

Report to Marin Community Foundation, January 31, 2006  
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***Sacred Visions and the Social Good: Religious Practice and Discourse toward a Just, Sustainable, Pluralistic Democracy***

**Overview**

This is the final report for Phase II of *Sacred Visions and the Social Good*, co-sponsored by Dominican University and the Graduate Theological Union. It is a follow up to the Phase I report of October 30, 2004, which focused on a web-based survey, interviews, and roundtables to identify the scope and mission of the program, and to the midterm report of March 15, 2005, which identified the three community-based projects for Phase II. This report alludes to aspects of Phase III (reporting and findings), but a final report for that phase and its additional funding will be forthcoming. For review, the Mission and objectives of the program are as follows:

*Mission Statement:*

*Sacred Visions and the Social Good* is a program of Dominican University and the Graduate Theological Union which builds networks of collaboration between academic and practitioner communities in Marin and the Bay Area. Scholars, community practitioners and their organizations will engage in community research, program development, and public outreach on the ways that faith traditions and ethical discourses contribute to wider visions and practices of the social good. In particular, the program is interested in learning how sacred traditions *mobilize* their members into practices of public engagement, how deeper ecumenical and interfaith cooperation can generate *shared visions and practices*, and how multiple faith visions contribute to a *broad spiritual and ethical framework* for a just, sustainable, and pluralistic democracy.

The *objectives* include ongoing collaboration between community practitioners and scholars in:

- 1) Community-based research or programs around faith and public life,
- 2) Interfaith collaborations around shared spiritual and ethical visions,
- 3) Roundtable discussions of project implications for public discourse.

**Collaborative Research Projects (May-December, 2005)**

We solicited research proposals from scholars at Dominican and the GTU in the winter of 2005. By March, representatives from both institutions and the coordinator chose three projects to be part of the program. Planning for each of these projects began in the Spring and culminated with special events (in August, or throughout the fall), around which research focused.

1) *The community-based project with BOCA youth organizing:*

This project, conducted by Dr. Mark Wilson of the Pacific School of Religion, GTU, used ethnographic methods to evaluate the successes and failures of faith-based community youth organizing by BOCA, the PICO style organizing group known as “Berkeley Organizing Congregations for Action.” The hypothesis of this study is that the “relational model” of PICO style organizing does not adequately address differences of *faith, race, and class* that the youth

experience, which may in turn account for a decline in youth involvement. Research methods included focus groups, thematic artwork, interviews with leaders and youth, and content analysis. A Youth Summit (in March, 2006) that draws from youth in three congregations (Euro-, Asian-, and African-American) will reflect upon the findings, and suggest a new set of strategies and faith paradigms (beyond “building relationship”) that can make youth organizing more effective.

2) *The interfaith collaboration between Sufis and Buddhists on Sustainability and Justice:* This project, coordinated by Dr. Ellen Hammerle, of the International Association of Sufism (IAS), with Dr. Harlan Stelmach of Dominican University joined Zen Buddhist (Green Gulch) and Sufi (IAS) communities in Marin to explore how their *sacred traditions and practices* contribute to a public vision of *sustainability and justice*. The program included teacher-student sessions in August 2005, which incorporated *action-reflection* groups and interviews with the researchers. The goal was to develop *personal narratives* of how being exposed to the other community’s teachings and practice transformed their own. Participants agreed that the two traditions can be mutually enriching, and that they share visions of social justice that the world needs.

3) *The spirituality-based project on Native Voices, Sacred Sites, and Public Education:* This project, coordinated by Dr. Arthur Scott of Dominican University, drew leaders from the Kashaya Pomo, Coast Miwok, and other tribes to educate public school teachers in native practices around the earth and to collaborate on wider implications for environmental policy. Colleen Hicks of the Marin Museum of the American Indian and Jeanette Anglin of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria provided additional planning and leadership. A *summer conference* of native and non-native teachers, community leaders, students, and others was held in August of 2005 at Dominican. The educational sessions covered traditional plants, practices and storytelling; public land partnerships; burial site protection and more. The research included education-action methods, survey evaluations, video transcripts and participant observation. The unusual mixture of native and non-native involvement allowed a unique atmosphere of respect and truth-telling to emerge, which culminated in *personal storytelling, challenging and healing*.

