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Context Matters: Studying Indigenous Religions in North America
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Abstract
Context is critically important to the study of indigenous religions in North America. This paper argues that the significance of context to indigenous (native, Indian, tribal, or aboriginal) religions is unique and particular. In studying indigenous religions, attending to context engages geographical, political, and methodological issues, which emphasize the diversity of indigenous ideas and experience. The Mi’kmaq relationship to their homeland, Mi’kma’ki, demonstrates the importance of land as fundamental context for indigenous religions; the figure of Kateri Tekakwitha illuminates the inextricably political nature of indigenous religions. Finally, methods, theories, and practices (such as self-reflexivity) that have arisen in indigenous contexts are important analytical tools in the study of indigenous ways of knowing/practices.

Context is an important matter in the study of religions. Robert Orsi (2002, 2005) and Meredith McGuire (2008) have pushed scholars to look to the importance of “lived religion”, religion in the context of people’s daily lives and experiences. These explorations have revealed the presence of religion in unexpected moments and unexpected places. Critical theorists reject overarching universals and argue for the importance of understanding the particular, in its historical and material context. For example, postcolonial studies of religions reveal intricate tensions between the emancipatory and coercive religious impulses, which necessarily coexist in colonial worlds (see Gandhi 1998, Loomba 2001). Early Christian scholars look to the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which texts were written, in order to interpret the texts themselves (see LaFosse, 2011). Across communities, traditions, and epochs, attending to context helps us understand why people practice religions as they do.

In the study of North American Indigenous religions and cultures, as in the study of all other religions and cultures, context matters. But to say that context matters means attending to the unique, particular factors, which shape indigenous religious communities, and our study of them. Recognizing that context matters here requires acknowledging the nature of indigenous philosophies and practices, and the insights that result, in their own terms, rather than as subsets of other categories of religions. This paper explores the importance of context to indigenous religions with reference to the recent literature on indigenous knowledge, on the social, political, and geographic context of this knowledge, on indigenous research methodologies, and on self-reflexivity as a contextualizing practice.

My exploration of this subject matter draws from my professional experience as a teacher and scholar. I have carried out ethnographic research among the Mi’kmaq in Atlantic Canada, and what I write here is informed by what I was taught by leaders, elders, and friends in Mi’kma’ki. My graduate and undergraduate students at Wilfrid Laurier University contributed immensely to my thinking on these matters. I want to honor my teachers and my students, for their insights.1 This article was written from Anishnaabe territory and developed while I was living in the Haldimand Tract, the territories awarded to the Six Nations after the War of
1812. I grew up near the small village of Schomberg, Ontario; my father was raised on a peach farm, and my mother on a potato farm. Members of my family settled in Canada more than seven generations ago. Why, you wonder, am I telling you all this personal information? Context matters.

**Context in Indigenous Thought**

Context is the hallmark of indigenous philosophies and religions, as these are ways of being in which things are seen as interconnected, and the world is viewed in a holistic fashion. Traditional indigenous knowledge is contextual. This means that knowledge must be understood not only in relationship to other knowledge but also as interconnected with the community and the place in which it has come to be. Trudy Sable and Bernie Francis clearly illustrate this in their recent book about the Mi’kmaq, *The Language Of This Land, Mi’kmak’i* (2012). They suggest that the Mi’kmaq understand themselves as sprouting from and rooted in the landscape, *weji-sqalia’timk* (17). The knowledge of the people is connected to the place where they live and to human relations (families and ancestors) and nonhuman relations (animals, plants, and objects in the natural world). Sable and Francis want to show that Mi’kma’ki is a fluid and living landscape filled with networks of reciprocal relationships and moral obligations.

We will illustrate a different conceptual framework and perception of Mi’kma’ki through a discussion of the Mi’kmaw language, and the encoded messages of the legends and the rhythms and sounds of the dances and songs. What we perceive as a literal landscape becomes a mirror of Mi’kmaw psyche, embedded in their culture, and inseparable from their being (Sable 1996, 2004). *Weji-sqalia’timk* is about an embodied landscape—a landscape that is still integral to the cultural psyche of the Mi’kmaq today... (25)

Sable and Francis are telling us that Mi’kmaw language, myth, ritual, culture, and land are inseparable parts of the whole. It’s not that each of these things is best understood in its context; it’s that each of these things is not itself without that larger context.

