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**Settler Salvation and Indigenous Survival:
George Copway’s Vision of “Reconciliation”**

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In the hot summer of 1845, Anishinaabe missionary Kahgegagahbowh, better known as George Copway, hosted a large camp meeting in the village of Saugeen in the Province of Canada where he was serving as a minister under the auspices of the Canadian Methodist Conference. Anishinaabe ministers, chiefs, and elders travelled from bands scattered around the Great Lakes to discuss their prospects for the future. Settler farmers had been encroaching on their lands and despite mounting conflicts the Canadian government proved unwilling or unable to intervene effectively. The gathered leaders had concluded that to assert their rights they would need to unite politically. At the centre of the tent meeting, from an improvised stage, community leaders praised “*Jesus Christ, Ke-sha-mon-e-doo O-gwe-son*, i.e., the Benevolent Spirit’s son” asking him to send aid where the government would not.¹ Notions of Indigenous sovereignty, including the drafting of their own code of laws and plans for consolidating their remaining lands into one super-reserve, dominated the discussion and were summarized by Copway into a five-point plan.² The Saugeen tent meeting proved to be a highlight of Copway’s career and he reflected on it glowingly in his autobiography: “Never was I more delighted than with the appearance of this body. As I sat and looked at them, I contrasted their

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former (degraded) with their present (elevated) condition. The Gospel, I thought, had done all this."³ In the young missionary's mind, only through the fusion of Indigenous political resistance and Christian religion could North American Indigenous peoples envision a future that ensured their survival and sovereignty in the face of spreading settler colonialism.

Despite Copway's excitement, the Methodist authorities made it clear that the Saugeen camp meeting was a blatant misuse of denominational resources. As he continued to deploy his Indigenous Christianity in unprecedented ways, non-Indigenous Methodist leaders became confused, angry, and alarmed, and they quickly and successfully moved to push him out of his position in the mission organization, eventually severing ties with him completely as punishment for his "bad conduct."⁴ Though he was not aware of it, the clash with his supervisors would set him on a path to New York City, where he would begin a decade-long career as Canada's first international literary celebrity.⁵ In addition, the ideas proposed at the Saugeen conference would form the foundation of Copway's reconciliatory vision for transforming American society in ways that he believed could ensure both the spiritual redemption of Euroamerican newcomers and the survival and political sovereignty of Indigenous Americans. Entangled with his pursuit of fame and power, these dual goals characterized the heart of Copway's attempts to envision a future wherein Indigenous and newcomer peoples could coexist in a mutually beneficial relationship. Though it stretches the historically-grounded meaning of the term, an analysis of Copway's political vision through the lens of contemporary notions of reconciliation reveals the long, and often forgotten, history of attempts to theorize ways in which settlers and Indigenous people could share the land in the best, or least harmful, way possible.

The roots of Copway's vision for long-term Indigenous political and social agency began to take shape during his time at a Methodist missionary school in the late 1830s. Attending a treaty signing in the summer of 1837, he witnessed the secession of what was to become eastern Minnesota and central Wisconsin. At another in 1842, he left angered by the deceptive and condescending attitudes of the government agents.⁶ Similar surrenders and unfair land purchases had been taking place in southern Ontario since the early nineteenth century, and some Methodist missionaries had supported Indigenous leaders in opposition to land speculators and Indian agents.⁷ Mid-nineteenth century Canadian Methodism was unusual in this regard and its missionaries' emphasis on Indigenous education and

combatting the liquor trade made them successful in Anishinaabeg communities where Catholic and Moravian missionaries had received much cooler welcomes.