## **Project Findings and Implications**

Each project team identified initial findings of their projects and research as they happened. There is a report for each project attached. Some of these findings include:

### *Summary of Findings for BOCA Youth Project:*

Findings focused on external and internal challenges to PICO principles for community organizing which the young people themselves identified.

- 1) External (social) challenges to the “Power in Relationship” principle. Youth identified these larger social forces as impeding the building of relationships between and among congregation-based youth from very different neighborhood, class, and racial backgrounds.
  - a) Ecological shifts in neighborhoods (eg. suburban “bubbles” vs. trouble city neighborhoods...),
  - b) Class and economic disparities,
  - c) Racial differences and polarization.

2) Internal (congregational) challenges to the “Faith in Action” principle. Youth identified these obstacles to using congregation-based faith as a mobilizing ingredient of their social action.

- a) Transitions in church leadership,
- b) Aging congregations and generational differences (around interpretations of faith and social action),
- c) The resulting marginalization of youth voices,
- d) Ambivalence around Christian faith and belief (less so in African American youth).

*Summary of Findings of Interfaith Sufi-Buddhist Collaboration:*

- 1) Mutual Respect and Transformation: Zen and Sufi practitioners experienced deep respect from each other, which allowed each tradition to nurture and transform the other, resulting in a new alliance of spiritual practice and insight around justice.
- 2) Modeling by Teachers: The history of friendship and respect between the teachers laid a foundation for the above transformation, especially as teachers served as direct examples of spiritual experience, practice and wisdom.
- 3) Teachings and Practices fundamentally from within: The contemplative practices of both traditions reinforced a shared commitment to the movement of social justice, first from within, then outward toward relationships and the world.
- 4) Arising of Awareness: The Visceral Energy Created: Telltale signs of transformation and building community came through a process of mutual deepening—in sharing each others’ practices and learnings and in the visceral energy that resulted.
- 5) Contemplative Quality and Language of the Heart: The western language of social justice was transformed by these contemplative communities into a language of the heart mind and spirit, which emphasizes that social justice arises from right intent and clarity of action. Ultimately, the challenge for humanity lies in learning to be as well as do the social good.

*Summary of Findings for Spirituality-based Native Voices Project:*

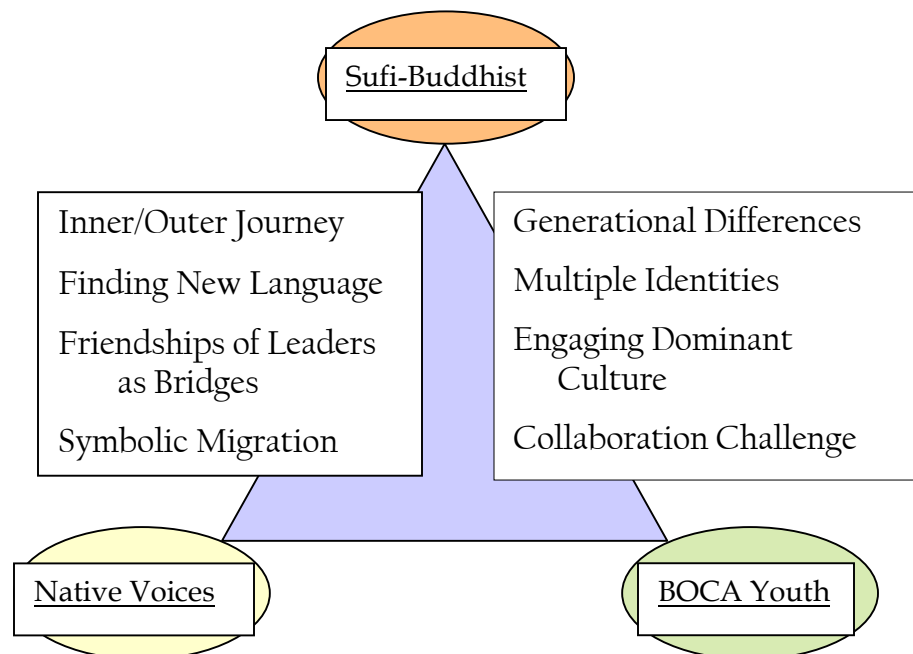
- 1) The Power of Stories: Native storytelling—of creation, of sacred mountains, of elders and family—were utilized constantly to convey spiritual strength, moral guidance, and cultural integrity. Most participants shifted to storytelling as their primary discourse by the end of the weekend, as a recognition of its strength and integrity.
- 2) Challenging and Guiding Non-native Ignorance: Non-natives were struck by the cultural livelihood and environmental practices of Native Americans today, and were graciously lead into contemporary native practices like basket-weaving. At the same time, Native leaders challenged non-natives to use the present tense when speaking about them (“we are still here”).
- 3) Truth Telling, Mutual Respect, and Cross-Cultural Collaboration: Native stories were filled with honest accounts of struggling against dominant culture, and even reached a crescendo of outcry and tears at a few points. Natives and non-natives alike held this suffering in trust and respect. Naming the wounds in an atmosphere of trust was key to deepened understanding, most evident in the personal remarks of the closing circle.
- 4) Inter-Tribal Cooperation in a Public Context: Despite differences between traditional and modern tribes, Native presenters and participants shared their deep respect and

