry and message should not be overlooked. His creative reading of Acts 17:25–26 suggests that people can celebrate their identities (especially in a world where hybridity is often a given) and yet advocate for unity. For Roberts, unity and reconciliation were found through common blood: all of humanity descended from common ancestry, and we are all reconciled to one another and to God through the one blood of Jesus Christ's sacrifice. Roberts was able to negotiate a positive recognition of his Native American heritage and to promote peace and forgiveness between groups.

Finally, Oral Roberts' spirituality is one that connected with Native Americans. His emphasis on dreams, visions, prophecy, the word of knowledge, and healing all tended to resonate with those from Native American religious traditions. The enthusiastic preaching and singing also felt more authentic to many Native American listeners than other more sedate forms of Christian expression. Roberts' Spirit-based positivism and his focus on divine resources to meet legitimate needs continue to offer useful conceptualizations that can serve to empower minority communities everywhere. Oral Roberts' message carries continuing relevance because of its important and creative contribution to the Native American community and to the continuing conversation on race relations.



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Notes

1 Jeffery Smith, "Oral Roberts' Last Sermon Delivered to Local Native American Church," 2009, n.p., <http://www.newson6.com/story/11688854/oral-roberts-last-sermon-delivered-to-local-native-american-church> (27 June 2018).

2 Bill Sherman, "Oral Roberts Visits Native American Fold," 2009, n.p., <http://>

- www.tulsaworld.com/news/religion/oral-roberts-visits-native-american-fold/article_d01313a6-8a6f-5196-8faf-1d2c52070a8a.html (27 June 2018).
- 3 Smith, "Oral Roberts' Last Sermon Delivered."
- 4 Roberta Roberts Potts, *My Dad, Oral Roberts* (Noble, OK: Icon Publishing Group, 2011), 285.
- 5 Smith, "Oral Roberts' Last Sermon Delivered."
- 6 Potts, *My Dad, Oral Roberts*, 284.
- 7 Oral Roberts, *Expect a Miracle: My Life and Ministry* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), 20.
- 8 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 6–7.
- 9 Hester A. Davis, "Indians in Arkansas: The Cherokee," *Arkansas Archeological Survey*, www.archeology.org (29 June 2018).
- 10 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 6–7.
- 11 Brent E. Riffel, "The Great Migration," *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, n.d., n.p., www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net (29 June 2018).
- 12 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 7.
- 13 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 5, 6, 7.
- 14 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 5.
- 15 E. M. Roberts and Claudius Roberts, *Our Ministry and Our Son Oral* (Tulsa, OK: Oral Roberts Ministry, 1960), 33.
- 16 E. M. Roberts and Claudius Roberts, *Our Ministry and Our Son Oral*, 35.
- 17 W. C. Armstrong, "A Contribution to His People: Oral Roberts Named 'Outstanding American Indian of 1963' at American Indian Exposition," *Abundant Life*, October 1963, 22.
- 18 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 20.
- 19 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 136–37.
- 20 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 26.
- 21 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 24.
- 22 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 25.
- 23 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 26.
- 24 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 40.
- 25 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 49.
- 26 William J. Molenaar, "Christian Unity," *Heritage* 34 (2014), 61.
- 27 David Harrell, *Oral Roberts: An American Life* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 3.
- 28 Oral Roberts, *Oral Roberts' Life Story as Told by Himself* (Tulsa, OK: Oral Roberts Ministries, 1952), 49.

- 29 Oral Roberts, *My Story* (Tulsa, OK: Oral Roberts Ministries, 1961), 34; Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 34.
- 30 G. H. Montgomery, "She Named Him Oral . . .," *America's Healing Magazine*, February 1954, 6.
- 31 Harrell, *Oral Roberts: An American Life*, 135.
- 32 G. H. Montgomery, "Deliverance Is Brought to Crow Indian Reservation," *America's Healing Magazine*, November 1955, 6.
- 33 E. M. Roberts and Claudius Roberts, *Our Ministry and Our Son Oral*, 33, 35.
- 34 Roberts, *My Story*, 34.
- 35 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 20.
- 36 Hilliard Griffin, "Missionary to the American Indian," *Abundant Life*, November 1959, 8.
- 37 Oral Roberts, *My Personal Diary of Our Worldwide Ministry* (Tulsa, OK: Oral Roberts Ministries, 1967), 46.
- 38 "Oral Roberts on Campus," *Abundant Life Magazine*, December 1972, 3, 8.
- 39 Roberts made strong stands against racism and segregation during the Civil Rights movement when it was not popular to do so and faced several death threats as a result (Oral Roberts, *The Call* [Garden City, NJ: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1972], 99–104). He leveraged his Native American ancestry to speak prophetically about racism, stating boldly, "I'm Indian. I'm neither black nor white." (Potts, *My Dad, Oral Roberts*, 55.) In his discussion of the topic in his 1995 autobiography, *Expect a Miracle*, 136, he once again referenced Acts 17:26 like he had among the Crow as an argument against racial discrimination and injustice.
- 40 Montgomery, "Deliverance Is Brought to Crow Indian Reservation," 6.
- 41 "Indian Tribes Honor Oral Roberts," *Billings Gazette*, 27 August 1955, 6.
- 42 E. E. Cox, "Tribe Stirred by Apache Boy's Healing," *Abundant Life*, March 1960, 6.
- 43 In the months just prior to the Oral Roberts meeting in Phoenix, Mary Patterson had embraced the Christian faith through the witness of the missionary Pearl Foster. After receiving the Holy Spirit, she claimed to have a growing assurance that God would heal her son. She felt a particularly strong impression that if she took him to the Roberts meeting, he would be miraculously cured.
- 44 Cox, "Tribe Stirred by Apache Boy's Healing," 7.
- 45 Hilliard Griffin, "Our Outreach to the American Indian," *Abundant Life*, January 1957, 28–29.
- 46 Griffin, "Missionary to American Indians," 7–9; Harrell, *Oral Roberts: An American Life*, 135–36.
- 47 Griffin, "Missionary to American Indians," 8.
- 48 Montgomery, "Deliverance Is Brought to Crow Indian Reservation," 5.
- 49 Cecil M. Roebeck, Jr., *The Azusa Street Mission and Revival: The Birth of the Global Pentecostal Movement* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2006), 14, 88, 138.

