On Repudiation:
A Cherokee Perspective

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There is a story that I picked up when I was living in Cherokee country during my years in eastern Oklahoma. As the story goes, there were two White men who showed up on a remote path and asked if they could hunt buffalo and live for a while among the Cherokee. Since there were plenty of buffalo back then, and no one had ever seen or heard of a White man (and thus had no reason to distrust them), those Cherokees decided to give the men food and a place to sleep. After feeding them, they felt the best hospitality they could offer was to give them a nice, thick buffalo robe on which to sleep and to let them know they would be secure. The Cherokees said,

Just lay this buffalo robe down and you will always have a place to stay here in Cherokee country. Where you lay down your buffalo robe, that place will be yours. It now belongs to you.

Well, the two White men had an idea. And when the Cherokees came back later the next evening to check on them, they found out just what these White men were up to. It seems the two men spent the whole day cutting the buffalo robe into one long, thin strip, starting from the outside and going all the way to the center. Now, a buffalo robe is a big hide, so that strip ended up being very long indeed. The White men had stretched and laid that strip across this great big area, connecting it at the ends, making one enormous square. The Cherokees looked puzzled. Then the White men proclaimed,

You said that wherever we put this buffalo robe, the land is ours. Now you see where the buffalo robe is. Everything inside that square is ours!

Though generosity is extended to them, they'll abuse the kindness and take advantage of it. It means that their gain, including land and its bounty, is more important than the potential relationships that can be built between two peoples. The most important part of the story to me, though, is that this old story is still being told around Cherokee country today.

Nowadays, well-meaning liberals and Christians might focus their concern on the two men in the story. “If only the Cherokees,” I can hear them say, “had met better people to make a different initial impression.”

One of the holdups of the settler-colonial mindset is that it interprets most problems through the ideology of individualism. As a result, they have difficulty understanding community ethics and community accountability. It also makes for dull story telling. Notice the story does not overtly condemn the White men as individuals, it simply describes their actions. And again, it matters not if the story is factual. What matters is that it is true.

What is true in the story is that settler-colonial society thinks they have a right to steal Indian land, by whatever means necessary, and remove the Indian to some other place. What is true in the story is that self-aggrandizing avarice is bound in the hearts of Settlers, regardless of their religious disposition. What is
true in the story is that the motivation for justifying and maintaining these heinous acts is White, dominant culture supremacy. How do I know it is true? Because the Settlers still have the land.

The damage done to Native Americans, and the land they were co-sustaining, is unfathomable. Whole systems of science, law, rhetoric, economic trade, languages, mathematics, agriculture, architecture, medicine, and more were totally disrupted, and we are now left with only the fragments of vast and highly advanced civilizations. The harmony on this continent was broken through settler-colonialism. Was it perfect before then? No. A Utopia? Not at all. But it was a land filled with extremely diverse groups of people who had figured out, for the most part, how to get along with each other and all of creation. And when there were problems, sometimes severe problems like war or drought, the people knew what was needed to restore harmony amongst themselves and with the land.

The old-time Cherokee folks say it is the task of all human beings to restore harmony when it is broken. My hope is that the repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery will set in motion the repair of these systems of harmony in North America (though those systems will look different now, for things rarely stay the same). My hope is that, together, we can restore harmony in the land. But I have had hopes in the past. Unfortunately, they’ve led to no good ends.

On Reconciliation Movements

Back in the mid to late 1990s, White Christianity experienced a “reconciliation movement” that I really wanted to believe was going to bring about peace and harmony between Indigenous and Settler peoples. After my wife and I participated in a number of these “platform reconciliation” events, we began to understand the dynamics of what was really happening. The White folks wanted “reconciliation” to expunge some latent sense of guilt, and that included a "nod and a wink" to Native folks. The Whites would do some crying around, say they were sorry, and then send the Native Americans back to the same physical and metaphorical places where they had been banished to generations earlier.

During those years, I was pastoring the Eagle Valley Church in Carson City, Nevada. Most of our congregation was made up of traditional Native American people who were following Jesus but in traditional Native American ways. Whenever I would return from one of those crazy "reconciliation" trips, I could count on the same wisecrack coming from one of three men in our congregation who always sat by the door. "Hey pastor," they would say, "did they give you any land back?" The tone was not that of a sincere question. It was more like the tone you may have heard in the buffalo robe story. Of course, after a half-dozen times, I finally got the message. And, I’m thankful for those friends and the sarcastic tone they used. It caused me to think deeper about what I was doing.

