

Pregnant with an Evil

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I have again and again tried to show you that our present world can finally be understood only as a perversion of the New Testament. . . . We spoke about the mysterium iniquitatis, the mystery of evil, the nesting of an otherwise unthinkable, unimaginable, and nonexistent evil and its egg within the Christian community. We then used the word Anti-Christ—the Anti-Christ, which looks, in so many things, just like the Christ, and which preaches universal responsibility, global perception, humble acceptance of teaching instead of finding out for oneself, and guidance through institutions. —Ivan Illich²

“Kill the Indian in the Child”

For one hundred and thirty-some years, Christian churches in my country ran residential schools for the expressed purpose of “civilizing” Indian children into the Canadian body politic.³ Or, to use a more graphic summary of this mission in the words of Duncan Campbell Scott, the 1920s Deputy Minister of Indian Affairs: “to kill the Indian in the child.”

For seven generations, Aboriginal children were rounded up with planes, Royal Canadian Mounted Police⁴ vehicles, sometimes even garbage trucks, and hauled off to schools impossibly far away from their home communities. Upon arrival, their hair was cut off, purportedly for delousing. Moccasins, shirts, blouses, and trousers that had been lovingly made by their mothers, grand-

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² David Cayley, *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich as told to David Cayley* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 2005), 169.

³ The residential schools program lasted from the 1870s to the late 1990s.

⁴ Also known as RCMP or “Mounties”—the national police force for Canada to this day.

mothers, and aunts were stripped off and burned with the same sanitizing justification. The children were forbidden to speak their own language and beaten if they were caught doing so. Any tie to home, community, or Indigenous identity was to be broken. They were not to speak to their own siblings. Each child was to become a shorn, uniformed tabula rasa on which the Christian commandments and Canadian civic virtues were to be cleanly inscribed. As a project on the public dime, all this was to be achieved at the highest efficiency of cost—that is to say, the barest minimum of care. According to the 1907 Bryce Report to Parliament, between 24 and 42 percent of these children died in the residential schools each year. Improvements to the care of these children were dismissed by the Canadian government as too expensive.⁵

Mennonites, typically averse to church-state collaboration in violence, failed to perceive the violence of this system and got caught up in its colonial mandate and its racist rhetoric. One Mennonite leader said in 1963, “We feel that saving the Indian out of his squalor, ignorance and filth is step one in bringing him to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.”⁶ In 1955, an official in the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs estimated that between one-third and one-half of all teachers in the “unorganized territories” (land located outside the boundaries of settler governance) were Mennonites.⁷

The abuses suffered by Aboriginal children at these schools and the colonial policy of forced assimilation are shameful beyond telling. I do not want to argue here, as other Christians have, that these abuses and policies have nothing to do with Christianity. We don’t get off the hook that easily. This is a tragedy that we must not only remember but also own. For if we are to avoid repeating such tragedies, we have to look for their source within our tradition. Canada’s Aboriginal children were kidnapped and driven down a road to hell that was paved with uniquely Christian intentions. To understand the origins of this strange evil that was convinced of its own benevolence, we need to revisit the days when imperial power first seduced the Christian church.

5 TRC Commissioner Murray Sinclair in conversation with Michael Enright on *The Sunday Edition*, August 10, 2014, <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thesundayedition/cyber-misogyny-roller-derby-opening-chile-s-black-box-justice-murray-sinclair-sarah-jeffrey-on-the-oboe-ralph-nader-1.2905156/justice-murray-sinclair-on-truth-and-reconciliation-1.2905159>.

6 Steve Heinrichs, “Confessing the Past: Mennonites and the Indian School System,” Mennonite Church Canada, 2013, <http://www.commonword.ca/ResourceView/43/16436>.