Indigenous philosophies are characterized by a grounded, contextual approach. Marie Battiste and James Sakej Henderson resist defining indigenous knowledge in a singular way, suggesting that perhaps the closest one can get to describing unity in Indigenous knowledge is that knowledge is the expression of the vibrant relationships between people, their ecosystems, and other living beings and spirits that share their lands (2000, 42). Building upon this discussion, Deborah McGregor suggests that indigenous knowledge embodies values “... such as respect, coexistence, cooperation, honor, thanksgiving, reciprocity, balance and harmony, and recognition of interrelationships among all of Creation...” (2004, 389). In my classroom, Elder Jean Becker has challenged students to understand indigenous philosophies as arising from relationships with the land. Becker draws on Yale Belanger’s textbook *Ways of Knowing: An Introduction to Native Studies in Canada* (2010), to articulate an understanding of land as “the heart of Creation” and “the source of Native identity, the mother to children (humans and other-than-humans), who were assigned responsibilities to act as stewards for all of Creation” (7). Belanger suggests that this relationship with land leads indigenous communities to develop sophisticated knowledge of the ecosystems in which they live, as they assess the strength of their own community life in terms of their ability to maintain the wellbeing of the land and of the reciprocal relationships constituted there (7–8). The ceremonies work to maintain right relationship with all beings—with other living humans, the ancestors, the generations to come, with other-than-human beings, and with Creation itself. In
these ways, land is the context of indigenous philosophy, culture, and religion, as the embodiment of relationships between many (human and other-than-human) relatives.

These insights about the importance of land and of relationships in Creation to indigenous philosophies have led some scholars to overlook the diversity among indigenous communities and their relationships to land. As Daniel Francis demonstrated in *The Imaginary Indian*, there are potent contemporary stereotypes that treat indigenous environmental thought as a romantic treasure trove of ecological wisdom gained from the mystic insights of “noble savages” (1992; see also Belanger 2010 and McGregor 1997). If land is seen as “the source of Native identity” in a thin and simple way that is identical across all Nations, then this only strengthens the stereotype. Instead, as Belanger reminds us, the importance of land and of Creation lies in local community contexts and relationships. These contexts and relationships change across the continent, as does the land. The Mi’kmaw live on the northern Atlantic coast, with salmon rivers, cold winters, and the great rushing tides of the Bay of Fundy. Ecological relationships in this place shape Mi’kmaw culture in multiple ways: the verb oriented Mi’kmaw language reflects the “fluidity of the Mi’kmaw world view. . . . There was never one word for Creator . . . but rather a number of different verbs . . . different processes of creation” (Sable & Francis 2012, 30–31); Mi’kmaw stories reflect not only “the mapping skills of the Mi’kmaw” but also their knowledge of “the sentient landscape” (42). The Mi’kmaw serpent dance teaches respect for the powers of the land and the medicines, and it also “teaches of the seasons, the directions, the stars, the nature of reptiles, the bird that leads one to the medicine and values of respect and care in collecting plants” (90). The context in Mi’kmak’i is fundamentally different from that of the Haudenosaunee, who live(d) in agricultural villages around the Great Lakes (Belanger 2010); the Inuit, who live(d) nomadic lives in the Arctic (Leduc 2010), or the Apache, who live in the mountains and deserts of the mid-West (Basso 1996). Taking the land seriously as a fundamental organizing principle of indigenous ways of knowing means recognizing how this principle leads to immense diversity. Nations, tribes, and communities all become who and what they are because of the particular place in which they are at home; these places in turn shape tremendous difference between communities. Understanding a particular community of people means taking their local context seriously. Context matters, not simply because it illuminates the importance of land as a fundamental principle to indigenous peoples across North America, but because it leads us to the diversity of thinking and practice that is characteristic of lived indigenous experience.

