

Truth and Reconciliation: Some of the things we are learning in Canada

Giving honor to God, I want to express my respect and appreciation for the land and the people of the land. It is a great joy to be here and a special joy to travel so far and feel like you are going home. I am grateful. I greet you as relatives.

I would like to talk about reconciliation in terms of what the churches have learned from Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the process designed to deal with the tragedy of Canada's Indian Residential Schools (IRS). Although not all of the churches of a Western cultural framework were involved with them, the IRS were a central part of a larger framework of colonization. All of the churches have been involved in the benefits of colonization and, at some level, complicit in their evil. It is essential for their spiritual and moral well-being to begin to examine what are the key areas of learning.

The churches have, with rare exceptions, acknowledged their complicity in the IRS and have issued appropriate apologies, accompanied by changes to policy and protocols in order to minimize the possibility of future abuses. In this they have acted with relative compassion and courage, but as these are actions of organizations that say that they begin and end in God's cosmic reconciliation, they leave something to be desired. As institutions within the larger society, they have done well, but as the ambassadors of God's reconciliation there is more to be desired.

First, the TRC has revealed that modern Western religious institutions have a limited capacity to understand systemic evil, especially mass systemic evil. Because Western societies emphasize individual autonomy, they have tended to approach massive instances of evil from that perspective. They look for perpetrators, who did the wrong rather than what went wrong. The churches are prone to the same limitations as their larger societies.

We can look to Biblical sources for alternative help. The New Testament discussion of Principalities and Powers is an example. More sophisticated and nuanced than modern Western discussions of evil, they propose a spirit – institutions, ideologies, and images – that can become “strongholds” of thought and attitudes that oppose God and create havoc for any perceived enemies – most often the poor and the marginalized and perhaps Creation itself.

There are many examples of these Powers in Scripture, from Pharaoh to Rome, but most interesting for our discussion are the ways that religious institutions become trapped in systemic evil. As with all Principalities and Powers, they begin with an orientation towards good. Principalities and Powers are the spirit that enacts communal life, the spirit that creates healing and helping community. But, like all things, they can find themselves in a competitive relationship with their Creator – even and, perhaps, especially with religious communities - and, when they do, they become oriented towards ends that are destructive. The spirit that is to enact communal life becomes an enemy of life.

This is seen so dramatically in the IRS. Meant for good, the powers become destructive of the stated purposes of the organizations they serve. In the case of the IRS, their mission becomes the elimination of the identity of Indigenous Peoples, the destruction of their communal life at all levels, supposedly for the good of the People. The angelic becomes demonic.

Related to this first area of learning, we can see that the churches have had a similar difficulty stepping into systemic good, meaning that they find it difficult to enter communal repentance and reconciliation. The TRC process has revealed that the churches' ministry is directed towards

individual repentance and reconciliation with little capacity to look at larger more communal levels. There seems to be a lack of moral imagination as to ways that a community can find repentance and life.

How does a church repent? This is a serious question for the churches involved in the attempt to destroy Indigenous identity. Fortunately, there are historical examples: St. Francis, for instance, saw his religious partners as participating in reparations. Further, he appears to recognize that past behaviour may rob the churches of their power to speak with moral authority. That authority must be won back by patient, humble, and persistent practice of repentance and reconciliation.

In regard to Indigenous Peoples, the church must now, resolutely, earnestly, and courageously begin to be partners in the Gospel-based restoration of Indigenous identity. This begins with an affirmation of the right of Indigenous Peoples to be who they are. It continues in support for the rights to the fullness of life in their own terms. Finally, it means that the churches use the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a guide for their own practice, as well as for their advocacy on behalf of Indigenous Peoples.

In this regard, we look to the third element: the Incarnation of the Living Word of God into Indigenous life. The Living Word of God desires to become flesh, as the ancient elders of the Church tell us, at all times and in all places. The cultural life of a people are the context of this incarnation, with the Living Word of God both affirming and challenging culture towards the transformation of life in God.

In the past, Indigenous life was considered too primitive to be this context and it was required by the churches that they become something else in order to be fit for the Good News. This, of course, is not Good News. There is an arrogance that, in light of the failures of churches in regards to Indigenous Peoples, is astonishing. The churches must resolutely, earnestly, and courageously back the Indigenous movement towards self-determination – becoming what God intended them to be, especially in the Church.

Up until now, we have looked mostly at what the churches should do, especially Western based churches. Now – fourth and finally - we shift to the most important part. Acknowledging that Indigenous Christian faith has always lived underground in Indigenous Peoples involved with Western Christian faith, we now look to see that faith emerge from hiding, to come into the light of the freedom which Christ purchased for us on the Cross.

Roman Catholic missiologist, Robert Schreiter, has studied reconciliation movements around the world. He notes that he has never found an instance of reconciliation that began when an oppressor decided to do better. In all cases, he claims, reconciliation came because the oppressed reclaimed their humanity.

This is the moment that we see dawning upon us. The People of the Land and Seas reclaiming their true humanity. This is the story of the TRC in Canada, but it is being reproduced around the world and, we must add, right here in this gathering.

The churches cannot stop this movement, though they can resist it. They may slow it, in regards to their own life and witness, but it ultimately cannot be stopped. I am glad to have lived to see this day.?