7 Ibid.

An Emperor Converts

In the year AD 312, Constantine the Great was fascinated by how certain dynamics of the Christian faith made it uniquely suited for uniting and galvanizing his body politic, the Roman Empire. The ancient tribal identities of the empire's colonized lands had not been erased by the sword of conquest, and Rome was pulling apart through a growing centrifugal force.. Everywhere, local identities were re-asserting themselves and driving for greater autonomy. Though Roman identity had spread to the edges of "the known world," it was ill-suited to universalization, because it was ethnic. If Visigoths or Africans were granted Roman citizenship, they never really saw themselves as "Roman." Constantine was fascinated by the idea that, in Christ, as Paul writes, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female" (Gal 3:28). Here was an identity that could both encompass and transcend ethnic and class identities. Here was a religion and an identity that could unite an empire.⁸

Apparently, Constantine found Christ on the battlefield, as he was preparing to meet Maxentius, his chief rival to the throne. According to legend, he saw a cross-shaped cloud and heard a voice: "Conquer by this sign." In response, Constantine painted crosses on the shields of his men. Within days, they were marching victoriously through the gates of Rome, holding up the Christian symbol on their armor and the severed head of Maxentius on the tip of a spear.

Whether or not Constantine's account of a heavenly sign was bona fide, his interpretation of what it meant to conquer one's enemies by the cross was most certainly novel. Up until that point, Christians by and large understood such conquering to mean winning over one's persecutors through the disarming, nonviolent love of Christ, a love Christ modeled on the cross through an act of forgiving self-sacrifice. The idea of a military campaign (or any project of the state) "in the name of Christ" was unthinkable prior to Constantine's impromptu paint job. In the words of Justin Martyr, an early Christian leader, "We who used to kill one another, do not make war on our enemies, we have each changed our instruments of war, turned our swords into ploughshares . . . and our spears into farming tools."⁹

⁸ Susan Wise Bauer, *The History of the Medieval World: From the Conversion of Constantine to the First Crusade* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 3-7.

⁹ Cited in Leonard Desroches, *Allow The Water: Anger, Fear, Power, Work, Sexuality, Community—and the Spirituality and Practice of Nonviolence* (Toronto: Trafford, 2004), 188.

While there was relief among Christians over the end of state-sponsored persecution—an end that came with Constantine’s legalization of the Christian faith—there was also grave concern about how this new relation to the powers would distort the faith. “As the Church increased in influence, it decreased in Christian virtues,” reflected the Christian scholar Jerome (c. 342–420). Within a hundred years of Constantine’s conversion, the Roman military machine was governed by an officially Christian doctrine of Just War; church and state were marching together in lockstep. Beheadings, wars, violent persecutions of religious heretics “in the name of Christ” had become not only permissible but also an unquestionable necessity for protecting the Christian state.

The Conscriptio of Christian Charity

The cross that was emblazoned onto the military machine was not the only thing that disturbed early Christian sensibilities. For the state also began to conscript Christian charity. The first “hospitals” were founded in post-Constantinian Roman cities as a way of addressing the growing homelessness problem, by ratcheting up and institutionalizing the early Christian practice of taking in the stranger as a way of receiving the Christ. Because Jesus told his disciples that whenever they welcomed “the least of one of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt 25:40, NRSV), early Christian homes had a practice of keeping a candle in the window, a scrap of bread in the pantry, and a spare sleeping mat ready to welcome strangers across the threshold of their own homes. John Chrysostom (“The Golden-Tongued”), a preacher at the time, preached vehemently against this transformation of the gospel call to welcome the stranger. So central did Chrysostom consider the habit of hospitality that he told his listeners if they ceased keeping this practice personally and spontaneously around their own tables, their homes would cease to be Christian.

Illich reminded himself and his friends of this practice by always carrying a candle stub in his pocket, which he would pull out any time “two or three” (or more) were “gathered together” (see Matt 18:20, KJV), placing it on the table and lighting it as a reminder that the circle of friendship gathered around it was always an open circle, held open expectantly for the other—another friend or a stranger (or even an enemy), who could become a friend. This openness to encounter the other was one and the same with an openness to the presence of Jesus. This was a far cry from the “instrumentalized machine” for efficient and professionally distant needs identification and service provision that this Chris-

tian practice would morph into—beginning with those first hospitals—which Illich refers to as the mutation of hospitality into hospitalization.¹⁰

Constantine is a prime example of Illich's refrain: "*Corruptio optimi quae est pessima*"—"The corruption of the best is the worst." This phrase summarizes Illich's thesis that the historically unique shape of modern institutions is best understood as a perversion of Christianity. Interestingly, the Christian parable that pushed Illich to this conclusion was the story that made him understand the radical ethnicity-transcending nature of the Christian gospel that Constantine found so attractive: Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan.