family connections with members of other tribes. We believe this inter-tribal cooperation and solidarity was heightened in this mixed Native and non-native audience, especially as stories of cultural genocide and struggle were shared.

- 5) Education as Guidance and Trust: Native presenters identified traditional education by the elders as more a matter of following and doing than asking “why?” This traditional way of education may account for some of the tensions with non-native public educators who, at times, explained every native practice with “expertise” in a way that did not recognize traditional methods or draw upon Native expertise in the community.

### Shared Themes and Findings

Team leaders also came together in ongoing *roundtables* through the fall to reflect upon these findings and to identify shared themes and implications about the intersections between sacred visions, practices and public life. We also held a *Writing Workshop* in November, to explore collaborative writing strategies and design some articles for publication in both scholarly and community venues. While the original plan to include a wide range of local scholars and community leaders was not fulfilled, these roundtables did involve people from the various communities involved in each project, in particular leaders from the College of Marin, BOCA, IAS, native communities, and others. From these discussions, project leaders and the coordinator identified emerging themes and findings shared by the three projects.



These findings and themes were presented before a group of scholars in religion and society at the American Academy of Religion in Philadelphia, November 2005 (slide presentation attached). The feedback from this group of 50 or more scholars affirmed the research methods involved, the relevancy of emerging themes to projects they had been involved in, and raised further questions about how this research—which is uniquely interfaith—can be

broadened and strengthened. A more in-depth panel discussion of these three projects is planned at the Western Region of the AAR in Claremont, CA this coming March to refine findings and implications and elicit proposals for similar projects in the future.

The shared themes and findings are highlighted below:

- 1) *Inner/Outer Journey*: The Sufi-Buddhist collaboration and the Native Voices projects highlight the importance of connecting the personal, inward spiritual practice with the outer work and public engagement of the community. Part of what is lacking in some of the BOCA youth programs is the depth and effectiveness of this connection, especially in terms of faith idioms and themes that the youth identify as their own.
- 2) *Finding New Language*: The Sufi-Buddhist project highlighted the importance of locating Western discourse about “social justice” in the contemplative language of each faith community: right intention, service, or the liberation of suffering. The Native Voices project offered a distinctive spiritual framework for encountering “The Earth”—not only as a fragile ecosystem, but also as a system of “relations” and “families” that all human beings are bound too. BOCA youth are struggling for authentic language about their own faith in relation to the world, a theme that informs the upcoming Hip Hop Conference.
- 3) *Friendships Among Leaders*: Each of the projects capitalized on the friendships or rapport between spiritual community leaders as a means of enhancing programmatic and research development. The Native Voices project built upon the close ties between the principle researcher, the Marin Native American Museum, and tribal leaders among the Coast Miwok and Kashaya Pomo. The Sufi-Buddhist project drew upon the respected friendship of leaders at IAS and Green Gulch to a deeper collaboration. And the researcher of the BOCA youth project knew some of the congregations and the BOCA leadership in a way that gave him trusted access to various youth groups. The leaders’ rapport provided an avenue into collaborative work and became a bridge between the communities that was strengthened through the work.
- 4) *Symbolic Migration*: The language and spiritual practice of each faith community in the Sufi-Buddhist project crossed over and enriched the other: both groups began to articulate views of compassion, suffering, overcoming ego, and working from “the heart” that was reinforced by the visceral energy of meditation and chant in each other’s presence. The Native Voices project established a norm of storytelling—about native traditions, relatives, the earth, and personal biographies—that permeated and reshaped the discourse of participants. The BOCA youth demonstrated critical awareness, artistic imagery and language about the tensions between neighborhood and church, world and faith that BOCA leaders plan to address more directly in the future.
- 5) *Generational Differences*: The generational gaps were most apparent in the BOCA youth project, where many youth expressed skepticism about the adult language and practices of faith. Among African American youth, however, the generational dynamic was less of a “gap” than one of finding a safe haven and value in the adult church world. In the Native Voices project, generations became a reference point for strength: of

