July 6, 1966

Box 388
Canyon De Chelly
Chinle, Arizona

Dear President Taylor:

In regards to the many inquiries or questions concerning Navajo way of life and their ceremonies, especially the medicine man and his "sings" by seminary teachers, missionaries and others working with Navajo people this letter is dedicated.

Also in regards to many people in the church with single-minded conviction that everything "Indianish" has to go; that every aspect of so called "Indian religion" is of the devil.

In all societies, whether Indian, Japanese, Germans, Polynesians, Italian, or white, wherever there is human groups, different culture and social structures have moral system that differ in important respects. Each of these and other particular societies has habitual and traditional ways of thinking, feeling and reacting that is characteristic of the ways that they meet its problems. Practically all realistic as they are in a lot of ways, each of these societies, could not be persuaded that if they accept "Mononism" they will actually be better off and will be a lot happier. They would even seemed to find satisfaction in general resistance to anything else that was proposed by any one church, any one government, or any one society from another country.

It must be remembered that to change a way of life, you must change people, that before you can change people, you must understand how they have come to be as they are.

So it is with the Navajos, anyone interested in working with human beings must understand or at least have a meaning of their way of life. Anyone working with Navajos should not have any single-minded conviction that they deal only with strange people and strange ways. Navajos had to face all the similar problems which mankind must somehow deal with. The ways and means which the Navajos have worked out through countless generations of trial- and error- learning must have some meaning or message to other human groups or individuals who have met the same issues in different contexts and worked out other answers.

It must be remembered that the Navajos are in a traditional stage. They are caught between their own standards and those which are urged upon them by missionaries, teachers, social workers and other whites. A number of them are so confused by the conflicting precepts that they tend to reject the problems of morality as insoluble and meaningless. Often those who deviate from their own ancient standards do a little soul searching and then in end go back to their own. The trend of thought might be - "Why should I deviate from my own, I'm a Navajo my skin color is different we were created separate from the whites. Our ways are meant for ourselves - No one else - Besides if I mingle with the whites I'll be violating certain act and I might get sick."
Most of the Navajo values and ethics are under attack from a competing set of assumptions. Some Navajos no longer feel comfortable at home or at ease in their world of values. But the Navajo view of life are still held by older people and some younger ones.

They make virtues out of truth and honesty. Many that are still loyal to tradition hold that the old Navajo way was not to lie, to cheat, or to steal. The evidence of such things today, they say, is due to white corruption. Occasionally stealing seems to be all right "if you can get away with it". In many part of the reservations, one can leave an automobile containing valuable articles unlocked for days and return to find everything in place. Thefts occur chiefly in the areas under strongest white influence, especially at special gatherings when many young people are lost between two worlds. There is no doubt that white contact brings, some break down in moralities. A Navajo does not spend much time worrying over a lie or theft when he's not found out, he seems to have no "guilt" feeling, but if he is caught, he does experience a good deal of shame. By the same token they do feel that sexual activity is improper or dangerous under particular circumstances or with certain persons. But they never consider sexual desires or act in themselves as "nasty" or "evil". Many people get the idea that "any decent Navajo" will feel guilty about a sexual act outside of marriage or before marriage. To them sex is natural and necessary and "that's what was made for". If a teacher tries to induce a boy and a girl to dance together, whereas refuse, she says, "they're acting stupid and stubborn". But they are from the same clan, and the thought of clan relatives having the same physical contact as a white social dancing gives Navajos the same uncomfortable feeling the person would feel if she was told to share the same bed with her adult brother.

The positive behaviors, which are taught are centered on affectionate duty to relatives, pleasant manners to all, generosity, self-control - the ideal conduct seems to be "act to everybody as if they were your own relatives". Stinginess is despised.

Industry is highly valued. A family must go to bed early and arise early for strength in mind and body. If someone sees smoke coming out of smoke hole then "there is something wrong; someone must be sick". Normally among the older people who still follow these things, drinking is disapproved and considered wasteful - it destroys the mind and body.

The ability to dress well is respected and taught. Cleanliness is stressed both mentally and physically. Display of wealth or possessions is not a personal matter as much as it is a family matter. It's not "see how rich I am" but "see how much we have". To seek riches as a personal aim in life is condemned. Skill at speaking by leaders and elders is important and highly respected. Training in certain occupation is stressed. Skillful farmer or livestock man is admired. No parents teach with important people as models. No parent says "If you work hard and intelligently, you might get as rich as Raymond Nakai".