Many of the values that brought success to the expansion of Methodism were rooted in its theological emphasis on principles of spiritual equality and social justice – principles that expressed themselves most famously in prominent Methodist challenges to nineteenth-century notions of race epitomized in the Atlantic slave trade. Canadian historian Neil Semple argued that these progressive ideas originated in denominational founder John Wesley’s theological critique of Calvinism. Interpreting Calvinism’s notion of an elect community, specifically pre-ordained for salvation, as exclusive, deterministic, and “logically and scripturally absurd,” Wesley argued that all humans were spiritually equal in their fallen state prior to salvation and equal in their responsibility to use their inherent will and conscience to approach God as individuals seeking salvation.⁸ Regardless of race or status, salvation was understood to be a gift offered freely and universally to all humankind.⁹ Copway’s description of himself as “saved by grace, by grace alone” and not by any individual merit reflected this Wesleyan soteriology.¹⁰ This theological egalitarianism was an important influence on Methodism’s approach to race. Wesley himself fought against American slavery and, in a letter to his friend William Wilberforce, he exclaimed that the institution of slavery was “the vilest that ever saw the sun,” declaring it “villainy” that an African man’s oath was not considered legally equivalent to a European’s.¹¹ These unconventional notions of racial inequality influenced the policy of Methodist missionaries in Upper Canada, leading them to contribute to a space that encouraged the Indigenization of Christianity in unanticipated ways.

Methodism’s abolitionist focus on social and political action dovetailed with Copway’s observations of the injustices done to Indigenous communities, and as a result his Anishinaabe Christianity blurred the line between religion and politics, growing into an almost proto-liberation theology that increasingly opposed the settler-colonial order. One of the earliest examples of this was the 1845 Saugeen tent meeting, which was in many ways nineteenth-century Anishinaabe Methodism coming into its own. Surprisingly, Copway’s expulsion from the Canadian Methodist Conference only strengthened his belief in the significance of Christianity to the assertion and preservation of Indigenous rights, albeit in a more

ecumenical form that identified the divisions between Christian denominations as an impediment to effective social action.

In addition to English literacy, Copway's Methodist education also provided a moral and theological framework comprehensible to non-Indigenous audiences that he could use to call for acknowledgement of and atonement for the wrongs committed against his people. In doing so, Copway often directly attacked the theological and intellectual arguments that underpinned the settler colonial project. One of the most blatant examples of this critique can be found in his travel narrative, *Running Sketches of Men and Places in England, France, Belgium, and Scotland*, where he openly criticized the common Euromerican practice of using biblical narratives of the providential downfall of the unrighteous to justify the conquest of North America:

I read in a different light from this the character of the God whom you love and serve. His benevolence is written in the page of nature around me; and every blade of grass, and the sweet sounds that vibrate on my ear, and salute my heart with feelings of warm emotion, tell me that the God who made the earth is a God of love. The God that we adore, my brethren, is not the author of the downfall and ruin of the North American Indians.¹²

Here, Copway combined an appeal to Christian notions of general revelation with naturalistic portrayals of Indigenous spirituality to challenge the roots of colonialism itself, declaring that a God of love would not have "crushed and made few the noble sons of America."¹³ By critiquing the logic of Euromerican theological justifications for colonialism, Copway implied that their conception of God was in fact completely opposed to his actual nature. In this way, Copway asserted that he, an Anishinaabe clergyman expelled from his denomination, had a more accurate understanding of true Christian theology and morality than Euromerican religious leaders.

Speaking from this position of moral and theological authority, Copway firmly placed the blame for the suffering of Indigenous peoples on settler society, highlighting the hypocrisy of Euromerican declarations that the fate of Indigenous peoples was pre-ordained by God. Although earlier he had forgiven these wrongs in his 1847 autobiography, that forgiveness was tempered with indictments of the British government,

which he referred to as “that *pseudo* Christian nation” which “grossly abused, deceived, and cheated” the Ojibway throughout the treaty signing process.¹⁴ In another passage, Copway reapplied a Biblical metaphor for Satan, “a roaring lion . . . seeking whom he may devour,” onto the European colonists who had invaded his people’s lands: “The white men have been like the greedy lion, pouncing upon and devouring its prey. They have driven us from our nation, our homes, and possessions.”¹⁵ By twisting a commonplace Christian description of the devil, Copway revealed the sinfulness of settler colonialism and the hypocrisy of Euroamerican Christianity in a way that would have been unsettling for a readership well versed in Victorian Protestant symbolism and morality. One of the most scathing examples of Copway’s subversive use of Christian theology and language appeared in 1851 in a printed transcription of one of his lectures published in the inaugural edition of his short-lived literary journal *Copway’s American Indian*. While arguing in front of a packed hall in favour of the establishment of an Indigenous aid society in New York City, he employed apocalyptic Christian imagery to deliver a prophetic judgement on Euroamerican society:

