

## **The Historiography of Indigenous-Settler Religious Relations in Canada**

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Those who write about the religious dimension of the history of Indigenous and settler peoples in Canada have to begin by making some preliminary decisions even before they consider any evidence. They need to decide what kind of things religions and spiritualities are: can they be neatly defined by a set of characteristics (such as doctrine, ceremonies, institutional affiliations, devotional attitudes, experience of the holy), or are they so diverse and fluid that they break through whatever boundaries we try to draw? Are some religions, or religious elements, truer or worthier or more important than others? Do the terms “Indigenous” and “western,” and similar pairs, denote clearly contrasting social essences, or are they overlapping, imprecise, catch-all categories? Are some cultures more advanced than others? Is colonialism a good thing that benefits the colonized, or a bad thing that oppresses them? Depending on their premises in these matters, most histories of Indigenous and settler religious relations in Canada take one of five historiographical approaches: conventional colonialist, reversalist colonialist, encounter, post-colonial, or decolonizing. I am not claiming any novelty for these categories, but I hope that identifying, illustrating, and comparing them will be helpful for our historiographical interrogation of texts about Indigenous-settler relations, and for orienting our own research. As with all models, these are ideal types; some historical studies present characteristics of more than one model, and some historical studies may not fit any of them. But quite a number of these accounts do fit fairly neatly into one of these categories.

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This essay began to take shape as I became aware how far my own previous work has been trapped in unexamined and problematic assumptions. In 2004, I published a kind of thematic history of Anglicanism in Canada.<sup>1</sup> It included a few specific topics in Indigenous-settler relationships, such as missions and residential schools, and some prominent Indigenous leaders, but otherwise I was content to use sources produced by settlers: synod journals, committee reports, episcopal pronouncements, settler memoirs and correspondence, the national denominational newspaper, Women's Auxiliary newsletters, church publications, and the like. As a result, how oblivious I was to the colonialism in the very air that settler Anglicans breathed! My narrow selection of sources concealed from me the colonial bias in the settler church's theological statements, liturgical texts, organizational structuring, mission policies, principles of ministry, educational curricula, budgetary priorities, and interventions with governments.

### ***Conventional Colonialist Approaches***

The most useful study of conventional colonialist discourse is still Edward Said's immensely influential book *Orientalism*.<sup>2</sup> Although his focus, as the title indicates, is western works about certain middle-eastern and "Oriental" regions, his analysis is perfectly applicable to colonial discourse about the "new world" as well. *Orientalism* has been criticized for many reasons: generalizing dogmatically, framing discussions polemically, selecting evidence lopsidedly and quoting out of context, distorting chronologies, correlating knowledge and power in crude ways, and disregarding niceties of historical detail, among other things. But it has also been noted that Said's thesis cannot really be refuted, since it is not at bottom a thesis about history but an analysis of a species of discourse characterized by certain tropes, perspectives, and assumptions.<sup>3</sup> Orientalism, despite the "-ism," Said says, is less a historical doctrine than "a set of constraints and limitations of thought."<sup>4</sup>

Here are eight characteristics of Orientalism identified by Said, most of them beautifully illustrated in this single pithy classic sentence which he quotes from a British colonial administrator in 1883: "The Oriental generally acts, speaks, and thinks in a manner exactly opposite to the European."<sup>5</sup>

It is *binary*: it opposes the West to the Orient. It homogenizes very diverse populations into two generalized collective identities.

It is *essentialistic*: it ascribes a kind of ontological stability to each of these two collectivities. They become types immune to historical change.

It is *ideological*: it is “a system of ideological fictions,” controlling the representation of human history and experience.<sup>6</sup>

It is *Eurocentric*: it represents the Orient only from a Western viewpoint, and reports much of the history of the Orient as a response to the West.

It is *monological*: it represents Orientals on their behalf since Orientals are seen as incapable of representing themselves.

It is *depreciatory*: it evaluates European ways as superior to Oriental ways. Europe is rational, developed, sober, humane, efficient, and civilized. The Orient is morally perverse, intellectually aberrant, unclean, linguistically opaque, sexually licentious, and barbarous.

It is *hegemonic*: It supports *la mission civilisatrice* and the colonizing program of the West. It justifies the struggle of the West to dominate Eastern territory on the grounds that Oriental people are backward and incapable of self-government.

It is *interventionistic*: it sees Orientals as “problems to be solved.”<sup>7</sup>

Substituting the term “Indigenous peoples of Canada” for the term “Orientals” produces an entirely accurate picture of the conventional colonialist discourse that Euro-Canadians have applied to the First Peoples of the country.<sup>8</sup> The very word “Indigenous,” together with similar terms, by which colonizers lump together “everyone here who is different from us,” are vital to this discourse. The main difference between Said’s Orientalism and Canadian conventional colonialist discourse is that western Orientalists did not imagine that the Orient would inevitably disappear from the face of the earth. But Euro-Canadian colonizers

expected that Indigenous peoples would do exactly that.

Probably the most influential practitioner in Canada of a conventional colonialist approach was Duncan Campbell Scott (1862-1947), the chief administrator and theoretician for Canada's policies for the cultural assimilation of First Nations peoples.<sup>9</sup> The son of a Methodist minister, Scott went to work as a copy clerk for the Department of Indian Affairs in Ottawa when he was just seventeen years old and retired fifty-three years later, having managed the department for most of his career. In his departmental reports, testimonies to Parliament, popular periodicals, historical anthologies, and literary works, he functioned as an amateur but trusted historian of Indigenous-settler relations. He was widely celebrated during his lifetime as the settler expert on "the Indian problem." (Canada's other Indigenous peoples, the Métis and the Inuit, did not fall under the Indian Act that Scott administered.) After Scott's death, however, his repressive policies, negligence, cover-ups of scandal, and callousness about the inhumane treatment of children in Indian residential schools came to be widely regarded with abhorrence. In 2015, a historical plaque was erected at his gravesite recognizing that his assimilationist residential school system had been characterized as cultural genocide.<sup>10</sup>