**Political Context**

Context is not only an important internal factor to the development of indigenous religions and cultures. Context is also tremendously important as we seek to understand the social and political forces, which shape indigenous experiences. For all indigenous communities in North America, the colonial context of their experiences over the last six centuries has been a tremendously powerful force (King 2003, Alfred 2005, Dickason & Newbigging 2010, Deloria 2003, LaDuke 1999); relationships and alliances between indigenous Nations are equally significant in their influence (Trigger 1985, 1996, Dickason & Newbigging 2010). Studying indigenous religions requires careful attention to this political context, and its influence both historically and in the present.

The political context of the study of indigenous religions is clearly illustrated by the example of Kateri (Catherine) Tekakwitha, a 17th century Mohawk convert to Catholicism who has become an important symbol of indigenous Christianity across the Americas and around the world. The Jesuits of New France chronicled this young woman’s rejection of marriage,
departure from her family to live at the mission, and her “private practices of piety and austerity” (Greer 2000, 179). Less than three years after she joined the Jesuit mission village, at 24, she died. Within 15 years, miracles began to be attributed to her. Known as the “Iroquois Virgin” and the “Lily of the Mohawks”, Kateri Tekakwitha was canonized by Pope Benedict XVI on October 21, 2012.

Kateri’s canonization was fervently prayed for across North America and around the world. During World Youth Days in 2002, half a million Catholic youth from around the world converged on Toronto, Canada, to celebrate their faith. Along a pilgrimage trail on the Toronto waterfront, billboards of important religious personages were placed to inspire the faithful; among them was an image of Kateri Tekakwitha. In 2004 and 2005, while I was carrying out ethnographic fieldwork in the Mi’kmaq community of Esgenoôpetitj, the members of St. Anne’s Parish prayed weekly for her canonization. Her picture and the “Prayer for the Canonization of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha” were pasted inside the front cover of every prayerbook in the small wooden church, and every service concluded with its recitation:

O God who, among the many marvels of Your Grace in the New World, did cause to blossom on the banks of the Mohawk and of the St. Lawrence, the pure and tender Lily, Kateri Tekakwitha, grant we beseech You, the favor we beg through her intercession; that this Young Lover of Jesus and of His Cross may soon be counted among her Saints by Holy Mother Church, and that our hearts may be enkindled with a stronger desire to imitate her innocence and faith. Through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the United States, statues of Kateri are installed in Wisconsin, Michigan, New Mexico, New York, and Washington DC. She is venerated by many across the Americas as the patron saint of indigenous peoples. At the same time, other indigenous people chafe against this devout Catholic depiction of a Mohawk woman’s life. They resist the appropriation of Kateri Tekakwitha as a Christian or Roman Catholic symbol or see her conversion story as a story of corruption and degradation. Kay Koppedrayer recounts her conversation with a Christian Mohawk man who characterized Kateri as a prostitute and a leaking pot.

... “[P]rostitute” had both literal and figurative sense; he meant that she was not the perpetual virgin her Jesuit biographies claim her to be. ... Second, he meant that her conversion and subsequent flight to the French mission in what is now Kanawake, Quebec, betrayed her heritage—or, at least represented a betrayal of what he, a twentieth century Mohawk, understood his heritage to be (1993, 277–8).

How does one make sense of these religiously and politically charged images of this Mohawk woman?

We find our first accounts of Kateri Tekakwitha in Jesuit hagiography, and it’s these accounts that have inspired the Catholic depiction of Tekakwitha ever since. Jesuits working in the mission field of New France (and around the world) sent written accounts chronicling their successes and failures home to a French audience, to inspire their faith and their support of Jesuit work. Koppedrayer suggests that Kateri is a Jesuit creation, a figure born out of the social and political life of 17th-century New France, in a “process which not only the Jesuits, but also the Iroquois, and even Kateri herself, participated” (280). In his biography of Tekakwitha, historian Alan Greer describes how research leads him
not only into the seventeenth century world of the Mohawks (my original destination) and into the
textual realm of hagiography (inevitably for anyone who works with saints’ lives) but also into the
Counter-Reformation France of Tekakwitha’s Jesuit biographers (2005, ix).