"Who Is My Neighbor?"

In the Gospel of Luke, a lawyer asks Jesus what he must do "to inherit eternal life." (This, by the way is not a "how to get to heaven" question but a question about how to become a full heir—the ultimate insider—to the life of God as Jesus has been explaining it.) Jesus turns the question back on the lawyer and asks which Scripture is the interpretive key for the Torah. The lawyer answers, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus tells the lawyer, "You have given the right answer. Do this, and you will live" (Luke 10:27–28, NRSV).

But the lawyer pushes for clarification, as good lawyers do. He asks, "And who is my neighbor?" It's a vague category, after all. How far does this obligation extend? To love another person as one's own flesh, one's own self, is no small commitment. The lawyer can see the extrapolations of this commitment widening outward to a limitless horizon and becoming either hopelessly dilute or impossible to practice. His question is a fair one.

Jesus, in typical fashion, answers with a story. Illich observes that this concrete, narrative mode is essential to Jesus's reply. The reply must be a story; it cannot be reduced to a rule. In fact, the story is about the transgression of rules. Illich asserts that the "doctrine about the neighbour . . . is utterly destructive of ordinary decency, of what had, until then, been understood as ethical behaviour. . . . In antiquity, hospitable behaviour . . . implies a boundary drawn around those to whom I can behave in this way."¹¹ This boundary is precisely what the lawyer is pushing Jesus to identify. Any ancient ethic required an *ethnos*—a tribe, a group—to contain it. Samaritans were not only outside the

10 Ivan Illich, "Pain and Hospitality," a paper presented in Chicago, 1987. <http://brandon.multics.org/library/illich/hospitality.pdf>.

11 Cayley, *Rivers*, 51.

Jewish fold, they were also the group most threatening to Jewish identity—half-Jews who had married and mixed with the Gentile culture, which an ever-pressured Jewish minority struggled to ward off.

What Illich hears in Jesus's story is the surprising assertion that my neighbor is whom I choose “in response to a call and not a category, in this case the call of the beaten-up Jew in the ditch.”¹² The story suggests that “we are creatures that find our perfection only by establishing a relationship,” a relationship that “may appear arbitrary from everybody else's point of view.”¹³ The lawyer asks for a rule. Jesus, in reply, tells a story about an outsider, and a religious rival being literally “moved in his innards” at the sight of his enemy's blood and misery, a response that initiates a surprising relationship of cross-cultural love.

The Christian practice of breaking bread together across lines of tribe and class, calling one another “brothers and sisters in the Lord,” and violating long-held ethnic food and purity taboos by their mingled fellowship was a shock to the ancient world—a scandal. For the early church, these new practices of the beloved community were central. The main thrust of the ministry of St. Paul is to proclaim the breakdown of “the wall of hostility” (Eph 2:14, NIV) dividing Jews and Gentiles, through the mystery of the Cross—the blood and misery of another wounded Jew. This somehow has the power to move people in their guts toward a new compassion and sense of family, beyond any inherited identities or obligations.

A New and Dangerous Freedom

Illich shows again and again how the new gift of the Christian community is both precious and precarious. It is a new goodness prone to a new evil. The new sense of family was supremely convenient for a megalomaniac imperialist. Similarly, the mission to bring all the world into “one new humanity in Christ” was fundamental to the residential school project. In both cases, we see how the Christian transgressing of ancient tribal boundaries represents a new freedom that verges precipitously on a new danger. This freedom is at once a cause for rejoicing or cringing—depending on one's place in history—for it set in motion the spread of a faith across the globe that, depending on only a subtle variation, begat encounters with either a radically new kind of peace or a radically new kind of violence.

The difference, according to Illich, lies in how the parable of the Good Samaritan is read as a summary of Jesus's message—either as an invitation to

12 *Ibid.*, 52.

13 *Ibid.*

relationship chosen freely, or as the grounds for a universal rule. His distinction brings to mind the slogan of Canadian luminary Marshall McLuhan—"the medium is the message." The medium of enfleshed, loving, and free "I-Thou" relationship is the message of Christ. Attempts at the same message, outside of this medium, become unavoidably perverse.