wisdom that had been passed down, of leaders and role models for Native identity and authenticity, and of ongoing inspiration and presence, even from those who had died. The very survival of teachings and means of practice (from medicinal plants to basketweaving) depended upon deep inter-generational respect and gratitude. In the Sufi-Buddhist project, the power of respect for transmission of wisdom was described more as a Teacher-student relationship than in generational terms.

- 6) *Multiple Identities:* Several leaders and participants in the Native Voices project described “living in two worlds” between dominant culture and Native American culture. Some highlighted the struggle and tension between the two worlds, while others embraced the gap between them as a mission to be overcome through education and advocacy. Still others spoke of multiple tribal affiliation as a challenge, but also as a strength of extending, multiple family relations. Several Sufi-Buddhist participants identified the solidarity between them—as members of non-dominant, contemplative traditions—as a source of strength for living in a society that either had a very different religious framework or little spiritual appreciation. The BOCA youth spoke of many sources of spiritual and cultural identity—beyond their congregation—that they wanted to draw upon to be more effective in engaging justice issues in the world.
- 7) *Engaging Dominant Culture:* Participants in the Native Voices project combined laments against injustices by dominant culture with plans for education and advocacy in ways that were both healing and challenging. The more participants named injustices and claimed the spiritual strength of their traditions, the more prepared they seemed to engage dominant culture pro-actively. BOCA youth identified obstacles imposed by dominant culture—especially along race and class lines—that prevented them from mobilizing shared faith commitments as a vehicle for social change. The Hip Hop conference will seek resources of youth culture that can strengthen such mobilization. The Sufi-Buddhist collaboration expressed interest in engaging the dominant culture by inviting them to a chanting and poetry session for healing and peace.
- 8) *Collaboration Opportunity and Challenge:* The sustained scholar-practitioner collaboration in the Native Voices project created a number of surprises and changed practices: from new forms of collaboration and trust between tribal groups, to new insights about how Native Americans negotiate two worlds, to facing limits of how much a scholar or an educator can say for or with a Native American community. The Sufi-Buddhist collaboration utilized research and learning as a vehicle to bring two communities closer together—in teachings, practice, and social commitment. All three projects exhibited levels of mutual engagement by scholars and community practitioners in ways that were mutually transforming of their work.

### Current Outcomes

→ Programmatic outcomes from project reporting include:

- 1) Creation of a *website* to report project findings and shared themes (Nov.). Andrew Kille, who has done interfaith web work, was contracted to create and manage this website for Phase III.

- 2) Collaborative writing of a “Native Circle” *article* from the Native Voices project (Jan-Feb), to be included in a Native American publication this spring.
- 3) *Manuscript and book proposal* for the Sufi-Buddhist collaboration, submitted to potential publishers this month (Feb.).
- 4) An *academic report and slide presentation* of the entire program to the Religion and Social Science section of the American Academy of Religion (AAR), November 19, Philadelphia.