Understanding who Kateri was requires understanding her life in its historical context,
including the social worlds of the Mohawks, of New France, and of the Christian world
of France itself.

Understanding how Kateri is received in the contemporary world, how she is venerated
and criticized, requires a recognition of the social and political embeddedness of indigenous
religions—indeed, of all religions. The reception of Kateri within global Catholicism, and
her canonization as the first North American indigenous saint, reflect the degree to which
some indigenous peoples in the Americas have embraced Christianity. But the process of
Christianization was intimately tied to colonialism. Christian missionaries came with the first
European traders and settlers and attempted to win as many converts as possible. They tended
to those dying of newly introduced diseases and often baptized them on their deathbeds
regardless of the wishes of the dying people themselves (Greer, 2000). After the formation
of the Dominion of Canada, and of the United States of America, Christian groups worked
closely with governments to “civilize” the Indians by turning them into Christians and away
from their identities as indigenous people. In Canada, the Indian Residential School System
exemplifies the power and horror of the process of “civilization” (Knockwood, 2001;

For many indigenous people in the present, Christianity is the colonizer’s religion, not a
revelation but a weapon. In God is Red, Deloria argued that “The confusion between
Christianity and American culture” is a problem for all American Christianities (2003, 228).
Indigenist philosopher Taiaiake Alfred characterizes Christianity as “the religious foundation
of imperialism” (2005, 104) and argues that “The Christian Bible has brought fear into the
hearts of our people” (145). While Alfred recognizes that some indigenized forms of Christianity
have “provided moral bearing” for indigenous people in the past, he believes that Christianity is
the main source of the spiritual and political defeat of indigenous peoples (144). Deloria suggests
that (nonnative) “Christians would be well advised to surrender many of their doctrines and come
to grips with the land now occupied” (2003, 292). The revitalization of indigenous communities,
in this view, must come through decolonization, the political reclamation of indigenous ways of
knowing and being, and from allowing the land to again shape the people. From this perspective,
Kateri herself is a colonial and colonized figure, one who is lost, not luminary. Further, the
revitalization of indigenous religions is also a political project, for many, a key piece of the process
of decolonization.

Defenses of Christianity are also political, in this context. Some suggest that Christianity
itself has become an indigenous religion, a source of consolation and of resistance through
the colonial years, and a religion that can be articulated within an indigenous worldview.
James Treat argues that the emergence of the articulate voices of indigenous Christians from
across North America is a significant contribution to a global liberation theology movement
(1996). He suggests that these Christianities are significant in that they are simultaneously
fully indigenous, and fully Christian, as they “silently cite extended families, revered elders, oral
traditions, sacred landscapes, visionary messengers, and mythic imagination as points of reference
in their communal “bibliography”’” (1). For some indigenous people, Christianity has become a
resource with which people attempt to resist colonizing agendas, such as when some Mi’kmag at
Esgenoöpetitj/Burnt Church turned to Christianity as a spiritual resource and source of political
allies during a violent conflict with the Canadian government (King 2014). In this context then,
the fervent prayers of Mi’kmag Catholics for the canonization of a Mohawk woman might be
understood as an expression of indigenous Catholicism, where Kateri’s story is another teaching, which has been shared between nations in the ongoing indigenization of Christianity. The canonization of Blessed Kateri, while complicated, could be seen in this context as a validation of the religious insight of indigenous Christians, and a reflection of the growing importance of indigenous Christianities.

The figure of the “Blessed Kateri” points us towards the complexity of interrelationships between the religious and the political in indigenous religions and cultures. When I teach my students about indigenous religions, inevitably some of them seize upon Kateri, or other indigenous Christians, as harbingers of a possible reconciliation between indigenous and settler communities. Almost always, they want to look at the “religious” and “spiritual” questions and resist the idea that every one of these issues is always already also political, in the (post)colonial Americas. Ideas about religion are shaped by the intimate roles of religions throughout the colonial processes of the past and the present, as ideologies of oppression and as resources of resistance, simultaneously. Studying indigenous religions in America requires deep attention to the political contexts in which these religions have come into their being.

