

Consensus

Volume 41
Issue 2 *Martin Luther and Antisemitism*

Article 5

11-25-2020

Christian Claims on Indigenous Peoples

Jean Becker

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



Part of the [Indigenous Studies Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Becker, Jean (2020) "Christian Claims on Indigenous Peoples," *Consensus*: Vol. 41 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol41/iss2/5>

This Conference Proceedings 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.

Christian Claims on Indigenous Peoples

Jean Becker¹

My name is Jean Becker. I am Inuk from Nunatsiavut, Labrador and I have lived among the Haudenosaunee and the Anishinaabe peoples for the last 40 years or so, not to mention all of you or some of you. Some of you were not born when I got here.

First of all, I want to start by saying that I am not representing a faith tradition. I think that is an important distinction to make about what I am saying. What I am saying is not Indigenous Spirituality. Indigenous belief systems are not, in our view, faith traditions. Furthermore, as an Inuk, I am speaking very specifically from a certain vantage point. There are still today some 60 Indigenous languages spoken in Canada and there are hundreds of different first nations across the country as well as the Metis People and the Inuit People. We are not a unified group. No one person speaks on behalf of us, certainly not in the way that you may have some unity among Lutherans (which I just heard at the table, there is not that much unity anyway). Having quite a number of Jewish friends, I know that there are differing opinions there as well. However, I do not think that we can talk about Indigenous points of view as quite unified a thing that you might say around Lutherans and Jewish people. I just wanted to be really clear about that.

I hope you can adjust to the change of pace here. I have been taught by my elders that whenever I speak, I am intended to speak for myself and from the heart and to say whatever is given to me by the circumstances, by whatever has arisen today. That is what I am doing today.

I want to thank Rabbi Telushkin for a really stimulating and inspiring address this morning. Thank you so much. I was really struck actually by the many similarities between the Jewish people and history and Indigenous people and the history here in Canada. Jews today are one-fifth of 1% of the world's population. I do not know how to equate the Indigenous population of Canada to that, but I can tell you that we are roughly 4-5% of Canada's population so we are very much in a minority here. As I understand it, in the United States, Native Americans can constitute about 1% of the population down there. Rabbi Telushkin talked about the oversized contributions of Jewish people to society and I think in Canada people would probably not view Indigenous contributions as oversized, but rather we are almost invisible here in Canada, even after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He talked about negative stereotypes of Jews perpetuated even in their absence. This is certainly true of Indigenous people.

I spent half of our break trying to remember the one joke that I have about Indigenous people that I thoroughly love, but I could not remember the punchline. So, I thoroughly enjoyed Rabbi Telushkin's humour throughout his talk. I always enjoy it when the speaker has some humour to lighten the mood and wake us up. So, I've decided to tell you my husband's favorite Indian joke, which is shorter, and I remember the punchline, too. There was a little boy traveling on a train with his dad, a little Indian boy and an Indian father. By Indian, you understand I mean Indigenous. They were on the train, sitting there minding

¹ Elder Jean Becker is the Senior Director, Indigenous Initiatives and Acting Vice President, Human Rights, Equity, and Inclusion at the University of Waterloo.

their own business. There was a group of what we call in Indian country, White People. You understand, White is not a racial designation. I hope you understand that this is the case in Indian country. White is not a racial designation; it is a political statement. So, they were talking about the Indian problem and they were complaining about all the money the government is spending on the Indians and how they were all getting a free ride. "They do not pay taxes, they get free education, all of the many benefits of being an Indian in Canada today." So, the little boy was getting madder and madder as he was listening to this. Then, he finally stood up and he stomped over to these men, and he said to them, "Well, you can all go to Hell. There are no Indians there."

That is my second favorite joke. But those are some of the stereotypes about Indigenous people in Canada. If you believe those stereotypes, you might be wondering why we are not living in the best houses with running water and why we are not floating around the lakes in yachts. But people do not seem to connect these things. Rabbi Telushkin talked about Jews being confined to ghettos. In Canada, the term is reserves. Pogroms against Jews – well, in Canada that did not happen. There were no Indian wars here. We just had residential schools, the removal of the children, the decimation of the culture through that means. The Rabbi talked about how the far right and the far left unite by hating Jews. There is a book by Stan Barrett called, *Is God a Racist?* and one of the things that Stan discovered in his research with White Supremacists here in Canada – a lot of his research took place in Kitchener, by the way – one of his interesting little tidbits that he discovered is that White Supremacists generally are supporters of native Canadians. They do not lump us in with other people of color. As a matter of fact, they tend to almost idolize us, hold us up as some kind of noble savages. And, of course, the far left seeks to form alliances with us for every cause that they take on, particularly environmental causes these days. You have to hire an Indian and get a headdress and put them at the front of the parade. So, while Rabbi Telushkin was speaking, I was trying to think of what it is, over ethics that defines this relationship with Indigenous people, not just in Canada either but across the world. I have not had a lot of time yet to fully flesh this out, but it seems to me that probably the answer is land. It is our land that is really an issue here. In the talk about reconciliation and the era of apologies, this is the one topic that is never addressed.

