

# WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

## FNMI Worldviews Worldview

Excerpt from *Aboriginal Perspectives*

Government of Alberta ■





## **WORLDVIEW**

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In the language of the Wapisiana people in Guyana, South America, there is no word for sorry. For example, if a person leaves a book lying on the floor and another person steps on it and damages it, that individual might say something like “What a silly place to leave a book.” Neither person would see that need for apology because in their culture, the concept does not exist.

People from different cultures have different ways of seeing, explaining, and living within the world. They have different ideas about what things are most important, which behaviours are desirable or unacceptable, and how all parts of the world relate to each other. Together these opinions and beliefs form a worldview, the perspective from which people perceive, understand, and respond to the world around them.

People from the same culture tend to have similar worldviews, but an individual's worldview is also shaped by his or her personal experiences. A culture's worldview evolves from its history, which is the collective experiences of the people within that culture over all the years of its existence. It also includes their beliefs about origin and spirituality.

The traditional worldviews of First Nations and Inuit peoples in Canada differ from the worldviews of people with a non-Aboriginal ancestry. You might compare a First Nations or Inuit worldview to a Euro-Canadian worldview, for example, by drawing a circle and a line. The circular First Nations worldview focuses on connections between all things, including the visible physical world and the invisible spiritual world. It sees time as always in a cycle of renewal that links past and present and future. In contrast, a linear Euro-Canadian worldview lays out separations between elements of existence (spiritual and material, life and death, animal and human, living and non-living) and sees time as a progression from point to point. There is no single worldview common to all First Nations, Métis, and Inuit individuals any more than there is a single worldview common to all European or African individuals. Differences in viewpoints exist between individuals within a single culture or community. In learning about traditional First Nations and Inuit worldviews, however, it is possible to identify several similarities between many first peoples' cultures.

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## SPIRITUALITY

For traditional First Nations and Inuit cultures, worldview is rooted in spiritual beliefs. Spirituality incorporates a culture's highest ideals, values, morals, and ethics. It defines the behaviour that makes a society survive and thrive. It involves honouring and respecting things that are unseen — the Creator, souls, spirits, the wind, the air — as well as those that are visible. It is an individual's understanding of their place and purpose in the world and their relationship to the seen and unseen forces.

According to western European thinking, everything in the universe has spirit. There is no division between animate things — human beings, animals, plants — and inanimate things — rocks, hills, mountains, land, sky, rivers, water, the wind and the sun. In contrast, according to traditional First Nations and Inuit spirituality, everything in the universe has spirit and is animate. The entire universe is alive with a constant dialogue or energy between all things that exist. For humans to live in balance with the universe, they must be aware of this dialogue and be careful not to insult or disrupt the spirits of animals, plants, wind, or earth.

In a universe in which everything is alive and has a spirit, certain sites, land formations, and types of matter have great spiritual power. Particular rocks, hills, mountaintops, and sites in a forest are honoured in key rituals and rites of passage. At these sacred places, initiation ceremonies take place, people fast and pray, and visions are revealed. These sacred places strengthen the link that binds humans to the natural world and the Creator.

Within traditional spirituality, creation is an ongoing process. The cycle of life is unending, as can be seen in the migration of birds, the rising sun, and the changing seasons. People walk in the footsteps of their ancestors, as will the generations yet unborn. The presence of the Creator is everywhere.

For traditional First Nations and Inuit peoples, spirituality is part of being alive, and part of everyday life. For example, to honour the corn or squash that they raised, traditional Pueblo people eat gently, reflecting on the plant that is becoming a part of their bodies and minds. Traditionally, respectful Inuit hunters speak to a caribou's *shua*, its "living essence" — before letting their arrows fly. Afterward, they thank the animal for giving its life and places something in its mouth to aid it on its journey.

Most cultures have some version of this ritual of thanking prey and their spirits. Prey are viewed as willing participants in a relationship with hunters. Hunters do not take; prey give themselves. In return for the animal's gift, hunters thank and honour its spirit and continue the cycle of giving by sharing the animal with their extended family.

Spiritual advisors are people who have powerful visions and are thought to have special insight into the spirit world. However, all individuals can receive communication from and can communicate with spirits and the Creator.