The heavens that have long been overcast with the vengeance of the Great Spirit upon the white man, are now beginning to break forth; and when a Society is formed in the City of New-York, it shall be one of the means to send its prayers to the God of the Universe, to avert the thunderbolt that Jehovah, in the hands of Gabriel, has now set in motion in the skies – that some day must come and rake up the bones of our ancestors, in the face of the prosperity of the white man, tells you that God shall become the accuser of the wrongs of my poor brethren [sic].¹⁶

While some of Copway’s audiences found the presence of this suit-wearing, English-speaking, Christian “mimic man” to be a reassurance of the rightness of the colonial project, those in attendance during this particular lecture likely found him to be an unsettling figure whose message conveyed disturbing theological implications regarding their spiritual future.¹⁷ He declared that non-Indigenous Christians had lost sight of God’s true nature, and that to avoid a future outpouring of divine wrath they would need to repent and atone for their complicity in the sins perpetrated against Indigenous peoples in North America.

Besides spiritual salvation, Copway's future vision also centred on the physical and political survival of Indigenous peoples. This second key element of his reconciliatory vision was precipitated by his engagement with the myth of the "vanishing Indian," a widely accepted notion that the impending extinction of Indigenous peoples was inevitable or even naturally or divinely ordained.¹⁸ The theological implications of this myth were especially troubling for Indigenous Christians, and Peter Jones, Copway's one-time mentor, lamented this horrific idea in his 1861 history of the Ojibway nation: "I cannot suppose for a moment that the Supreme Disposer has decreed that the doom of the red man is to fall and gradually disappear, like the mighty wilderness, before the axe of the European settler."¹⁹ Portraying colonialism as an onslaught of industrial technology against an unsullied pre-modern world, Jones engaged critically with his own Christianity by questioning arguments that the suffering of Indigenous North Americans was the result of divine providence.

After travelling extensively throughout the United States, Copway wrote a letter to the Philadelphia *Saturday Evening Post* in 1850 in which he too challenged the truth of this myth of inevitable extinction and argued that action had to be taken immediately if this fate were to be averted:

The ministry of this country, and the sluggards in the cause of humanity, say now: *There is a fate or certain doom on the Indians, therefore we need do nothing for them.* How blasphemous! First you give us rum by the thousand barrels, and, before the presence of God and this enlightened world, point to God, and charge him as the murderer of the unfortunate Indians . . . save us from such orthodoxy!²⁰

For Copway, the theological and historical narrative of Christianity seemed to offer a means to preserve Anishinaabe community and political identity in the face of such a bleak future.²¹ Indeed, in an 1851 political treatise titled *The Organization of a New Indian Territory, East of the Missouri River*, Copway argued that Indigenous adoption of Christianity and literacy was a core part of "the only means which [could] be used to save the Indians from extinction."²² But it was not simple appropriation of Euromerican ways of knowing and being that would avert the coming Indigenous apocalypse. In that same essay Copway went on to present his fuller vision for the future survival of Indigenous North Americans: a

wholesale restructuring of American society through the creation of a pan-Indigenous state along the eastern banks of the Missouri river. He proposed that this new land be named Kahgega, a shortened version of his own anglicized Anishinaabemowin name.²³

By the mid-nineteenth century, multiple visions of how colonial society could take shape in the future had already been theorized, promoted, discussed, and rejected. As a political solution to the so-called “Indian problem,” Copway’s proposed transformation of the American west expanded on ideas promoted by earlier thinkers like William Augustus Bowles. These plans served as potential compromises within the larger discourse on the future of Indigenous America, conversations that often centered on the myth of the vanishing Indian. As early as 1781, Thomas Jefferson, despite his acceptance of an abstract, Enlightenment notion of racial equality, expressed his belief that “the wilderness” and its Indigenous population would inevitably give way to a Euromerican agricultural society.²⁴ Jefferson cushioned the need for removal with the idea that Indigenous populations could perhaps be saved and improved by assimilating them into Euromerican culture.²⁵

Pretenses of compassion were abandoned in 1833, however, when President Andrew Jackson stood before Congress and declared that the Indigenous population was incapable of improvement and needed to vanish in order to make way for American civilization.²⁶ Jackson’s aggressive Indian policy was continued in 1850 when President Zachary Taylor authorized the forced removal of Anishinaabeg communities from Michigan and Wisconsin to Minnesota.²⁷ On the day that Taylor died while still serving in office, Copway jotted down his thoughts, referring to Taylor not as “President,” but as “General Taylor,” and stating that he hoped “the Great Spirit had forgiven him for killing so many of the red men of my country.”²⁸ Copway waded into this political discourse full of optimistic ambition, embarking in 1849 on a tour of the western territories in order to find a suitable geographical location for his self-titled state.