Decolonizing the Study of Religion

The political nature of the study of religions is important to recognize not only because politics shapes indigenous religions but also because politics is an important influence on how indigenous religions are understood. Alfred takes up this point when he discussed the ways in which colonization has affected the thinking and understanding of Mohawk people about their own traditional religion. Drawing upon Thohahoken’s (Michael Doxtator’s) writings about the Kariwiio (the Code of Handsome Lake), a series of prophetic visions given in the 1800s, Alfred argues that the experience of Christianity has transformed how his people understand their own teachings:

being colonized and Christianized, we interpret our traditional teachings, like the Kariwiio and the concepts of “peace, power and righteousness” not as true Onkwehonwe [original people] would, but as contrite penitent believers in a religion. We think more like our Christian-influenced conservative colonizers than like the free-thinking philosophical warriors our ancestors once were. (197)

For Alfred and Doxtator, the transformation of an indigenous way of being into a Christian mode required reinterpreting indigenous teachings into a formal code of ethics upon which judgements are made about people’s social actions. This extracts these teachings from their indigenous context and transforms them into “an actual religion” (198).

How do we understand this claim of Alfred’s that indigenous teachings are diminished by being thought of as an actual religion? He is making a political argument. Scholars of religious studies recognize that the social and political origins of the term “religion” shape the study of religion in broad and critical ways, by defining what does and does not count as religion. Since the origins of “religion” and its study are Christian, religion has historically been defined in terms of belief, and often as the beliefs of individual people (Nye, 2008). Through the colonial process, as European Christians moved around the world, they struggled to understand the diverse cultures and philosophies they encountered. They brought the category of “religion” with them, to help them order and understand the unfamiliar (Asad, 1993). In indigenous North America, individual beliefs are much less relevant than relationships and ceremonies. Nonetheless, indigenous ways of life have been recast in Western terms, made into “actual religions”, in order to render them more familiar. Even the use of the word religion to describe the lives of indigenous people is a
part of this process, since the category of “religion” arises in Western (and not indigenous) epistemology. The challenge, then, is that those who use the ideas and practices of Western knowledge systems in order to understand indigenous “religion” can end up decontextualizing them, turning them into poorer versions of Christianity.

In Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts, Margaret Kovach engages indigenous research practices in the academic context (2009). Kovach characterizes indigenous methodologies as arising in the context of indigenous epistemology, engaged in decolonization and the praxis of resistance, culturally grounded in tribal knowledge, self–reflexive, reciprocal, and exemplifying the “deep connections between knowing, story, and research” (18). Her “research story” does not suggest that Western research methods must be rejected or abandoned but that there is an important place for indigenous research frameworks within academic research, alongside other qualitative methods. She further argues that

... indigenous research frameworks are those that centre and privilege Indigenous knowledges. It goes deeper than mere Indigenous methodologies that share a relational and holistic foundation, but rather the knowledge must be localized within a specific tribal group.

...That which contextualizes life—place, kinship, ceremony, language, purpose—matters greatly in how we come to know. All of this tells us who we are, and will surface in indigenous research frameworks. Reclaiming is naming, and identifying Indigenous inquiry is a political act. (176)

This characterization of indigenous methodologies takes up the question of how cultural frameworks shape and construct categories of knowledge. If one recognizes that Western epistemologies shape Western theories and methods, then this is a first step. The response is not to work harder to find an “objective” set of theories and methods—who could possibly be an objective knower, removed from their social, political, and epistemological context? And what use would such “knowledge” be? Rather, Kovach suggests that the next step is to make space for other forms of knowledge, those shaped by indigenous epistemologies and by indigenous ways of life, including indigenous practices and understandings of relationship (place, kinship) and religion (ceremony, language, purpose). While Kovach explores the methodological space for such research, Sable and Francis are among those who attempt to put it into practice, as we have seen in their writing on Mi’kma’ki.