## RELIGION

Spirituality is not religion. Religions are systems of attitudes, beliefs, and practices that focus on groups, while spirituality centres on an individual's understanding of his or her place in the world. However, both spirituality and religion can coexist in an individual's life.

One of the main goals for the first Europeans travelling to North America was evangelism, which is the act of converting others to their own religious beliefs. The French, in particular, saw the conversion of First Nations people to Roman Catholicism as an important part



of their work in North America. In their worldview, evangelism was one of the best ways one could serve God.

Roman Catholicism is just one denomination of the Christian religion. Christianity incorporates many different denominations — Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and others. Basic Christian beliefs are the same, although their practices and interpretations differ, much in the way that First Nations spiritual practices differ from culture to culture.

Since the seventeenth century, when efforts to convert them began, First Nations and Inuit peoples responded in various ways. Some completely rejected European religions; others completely rejected traditional spirituality. Still others adopted aspects of both.

Many First Nations and Inuit peoples were curious about Christianity and understood it by fitting its teachings within the worldview provided by their traditional belief systems. For example, the idea of the Christian God, the creator of all things, was not new to First Nations, who already believed in a Creator or Great Spirit. The Christian creation story, Genesis, as told in the Holy Bible, could be seen as a new version of the creation stories they knew from their oral tradition.

The use of symbols to demonstrate faith was also familiar to First Nations, who had always used symbols to reinforce their spiritual beliefs. A symbol is one thing that stands for another. A cultural symbol is often a simple cue that, when used, causes members of the culture to think about a much more complex meaning. The most widely recognized symbol of Christianity is the cross.

The use of celebrations to affirm faith and give thanks was also a part of traditional spiritual practices. The Christian celebrations of Christmas and Easter are holy festivals centred around the birth and death of Jesus. One of the most important Christian beliefs is that Jesus was the son of God and that he spent time on Earth, sharing God's wisdom with the people before returning to heaven.

Pilgrimages are another kind of religious activity. Worldwide, people travel long distances to sacred places and shrines, hoping to receive a blessing from God. The concept of sacred sites with special significance was long a part of traditional First Nations spirituality.

Despite these similarities, it is incorrect to classify spirituality as a religion. Spirituality is an individual's lifelong journey — it is a way to live within the world that each person must explore and learn for himself or herself. Religion presents a way to live within the world — the challenge there is to learn and live the religion's teachings.

In general, Métis people tend to have a close relationship with Christian religions. Métis people descended from French-speaking Métis families are frequently Roman Catholic. However, many Métis people also maintain the spiritual beliefs of their First Nations ancestors.

## LAC STE. ANNE, ALBERTA

Lac Ste. Anne was known by local First Nations as *manito sâkâhikan*, Cree for “Lake of the Spirit,” long before it became an important site for Roman Catholics. *Manito sâkâhikan* was a traditional First Nations gathering place for the summer buffalo hunt.

Oblate priest Jean-Baptiste Thibault started a mission in 1844 at the lake because of the large numbers of Métis and French-speaking Roman Catholic settlers in the area. He renamed the lake Lac Ste. Anne, after Ste. Anne de Beaupre, the mother of Mary. The Lac Ste. Anne mission was taken over by Father Albert Lacombe in 1852. He and the other priests at the site



gained a reputation for their special holiness. They cared for the sick and worked to prevent armed conflict among the cultural groups in the region. Many First Nations and Metis people in the area converted to Christianity.

The first pilgrimage to Lac Ste. Anne was held in 1889. Several hundred people attended, and it soon became an annual event. Today, the pilgrimage to Lac Ste. Anne has become the largest annual gathering of First Nations and Métis people in Canada.

Catholic priests at the Lac Ste. Anne shrine offer many services during the annual pilgrimage. Mass is held three times a day, in Cree, Dene Suliné, Blackfoot, Dené Tha', and English. Christian beliefs also include baptism as a symbol of spiritual cleansing and rebirth. In a special ceremony, a bishop blesses the water of the lake, asking God to make it a source of renewal and healing for all people. Hundreds of people then wade into the water to receive this blessing.