The dominant form of North American Christianity is a Christianity that centers Whiteness, making White the "norm" and the “universal.” In the Apostle Paul’s language, whiteness is “a power and principality” that is killing the Church Christ loves. One of the endemic flaws I find in White Christianity is its pervasive theological dualism. Because White Christianity is embedded in strong European Enlightenment experience and thought, it should be no surprise that a great gap exists in Settler Christianity between word and deed. In Euro-centric theology, what one believes means everything. Belief almost always trumps experience. Doctrine wins over action. Orthodoxy beats orthopraxis. Theology is something you think, not something you do. Indigenous traditions, for the most part, don’t have doctrinal beliefs; we simply live and do. Our belief is living our daily lives. With White Christianity, one can actually hold a set of beliefs and rationalizations as to why there is no consistency between those beliefs and real life. Of course, this problem is not unique to White peoples. Jesus even dealt with it.

I recall a story about a farmer who had two sons. The farmer told one son to go work in the field and that son said he would go, but he didn’t. The second son whined around and complained when he was asked to go work in the field, and he told his father how much he hated the farm, complaining the whole time, but that son actually went to work. After telling the Pharisees that story, Jesus turned to the Pharisees and asked them to identify the righteous one. They told him it was the one who did the work. Then Jesus told them something absolutely astonishing! He said that the ones they consider the worst among them, the prostitutes and tax gatherers and other “sinners” are receiving the kingdom before the religious folks. For Jesus, it seems it was all about what one does, not what one says they believe. Jesus’ shalom kingdom was one made up
Godzilla on the path of discovery. / ART: STEVEN PAUL JUDD, KIOWA AND CHOCTAW
of actions, and he didn’t have a whole lot of good to say about correct beliefs.

My third great-grandfather, Gulequah, fought against the Americans at the time of the “War for Independence.” He was fighting against the Americans in order to gain Cherokee freedom. That Cherokee War (known as the Chickamaugan War) lasted some 16–19 years. In 1791, Gulequah was a signer of the first peace treaty between the Cherokee and the Americans – the Holston Treaty. It was not good. In fact, the people from the U.S. who staged it went to great lengths to be sure everything was tilted in the Americans’ favor. Nonetheless, George Washington sent peace medals to all those chiefs and headmen who had signed, including Gulequah. The Holston Treaty meant that our two peoples were to be friends; it says the words, “Peace and Friendship” right there on the medal. But after knowing the history of the treaty and what has happened since, I have to ask myself, “How long can a friendship last when one friend thinks he/she deserves everything and the other friend deserves next to nothing?”

Making It Real

Repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery cannot merely be a theological position or a statement of belief. The land taken by one people because they thought, and continue to think, that they were superior to another people, resulted in tragic loss. That loss continues today in the form of generational poverty, disease, limited opportunities, post-colonial stress disorder (PCSD), and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The loss to Indigenous peoples is real and calculable. For this reason, repudiation must start with a full litany of wrongs perpetrated against the Indigenous peoples of North America, including the specifics of who, what, when, where, how, and why. The purpose of naming these crimes and their perpetrators is for the healing of both the offended and the offenders. Theologically, we call this “confession.” Confession allows the perpetrator to know the reality of these crimes and to understand how they’ve impacted people’s lives. Confession allows the victims to validate their experiences and those of their people without the usual retorts like, “When are you going to get over it?” or “You’re never going to get ahead playing the victim.”

Next, there must be a creative process put in place that begs the offended to help the offenders come up with ways to ensure this will never happen again. White Christians, in my experience, are really poor at building relationships with Natives. Give a church an issue and they will program the hell out it... but relationships? Biblically, what we are after here is “repentance.” The offenders must not only stop the violence of dispossession, but proactively do the opposite. This takes a while because it has to be done in relationship, or it has little chance of success.

Finally, the offenders must provide “restitution.” According to Biblical patterns, restitution should be greater than the original offence (think of the Zacchaeus story, Luke 19) and it should be left up to the offended to what, in particular, that restitution should be.

There’s no denying how tough this is. But people can do very tough things when necessary.

What I have outlined is a Christian path, but it seems pretty Indigenous to me. It also seems like simply the truly human thing to do for anyone who is trying to please Creator and care for their fellow human beings. You might have noticed that I didn’t say anything about people apologizing or saying, “I’m sorry.” One’s words are not really necessary when one’s actions speak for them.

My concern over Christians mobilizing to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery is that they will still view it through a non-Christ-like, dualistic lens and fool themselves into thinking that they simply need to condemn the Doctrine without taking the action really needed to heal the friendships between our peoples. So, if you are not ready to deal with the foundation underlying Discovery, namely White Supremacy, White Privilege, and White Normalcy, then do not repudiate it. Save yourself from the hypocrisy. Because, if you repudiate all the documents bearing reference to the Doctrine of Discovery, tear them up into little shreds, and do not act with the righteousness that should be accorded such an action, you may as well tape all those shredded papers together into one long strip and place it on a map of the North American continent. And that will be your buffalo robe.