Unsettling Whiteness: Refocusing Christian Theology on Its Own Indigenous Roots

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I am a white Settler on native land in a place known as “the strait of Lake Erie” (le déroit du lac Érié), more colloquially named the Motor City. I write as a Christian activist, who came to this epicentre of the industrial revolution in 1974, fresh from college. Back in the day, I was eager to translate Pentecostal spirit and Evangelical energy into mission to “help” poor people in the inner city deal with desperate conditions. More than 40 years later, I have been deeply chastened by such a damming sense of superiority and profoundly unsettled by my involvement with folk who look differently than I do. I continue to wrestle with my own hubris in a schoolhouse of initiation whose confrontation of my ignorance and embrace of my fumbling efforts at solidarity has been, and continues to be, life changing. I owe most of what I have to say here to the ongoing challenge of black and native “street teachers” and ordinary folk.

It is out of that hothouse experience that I both listen and respond to my northern neighbours. The advocacy of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission for ecclesial attention to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is a bellwether on this side of the river as well. My own country has not gone so far in its attempt to listen to those whose lands and cultures it has violated and marginalized over the last 500 years. Listening is exactly what I want most to lift up here.

The Declaration represents a framework for that listening, but only begins to uncover its heart and hurt. I have had much help from people of colour in my life in becoming aware of a thing called White Privilege and its institutional consort, White Power (or White Supremacy or just plain Whiteness). I capitalize them as they function like spiritual influences the Bible would label “Principalities and Powers.”

What is this thing called “Whiteness” as a force of history? A hidden Power that inhabits institutions, influences policies, whispers in psyches, and colours perceptions without itself appearing, except in shadows and at the edge of vision. I have only become aware of how profoundly this Power has moved my will, shaped my desire, and birthed my thought, as black and native people in my life have called out its nearly invisible Presence that is so obvious to them. I am married to a Filipina, from a country colonized by my own for half a century, so the scrutiny is relentless— but also very healing, in the midst of the “trouble” it occasions. I am, year-by-year, deepening my understanding that I am a Settler on someone else’s land, and enjoy access to unjust amounts of “resources” and goods because of someone else’s labour. I am being “unsettled.” Or more precisely, what is being unsettled within and around me is White Power (I am actually more than just the Whiteness that “possesses” me).

Again, what is Whiteness as a force of history? It is the presumption of superiority: the supposed right—indeed the duty— to think of oneself and one’s culture and lifestyle as superior to those who have been conquered, subdued, enslaved, and coerced into submission.

The Declaration points to the profound difference Indigenous peoples and their cultures embody compared to the ideas, technologies, policies, and values exhibited by the white westernized peoples and cultures that colonized the Americas beginning in 1492. Today, climate change raises serious issue with
a number of those colonial values and much of that “modern” cultural orientation. By comparison, Indigenous cultures that have inhabited bioregions for thousands of years without destroying their local ecosystems stand as a witness of hope and the possibility of living more sustainably and justly in a given area. But admitting such when one has been trained to think of one’s own western, Christian, modern white culture as the superior way of being on the planet is a traumatic admission. How shall we negotiate such an admission? How do we talk about it? All I can do is talk about my own experience, awareness, and practice.

The Declaration offers a comprehensive framework for listening to the uniqueness of Indigenous experience in its difference from white, western, globalizing hi-tech culture. That difference is not just a matter of political correctness – like learning to respect, say, Mongolian throat singing when one is used to Handel’s Messiah. The stakes are much deeper, failure to hear much more catastrophic. It may well be that Indigenous insight into how to live respectfully in a given locality is now the litmus test for our species if we are going to avoid extinction within the next century. If we don’t learn to listen to our Indigenous brothers and sisters, and begin to be schooled by some of what they know, it is likely to be “us” who will not survive.

But here is the hopeful thing. Go far enough back in the family trees of any of us and you ultimately get to an “Indigenous” memory and way of living.

The Declaration is a framework to guide a Listening. The heart and soul of what needs to be heard, however, is not simply a series of rights and duties, but a Speaking that is full of mystery and vitality: co-extensive with the land and all that lives in it, under it, and above it. The rights and duties are disciplines, a latticework of accountability. The quest the Declaration underscores is a journey towards a Voice – or really, a plurality of Voices – and not all of them human. Indeed, the most comprehensive Voice that the Declaration renders audible today is climate change.