What about the land and the water, as Daniel Maoz pointed out earlier? So, it is all well and good to talk about better relationships, getting along with each other. Fundamentally, the issue that has to be addressed and has to be talked about is land. I want to go back in history and talk a little bit about how we came to where we are today in regard to this land. The Doctrine of Discovery seems to be a good starting point. In case you do not know, the Doctrine of Discovery was not one but a series of fifteenth century Papal Bulls. These Papal Bulls are the legal foundation upon which North America was colonized. The first one came from Pope Alexander VI, *Inter Caetera Bull* of May 4, 1493. I will just read you snippets out of it.

To the illustrious sovereigns, our dear son in Christ, Ferdinand, King, and our very dear daughter in Christ, Isabella ... chose our beloved son, Christopher Columbus ... discovered very remote islands, and even main lands ... therein dwell very many peoples living in peace ... and are found gold, spices, and very many other precious things of diverse kinds and qualities ... we exhort you to lead the people's dwelling in

these lands and countries to embrace the Christian profession ... we give, grant, and assign to you and your heirs and successors ...

Pope Alexander noted that he was speaking on the authority of the Almighty God – pretty high authority. The Doctrine of Discovery inspired the Monroe Doctrine, which gave the U.S. hegemony over the Western Hemisphere, inspired manifest destiny, which justified westward expansion. The principle of discovery gave European nations an absolute right to New World lands and native peoples. It gave certain rights of occupancy and use. The Doctrine of Discovery underlies the legal relationship in Canada with Indigenous people today. Under that doctrine, Indigenous people could not claim land ownership, only occupancy and use. The Doctrine of Discovery today is manifested in international law. The legitimacy of the British Crown's assumption of underlying title and the limitation of aboriginal rights and the occupation and use of the lands of Turtle Island is grounded in that doctrine. Indigenous rights in Canada today are considered by the dominant society to be Common Law rights stemming from the British Crown's earliest sovereignty claims which are legitimated by the Doctrine of Discovery.

What is to be done with fifteenth century Papal Bulls that gave the whole continent and its peoples to an invading force? There have been numerous calls on various Popes, particularly the last three, to repudiate or rescind the Doctrine of Discovery. I was really interested in Rabbi Telushkin's definition of repentance and atonement. First, he says you must recognize the harm done. So far, the successive Popes have refused to make an apology following requests by first Indigenous people and more laterally by the Canadian government. (I will not say the Catholic Church because, as I understand it, the Catholic Church has avoided an apology from Rome regarding residential schools on the basis that all of the Churches are autonomous.) There was actually a motion passed in Parliament asking Canadian Bishops to go to Rome and ask for that apology to be made and the Pope has refused to do so. I would say that the first step in atonement has not been accomplished yet: recognize the harm done and state what that harm was. I asked Rabbi Telushkin what the second step was, and he said, "The second step in that process is undoing the damage done."

While I fully recognize and acknowledge the work that a number of the Churches have done, including the Catholic Church, to at least make some steps towards undoing that harm, I think there is still a lot of work to be done in that area. Seventy percent of the residential schools in Canada were Catholic schools. I think that fact alone speaks to the importance, at the very least, of a Catholic acknowledgement of the extent of the harm that was done. In my view, it certainly calls for an apology. But, then, I was thinking, if the Pope repudiates the Doctrine of Discovery and if, in fact, this is what gives legitimacy to the occupation of not only the Americas but many other Indigenous lands throughout the world, this could be quite a dilemma. I can just hear some of the cases springing up in the Supreme Court. So, we are back to the same point. I think that, perhaps, this is really the source of the refusal to address land issues.

People here think the only solution is to drive out all of the people who are not Indigenous and return it to a pre-colonial state. I do not think anybody envisions that happening and I do not know of any Indigenous group in Canada or elsewhere who is even suggesting that. But we are here in Waterloo. We are on the Haldimand Tract. Six miles on either side of the Grand River, source to mouth, is Haudenosaunee Territory. Most of these lands are in possession of non- Haudenosaunee people. These lands somehow left the control

of the Haudenosaunee people without ever being paid for. The amount of rent that we should be paying is quite a large amount. The dispossession of these lands started back around 1800 and, yet, there is not even a conversation in this territory. None of us is talking about how we redress, how we undo the harm that has been done in this very local example. Every part of the country has these examples. There is nowhere in the Americas that was unoccupied. The whole notion of *Terra Nova* has been proven to be a fallacy. The territory was occupied and it was in use.

I am happy that this conference has been started. I truly hope that it will continue into the future. Talking about the Luther legacy is very critical. Having begun by talking about what is perhaps the most difficult part of his legacy is a very good step for the Martin Luther University College to take. I acknowledge you for your courage and your compassion in taking this conversation on.

Thank you for listening to me and thank you for including an Indigenous perspective, as Martin Luther University College always does at what I think is a really important conversation that you are having here.

Thank you so much.

Bibliography

Alexander VI, Pope. "The Papal Bull Inter-Caetera, 1493." *American History: From Revolution to Reconstruction and Beyond*.

<http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/documents/before-1600/the-papal-bull-inter-caetera-alexander-vi-may-4-1493.php>.

Barrett, Stanley R. *Is God a Racist? The Right Wing in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto, Press, 1989.