In the introduction to this paper, I told readers more than they might have expected about who I am and how my ideas on this subject have been shaped. Kovach is among many scholars who argue that self-reflexivity is important in indigenous research (King 2003, McGregor, 1997, Brown & Vibert 2003). Self-reflexivity is now common in many qualitative methodologies (Creswell, 2013), but it has a particular significance in indigenous contexts. The practice of self-reflection in research and writing about indigenous religions is a contextualizing and political practice, which takes indigenous ideas of relationship seriously in an academic context.

Not long ago, I went for lunch with two indigenous colleagues at Wilfrid Laurier University. Together, these women work to make indigenous students welcome on campus and more broadly to build indigenous community space on campus in the physical, social, emotional, political, and academic senses. Often, their events include indigenous and non-indigenous members of the campus community; I have attended them myself, many times. We got to talking, somehow, about the importance of introductions within indigenous circles. When my colleagues introduce themselves, they say “I’m Kandice, Mohawk from Tyendinaga,” and “I’m Melissa. I’m Anishnaabe and my family comes from Curve Lake.” Melissa
and Kandice are introducing themselves by way of their community in the deepest sense. For them, self-identification involves recognizing their relationships to home, family, and place, not simply their professional roles and networks. They observed that this practice of introduction, so familiar and necessary to them, was often disorienting for non-indigenous people. These self-introductions are not the same as those we hear in the current postmodern political practice of introducing oneself by one’s signifiers—I’m a white, straight, single female, for example. Signifiers introduce matters of individual identity and lifestyle. Rather, the indigenous practice introduces a person by way of their relations. It’s a practice that affirms context and the importance of social and geographic relationships in shaping who you are and how you think. As a non-indigenous person, I often attended events hosted by Kandice and Melissa, saying “I’m Sarah, and I teach in Religion & Culture.” These professional, academic relationships are fundamental influences on who I am and how I think. And so are other more personal relationships, as I sketched at the outset.

In the academic study of religion and in native studies, there have been (and continue to be) debates about who can and should be studying indigenous cultures, religions, epistemologies, and philosophies and for what purpose (Grimes 1996, Hernández-Ávila, 1996). Clearly, the premises and principles of an academic inquiry, and of the inquirer, shape the insights that result. Rather than policing who can and cannot participate in a discussion, the practice of self-reflexivity engages authors, readers, teachers, and students in the context of what is being shared, and by whom. Taking context seriously in this way can be surprising, for those who are accustomed to striving for (and reading) a dispassionate, objective authorial voice. It’s a practice that can be misread, as something arising from Western identity politics. But self-reflexivity, understood as an honoring of relationships, is also a valuable way of contextualizing knowledge and insight in the study of indigenous religions.

When studying indigenous religions, context matters. It’s tempting to understand this statement as an illustration of a universal principle, but such a principle is a paradox. What’s far more important is to appreciate how the process of taking context seriously redirects us to the power of local places, opens space for the diversity of indigenous religions, and makes the political nature of such religions clear. It reinforces the importance of understanding indigenous religions in ways that take indigenous terms, categories, and methodologies seriously. Like all other dimensions of the study of religion, contextualizing indigenous religions is a political practice, one that puts scholars and students in the field of view, along with those whom they study.

Short Biography

Sarah King is interested in the religious, cultural and political nature of human relationships to environment. Her paper Conservation Controversy: Sparrow, Marshall, and the Mi’kmaw of Esgenoôpetitj (International Indigenous Policy Journal 2011, 2(4)), examines the role of political sovereignty, traditional religion and spirituality in a violent dispute over aboriginal treaty rights. She is an Assistant Professor of Sustainability Studies in the Liberal Studies Department at Grand Valley State University (GVSU). Before coming to GVSU, she held a postdoctoral fellowship at the School of Environmental Studies, Queen’s University, and was an Assistant Professor, Religion and Culture, at Wilfrid Laurier University. She holds PhD from the University of Toronto’s Centre for the Study of Religion, where she was also a member of the Collaborative Program in Environmental Studies. Sarah is a Canadian of European descent, who grew up in rural Southern Ontario, and has lived in...
Atlantic, Pacific, and Northern Canada. She now lives in Anishnabé territory in the Midwestern United States, with her family.

Notes

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