Scott used racial language as a vehicle for essentializing Indigenous peoples. He saw no doubt, "that the native inhabitants of North America are of one race," despite their linguistic variations and differences in lifestyle.<sup>11</sup> He readily generalized about the "Indian nature." On the one hand, when he was trying to be positive, he characterized it as attuned to the natural environment, physically vigorous, and gifted in the domestic arts (think, for example, totem poles).<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, he pictured the "Indian race" as afflicted with superstition, indolence, an incapacity for altruism, and a need to feud with other tribes.<sup>13</sup> Before colonial repression had done some of its useful work, the "Indian nature," as witnessed by the earliest Europeans in Canada, was "ready to break out at any moment in savage dances, in wild and desperate orgies," and in the resort to tomahawks, firebrands, and scalping knives.<sup>14</sup> Clearly Scott was oblivious to the possibility that many Euro-Canadians could be seen in a similar light: self-serving, bellicose, violent, indolent, and sexually excessive. Scott's colonialism led him only to contrasts, not comparisons. "Indians" were the opposite of Europeans (and Euro-Canadians). The "Indian nature" was primitive; Europeans were civilized.

Like colonizers elsewhere, Scott spoke very frequently of the

colonized population as a problem. He identified a regrettable “maladjustment between aboriginal and civilized systems.”<sup>15</sup> The problem was that only the civilized system, the Europeans, “the superior race,” had a future.<sup>16</sup> What to do with the inferior race? The problem would solve itself in the long run, Scott thought; the unforgiving laws of social Darwinism would inevitably force primitive cultures either to advance – having been “overcome” by the best in European culture – or to be extinguished.<sup>17</sup> But Scott was too impatient to wait for the inevitable. He was in a position, as head of the Indian department, to hurry things along, “to apply methods which will . . . lead eventually to his [i.e., the Indian’s] disappearance as a separate division of the population.”<sup>18</sup> Scott’s strategy was twofold. First, “Indians” needed to be protected from the worst classes of Europeans, such as the fur-traders, the con artists, the sex traffickers, and the rum merchants, who had brought the “Indians” down to a condition of “squalor, dejectedness, and intemperance.”<sup>19</sup> This objective was being accomplished by removing “Indians” to reserves, “a sort of sanctuary” for them until by advancement they could be absorbed “with the general citizenship.”<sup>20</sup> Second, “Indians” needed to be educated. The churches had taken on this task in their missions and the residential schools, engineering “the substitution of Christian ideals of conduct and morals for aboriginal conceptions of both”: there was the dualism again.<sup>21</sup> However much church leaders may have understood their mission as a religious one, Scott valued the churches as instruments of the social policy of Europeanizing Indigenous peoples. “As the Indians progress into civilization,” Scott wrote in 1931, they will, “finally disappear as a separate and distinct people, not by race extinction but by gradual assimilation.”<sup>22</sup>

Needless to say, Scott’s prophecies were wrong.

Although Scott earned his living as a civil servant, “the centre of his life was not in his office, where he seldom came early, and never stayed late,” as one of his friends wrote, but in his creative writing.<sup>23</sup> His passion was producing poetry, short stories, and novels. His literary career, characterized by what Northrop Frye called “a very uneven output,” earned him during his lifetime a significant measure of celebrity, if never as much admiration as he thought he deserved.<sup>24</sup> In his short stories he often depicted “Indians” as drunken, pagan, or violent secondary characters, as commentators have noted.<sup>25</sup> The vanishing Indian was another favourite idea, illustrated in his “Onondaga Madonna,” perhaps his best-known poem on an Indigenous theme.<sup>26</sup> It is a word-portrait of an Indigenous

mother and baby which sums up Scott's sense of the entire history of "the Indian race" in a fourteen-line sonnet in Petrarchan form. That Scott used a woman to symbolize the Indian race, as he also did in "The Half-breed Girl," "At Gull Lake," and "Watkwenies," is consistent with Edward Said's observation that conventional colonialist discourse tends to gender the colonized as female, represented as passive and subordinate.<sup>27</sup> The Onondaga Madonna in the poem is a "woman of a weird and waning race, / The tragic savage lurking in her face." The words "weird" and "savage" express her primitive nature; the words "waning" and "tragic" prophesy the inevitable disappearance of her people. Scott sexualizes the mother's native savagery with references to her burning "pagan passion," her stained lips, and the "wildness in her veins." The Onondaga Madonna's particular contribution to the disappearance of "the Indian race" is that she has apparently inter-married: "her blood is mingled with her ancient foes," the poem says, so she is a half-breed. And then her baby is "paler than she," suggesting a white father. If so, then under the Indian Act, as it stood at the time, this baby had no Indian status; colonial legislation was designed to promote the assimilation of Indigenous peoples.

A more recent example of conventional colonialist discourse is the trial court decision in *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*, written in 1991 from the Superior Court of British Columbia by Chief Justice Allan MacEachern.<sup>28</sup> (The decision was overturned on an appeal that in turn was upheld by the Supreme Court of Canada.) The case involved a land claim brought by forty-eight hereditary chiefs of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en nations, led (for purposes of the legal record) by Chief Delgam Uukw, who sued for the recognition of their ownership of 58,000 square kilometres of territory. The plaintiffs argued that under Section 35 of the Constitution their land ownership was an aboriginal right; the province counter-argued that these nations could not have owned land aboriginally because before European contact they had been too primitive to have a system of land ownership. To support its case, the province called a cultural geographer-for-hire with no field experience that it frequently recruited to testify against aboriginal land claims; she explained that Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en peoples received their first understanding of social organization from Europeans. Supporting the plaintiffs, three internationally prominent anthropologists explained to the judge that the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en peoples did indeed have well-developed social organizations before contact, as verified by their oral tradition and the observations of the

earliest European explorers and traders.