While Euromerican society understood Indigenous people to be facing a choice between assimilation and extinction, Copway presented a third option. The proposed structure of Kahgega ostensibly ensured the physical and spiritual survival of Indigenous peoples through their adoption of Christianity and English literacy while maintaining the continuity of Indigenous sovereignty through their representation in Congress by educated Indigenous representatives.²⁹ It was this element of future

survival and preservation (and a characteristic touch of narcissism) that Copway likely had in mind when he named the territory after himself, as he translated Kahgega to mean "firm, or ever," which would mean "Ever-to-be Indian Territory."³⁰ In his 1850 history of the Ojibway Nation, Copway envisioned the creation of Kahgega as an end to the era of colonial paternalism: "the government and its agents style us "My children." The Indians are of age – and believe they can think and act for themselves."³¹ Although independent from the rest of the United States, Copway believed that for Indigenous people to achieve equality with Euroamerican society, they would need to adopt Christianity and English literacy. In his mind, Christianity was not only valuable for its spiritual benefits, but would also serve as the vehicle for social and political empowerment.³²

Consistently in his writings and speeches, Copway expressed a grandiose image of his role in history as a savior of and advocate for Indigenous peoples. In the 1847 introduction to his autobiography he drew a correlation between himself and the prophet Moses by exclaiming, "I am a stranger in a strange land!"³³ More than a casual turn of phrase, this quotation highlighted Moses's culturally hybrid identity that shifted between Pharaoh's court, the enslaved Israelite community, and the camps of the Midianite shepherds. By prefacing his autobiography in this way, Copway highlighted his role as a prophet speaking spiritual truth to power and revealed his ambition to become a political emancipator who could lead his people to an imagined promised land west of the Mississippi. Indeed, he also argued that the new territory needed to be administered and represented in Congress by a cadre of literate Indigenous Christians, specifications that all but guaranteed him a central role in overseeing Kahgega.

When Copway's political proposal met with rejection in Congress in the spring of 1850, however, and as his book sales continued to flag, he fell from the public eye and began to struggle financially. This decline was matched by a softening of his critique of settler society, and he turned increasingly towards performances where he took on the role of a noble, romanticized "Indian" acting out scenes from his friend Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem *The Song of Hiawatha*. After dabbling in anti-immigrant nativist movements, narrowly abandoning a disastrous filibuster expedition to Cuba due to seasickness, and recruiting Indigenous volunteers for the Union in the Civil War (a conflict that claimed the life

of his son), Copway spent his remaining years working as an itinerant “Indian Medicine Man” who offered healing “without the use of minerals” in the “Indian Mode.”³⁴ In 1869, estranged from his wife and children and with his career in tatters, Copway died a guest at the home of a pastor in Ypsilanti, Michigan.³⁵

Finally, what can be learned when the lens of reconciliation is brought to bear on Copway’s failed attempt to transform colonial society? The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Final Report states that “‘reconciliation’ is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country. For that to happen, there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour.”³⁶ Interestingly, these four stated requirements of awareness, acknowledgment, atonement, and action all appear in Copway’s calls for the repentance of settler society and his political vision for the establishing of an Indigenous territory.

Through the creation of Kahgega, or a similar self-governing Christianized Indigenous state, and the acknowledgement of and atonement for the history of colonial violence suffered by Indigenous peoples, Copway believed that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples would be saved from spiritual and physical destruction. In this way Copway proposed his own solution to the problem that undergirds all conversations around reconciliation: how do we best live together in a shared land with a history of colonial oppression and violence? Though the modern conceptualization of capital “R” “Reconciliation” might not apply to Copway’s historical or geographical context, considering the TRC’s brief definition of the term, I would argue that Copway’s imagined future and others like it can be described as “reconciliatory visions,” proposing alternative forms of a colonial social order that gestured towards an imagined potential future state of harmony, healing, and Indigenous self-government. Though such visions often took abstracted utopian forms, Copway’s descriptions of Kahgega aimed for practical compromise, a quality that failed him when he presented his notion before Congress in 1850.

