

Philosophy Professor Gordon Christie is one of three Visiting Humanities Research Fellows at Lakehead University participating in the Native Philosophy Project, a program funded by The Rockefeller Foundation.

Comparing Two World Views

By Michelle Novak

Gordon Christie is trying to bring together two worlds from two different perspectives. He is attempting to uncover and articulate a philosophy of Inuit society, and to compare its belief systems with Western models of thought.

"We believe we're generating a system of thought analogous to philosophy," says Christie, "But is it? Or is it spiritual or cultural?"

An Inuit who grew up in the Northwest Territories and went on to study Philosophy at Princeton University, Gordon Christie is acutely aware of the need for caution. "We don't know if Native philosophy is even communicable to others outside its framework," says Christie, "or if there is a panNative philosophy or even a world Native philosophy... Anyone who says 'This is it' will be questioned."

Christie is motivated by the need for Native philosophy to be explored and recorded autonomously, but also in relation to other models of thought, particularly by those from an Indigenous background. Attempts at comparison will centre specifically on the nature of knowledge and certainty (epistemology), the nature of existence (metaphysics), and political theory and ethics.

Unlike Western philosophical schools, Native philosophy does not have "touchstones" with which to compare new information. Precious little is physically recorded or gathered as yet. Christie's approach is cen-

tered not in evaluating a people's world view from one empirical stance, as is a common practice, but in a more relational and multiperspectival way. Native philosophy largely exists in an aural mode, expressed in mythic narratives passed down through countless generations. To this Christie will add reports of ethnologies and anthropologies, but will focus most of his attention on a small but rapidly growing body of first-person literatures.

Christie advocates a sensitive approach, that is, letting the picture emerge rather than having it fill our perceptions of what it should be. His primary goal is to let his subject matter develop from within, whatever shape it may take: "We must uncover, not invent it," he says, "The goal is discovery."

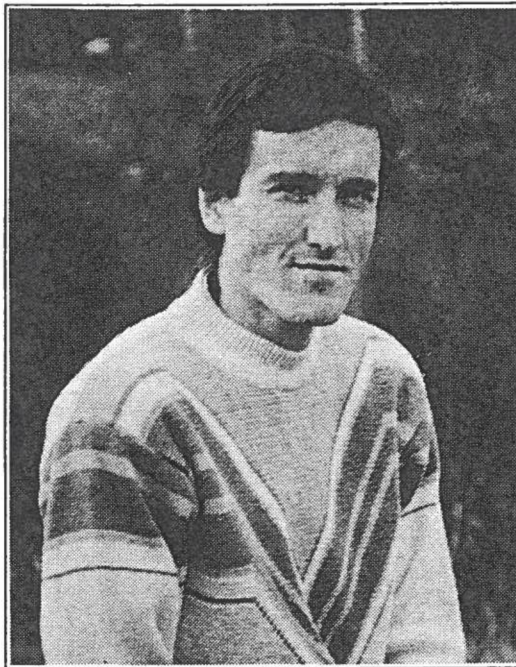
An apparent instance of the fundamental differences in the nature of Inuit beliefs and Western beliefs comes from a study of the differing perception of people and society. The "social contract" theory, central to many Western belief systems, focuses on the adversarial nature of civilization. It theorizes that societies are formed only because of the individual's need to share resources, to further his own progress and to protect himself. However, the Inuit views human nature from the premise that we are social animals in harmony with each other and our natural environment.

Christie is wary of the danger of what he terms "philosophical integration" -- approaches which attempt to incorporate Native perspectives into a world view. Christie warns if the purpose is only to criticize and compare Native philosophy with other, more established and familiar models, these truths will be limited by the perspective to which they are linked. In this realm, he says, "the stronger may dominate the weaker."

Still, Christie thinks the unique nature of Inuit philosophy is not an impediment to understanding, musing that "it may be

a virtue that it does not fit the Western epistemological model."

Michelle Novak is a graduate of Lakehead University currently enrolled in the Master's program in English. She is one of several Lakehead students participating in SPARK -- Lakehead, a writing program funded by NSERC.



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