At one point the judge moved the hearing to the territory involved, in northwest British Columbia west of Smithers. He was struck by how vast and empty it looked. He concluded that these peoples were not sufficiently advanced on the scale of social evolution to know how to plant crops, agriculture being a sign of civilization. The anthropologists argued in reply that the annual salmon run and other local natural resources were more productive and reliable than agriculture could have been in unsuitable soil. MacEachern dismissed the evidence of the anthropologists as mere advocacy, and he dismissed Indigenous oral tradition as falling short of European legal standards of proof. He was left with the conviction that the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en lacked any institutions of self-government beyond "the most rudimentary form of custom." They therefore had no system of ownership. He ruled against the plaintiffs. His decision checked off several boxes of conventional colonialist discourse: a binary understanding of "civilized" and "primitive," a Eurocentric understanding of culture and government, a hegemonic rationale for settler control of the land.

Conventional colonialist discourse continues to have a kind of common-sense appeal among many Canadians today. A study of Canadian news coverage of Indigenous issues from 1869 to 2005 has documented persistent colonial assumptions and negative stereotypes about Indigenous peoples.<sup>29</sup> A book published in 2008 by Frances Widdowson, a professor at Mount Royal College in Alberta, and her husband, though thoroughly panned by academics, won a number of favourable reviews in the popular press. In the familiar mode of oppositional, generalizing, Eurocentric, and disparaging discourse, their book depicted Indigenous peoples in Canada as Neolithic on the evolutionary scale, attached to archaic traditional knowledge, undisciplined in their work habits, bonded to land in ways that isolated them from the modern economy, and wedded to obsolete customs. Indigenous people needed to "obliterate" their traditions and embrace development.<sup>30</sup>

### ***Reversalist Colonialist Approaches***

Reversalist colonialist discourse starts out on the same path as conventional colonialist discourse by essentializing and polarizing the worldviews and values of colonized and colonizer. But after that it draws

opposite conclusions. It frames colonization as a story of oppression, not one of benevolence; it honours the pre-contact past of Indigenous peoples, instead of disparaging it; and it promotes Indigenous resistance, not subservience.

A particularly influential practitioner of reversalist colonialist discourse was the well-known Native American activist Vine Deloria, Jr. (1933-2005), a member of the Oglala Lakota nation, and a professor at the University of Arizona and later at the University of Colorado. Among his many writings, his book *God is Red* focused particularly on religion.<sup>31</sup> It accepted the conventional colonialist binary, essentialized opposition between Indigenous American religion and Biblical religion. There was a “great gulf,” Deloria said, between “traditional Western thinking about religion and the Indian perspective”<sup>32</sup>; “these two traditions are polar opposites in almost every respect.”<sup>33</sup> But Deloria inverted the missionary’s condemnation of Native religion and exaltation of Christianity: instead, he presented Native spirituality as wise and generative, and Christianity as superstitious and destructive. Deloria treated all forms of Christianity, and sometimes Judaism as well, as a homogeneous mass. This Western religion, he said, made God a temperamental and egoistic control freak; it used hymns to flatter and deceive the Deity; it separated people from the life cycles of the natural world; it taught a harsh and unjust doctrine of election; it promoted a spineless fear of death; and it pictured salvation as an escape from this planet to a place where people “can enjoy eternal life filled with the delights that they were denied during this lifetime.”<sup>34</sup> Christians built artificial churches that needed consecration to be cleansed of the taint of the natural world before use. They understood creation in an anti-ecological way that damaged the environment. They designed their services of worship to raise funds. The way forward for Indigenous peoples was to recognize the “fatal flaws” of “whites and their Christian religion,” and to promote the “renewal” of “tribal religions.”<sup>35</sup> Doing so would help them reclaim their “political and cultural identity and independence.”<sup>36</sup>

Now, Deloria knew that in fact a great many Native Americans espoused Christianity. His own father was a prominent priest in the Episcopal Church. But by its harsh dualistic logic, *God is Red* delegitimated their cultural identity.

In Canada the most prominent expression of reversalist colonialist discourse is the report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples



(RCAP), published in 1996.<sup>37</sup> This report, 4,000 pages long, filling five volumes, was the culmination of the most ambitious and intensive research project into Indigenous-settler issues in Canadian history. The Commission had been established in 1991 with an extremely broad, sixteen-point mandate to propose solutions to virtually all the problems confronting Indigenous peoples in Canada, with a view to restoring justice to the relationship of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. RCAP was headed by four Indigenous and three non-Indigenous commissioners and supported by a staff that numbered between eighty and 120 persons at any one time. It held hearings all across Canada, received over 2,000 briefs, and commissioned 350 research studies.

The report is organized around a binary and essentialistic opposition between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures, worldviews, and political realities. RCAP's reason for emphasizing the radical, permanent cultural difference of Indigenous peoples from non-Indigenous peoples was to support its conclusion that Indigenous peoples should be recognized as sovereign, self-determining nations. Some critics, however, while endorsing RCAP's recommendation for Indigenous sovereignties, have been troubled by an argument that seems to deny the reality of cultural change. More persuasive arguments have been suggested.<sup>38</sup>

In any event, RCAP declares from the beginning of its report that Aboriginal belief systems, cultures, and forms of social organization have "differed substantially" from European patterns.<sup>39</sup> True, Aboriginal cultures are diverse, but their worldviews are all "consistent in important ways."<sup>40</sup> Here are some of the elements that RCAP identifies in this distinctly non-western worldview: "actions initiated in a spiritual realm affect physical reality; conversely, human actions set off consequences in a spiritual realm";<sup>41</sup> "renewal of life" can be "accomplished through prayer and proper behaviour";<sup>42</sup> "spirituality is central to health";<sup>43</sup> spirituality is "not a system of beliefs" but "a way of life."<sup>44</sup> But do these examples prove a radical contrast between Indigenous and western religious thought? All of these statements look quite commensurate with what many Christian traditions have to say about grace, prayer, liturgy, and discipleship.