This ambivalence on the part of the US government, and the earlier hostility of the Canadian Methodist Conference towards Anishinabeg political activism at the Saugeen Conference both speak to a hard reality that often surrounds conversations around reconciliation. At every turn, it

was Copway who had to "do the work" to envision the possibility of an alternative to termination or assimilation. Even his theologically grounded statements on the evils of colonialism and the need for repentance and atonement on the part of Euromerican society were met with hostility, amusement, or indifference. Within the power structures of nineteenth-century North America, real dialogue was impossible and Copway fell to the sidelines of public consciousness once he ceased to be entertaining. In the end, his reconciliatory vision of an alternative colonial order placed demands on the empathy, adaptability, and imagination of settler audiences that they were unable or unwilling to meet.

Endnotes

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3. Copway, *Life*, 148.
4. Letter from J. Lewis[?] on behalf of Allen Steele to Mr. Green, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions Archives, 1810-1961 (ABC 1-91), Houghton Library, Harvard University.
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6. Donal B. Smith, "Literary Celebrity: George Copway or Kahgegagahbowh (1818-1869)," in *Mississauga Portraits: Ojibwe Voices from Nineteenth-century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 176; and Bernd C. Peyer, *The Tutor'd Mind: Indian Missionary-Writers in Antebellum America* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 240, 176, 179.
7. Peter S. Schmalz, *The Ojibwa of Southern Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 130.
8. Neil Semple, *The Lord's Dominion: The History of Canadian Methodism* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 15.
9. Semple, *The Lord's Dominion*, 15.
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11. John Wesley, "Letter to William Wilberforce – 1791," umc.org, accessed December 12, 2016, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-letters-of-john-wesley/wesleys-letters-1791/>.
12. George Copway, *Running Sketches of Men and Places in England, France, Belgium, and Scotland* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2007), 312.
13. Copway, *Running Sketches*, 312.
14. Copway, *Life*, 94. Emphasis in original.
15. 1 Peter 5:8, *The Holy Bible*, Authorized King James Version (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1999); and Copway, *Life*, 161.
16. Copway, "Meeting at Tripler Hall, June 1," *Copway's American Indian I*, No. 1, 1851, 2.
17. For a more detailed analysis of the colonial strategy of "mimicry" see: Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 86.
18. Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1982), xi.
19. Peter Jones, *History of the Ojebway Indians: With Especial Reference to Their Conversion to Christianity* (London: A.W. Bennet, 1861), 29.
20. George Copway, *The Traditional History and Characteristic Sketches of the Ojibway Nation* (Toronto: Prospero Books, 2001), 264-5. Emphasis in original.
21. Donald B. Smith, *Sacred Feathers: The Reverend Peter Jones (Kahkewaquonaby) and the Mississauga Indians* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 86.
22. George Copway, *Organization of a New Indian Territory, East of the Missouri River* (New York: S.W. Benedict, 1850), 4.
23. Copway, *Organization of a New Indian Territory*, 18.
24. Timothy Sweet, "Pastoral Landscape with Indians: George Copway and the Political Unconscious of the American Pastoral," *Prospects* 18 (1993): 4.
25. David G. Hackett, *That Religion in Which All Men Agree: Freemasonry in American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 177.
26. Hackett, *That Religion in Which All Men Agree*, 177.

27. Peyer, *The Tutor'd Mind*, 246; Dale T. Knobel, "Know-Nothings and Indians: Strange Bedfellows?" *Western Historical Quarterly* 15, No. 2 (April 1984): 180.
28. Copway, *Running Sketches*, 13.
29. Timothy Sweet, "Pastoral Landscape with Indians," 3.
30. Copway, *Organization of a New Indian Territory*, 18.
31. Copway, *The Traditional History and Characteristic Sketches of the Ojibway Nation*, 201.
32. Smith, *Sacred Feathers*, 86.
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