To support and share with friends and relatives is "ideal" thing to do. Members of a "well-off" family are expected to share and spend freely of their substances. Riches are not identified with single individuals but with family, or "outfit".

All wealth is desired for this purpose and security rather than for single "glory", "power" or prestige.
Navajos regard personality as a whole—they say, you cannot treat a man's "body" without treating his mind". In this way Navajos are ahead of "bilagamas" who are now beginning to realize it is the patient not the disease, which must be treated.

Rights of individuals, including children, over their personal property are respected.

Navajos hold that human nature is neither good nor evil; both qualities are blended in all persons from birth on. The notion of "original sin" is absent from Navajo view. They hold that no large amount of knowledge of religious seal can do more than change somewhat the relative proportions of "bad" or "good" in any individual. They say that this life is what counts—they have no sense whatsoever that this life is a "preparation" for another existence. There is no belief that the way one lives on this earth has anything to do with his fate after death. Navajos do not orient themselves to principles of abstract morality. They get their orientations from face to face contacts with the small group of people with whom they deal from birth to death. They concern themselves, with the expediency of immediate situations.

In regards to nature, nature is more powerful than man, Navajos accept nature and adapt themselves to her demands as best as they can. They try to influence her with songs and rituals, they feel that the forces of nature determine the success failure of crops, growth of grass for livestock; plague of insects that destroy crops and other plants; they try to utilize what nature furnishes but they do not even hope to master nature.

Many white people take the opposite view. They spend their energies fighting nature; adapting nature to their purposes instead of themselves to her demands. Their premise is nature will destroy them unless they prevent it; the Navajo premise is that nature will take care of them if they behave as they should and as she directs.

Massage and heat treatments sometimes produces good results in white society. In Navajo, sweat bath and yucca root bath probably have effects on nervous system in a similar way (hydrotherapy). Sometimes the "sings" produces good results, a good humble medicine man thinks "clean" thoughts for the patient. He shares this "clean" thoughts with the patient and others at the sing. He teaches a good clean way of life. His faith and the faith of the patient's family and relatives help cure the patient.

But, there can be no doubt that main effects are "Psychological"; there is nothing mysterious about this, skillful doctors, even we in the church know that, the will to get well, the belief that one is going to recover, and other attitudes can be more than half the battle in recovering from any illness or injury.

Sometimes a Navajo, especially a traditional one, feels lonely and homesick, living by a strange routine and eating unfamiliar food. Illness sometimes gives the patient the suspicion that he is disliked or unprotected.

During the "sing", the "chant" of the medicine man makes the patient feel himself personally (rather than impersonally), being secured and loved, for his family and relatives are spending their money and substances to get him cured and they are rallying round to help in the sing.
Then there is the prestige and authority of the medicine man assuring the patient that he will recover. A good medicine man that is. Not all medicine men are good, some are "quacks" but, in the capacity of a respected singer, gifted with the learning of a good way of life. He is more than a mortal and at times becomes identified with something powerful or supernatural, speaking in their voices telling the listeners all is well, sometimes his powers are connected with some supernatural powers that made the earth, man, the sun, the rain, the "holy air" that we breathe, and etc.

It is difficult for many white people to understand they whom the resources of medicine are available to Navajos in government hospitals, likewise many missionaries or other members of church working with Indian people wonder why they don't turn to priesthood. The Navajos continue to "idolise" the so called "ignorant medicine men". They may be ignorant in a lot of ways, but their "clean thought" and their teaching of a good way of life is far better than any "learned men" who don't know what life really is.

7 The answer is that Navajo "sings" brings good results in many cases as good as those of a white physician or hospital. That is why it is so hard to let them understand our way of thinking and teaching. There are many cases where individuals who obtained no relief from white medicine have been cured by "sings". So "sings" isn't something easily forgotten, it is highly valued by the Navajos, it is part of their social organization, a social institution in fact.

So then the Navajos finds his "religion" as way of good hope or a way of good life when he is sick or disturbed. It meets their human needs. It gives them a sense of continuity and security which Christianity cannot give them because they simply do not understand it. Their own beliefs continue to satisfy and to help them in their difficult every day living. It gives them something to hold on to, gives them a sense of excitement. Sometimes it constitutes in part, an escape mechanism. It may be said in both secular and sacred realms, "sings" and other religious practices serve as statements of the right way to behave and the reasons therefor, somewhat as the Bible or Book of Mormon does in our church and in other Christian societies.