Working from its premise that the western and the Indigenous are essentially opposed, RCAP constructs a historical narrative of zero-sum religious conflict: where Christians have won, Indigenous people have lost. Christianity, with its "bigotry," "prejudice," and "intolerant" views, came

to Indigenous peoples as a hostile and destructive force.<sup>45</sup> Christian religious campaigns “undermined Aboriginal cultures.”<sup>46</sup> For instance, Wendat Christians “were obliged to give up . . . much of what had given them their overall sense of identity as Wendat.”<sup>47</sup> In Rankin Inlet, Inuit ceremonies “were replaced by Christian practice,” as a result of Christian intolerance.<sup>48</sup> The only way to renew Indigenous culture was to return to the purer past before colonization and Christianization. Like Vine Deloria, Jr., the RCAP report rejects the possibility of an authentic Indigenous Christianity; Indigenous Christians have effectively repudiated their Indigenous identity. The reach of this sweeping conclusion becomes obvious when we consider that in 1991, as RCAP was beginning, the Canadian census reported that, among Aboriginal respondents, 85% identified as either Roman Catholic or Protestant.<sup>49</sup> RCAP seemed to be condemning the vast majority of the Indigenous peoples of Canada as not authentically Indigenous.

Occasionally, it is true, RCAP acknowledged, albeit obliquely, that some Indigenous people were Christian. In a historical introduction to the Métis, who historically have overwhelmingly identified as Roman Catholic, RCAP says nothing of their religion, but a sidebar notes that they did not hunt buffalo on the Sabbath.<sup>50</sup> RCAP acknowledges in passing that the Mi’kmaq were “devoutly Catholic,” but its purpose in context is to explain why on one occasion a group of Mi’kmaq could allow themselves to be hoodwinked by a settler priest.<sup>51</sup> At another point RCAP recognizes that “in some communities there is a long history of attachment to the church,” but it then remarks that these communities and churches enjoy, “by all accounts, mutually respectful relations,” as if the churches were essentially foreign to the communities.<sup>52</sup>

The reversalist colonialist approach long pre-dated Deloria and RCAP, however. It guided the movement within academic anthropology that, since the 1960s, has come to be called “salvage ethnography.” The term refers to projects, particularly in the decades before and after the turn of the twentieth century, to record Indigenous cultures before they disappeared. The most influential such researcher on the Canadian scene was Franz Boas (1858-1942), sometimes called the parent of American anthropology, who taught for most of his career at Columbia University.<sup>53</sup> He lived with the Inuit on Baffin Island for a time in the 1880s, and afterwards worked with the Kwakwaka’wakw people of Vancouver Island on several occasions. His legacy of books, articles, and field notes of

observations and interviews is a treasure. His agenda was to discover and record the pure, authentic, unassimilated, normative essence of Indigenous cultures in their late pre-contact period, before the onset of European influence, which he regarded as intrinsically alien and degrading. His work lent a scientific legitimacy to the reversalist colonialist approach.

In many ways Boas's contribution was positive. Demonstrating that Indigenous cultures did not need to change in order to have value and importance helped free the discipline of anthropology from the misconceived social Darwinism of its earliest practitioners who thought that societies either evolved from lower to higher – or disappeared. And Boas's commitment to the survival of Indigenous cultures moved him to challenge sharply Canada's oppressive and assimilative policies toward them, such as its suppression of Indigenous ceremonies, although in this effort he had no leverage. But historians of religion, who like to understand how change happens, have been disappointed that Boas's approach left him indifferent to the processes of religious encounter that were swirling around him. Interesting relevant data about religious change can be found in his field notes, since Boas's informants naturally did talk about Christianity. But he excluded this theme from his publications. Other salvage ethnographers similarly excluded aspects of their informants' lives that smacked of western religious influence since such data "did not fit with their ideas of unchanging Indigenous identities," as Amanda Fehr notes of some later anthropological scholarship relating to the Stó:lō people.<sup>54</sup>

Boas's methodology has been criticized. Since contact with Europeans had obviously already happened by the time Boas arrived, his method relied on drawing inferences about earlier times. But Boas's informants were inevitably bicultural themselves, and thus already compromised by the European influences that he regarded as impure. Boas seemed unaware that no single informant could speak authoritatively for everyone in their community. Moreover, he inevitably filtered his observations through his own western presuppositions and training.

Thus, although salvage ethnography gives evidence that would otherwise have been lost about the ways of life of Indigenous peoples before they suffered the worst dispossession and assimilation, it reflects a western point of view, builds on a flawed methodology, and serves an essentializing ideology. Ironically, some Indigenous communities have used salvage ethnography for parts of their own pre-contact history, a practice that has been called "historiographic colonialism."<sup>55</sup> David Z.

Scheffel gives an example from 1986, when the Shuswap nation of British Columbia, an Interior Salish people, published seven booklets describing their cultural heritage. Scheffel found that in large part these booklets comprised quotations or paraphrases from early twentieth-century ethnographic studies of the Interior Salish people by James Teit, a protégé of Franz Boas.<sup>56</sup> However, the booklets excluded observations that might offend modern Euro-Canadian sensibilities, such as instances of brutality in warfare, descriptions of coming-of-age ordeals, and prohibitions formerly imposed on women. Scheffel cautioned that the Shuswap people were constructing a sense of their heritage based on a European's observation during the early colonial period, adjusted so as not to risk negative judgment from modern Euro-Canadians.