Climate change is, in fact, a form of communication. “What” is speaking in the new extremities of changing weather is certainly what Indigenous peoples have long warned about – the comprehensive “blowback” that happens when too many cultures have been decimated and peoples disappeared, too many rivers dammed, mountains decapitated, fish stocks collapsed, and oceans filled with plastic. But climate change could equally be said to express a more rudimentary and comprehensive “demand for respect” from the kindred life forms – such as corn kernels, oak trees, sunflower seeds, bears, salmon, honey bees, or even more complex “creatures” like cloud banks, stream beds, forest canopies, lava chambers, gas.
fields, etc.—that Indigenous peoples have long listened to and cared for, but that modern cultures have disparaged as mere "resources" to be re-engineered and used up at will. Each of these can be distinctly "heard" in climate science, as in Indigenous myth. And one of the Voices most silenced in this ensemble of extreme weather is our own Indo-European ancestry. Among other things, I would venture that this Declaration represents a counsel and a demand of our own forebears.

As a Christian, I am learning that Christianity itself, in its primal roots, carries an Indigenous memory that was only gradually eclipsed in the long march of history. The Jesus of first-century Palestine initiated a movement of peasant folk struggling to recover a way of living inside the situation of Roman occupation that was more just in human relations and more sustainable in ecological relations. Throughout the European Middle Ages, Christian folk often amalgamated earlier ways of living that still respected the soils and forests and rivers as "living creatures." But so much of that got lost inside the Whiteness that was birthed by European Christian colonialism. African American theologian William James Jennings is helpful here.

In his book, The Christian Imagination, Jennings traces the way Whiteness embodied and encoded a double displacement. Europeans were voluntarily displaced from their homelands and Native and African folk were forcibly displaced from theirs. Both were offered Whiteness as the replacement for identity and hope.

Europeans were invited to forget their particular German, Irish, Italian, Hungarian cultures and identities and embrace the psychic compensation of being considered "White" by the leadership class that was taking over the land—even while they were often oppressed and exploited by that same elite. And Native folk were forced to forgo all the elaborate and subtle ways they had built their cultures into the local environments, working out their sense of identity in relationship with the particular plants and animals whose characteristics, habits, and bodies they admired and relied on to survive. Native folk and enslaved Africans were confronted with a White way of being; they had to emulate language, dress, economic practices, religious beliefs, or face utter disparagement and annihilation. Of course, as the Cherokee experience in the Trail of Tears (the forced removal of 1838–1839) so clearly shows, trying to conform to "Whiteness," in the end, secured nothing.

Most Europeans who came across the Atlantic were trying to escape horrific conditions, like economic exploitation, religious repression, famine, and plague in their homelands. But coming over as colonists, settling on stolen land and participating in the genocidal elimination of native dwellers, and (in my country) agreeing to cooperate with the enslavement of darker-skinned others because of the economic benefit it offered all meant losing the connection to Indigenous ancestry, memory, and ways of living symbiotically "on the land."

The Declaration—once it is actually heard and understood by white western Christians—so often occasions deeply visceral reactions. So many lost voices, devastated cultures, ravaged peoples, ripped up eco-systems, disappeared species, painful compromises, and forgotten ancestries are speaking up. If we let go of our defences and denials, face the dire prospects of the climate apocalypse that threatens, and seek a viable future together, the Declaration represents a counsel and channels a Voice that Christians may well discover, after the fact, is the same kind of Voice Moses encountered in the bush.

Listening to the Declaration means, first of all, listening to First Nations peoples here. Owning the genocide our forebears committed. Facing the fact that our entire claim to property rights was conjured out of thin air by 15th-century papal bulls that created the heresy of the Christian Doctrine of Discovery. Learning that thousands of Indigenous children were kidnapped, abused, sterilized, and killed in church-run residential (or boarding) schools. That even today, Indigenous women are being raped and disappeared, and Indigenous children stolen and some prostituted out. Understanding that their demands for justice are paramount and require active support for movements like Idle No More or resistance to pipelines on Indigenous land.

Listening will also push us towards learning to listen to older, more Indigenous European traditions of living close to the soil—some of which "converted" Christianity itself back to the land in the Middle Ages.

Ultimately, the crisis we face demands uncompromising honesty, a willingness to learn from a quite brutal history, and the resolve to cooperate with native movements working for change. "All our relations" are speaking, as are all of our ancestors. Can we halt our hubris and respond with justice?