→ Continued program outcomes include:

- 5) Presenting project and shared findings to California scholars of religion at the *Western Region* meeting of the AAR in Claremont on March 13. Each project will have one to three presentors as part of a panel presentation, that fills the program of the Person, Religion, and Culture group.
- 6) A **collaborative article** on the shared findings and themes of the three projects, arguing for the unique contributions of interfaith and ecumenical collaborations in religion and public life. (Spring)
- 7) *Posting of project reports*, shared findings, and analysis on the website ([www.sacredvisionsproject.org](http://www.sacredvisionsproject.org)). Analyses will include *religious motivators of public engagement* and *case studies of collaboration* for teaching and reflection.
- 8) A *Public Forum* on Religion and Public Life, focusing on the three projects and shared findings. The theme will be “religious collaborations toward public engagement.” This will bring scholars and religious practitioners together in the Bay Area to learn about and reflect upon the program’s findings (May 2005). In preparation for the event, outside consultants will be asked to review the findings and comment on their significance.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Below are a list of possible strategies for future programming and research for the “Sacred Visions and the Social Good” program. Each of these strategies seeks to maximize community-based projects, cross-community collaborations, and broader community impact in Marin, in ways that link with broader Bay Area collaborations.

*Strategy 1:* Build on the three existing projects for further development.

Youth Community Organizing: Develop an action-strategy and research project for tapping youth, cultural forms to enhance faith-based activism. Link BOCA strategies with emerging Marin strategies for faith-based community organizing, targeting youth involvement.

Native Voices Project: Develop an education-strategy for an Native Inter-Tribal conference to be held at Dominican in the fall 2006. Develop an measure strategies for cross-tribal cooperation in advocacy and public policy, around issues of the environment,

sacred sites, education around native issues, and other issues identified by the conference.

Sufi-Buddhist Collaboration: Develop a “contemplative traditions-social action” training conference, which mobilizes contemplative practices of various traditions in Marin and the Bay area in the pursuit of social justice issues. Focus on communities that practice meditative and contemplative forms in ways that link the “inner journey” with the “outer journey” as a social justice movement.

*Strategy 2:* Build on Shared Findings and Themes to Involve a wider number of faith and ethical communities in mobilizing their traditions to address public issues.

- 9) *Inner/Outer Journey:* Bring various spiritual/contemplative traditions to lead a public forum on exploring the movement from “inner” integrity and identity to “outer” engagement, on current issues of public concern (from the environment, to housing, to youth advocacy).
- 10) *Finding New Language:* Explore how Western language about “justice” or “rights” become rearticulated in the context of non-Western religious or spiritual traditions. Invite three non-dominant spiritual traditions to explore this question, and develop a media piece that engages the themes and limits of western based justice traditions.
- 3) *Friendships Among Leaders:* Work closely with the Marin Interfaith Council to identify the strongest peer-relationships among local community leaders, and invite them to develop a research project on how their various faith communities contribute to community issues.
- 4) *Symbolic Migration:* Explore how storytelling traditions, like the Native American or Jewish rabbinical (and Hasidic) traditions reshape public, social issues in story form. Develop a youth curriculum piece on how to address issues of friendship and equality, issues of caring for the earth, or issues of learning from and respecting elders that can be used in local schools.
- 5) *Generational Differences:* Develop an inter-generational conference between two faith-based communities that explores how do generational differences in a given religious or spiritual community serve as barriers to passing sacred traditions on to youth and families? Develop an inter-generational public service project that creates new patterns of cooperation and social witness.
- 6) *Multiple Identities:* Interview leading spiritual and community leaders in the Bay area around the kind of multiple identities do they (and their communities face), especially when involved with public settings? Develop a media piece to tell their stories.
- 7) *Engaging Dominant Culture:* Develop a sacred rituals conference, that is interfaith, on how various traditions name the wounds, lament, and outcry of past injustices against the

marginalized in California. Develop a plan for increased rituals, actions, and responses of healing and reconciliation with Native Americans, immigrant labor communities, and others for the Bay Area.

- 8) *Collaboration Challenge*: Develop a network of Bay area scholars to support one another in community-based research. Use this network to advocate in educational institutions on the value of community-research and involvement for scholarship.