#### *Approaches Foregrounding Cultural Encounter*

Both conventional colonialist approaches and reversalist colonialist approaches accept the premise that “Europe produced history and Natives submitted to it,” as Brett Christopher has wittily summarized it.<sup>57</sup> In the conventional version of the colonialist approach, missionaries enlightened uncivilized Indigenous peoples; in the reversalist version, missionaries upended integrated Indigenous cultures. Both versions picture Indigenous peoples in a receptive and passive role. In the 1970s, by contrast, a number of historians began recognizing Indigenous agency in what they saw as a complex and ambiguous process of religious and cultural encounter. It is probably no coincidence that this historiographical shift was happening as Indigenous peoples in Canada, the United States, New Zealand, and Australia were making their political voice more widely heard, challenging their historical displacement, and exploding settler stereotypes of childlike Natives requiring protection and tutelage. It also paralleled a movement in academic history to liberate narratives of the past from the dominance of male white elites by recovering knowledge of marginalized groups, such as women, people of colour, workers, slaves, and immigrants.

“Cultural contact” was how Cornelius Jaenen in 1976, and Robin Fisher in 1977, named their theme.<sup>58</sup> Jaenen, looking at Quebec, and Fisher, looking at British Columbia, both found that in the early years of contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples the relationship was one of relative equals. Fisher, a New Zealander who was then teaching at Simon Fraser University, found that First Nations people in the land-

based fur trade welcomed European contact because they relished the new ideas, new technologies, and new wealth. They exercised control over their military and commercial alliances, as well as negotiating new religious ideas. Christianity came to them not only from French Canadians but also from Christian Iroquois, who had already adapted it into an Indigenous culture. Cornelius Jaenen, who taught at the University of Ottawa, recognized the dialogical character of religious encounter in Quebec; missionaries had to adjust their message to their audience, and their audience could choose how to interpret and respond to the message. Jaenen doubted the view that there were chasms of thought and perception between Indigenous and European peoples; on the contrary, both Jesuit missionaries and First Nations peoples found attractive elements in each other's religion that they wanted to understand. Of course, in the long run, both in British Columbia and in Quebec, the power differential definitely favoured the Europeans since they had greater immunity to their own germs, wielded deadly firepower and other technology, and began immigrating in large numbers. But although this power differential may have diminished the scope of Indigenous peoples' choices, it did not destroy their human agency.

If there was one pathbreaking book in the twentieth century on the history of the Indigenous-settler Christian relationship in Canada, it was John Webster Grant's 1984 *Moon of Wintertime*.<sup>59</sup> As one reviewer wrote, "[It] goes well beyond anything previously available."<sup>60</sup> Its subtitle, *Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter since 1534*, signaled that the author recognized the strength of Indigenous cultures and the agency of Indigenous peoples, but nevertheless assumed a binary with the missionaries on one side and the "Indians" on the other. In fact, Grant's main interest was the settler missions, although he did recognize the impact of some conspicuous Indigenous and bicultural missionaries such as Peter Jones. The reader senses that Grant reflexively understood the churches as Euro-Canadian institutions: of course, in their power centres they certainly were just that, but this filter could obscure the more complex landscape of encounter in Indigenous territories. Nevertheless, the book exercised a wide and helpful influence because of its breadth of scope, its avoidance of stereotypes, its command of a wide historical literature, its care and accuracy in its use of sources, and its sensitive and even-handed treatment of some tricky themes including the complex meanings of religious conversion, the ambiguities of inculturation, and the varied and unpredict-

able effects of encounter.

### ***Post-colonial Approaches***

Four or five years after the publication of *Moon of Wintertime*, post-colonial studies and subaltern studies reached the North American academy, offering fresh insights and new analytical tools that quickly enriched historiographical approaches of cultural encounter.<sup>61</sup> “Post-colonial” is a contested and imprecise term, and it means different things in different academic disciplines. The post-colonial approaches that are important for our purposes have sought to un-think Eurocentrism, to disclose the impact of imperialism, to retrieve Indigenous experience, to unsettle ideologies by attending to historical particularities, to take account of social complexity and change, and to challenge stereotypes, essentialisms, and colonizing binaries. They have also, like the earlier approaches of cultural and religious encounter, insisted on the agency of Indigenous peoples despite the cultural hegemony and power differential on the side of the colonizer. The “post” in post-colonial, as the term is used in history and the social sciences, indicates a critical awareness of the power dynamics and ideologies of colonialism – it is not a temporal marker implying that we have left colonialism behind.<sup>62</sup>

It is not always easy or useful to define the boundary between “encounter” and “post-colonial” approaches, but a couple of illustrations will suggest differences. Both Robin Fisher and John Webster Grant had written that, before the arrival of Christianity, Indigenous peoples had been losing confidence in traditional belief systems, paving the way for Christianization.<sup>63</sup> The implication seemed to be that, in order for Christianity to prosper, Indigenous belief systems had to have been weakened. One is reminded of the earlier salvage ethnography that understood Indigenous acceptance of settler religious ideas and practices as an erosion of an essentialized Indigenous identity. By contrast, post-colonialism sees all societies as evolving, often under the influence of other cultures, both Indigenous and European. Openness to the wider world and the negotiation of new ideas could be seen as a sign of a healthy and vigorous society, rather than a failing one.

Another post-colonial influence is a heightened hermeneutic of suspicion in the use of settler documents, recognizing their filters of colonial ideology, and looking for meaningful silences, inconsistencies,

slips, and asides that may be unintended clues to Indigenous perspectives, interests, and agency. Read conventionally, settler documents about Indigenous affairs often show the colonizers solving “the Indian problem”; read post-colonially, the same documents often reveal the colonizers’ delusions about the Indigenous–settler relationship. For instance, James R. Miller noted in 1990 that on the whole, up to that point, scholars had been inclined to treat “policy intent and effect as similar, if not identical, largely because they concentrated on government fiat and documents.”<sup>64</sup> A more critical approach to the documents, as well as recourse to Indigenous sources, usually showed that many Indigenous peoples were finding ways to resist, evade, ignore, mitigate, or defy the full force of colonial initiatives. Thus, settlers might prohibit potlatches, but potlatches still happened. And what a settler missionary taught was not necessarily what an Indigenous Christian accepted.

