

INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH: A NEW WAY FORWARD

Edited by
William H. U. Anderson and Charles Muskego

Concordia University of Edmonton
Alberta Canada

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Indigenous People and the Christian Faith: A New Way Forward
Canadian Centre for Scholarship and the Christian Faith
At Concordia University of Edmonton
Alberta Canada

To Shauna, Eli and Maci

Reconciliation includes anyone with an open mind and an open heart who is willing to look into the future with a new way.

~ Chief Dr. Robert Joseph

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Introduction*

William H U Anderson

I am the son of British immigrants to Canada who came here in the 1950s. But I have tried to understand Indigenous people and the issues in an empathetic way. I also believe that I can contribute to a “New Way Forward” as represented by this book. We must work together with common human dignity on the planet we share together.

I can largely credit my M.A. student and co-editor of this book, Charles Muskego, for a detailed education on Indigenous people. I supervised his M.A. thesis *Asserting Postcolonial Identities: Cross-Textual Readings of Ezra-Nehemiah and Indigeneity in Canada* (2016). I will talk about this thesis in more detail later but suffice it to say for now: Charles taught me so much about Indigenous people and the surrounding complex issues.

Turtle Island is an Indigenous name for the earth. It is also used specifically to refer to North America—as the turtle best represents the geographical shape of North America. I was privileged to meet Alex Angnaluak who provided the drawing on the cover of this book. He is the recipient of numerous awards—not only for his artwork—but also for his leadership of Indigenous people. He received the very prestigious Governor General of Canada award for the National Aboriginal Role Model. He was born in Cold Lake Alberta but is also Inuit. He spoke at our 2018 conference on “Indigenous People and the Christian Faith: A New Way Forward” where he used his own artwork in a presentation on “Traditional Indigenous Stories in Art”. He was later awarded the prestigious Historica Canada Indigenous Arts and Stories. We sat together at the conference banquet table. He was just finishing off the drawing of Turtle Island when he handed it to me and said: “I want you to have this as a gift”. I was overwhelmed with humility and joy! It hangs with pride in my office at Concordia University of Edmonton.

Since creation is the starting point for all human beings, it seems like a fitting place to begin. Turtle Island represents not only creation but also the home for all of us as human beings. We need to be kind to each other and the

* A version of this text in the form of an editorial in the *Canadian Journal for Scholarship and the Christian Faith* was used to support the 2018 conference “Indigenous People and the Christian Faith: A New Way Forward”. See <http://cjscf.org/editorial/a-new-way-forward/>. It is used here with kind permission.

earth: It is the only home we have and relationships are key to living a peaceful and prosperous coexistence. Creation is referenced in many places in this book—and the concept is necessary when relating to Indigenous people. The last chapter deals with an “Indigenous Eschatology”—and creation has a big role to play in that.

Two of my favorite places in the world are Tofino in British Columbia and Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump in southern Alberta. I have visited them many times. Both sites have been the home to Indigenous people for over 10,000 years. That is almost twice as long as ancient Egypt. I remember a wonderful experience with a young Indigenous guy on the wharf of Tofino. He was talking with some tourists who were there and was saying how much joy he had being an Indigenous person—relishing the most beautiful creation around him as his home!

Dances with Wolves in 1990 also made a huge impact on me. It made me think how beautiful Indigenous culture is and how we Europeans messed it up. Later in the 90s, while doing my doctorate at the University of Glasgow in Scotland, I remember a very vivid memory of me standing the cloister looking at a poster for a North American Indigenous art exhibit being held there. I wondered if I should just stay in my ancestral homeland of Scotland. But without sounding like a psychological rationalization, my blond hair and blue eyes betray the fact that I am really the product of ninth-century Viking raids into Scotland. Genesis 10, the so-called Table of Nations which provides the background for the nation of Israel, also makes the point that none of us are of pure genetic or ethnic uniformity. We are all migrants of mixed genetics and ethnicity—and that’s a good thing! This includes the fact that American (North, Central and South) Indigenous people are from other geographical, genetic and ethnic backgrounds themselves. However, this in no way mitigates the inherent right of first peoples to this land. I also realized that there is no “going back” and that we are all stuck with a complex situation. This is a point that my Indigenous student Charles will make later when I discuss his M.A. thesis.

