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What the TRC Reveals About the Churches

Mark McDonald*

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) experience was an important one for all of the churches in Canada, even those not directly involved in the Indian Residential Schools (IRS). All of the churches--especially those of a Western cultural framework--have been involved at some level in the benefits and detriments of colonization, and the IRS and their legacy are a cornerstone. Relevant to all of Canadian society, the TRC sheds special light on the faith and practice of Canadian churches.

The first, foremost, and, perhaps, most obvious learning from the TRC regards the dangers inherent in the cultural relationship between the church and surrounding society, especially the seductive power of governmental partnership and broad cultural collaboration with power--economic, political, and cultural. The churches saw themselves as the religious aspect of Western society and, in most ways, the interests of the broader society were seen to be the interest of the church. Though we can say that--only at times and all too rarely--the churches played a modulating role in the excesses of colonial power, they also can be said to be an animating partner in the entire project of colonization. The churches by their teaching and practice contributed to the ideology of colonization and, by way of cooperation, absolved it.

The increasing lack of profile and power of the institutional churches in Western society make some long for a past that seems to be assumed to have been largely positive to the churches' goals. The findings of the TRC should give missiological thought a healthy and prolonged pause at any strategy that looks for a return to societal and cultural prominence as a means to Christian advancement.

Somewhat related to the above, is the problematic influence of Western notions of individual autonomy on church teaching and practice. Though the churches have, often resolutely and sacrificially, responded to the revelations of their complicity in the IRS by apology and major changes in policy, they have yet to integrate the findings theologically or in their spiritual practice. This appears related to some conceptual difficulties.

Ideas of individual autonomy stunt Biblical and traditional theological notions of systemic evil. Evil, as a result, is thought to be the product of individual choices alone. In analyzing evil, we look for the guilty individuals rather than examine or understand systemic factors. Investigation of policy making and decisions may get us closer, but it fails to achieve the complexity and sophistication of Biblical conceptualizations like the Pauline treatment

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of Principalities and Powers. Further and with greater damage, it fails to recognize the habituated assumptions and values that perpetuate systemic evils like racism and colonialism in organizations and societies.

If the church has a faulty understanding of systemic evil it also cannot strive towards systemic good. Communal repentance is near impossible if you understand reconciliation in terms that are always individual. The churches have been good at describing what individual repentance and reconciliation look like, but fail at a larger frame. Today, we can identify this as a priority, a necessity if the project of reconciliation is to succeed.

What would communal repentance look like? There are few examples to follow but there are hints that something that points towards a change of identity; something that brings the churches home to Turtle Island (North America) without exploiting or oppressing the First Peoples of the Land. In part, it is to let the negative history and a hopeful future become dual aspects of the churches' identity in Canada today.

In sum, we can compare, on a communal level, the churches' condition in regard to the IRS as comparable to the recently documented cases of "moral wound" or injury to soldiers who have taken part in war. At an individual level, participation in the systemic evil of war distorts moral decision making and limits the capacity for moral judgements. At a communal level, involvement in the systemic evil of colonization has limited the capacity of the churches to act and judge morally in regard to Indigenous Peoples, at home and abroad. Here in Canada, the problems of the IRS has metastasized into the Prison and the Child Welfare Systems. Abroad, Canada has exported its serious on-going issues with colonial behaviour into other countries through its extractive industries. The churches' absence of moral critique in regard to these practices displays, along with the rest of Canadian society, an on-going incapacity to recognize moral failure and act with justice.

The TRC, as we have viewed it in this brief paper, is a call to renewal for the churches. It is an opportunity to rediscover aspects of its foundational message and life that have been obscured by their long-term chaplaincy to Western society and its values and practices. It is here that a moral wound can be healed. In this way, we can say that there is much good to be born in this moment of challenge, making it, potentially, a moment of grace?