Here are four representative studies with a post-colonial bent that have relied on settler sources, but used them creatively, followed by five studies that have registered the voices of Indigenous witnesses as they are heard in their own writings, in oral traditions, in anthropological reports, or in quotations in settler court transcripts or other documents.

Kerry M. Abel, in a 1993 history of the Dene nation that relies primarily on missionary sources, Hudson’s Bay Company documents, and settler letters, diaries, and memoirs, includes a chapter on the Dene encounter with Christianity.<sup>65</sup> She finds that many Dene folks initially responded favourably to Christian ideas because they found similarities with their own systems of belief and ceremonial, for example in teachings about life beyond death, ways of praying and singing, and the roles of spiritual leadership. However, an obstacle to Christianization was that the Dene valued relational reciprocity, and they experienced most missionaries as rude and standoffish. The towering exception was Robert McDonald, an Anglican missionary who married a Gwich’in woman in 1876. Abel speculates that McDonald’s naturalization into the local society may explain why “the Gwich’in are the only Dene who today generally identify themselves as Anglican.”<sup>66</sup>

In 1966, Raymond J.A. Huel surveyed the western Canadian missions of the Oblate order between 1845 and 1945, referencing Oblate sources but seeking to apply “the canons of ethnohistory as elaborated by specialists such as James Axtell and Bruce Trigger” to understand Indigenous perspectives.<sup>67</sup> The Oblates were by far the most active group

of Roman Catholic clergy working with Indigenous peoples. Huel acknowledges that Roman Catholicism was generally unappealing to Indigenous peoples because of its Eurocentrism, its intolerance of “heathen” practices, and its rigid pre-Vatican II ecclesiology that excluded inculturation. Nevertheless, it found success in the annual July pilgrimage to Lac Ste Anne, Alberta, which still attracts thousands of people for a week of spiritual renewal and healing that connects Indigenous and European Christianities.

Brett Christopher, in a 1998 book, focuses on an Anglican missionary named John Booth Good, who lived among the Nlaka’pamux (the Thompson people of the Interior Salish) in the late 1860s and early 1870s.<sup>68</sup> Although Christopher uses church, mission, and government documents almost exclusively, he teases out examples of the community’s initiative: they had invited the Anglican mission in the first place, in order to rid themselves of an Oblate mission; they adapted elements of Good’s teaching to their own spiritual understandings; they taught their own versions of Christianity among one another; and they enlisted Good’s help in pressing land claims.

Allan Greer’s biography of Kateri Tekakwitha, the young Mohawk Christian convert who lived at Kahnawake in a Jesuit village of Indigenous converts in the seventeenth century and was canonized in 2012, builds on a very close reading of diverse settler sources, with careful attention to genres, audiences, and assumptions.<sup>69</sup> The author also constructs rich historical contexts from ethnographic literature, which allows him to consider how Christianity would have been understood across linguistic and cultural boundaries. The Jesuits at Kahnawake gave space for the Indigenous inculturation of Christianity and Kateri’s style of Christianity illustrates the “braiding” of French and Haudenosaunee cultures.<sup>70</sup> She perfectly captures the dialogical character of this period of religious encounter, as her spiritual impact on the Jesuits was at least as profound as theirs upon her.

I will turn now to some examples of historians influenced by post-colonial objectives who have sought to hear Indigenous voices directly, not solely through settler accounts.

Michael Harkin, for his concise study in 1997 of the Heiltsuks of the central British Columbia coast, focusing on the half-century following 1880, spent twelve months in the community doing fieldwork in addition to undertaking thorough archival research.<sup>71</sup> The Heiltsuks had been



evangelized beginning in the 1860s by the Methodists, including the well-known Thomas Crosby (1840-1914). Today they remain closely linked to the United Church of Canada. Harkin argues that their encounter with missionaries, so far from compromising their sense of cultural identity, actually promoted it and helped them define it, since it helped them “think consciously about their own culture and, later, construct a concept of tradition.”<sup>72</sup> In the process of helping the Heiltsuk develop “a new, more embracing ethnic identity,” Methodism exercised a unifying force among different factions and villages.<sup>73</sup> As a result, even though the Heiltsuks adopted many elements of Victorian culture, they did not surrender their collective identity.

In 2003, Susan Neylan of Wilfrid Laurier University published her carefully researched, creatively interpreted, clearly written study of Tsimshian Christianity in the nineteenth century.<sup>74</sup> Her most valuable single resource is the daily journal Arthur Wellington Clah, a Tsimshian Christian, kept over fifty years. Written in idiosyncratic English and in challenging handwriting, his journal is remarkably personal, self-reflective, and open, especially in contrast to the typical articles published under the names of Indigenous church workers in missionary journals (though Neylan has researched them as well with appropriate sophistication). A general conclusion in a book rich with insights is that “Christianity offered a means of expressing some Tsimshian traditions in new ways under a colonial regime that outwardly shunned them.”<sup>75</sup>

For the post-contact religious history of the Nisga’a, the northern neighbours of the Tsimshian on the Pacific coast, Nicholas P. May, now at the University of British Columbia, completed an exceptionally fine PhD dissertation in 2013.<sup>76</sup> For his project he interviewed a number of Nisga’a people, mainly elders, chosen in consultation with the nation’s research organization, the Wilp Wilxo’oskwhl Nisga’a Institute (WWNI), and made considerable use of ethnographic research. He finds that the Nisga’a had always welcomed new knowledge and had always been receptive to new sources of spiritual power. As a result, they warmly welcomed the early promoters of Christianity (or, as May prefers to say, Christianities), and they found it easy to connect modules of the missionaries’ teaching to their belief systems. But as settlers invaded their lands and missionaries began expecting obedience to their instructions, the Nisga’a were surprised by how much Christianization was costing them.

