

Consensus

Volume 37
Issue 1 *Journeying Together toward Truth and
Reconciliation*

Article 7

5-25-2016

Coming Full Circle: Constructing Native Christian Theology

Scott Knarr

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Knarr, Scott (2016) "Coming Full Circle: Constructing Native Christian Theology," *Consensus*: Vol. 37: Iss. 1, Article 7.

DOI: 10.51644/AKY03988

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol37/iss1/7>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

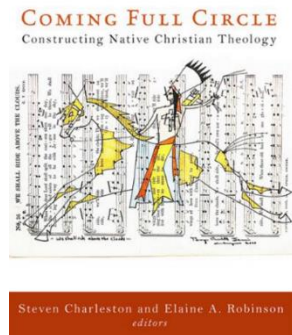
Book Review

Coming Full Circle: Constructing Native Christian Theology

Steven Charleston and Elaine A. Robinson, editors

Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2015

For some people Native and Christian is an oxymoron. How could one claim the faith of missionaries who denigrated language, culture and spirituality of this land's First Peoples? *Coming Full Circle: Constructing Native Christian Theology* edited by Steven Charleston and Elaine Robinson gathers an impressive array of Native Christians who create a framework for doing theology that is consistent with traditional Native spirituality. The Rt. Rev. Steven Charleston (Choctaw) retired as president and dean of Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, having served previously as Bishop of Alaska. As visiting professor at Saint Paul School of Theology (United Methodist) in Oklahoma City, he co-taught a course in Native American religious traditions with Elaine Robinson, dean of the school, entitled "Theology in Red and White".



The *Coming Full Circle* anthology grew out of that collaboration, and the desire to gather a chorus of authentic voices to enact a method for doing Native Christian theology collectively. Perhaps unique in such writing projects, the contributing authors gathered in community as a collaborative council to break bread and discuss with one another. Far more than simply submitting a manuscript, these people exchanged and shared with one another as they told stories and became a community of theologians.

Their depth of engagement points to the values and ways of knowing which are embodied by Indigenous peoples. The value of full community participation, the use of storytelling as a means to communicate life lessons, the importance of understanding our place within the created order and the interconnectedness of all life forms, and the acknowledgement of the pain and trauma suffered at the hands of the colonial project and how that trauma is continuing to impact Indigenous communities are threads which are woven into the words of each contributor.

Charleston presents a Native theological theory which is grounded in a collective cultural memory remembered through story and place. While Western Christian historians are often confounded by conflicting stories, facts and dates, Indigenous theologians embrace diversity. The intimacy of relating one's own story creates a bond which builds relationship and allows the truth told to become both expansive and particular. Such a constructive approach views Christianity as a positive religious expression which Native people may claim for themselves.

The first common thread in constructing a Native Christian theology is community. Martin Brokenleg (Lakota) asserts that his family and church communities are the same: "I could not distinguish family from church nor church from family" (page 135). Because his

Indigenous family circle was intertwined with the Episcopal church, and the family unit in Lakota tradition is five generations and 250 people in scope, his identity and sense of belonging spanned the familial and ecclesial realms. Each individual's experience is understood through the lens of their community relationships. Lisa Dellinger (Chickasaw) describes sin as falling out of balance with creation. This most often occurs when we do not respect the nature of a particular relationship. Dellinger characterizes sin as “the imposition of one's will onto that of another in ways that endanger the community and the individual as a community member” (page 127). Regaining harmony entails the restoration of balance to the community.

The second common thread is the use of storytelling to transmit theological truths. Brokenleg states: “There is a fundamental humility in speaking out of a personal experiential perspective; it is understood to apply only to the self and not necessarily to any other” (page 142). The old ones share life truths which convey the culture and expressions of spirituality rooted in a particular location. Ada Deer (Menominee) shares: “You need to know who your people are, where they came from, because that's your story. That is you. And you need to know what your part is in that story. You have a part. You are here for a purpose. Every person in the tribe is important” (page 212). In the hearing, and the telling, each person becomes connected to the story. Indigenous people know where and to whom they belong.

The third common thread is this connection to a particular location and place. This connection is not merely an admiration of the beauty of a natural setting, but an openness to letting the Spirit reveal itself. Jace Weaver (Cherokee) asserts that “we must develop a theology not of land but of place. We need a working theology that takes the revelatory power of place seriously, that recognizes sacred sites as revelatory in and of themselves, locations that reveal things about ultimate reality that we cannot know in any other way” (page 52).

The fourth common thread is to acknowledge how Native people have suffered and continue to suffer significant trauma through colonization and how restoring language and spiritual practices become acts of self-determination. Recovering these cultural signposts allow Indigenous people to fully experience their unique ways of knowing and being in the world.

Coming Full Circle brings the ethos of Indigenous spirituality into the church. The value placed on community participation, the use of stories to communicate truths, the kinship with all of creation, and the recognition of the trauma suffered and survived by the colonial project are common threads which point us towards a vision for an authentic Native Christian theology.

Scott Knarr
Diaconal Minister of Music
Mount Zion Lutheran Church
Waterloo, ON