50 Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Publishing, 1994), 189–202. The title of the chapter is “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle.”

51 William G. McLoughlin, *The Cherokees and Christianity, 1794–1870: Essays on Acculturation and Cultural Persistence* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

52 Tarango wonderfully describes Pentecostalism among Native Americans in “Jesus as the Great Physician: Pentecostal Native North Americans within the Assemblies of God and New Understandings of Pentecostal Healing,” in *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Healing*, ed. Candy Gunther Brown (Oxford University Press, 2011), and in *Choosing the Jesus Way: American Indian Pentecostals and the Fight for the Indigenous Principle* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), but she neglects to make any mention of Oral Roberts. Tarango’s study is primarily focused on the Assemblies’ of God work among the Navajo in Arizona, so that likely accounts for her omission of Roberts. However, Roberts held a crusade in Window Rock, Arizona, in 1959 at the invitation of the Navajo Tribal Council. This event certainly had some influence on the view of Pentecostalism among the Navajo community and was contemporary with other events about which Tarango reported. There is a great need for scholars of Native American Pentecostalism to consider Oral Roberts’ contribution. Roberts is the most notable Native American Pentecostal in the twentieth century, and his influence among the Native American community has not yet been thoroughly studied.

53 Tarango, “Jesus as the Great Physician,” 108.

54 The other “most renowned Native American healer of the 20th century,” according to Gone, was the Lakota holy man, Black Elk, who converted to Roman Catholicism in mid-life, repented of his indigenous ceremonial practices, and led many other Native Americans to Christianity.

55 Joseph P. Gone, “Indigenous Healing Past and Present: Exploding Persistent Binaries,” in *Indigenous Cultures and Mental Health Counselling: Four Directions for Integration with Counselling Psychology*, ed. Suzanne Stewart, Roy Moodley, and Ashely Hyatt (New York: Routledge, 2016), viii.

56 W. W. Keeler, *Citation of the Cherokee Nation: Our Father’s Hand*, 1972.

57 James F. Downs, *The Navajo* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), 101–2.

58 Tarango, “Jesus as the Great Physician,” 108.

59 Daniel C. Swan, “Architecture, American Indian,” *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, n.d., n.p., <http://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=AR007> (22 June 2018).

60 Robert Easton and Peter Nabakov, *Native American Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 425.

61 Patrick Neal Mingos, *Slavery in the Cherokee Nation: The Keetoowah Society and the Defining of a People, 1855–1867* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 41.

62 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 10–11.

63 Armstrong, “A Contribution to His People,” 22.

- 64 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 24, 136.
- 65 Gone, "Indigenous Healing Past and Present," xi–xii.
- 66 Gone further notes that in U.S. census records the members of Oral Roberts' immediate family self-identified as "white," including his mother Claudius Pricilla Irwin Roberts, who elsewhere described herself as one-quarter Cherokee. Her self-identification as "white" on census records may have been the result of census rules on a particular year or instructions given by census workers and is therefore not a reliable indicator.
- 67 E. M. Roberts and Claudius Roberts, *Our Ministry and Our Son Oral*, 33.
- 68 This article seems to indicate that Oral Roberts' "All-Indian crusades" were more numerous than are reported in the ministry's magazines. This stands in contrast to biographer David Harrell's claim that "the organization never formulated a substantial 'outreach' to Native Americans (Harrell, *Oral Roberts: An American Life*, 135.). Further research into the listing of crusades would prove helpful. Also, there were numerous crusades where significant Native American populations were present but where an "All-Indian" night or crusade may have been impractical (see Roberts, *My Personal Diary of Our Worldwide Ministry*, 46). Specific outreaches to proximate Native American groups may have taken place. Such outreach would have almost certainly not been classified as an "All-Indian" effort but would have constituted a significant effort to make meaningful contact with these communities.
- 69 Gone, "Indigenous Healing Past and Present," xi–xii.
- 70 Armstrong, "A Contribution to His People," 22.
- 71 Armstrong, "A Contribution to His People," 23.
- 72 "Oral Roberts on Campus," 3, 8.
- 73 "Oral Roberts on Campus," 3–5.
- 74 Harrell, *Oral Roberts: An American Life*, 272.
- 75 "Oral Roberts on Campus," 1–8.
- 76 Glen V. McIntyre, "Oral Roberts and the Cherokee Heritage," *Saturday Evening Post*, July/August 1983, 88.
- 77 Montgomery, "She Named Him Oral . . ." 6.