In the eastern Canadian Arctic, Frédéric Laugrand, an anthropologist

at Laval University, and the late Jarich Oosten, a religion scholar at Leiden University, collaborated on a 2010 study of the relation between Christian missions and Inuit shamanism, based on twelve years of interviews, courses, and workshops with Inuit elders and others.<sup>77</sup> Their book challenges settler perceptions of the decline of Inuit culture. These perceptions, they think, resulted from the disinclination of Inuit people to tell outsiders about their traditions. In fact, Laugrand and Oosten find Inuit culture to be strong, resilient, and for various reasons readily able to absorb Western technology, ideas, and religion. Like scholars working elsewhere, Laugrand and Oosten observe that Christianity thrived in the eastern Arctic not because it was imposed from outside, but because it grew from within the community itself. For example, the Inuit themselves, unknown to the missionaries, led some of the earliest Christian revivals in the eastern Arctic. Inculturation often took the form, not of adapting Christian teaching to Indigenous ideas, but of using Christian symbolism to reinterpret Native traditions. Today, the authors conclude, “Inuit have completely incorporated Christianity into their cultural traditions, and consider it as part of their cultural heritage.”<sup>78</sup>

Brenda Macdougall, a professor at the University of Ottawa, published a remarkable study in 2010 of one of the oldest Métis communities in Canada at Île à la Crosse in northwestern Saskatchewan.<sup>79</sup> This was largely a community of families with French Canadian fathers and Cree or Dene mothers. Macdougall makes creative and careful use of such apparently unpromising documents as scrip applications, as well as settler documentation. She argues the startling but persuasive conclusion that the attachment of the Métis to Roman Catholicism did not derive primarily from the Roman Catholic fathers. Instead, the Indigenous mothers, given “their existing knowledge and interpretive systems,” including their strong Cree sense of their relation to the spirit world, were predisposed to Catholic ideas.<sup>80</sup>

These recent studies, though specific to their contexts, generally agree in a number of observations. Pre-contact Indigenous cultures were not fixed and rigid, but instead were open to what could be learned from the newcomers. In particular, their belief systems and spiritualities often had some resonance with the Christianities of the colonizers. “It is a striking feature of Christianity’s expansion,” wrote Lamin Sanneh, a missiologist at Yale, in another context, “that it seldom arrived as a surprise.”<sup>81</sup> Christian ideas often preceded the European missionaries into

Indigenous territories and could flourish without Euro-Canadian direction. Indigenous peoples received European religious ideas, communicated across linguistic and cultural barriers, in unpredictable ways that were shaped by Indigenous translations, analogies, and worldviews. Euro-Canadian Christianity presented itself not as a tidy package but as a congeries of disparate spiritual, doctrinal, ceremonial, moral, material, documentary, and regulatory elements; the separability of these elements was underscored by the conspicuous fact that the missionaries themselves disagreed about them, especially but not exclusively across denominational lines. Indigenous Christians therefore felt free to select among these different elements as well. In other words, Indigenous peoples negotiated and constructed their religious identities just as Euro-Canadians did.

It is significant that most of these studies focus on the first generations of Indigenous-settler contact (which happened earliest in the east, latest in the north), as Indigenous peoples were still experiencing Christianity as a fresh force originating in foreign cultures. Some elements of the post-colonial approach are perhaps less applicable to later periods, after Indigenous Christianity had put down roots, as bicultural identities complicated the story of cross-cultural encounter, as the churches' mission priorities and strategies changed, as off-reserve populations increased, and as principles of *laïcité* and the increasing separation of church and state in Canada made Christianity less suitable as an instrument of government control, and a little less likely a vehicle of cultural hegemony. Indeed, Indigenous Christianities in Canada after the Second World War have not claimed the interest of many academic historians.

But on what may be called a more popular level, narratives and storytelling about Indigenous Christian experiences abound, often characterized by post-colonial elements such as agency, hybridity, and counter-hegemony. A prime example is Wab Kinew's *The Reason You Walk*, which led the *Globe and Mail*'s best-seller list for several weeks in 2017.<sup>82</sup> Kinew, a popular radio broadcaster, politician, and activist, tells a story of his family, and although he shows no personal attachment of his own to Christianity, he respects, and even takes some pride in, his father's Roman Catholicism, woven together with his Indigenous culture and spirituality. The father, Tobasonakwut Kinew (whom the son calls Ndede, "my father"), had experienced the full terror of Indian residential schools, with its humiliation, beatings, sexual abuse, and assimilative mechanisms, and his personality was permanently damaged by it. But, the son says,

Christian practices and teachings “worked their way into his spirit.”<sup>83</sup> He connected western and Indigenous knowledge systems as a teacher of Indigenous subjects at the University of Winnipeg, and he attended an Aboriginal Catholic church in Winnipeg’s west end. In fact, he became a close friend of the archbishop of Winnipeg, James Weisgerber, whom he adopted as his brother in an Objive ceremony at a Lakota sundance. Later, the two traveled together to Rome for the canonization of Kateri Tekakwitha. To read this short book is to enter a very different world from the ones constructed by either Duncan Campbell Scott or the RCAP, where Indigenous culture and Christianity cannot coexist. Kinew is certainly not commending Ndede’s path as an ideal, but his story shows that, despite all the assimilative energies and distortions of an oppressive colonial system, and despite the efforts of some Indigenous activists to delegitimize Indigenous Christians, his father retained the agency to negotiate an enriching bicultural identity that was religiously complex.