Colonialism is a complex matrix of inter-related ideas such as philosophy, politics and economics frequently embedded in law, e.g., the Indian Act. At the core of colonialism, in my view, is pride. It is a veritable “Tower of Babel”. It is the arrogance and pretentiousness that one culture is superior to another—and therefore presumptively asserts its dominance over other people groups—while stealing their land and resources. This was often possible based on some form of technological advantage, e.g., gun power. One should note, however, that Charles Mann in his book *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus*, has in recent years challenged this notion of technological superiority, e.g., firearm targeting was not very accurate during this

period. Mann further argues that European colonization had more to do with the “perfect storm” of circumstances—including plague and famine—which allowed Europeans to prevail over and against overwhelming population odds. In other words: There was no “superiority” involved but simply *opportunity*. Colonialism goes hand-in-hand with imperialism (sometimes these terms are used interchangeably). My definition of imperialism is both simple yet essential: “Imperialism is killing other people and stealing their stuff”.

While I understand that some scholars like the African biblical scholar Musa Dube at Botswana University just view the Bible as colonizing, I view the problem as arising from the hermeneutics (interpretive strategies) applied to biblical texts, e.g., colonial readings of biblical texts. This perspective can only entangle us in the past and provide no real way forward. My Ph.D. supervisor at the University of Glasgow was Dr. Robert Carroll. He was a notorious atheist and detractor of all things Christian. I remember him, at the end of a black South African scholar’s presentation on “Postcolonial Readings of Chronicles in a South African Context”, saying: “You should take the Bible and throw it into the ocean: It’s the source of all your problems!” I can totally understand where he was coming from and why the Bible is seen as problematic for Indigenous people. But I would argue that it is colonial hermeneutics and abuse of the Bible that are to blame rather than the Bible itself—as Charles’ thesis clearly and articulately demonstrates. There are three chapters in this book from African scholars who will address Indigenous issues in relation to the Bible and theology.

Postcolonialism is a theoretical perspective which “unmasks” and seeks to dismantle colonial power structures. I was first exposed to postcolonial readings of biblical texts at Glasgow University. Specifically, I was exposed to South African biblical scholars who employed postcolonial readings of Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah to overthrow and deal with apartheid. In 1994, I was the secretary for the conference on “The Bible in Africa” (another irony). One black South African scholar, the one mentioned above, demonstrated how a postcolonial reading of Chronicles may facilitate “truth and reconciliation” in South Africa. Twenty years later, I was able to suggest to my Master of Arts student, Charles Muskego, that he could do a similar thing by using postcolonial readings in relation to Indigenous issues here in Canada.

Charles is Dene Suline from Cold Lake Alberta. As I mentioned earlier, he wrote a brilliant M.A. thesis with me entitled *Asserting Postcolonial Identities: Cross-Textual Readings of Ezra-Nehemiah and Indigeneity in Canada*. There is no way that Charles could have written this thesis without his training as a biblical scholar *and* his five years of experience with Indigenous Relations in the Government of Alberta. He is currently the Communications Director for Cold Lake First Nation in Alberta. The thesis is a masterpiece, in my view, of

how biblical studies and theology can have actual, practical effects in the so-called “real world”.

Like Charles in his M.A. thesis, I am not going to recount all the horrific things that have happened to Indigenous people—because all of that has been well-documented—and because we want to move forward. Several chapters in the book deal with historical issues. Moving forward still requires a realistic acknowledgement of the past in order to deal with it and its fallout. Otherwise, we will be trapped in an unending cycle of bitterness, anger, pain and dysfunction. Colonialism is what caused the mass suffering of Indigenous people here in Canada, the Americas, and around the world, e.g., Australia. Chapter 5 considers Postcolonialism in relation to the Indigenous people of Japan, the Ainu. Chapter 7 provides a “glocal” (local and global) perspective with the hope of providing a tool with which to deal with some of this historical baggage.