Illich's tour through early church history and New Testament texts brings Canada's church-run, state-sponsored residential schools into sharper focus than do typical "decolonizing" critiques. Yes, the residential school system was chauvinist, racist, and imperialist. But more insidious and ultimately more damaging to its young inmates than that was its hell-bent mission to save them. It is one thing to recover from the wounds of disdain. It is another thing to recover from the wounds of charity. For the survivor of violent charity, love itself has forever been disfigured.

The residential schools were not the product of a generic colonialism but a specifically (and perversely) Christian one. Illich contends that the misapplication of the story of the Good Samaritan as the basis for a universal rule—the obligation to rescue the pitiable—gives the Christian West an attitude toward the other that is unique in history:

Only . . . with the Western European Church did the alien become someone in need, someone to be brought in. This view of the alien as a burden has become constitutive for Western society; without this universal mission to the world outside, what we call the West would not have come to be.¹⁴

This uniquely Western, biblically derived (and deranged!) sense of mission drove school teachers and administrators to impose their saving ministrations upon Canada's First Nations, convinced that they were the rescuers and Canada's First Peoples were those in need of being rescued. A closer reading of the tale of the Good Samaritan might have made the teachers consider that the ones they viewed as aliens—members of a "lost race"—could turn out to be the ones to rescue *them!* But this humbler reading was missed. That the missionary might be the one in need of saving did not occur to Western mission workers. Attributing needs always to the other, they targeted the most vulnerable members of Indigenous communities—the children—not out of malice but out of Christian mercy! While there were undeniably pathological predators who infiltrated the residential schools, many of the staff were well-meaning missionaries who dedicated their lives to the "service" of these children. The

¹⁴ Ivan Illich, "Vernacular Values by Ivan Illich," 1980. <http://www.preservenet.com/theory/Illich/Vernacular.html#1>.

government chose Christian missionaries for this project because of their passionate sense of charity. The missionaries were willing to work literally for nothing, believing that their mission to “the poor” was securing them “treasures in heaven” in place of material reward.

The perverse nature of the relationship between these would-be saviors and the children they felt obligated to love and then shackle, arose directly out of a Christian mission stripped of its sense of freedom and reduced to a set of rules demanding universal dissemination. Humans have always had rules but rules contained by an ethos—the spirit of a particular people in a particular place.

For an Indigenous example, Ella Deloria sums up traditional Dakota ethics with the following four commands: First, “Be a good relative. That is of paramount importance!” Then, “Be related, somehow, to everyone you know.” Next, “Be generous.” And finally, “Be hospitable!”¹⁵ In many ways, this ethic is more spacious and gracious than the rule-bound, minutia-obsessed Christianity imported to Turtle Island¹⁶ by Europeans. But this spacious ethic of generous hospitality does have boundaries; it draws a clear line around the tribe within which it is applicable.

Melanie Kampen, a Mennonite theologian who is decolonizing Christian theology by interrogating it with Aboriginal paradigms, points out that the wideness of this “all my relations” ethic is not to “be confused with a liberal tolerance that seeks to dilute differences and dissolve identitarian boundaries. The exclusivity of the tribe [is] important.”¹⁷ She argues that the boundedness of Aboriginal ethics to a specific place and people “cannot result in dominance or colonization.” This is a vital insight into why many Indigenous cultures have no interest in colonizing or converting other peoples. But at the same time, this sense of ethical enclosure cannot call for a Lakota to “be a good relative” to a Cree or an Ojibwa.

Jesus, on the other hand, tells a story to his first-century Jewish community of a Samaritan who breaks out of such a boundaried world and loves someone to whom he has no tribal ties. This was—and is—good news. Illich’s insight is to see how easily this good could turn evil. For when this new freedom became a rule, a door opened to a tyranny never before known in history. Whereas a Ghengis Khan or a Julius Caesar could behead children without a second

15 Ella Deloria, *Speaking of Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 48–49. First published 1944.

16 Turtle Island is a traditional Aboriginal term for our continent, arising from a sacred story where Nanabush builds up the land on the back of a turtle.

17 Melanie Kampen, “Unsettling Theology: Decolonizing Western Interpretations of Original Sin” (master’s thesis, University of Waterloo, 2014), 54.

thought in the process of extending his empire, Christians could now round them up for total cultural annihilation, purportedly out of charity and for the children's own good.