### *Decolonizing Approaches*

The decolonization of western knowledge systems has emerged as a major thrust of Canadian academic policy in recent years, as is evident from numerous books and articles, conferences, funding agency competitions, university and college initiatives and personnel appointments, and informal conversations. To speak of the decolonization of knowledge has its dangers, as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang have argued; it is a metaphor that can divert our attention and energy away from literal decolonization – the repatriation of stolen Indigenous land and wealth and the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty.<sup>84</sup> Nevertheless, the decolonization of knowledge can help blaze a path to literal decolonization, by relativizing the settler accounts of the past that have functioned to justify and reinforce the effects of colonialism.

A highly promising approach to a decolonized historiography is the collaboration of settler and Indigenous scholars, knowledge-keepers, elders, and others in projects that uncover the past in all its colour and complexity. A creative and even exciting example of this approach is the collaboration of Leslie A. Robertson, an anthropologist and ethnographer at the University of British Columbia, with members of a Kwakwaka’wakw ‘na’ mima (clan) on a project to recover their family history. They documented their project in a significant co-authored publication in 2012.<sup>85</sup>

Their focus was the woman whom most of the 'na'mima knew as "Granny Cook" (1870-1951). Her English name was Jane Cook and her Kwak'wala name was Ga'axsta'las. As a first child of a first child she had high status in the 'na'mima, and she also had high status in her Anglican parish as president of the Women's Auxiliary for thirty years. The problem for her descendants was that when she married in 1888, she deliberately stepped out of her standing in the potlatch system. That tainted her reputation. In fact, some salvage ethnographic studies of the Kwakwaka'wakw, which naturally circulate in the community, named her as a kind of turncoat to her nation, a Christian convert whose new religion led her to repudiate her culture. Her descendants, shamed by the anthropologists and left without status in the potlatch system, suspected a more complicated story, which indeed emerged as they decolonized the binary and essentializing premises of the salvage ethnographers. Ga'axsta'las was a fluent speaker of Kwak'wala and a firm advocate for Aboriginal rights who, however, also worked in close proximity to the colonial powers. She did reject the potlatch system, but it was by then a system distorted by conditions of European contact. Among other reasons, she rejected the potlatch system because she thought it mistreated young women. But was her commitment to the protection of women a westernization or a recapture of Indigenous wisdom? The book ends with the celebratory report of the potlatch ceremony that restored Ga'axsta'las' descendants to the system.

Decolonizing historiography may appear at first sight like a straightforward enterprise, bringing together western documentary sources and Indigenous oral sources, western explanatory systems and Indigenous ones, western interests and Indigenous ones. But, in fact, it is a puzzling proposition for many reasons.

First, it is not so easy to distinguish western and Indigenous systems dualistically, as Martin Nakata has pointed out, since they have been influencing each other for centuries. Indeed, he says, Indigenous people have come to know themselves both through their traditions and through western knowledge systems. Moreover, he adds, Indigenous and non-Indigenous systems alike need to be critiqued, since they all lack transparency "in terms of how they disguise the politics of their production in contemporary collective spaces."<sup>86</sup>

Second, it may be hard to agree who owns historical information, and which parts should be broadcast. In the west, history is generally a public commodity, with some exceptions, notably for reasons of privacy

or national security. In many Indigenous communities, by contrast, stories may belong to the charge of identifiable people and trusted knowledge-keepers. A result is that western history, easily accessed and managed, can be distorted into “fake news,” while the accuracy of Indigenous stories is safeguarded by knowledge-keepers. This question of ownership raises ethical questions about quoting the published works of salvage ethnographers, who themselves may not have secured the appropriate permissions.

Third, what should be done when oral and literary sources do not support each other? For instance, as plans were being made for the 400th anniversary in 2013 of the friendship agreement between the Mohawks of the Mohawk Valley and the Dutch of New Amsterdam, a number of non-Indigenous historians were dismissing the agreement as a pious fabrication. By oral tradition, the 1613 agreement was confirmed by a two-row wampum belt (*kaswentha*) – a belt with two rows of small purple shells on a background of white shells, representing the two peoples voyaging down the same river peacefully, in parallel, without interfering with each other. But the original belt no longer exists, and there is no contemporary text-based documentation that the Mohawks used white wampum in 1613. For some historians, the absence of written evidence trumps the presence of oral tradition. Is this a reasonable view? Or should it be critiqued, as some suggest, as the colonial mentality of western academics, who define the rules of history in a way that grants them the sole authority to authenticate knowledge of the past, thus securing the colonizers’ superior social position?<sup>87</sup>

Fourth, who has the moral authority to sponsor collaborative research between Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars? Is the university permanently disqualified by its roots in western knowledge systems? Or could it ever be reformed by recruiting Indigenous personnel, recasting research standards, and revising curricula? And can western funding agencies be trusted?

My suggestion is that the churches should become sponsors of research into the history of Indigenous-settler religious relations. They should recruit both western-trained and Indigenous scholars and leaders to do it. Their aim would be to construct accurate, candid, balanced, and frankly repentant stories and understandings of their common church history. Such truth-telling would advance reconciliation, to which most of our churches are committed (some more vigorously than others), and the

churches would be responding positively to those “calls to action” that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has addressed particularly to them.<sup>88</sup> The churches are among the few organizations in Canadian society with historic roots and significant memberships in Indigenous and settler communities alike. Indigenous and settler members of Christian denominations belong to the same network of people, a context that provides a foundation of trust for acknowledging the ongoing legacy of past injustices, hurts, and misunderstandings. The churches, even given the bitterness with which many Indigenous people understandably view them, and even despite their colonial roots and reflexes, could become a kind of beachhead for decolonization.

And a group very much like the Canadian Society for Church History could create a space where many people connected with churches, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, could engage with one another, across cultural and denominational boundaries, to move beyond historiographical colonialism, and to seek deeper wisdom about our shared religious past.

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