I find two amazing things about Charles. One, that he is not more angry with the past than he is. I think this is because of his Christian faith, realism, and determination to build a better future for his people here in Canada. But one can most certainly detect his annoyance at the Indian Act and Bill C-31 in places of his thesis. Secondly, I find it amazing that Charles did not abandon his Christian faith. Indeed, I have had the privilege to marry him and his wife, and baptize their children. Moreover, I find it astonishing, given the abuse that Indigenous people have suffered via colonialism (and the wrongly applied version of Christian religion), that 65% of Indigenous people in Canada remain Christian. This is almost twice the national average.

There are some other surprises in Charles’ thesis. He goes even so far as to be open and fair with the missionary movement—without defending their injustices. He views them as sincere but naively used for colonial purposes and agendas here in Canada by political powers. Chapter 3 will drill down much deeper into the Oblates and Indigenous people as a model of reconciliation.

Charles also gained insight into the complexities of Indigenous issues by researching and writing his thesis. There are a plethora of first nations in Canada—and the issues are massively complex—with no “one size fits all” answer. So it takes this kind of research to analyze and sort the issues and problems out in order to come up with working solutions. This will be the focus of Charles’ Ph.D. when he gets around to it.

The number one purpose of Charles’ M.A. thesis is to provide a “new way of thinking” about the past, problems and issues. The significance of this M.A. thesis is precisely this: It shifts the focus *from a negative past to a neutral present for a positive future*. I am sure that that positive future depends on a real-

istic perspective on the past which will give Indigenous people a positive future through government policy guided by Indigenous peoples' asserting their self-identity and self-determinism. This is likely to be the focus of Charles' Ph.D. work. As editors, we chose the first chapter to be the one that deals with worldviews and "ways of thinking". Chapter 12 also looks at the I-Thou Ideals which may also be used in reconciliation based in thinking and relationships, i.e., thinking which leads to a "new way forward" (action!).

As already noted, The Canadian Centre for Scholarship and the Christian Faith conference for 2018 was on "Indigenous People and the Christian Faith: A New Way Forward". I believe that this was a very significant conference for so many different reasons. Like Charles' thesis, and without denying nor trying to mitigate a horrific past, we are stuck unless we move past the past. This conference acknowledged the real past but *focused on a new way forward*.

We welcomed all people groups to come and learn and think about how we can all work towards that goal—with love, forgiveness, truth and reconciliation. The conference was an opportunity to dream big and figure out ways to make it happen!

Our keynote speaker was Dr. Cheryl Bear from the Nadleh Whut'en First Nation in British Columbia. She is a faculty associate with Regent College in Vancouver. She and her family, in a camper, have visited over 600 Indigenous communities in both the USA and Canada. She is an award-winning musician too. She combined her scholarly and musical insight into how Indigenous people can heal from the past, act today, and have a bright future with Christian faith. She has a passion to bring the gospel to Indigenous people in culturally relevant ways. Chapter 9 examines how transcontextualization of the gospel has transformed Indigenous Hindu Christians in India and affected missionaries and Christians in other parts of the world to positive ends.

We had an Indigenous Art Exhibit where Alex Angnaluak and other Indigenous artists showed their art and explained it to the attendees. There was lots of music and the conference opened with Indigenous Christian worship. Some chapters of the book deal with the importance of music, ritual, and contextualization of Indigenous forms of worship from Africa, Brazil, and America in relation to the Christian faith. They also struggle with the tension between transcontextualization of the gospel and syncretism. That is, when do forms of worship compromise Christian doctrine and when are they legitimate cultural expressions of Christian faith. One new way forward is to work together to have culturally relevant forms of worship for Indigenous people. Chapter 11 looks at that with the Blackfeet and Pentecostalism.

We are delighted that we have so many international representations in the book. While the Canadian Centre for Scholarship and the Christian Faith is

obviously Canadian, we are also international. Many different Indigenous people groups are represented in international populations. We, again, are able to provide a glocal perspective on Indigenous people in this book.

I would not want to presume nor claim too much for this book. The issues are massively complex and the pain enormous: No one can deny that. But again to look to a visionary young Indigenous leader, Charles Muskego, unless we move past the past we will be trapped by it. This is something the other young Indigenous leader Alex Angnaluak emphasized throughout the conference. Hopefully this book, along with Charles' admonition to a "new way of thinking", may be a part of the larger goal of a "new way forward" for Indigenous people and the Christian faith.

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