Mysterium Iniquitatis: The Mystery of Wickedness

Illich finds in St. Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians an awareness of this new evil to which Christians are uniquely prone. He writes: "The Church had gone pregnant with an evil that would have found no nesting place in the Old Testament."¹⁸ Paul names this evil *mysterium iniquitatis*, the "mystery of lawlessness" (2 Thess 2:7, NRSV) and identifies it with the antichrist, a spirit that would nest in the church, taking on an appearance of Christ's spirit but would in fact be its demonic opposite.

To the modern reader, such words sound terribly churchy and weird. But Illich believes that the phenomenon of the antichrist can be investigated historically, without recourse to faith or belief, by powers of observation available to Christians and non-Christians alike. "The more I try to examine the present as an historical entity, the more it . . . forces me to accept a set of axioms for which I find no parallels in past societies and displays a puzzling kind of horror, cruelty, and degradation with no precedent in other historical epochs."¹⁹

I can think of no more accurate category in which to place the abduction, forcible confinement, and assimilationist reprogramming of Canadian Aboriginal children by coercively charitable Samaritans acting in the name of Christ. And from here, it is not difficult to imagine the road to the darkest, hideous, sexual and physical abuses now catalogued by Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission on residential schools.

The sick relationships between these abusive saviors and their captive charges reminds me of the torturer/nurse Annie Wilkes in Stephen King's horror novel *Misery*,²⁰ whose plot can be read as a terrifying parody of the tale of the Good Samaritan. Wilkes finds the author Paul Sheldon on the roadside, injured by a car crash, and takes him back to a remote cabin to nurse him back to health. She tells Sheldon she is his greatest fan, but her twisted love admits no freedom. When she finds his newest manuscript not to her liking, she becomes highly agitated, lecturing him on its violence and profanity. As time goes on, she becomes psychotically punitive, jailing and re-injuring Sheldon, forcing him to rewrite his story as she wants it to go, with a "nicer ending." In

¹⁸ Cayley, *Rivers*, 59.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁰ King, *Misery* (New York: Viking, 1987).

the end, Sheldon narrowly escapes with his life, a profoundly broken man who succumbs to alcoholism and for years loses his voice as a writer.

The parallels between this psychological horror story and Canada's residential schools are uncanny, eerie. How many Christian missionaries began their service to Canada's First Nations with a romantic tale of rescue in their heads? How many became bitterly violent when the children they thought they were saving did not reciprocate their fantasy? How many young Aboriginal Paul Sheldons were trapped in the terrifying dilemma of trying their best to reshape not only their behavior but also their own language and narrative, to please a violently controlling Nurse Wilkes while desperately scheming how to escape? Can any of the conversions to Christianity in these schools be considered as anything other than Stockholm syndrome, the twisted dynamic that turns hostages to identify with their kidnappers?

Resisting Erasure, Embracing Inclusion

In contrast to the residential schools, some Christian missions have been freely offered and freely received among Canada's First Nations, and their stories shine like a light in the darkness of missions co-opted by the colonial machine. The Right Reverend Mark MacDonald, National Indigenous Bishop for the Anglican Church of Canada, is a carrier of that light. One of his most compelling stories comes from the Gwich'in people of Alaska, where MacDonald served as bishop prior to coming to his current post in the church (which in itself represents a startling counter-narrative to the predominant colonial story).

When the very first Anglican Bishop of Alaska arrived in Alaska in 1862, he found four thousand Gwich'in reading the Morning and Evening Prayers in their skin huts every day as they followed the caribou. "They were probably the most Anglican people in Canada at the time," says MacDonald of their rigorous routine of Christian prayer, "without the benefit of clergy, I might add."²¹ The prayers were in their own language, translated into Gwich'in from Ojibway by the Catechist Robert MacDonald, an Ojibway who had come to live with them decades before the Gwich'in had any contact with white missionaries. MacDonald and other Aboriginal catechists had been trained in Winnipeg by the Anglican Church and Mission Society, in many ways a theologically conservative institute but nevertheless one that accepted Canada's Indigenous

²¹ Mark MacDonald, "Indigenous Anglican Ministry in Northern Canada" (public lecture, St. James Cathedral, Toronto, October 28, 2014). All quotes attributed to MacDonald in this section come from this lecture unless otherwise noted. A video of the lecture was formerly hosted on the St. James Cathedral website.