The same degree the "sings" and other so call superstitions or myths are the Navajos' code of manners and morals and their law books as well. These and other legends and folk tales are also their literature, which serves from simple intellectual and moral edification to simple entertainment. Because they tend to preserve and to carry forward ancient Navajo tradition, they have a significant usefulness as an obstacle or brakes upon the speed of cultural change. If these beliefs of the Navajo way of life were suddenly swept away all at once and before "Mormonism" or any other Christianity beliefs had become understandable enough to serve as a satisfactory substitute, the Navajos would be completely lost or disoriented. Their life would be in chaos and would be without meaning. There they would be, barren and naked. Of course it would be another story if they had a testimony of Jesus Christ. They would have something to hang on to. I've seen very few in this position. They need a lot of work to really convert them, we cannot expect them to change "overnight". Its going to be a gradual long process to get them to see the light from the darkness that they've been in for several thousand years. I know its a challenge any time when one starts working with any Indian tribe. It takes patience with a lot of patience, understanding, sacrifice and love to work with these Navajos or any other group of Indians.
It cannot be a person with one-sided view point. It cannot be a person whose ideas are only from one angle. It cannot be a person who thinks everything "Indianish" has to go. It cannot be a person without patience, love and understanding for the people. It cannot be a person who thinks "If Ammon and Sons of Nosiah do it; can it be done with the Navajos and all other Indian tribes". It cannot be a person who thinks or says "They're no different than any other people who thinks Indians, they must be treated the same". It cannot be a person life, and most important of all it cannot be a person who has not a testimony of the gospel the divinity of Jesus Christ—failing to ask for help in working with the Indian people.

Some of us, sometimes reason just because we have read or know the Book of Mormon we know everything there is to know about Indians. Again some reason just because they have a foster child in their home, they know everything about Indians, again some think just because they have adopted Indian children in their homes, they understand and know every—about the Indians. Then there are some who have worked with Indian people, a few months, a few years, they may tend to think the same.

Sometimes in working with Indian people, we fail to come down to their level, we tend to reach them from above, aplace they don't know or understand. We fail to "wet" our foot. Our intentions are good, but we love them at a distance. We don't go "all the way". We tend to think or judge that other people way of life is wrong or bad. Ours is superior, ours is good and right, sometimes failing to see some of the "bad" in our own way of life.

Some the Navajos themselves are aware of this stabilizing force of their religious beliefs. Consciously or unconsciously they act accordingly. Since the medicine man is usually an intellectual, one who know the habits and tendencies of his patient in the same manner as well as the family doctor in white society, it is likely, like the family doctor, he often gives sound practical advice.

When people live in such circumstances and conditions as the Navajos, under constant threat from physical environment, fear of lightning, or fear of violating certain taboos or superstitions, it is no wonder they cling so strongly to their so call "religion". I know it's tough to crack—but there is a lot of good in it, "sings" and etc. It makes it stronger for them to give up. It's not something that is all bad. Nor is it something of Satan totally—too many people tend to judge them as of Satan immediately without a second thought. Does Satan think "clean thought" or teach a good way of life or influence the people for good?

Thus "sings" and other rituals resolves social maladjustments that might other wise upset the stability of the group. For this reason and others many people are involved directly or indirectly and they feel their involvement so warmly that groups are brought more closely together, it gives the people awareness of common goals, common beliefs and a common value system. It brings individuals together where quarreling is forbidden.

I realize that I have barely touch the subject in explaining some aspects of the Navajo's way of life; but in summary of what I have tried to explain, the "sings" or other rituals or ceremonies together provide systematic protection against supernatural dangers, the threats of all of the powerful dominant society. It is through these things the Navajo can present a unified front to all these pressures.

I grant that not every Navajo lives his "religion" or standards, just like not everyone lives up to the laws of the land or his Christian church. Even we in the church have a hard time keeping the commandments sometimes. The older generation are still loyal to the things mentioned sprinkle with blends of white way of life. The times are changing and the Navajos realize they must change; when they do there'll be some week down in their moralities. This they fear; because it has happened and it happening every day. For this reason many blame "white corruption" and have developed
an undesired attitude towards them.

This letter is in part, merely for an understanding of some of the things Navajos stand for. I realize I barely touch on the subject, but I hope it will provide some partial answers to the questions in the minds of many.

Sincerely your brother,

George Patrick Lee