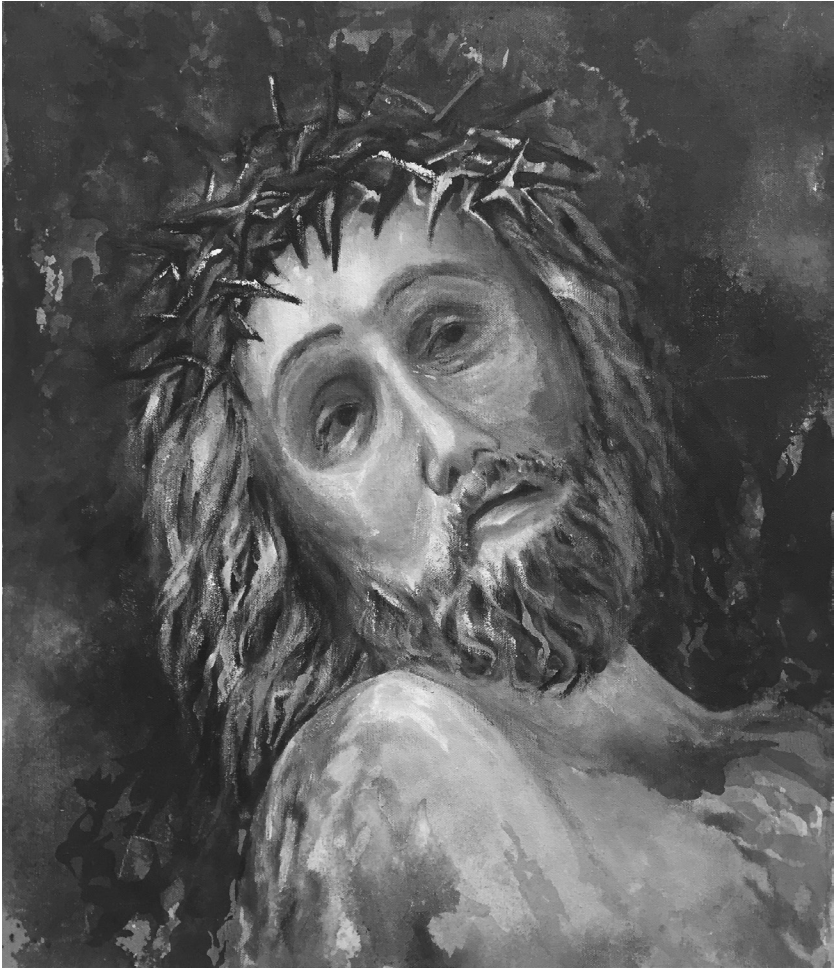
peoples as having “a valid culture, a valid cosmology and a valid way of life.” The task of mission, as it was understood, “was not to make Indigenous people like Westerners, but to make an Indigenous form of Christianity develop.”

The Gwich'in remain to this day one of the most separatist Indigenous communities in Canada. A friend of Bishop MacDonald's, an orthodox Jew, has remarked to him, “I never thought I would find such a thing. But in this case, their Christian faith has helped them to resist colonization rather than submit to it.” To MacDonald, this surprise is a sign that “the Gospel and the power of God is greater than our intentions. Which means that even when we intend to use the Gospel to ‘civilize’ someone, you end up with a Desmond Tutu; you wind up with a Martin Luther King; you end up with a Black Elk.”

Black Elk was an Oglala holy man and a Roman Catholic catechist, who experienced pressures from missionary overseers to abandon his traditions. Yet at the end of his life, Black Elk decided to reclaim his Lakota identity openly, recording the sacred rites of the Lakota and the shamanic vision that had marked him as a young boy as a spiritual leader for his people. At nine years of age, he had been taken up into the heavens by the sacred Thunder-beings of the West and given glimpses of his people's future. His vision had also had universal dimensions, but unlike that of the residential schools project, in Black Elk's vision, tribal identity was brought into an enlarged human family by inclusion rather than erasure: “And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father.”²²

To Black Elk, Jesus was easily recognizable as “a good Lakota.” Mark MacDonald argues that leaders such as Black Elk or Robert MacDonald are typical of what he calls Aboriginal spiritual genius, representative of a vast majority of the Aboriginal inhabitants of Turtle Island, whom both anthropologists and the church have historically written off as failures. MacDonald estimates that there is a small minority—roughly 5 percent—who are pursuing a path of pure traditionalism, and an equally small minority of fully assimilated Aboriginals, who are completely cut off from their communities and culture as intended by the residential schools project. The 90 percent in the middle, dismissed as “tainted” by anthropologists and “syncretists” by the church, are heroes to

22 Cited by Edwina Gateley in *Christ in the Margins* (New York: Orbis, 2003), 115. Gateley's text is accompanied by the stunning iconography of Robert Lentz, who fashions traditionally styled religious icons with unofficial, marginal saints: figures such as Black Elk, Julian of Norwich, and Albert Einstein.



"Head of Christ 2"

Jane Gateson

MacDonald for the way they have married the essence of Christian faith to an Indigenous cosmology and way of thinking.

MacDonald sees Christian Indigenous elders offering Canada a unique opportunity to understand anew the nature of the Canadian story and the spiritual wisdom that blends what is essential and good in the Christian Gospel with the “all my relations” worldview of Indigenous peoples. He says: “I think there is probably no other country—and I know a lot of what’s going on elsewhere—that has this possibility of really changing the way we understand not only Indigenous people but the environment and all kinds of things.”

MacDonald is often asked by contemporary Canadians why his people would want to be Christian, given all the disrespect and abuse they have experienced at the hands of the church. He gives two reasons: The first, he says, is simply Jesus, whom they find “compelling, and lovely, and powerful.” The second is the memory of those early missionaries who made their life with the people, “who traveled where they traveled, who ate with them when there was game, who starved with them when there was none.”²³ The people still remember their love and their sacrifice.

These missionaries are the kind that Illich talks about and celebrates wherever he finds them. Genuine Christian mission, according to Illich, “demands searching self-criticism, and a disposition to listen and lose oneself. It requires an ability to bracket and relativize one’s own culture in order to hear what the Gospel says when it speaks in the voice of another culture.”²⁴ “To use the Gospel to prop up any social or political system” is “blasphemous.”²⁵ The gospel as a tool for one culture to colonize another is an abomination.

Re-orienting

In this, Illich is stating one maxim of modern society in its strongest terms while stubbornly defying another. Yes, the idea that religion can be used to prop up political structures is automatically suspect and deeply distasteful to a majority of Canadians today. In our cultural memory, the sanctimonious and secretly abusive clergyman forcibly educating children into subjection to God and Country has become an archetype, the worst kind of boogeyman, and we are not letting him back in. But we are not stopping there; we will not abide *any* kind of missionary anymore. The idea of the self-critical, self-surrender-

²³ Mark MacDonald, Keynote address at Diocesan Sacred Circle, St. Peter Dynevor, June 16, 2012. Personal notes.

²⁴ Cayley, *Rivers*, 6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

ing, non-colonial, non-ethnocentric missionary Illich praises has become an impossibility to us. Such missionaries cannot exist in the postmodern liberal imagination. They must not.

Yet as we bar that door, we are attempting an expulsion that no culture has ever sustained: a politics without religion. Every people on earth have spiritual narratives and authorities that underpin their social and political conventions. For First Nations as a paramount example, a divorce between their spiritual world and their polity is unimaginable. They testify that a human being, or a human culture, cut off from its sacred stories, from its spiritual songs and healing rituals, is an amputation, an empty shell. This is precisely the gravest harm inflicted by the residential school system on Canada's Aboriginal people.

So where does this leave us? We must not repeat the dynamic of that system by remarrying religion to the state, but neither may we repeat its dynamic by re-divorcing the physical world from the spiritual. Like Illich, I cannot but see our predicament in apocalyptic terms. We are at the end of the world as we know it.

There is a resolution possible, but this involves something entirely new in human history: a culture oriented toward a spiritual power completely free of all violence or coercion. The challenge for the churches in the new millennium is to embrace the novelty of this project and reject absolutely the foundational violence from which it turns away.