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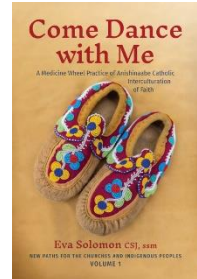
Book Review

Come Dance with Me: A Medicine Wheel Practice of Anishinaabe Interculturation of Faith.

Eva Solomon CSJ, ssm.

Toronto, ON, Canada: Novalis Publishing Inc., 2022.

In *Come Dance with Me*, Sr. Eva Solomon generously invites the reader into a uniquely indigenous approach to spirituality and doing theology. Her purpose is to “develop and articulate the medicine wheel model of theological reflection out of the root metaphor of Anishinaabe culture.” (p.21) Sr. Solomon’s method arose from “the interrelationship of the Anishinaabe people of the Thunder Bay diocese with the Roman Catholic Church as they dialogue in the context of the Native Pastoral Seminar.” (p.19)



Sr. Solomon, "Megisique" (Eagle Woman), is a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph. She is a Sacred Pipe Carrier and Conductor of Sweat Lodge ceremonies. She has worked for many years with the Canadian Catholic Bishops on ministries with Indigenous peoples. She has created numerous television programs with Village Productions for Vision TV and TV Ontario. Sr. Solomon has been an important intercultural bridgebuilder in churches and the wider community. It is a tribute to Sr. Solomon that her book is the first to be published by an Indigenous Canadian Catholic theologian.

In 2009 Sr. Solomon claimed, "It's necessary to understand who we are as Catholic aboriginal people. We need to know our spiritual roots."¹ In *Come Dance with Me* she provides an important contribution to her lifelong commitment to further understanding among Indigenous members of the Catholic community about their faith journey. Equally important, she provides a window on that faith journey for non-indigenous and non-Catholics.

Sr. Solomon begins by rehearsing a historical perspective that takes the reader to the time before European contact and to the values and beliefs that shaped an Anishinaabe worldview. With European imperialism and conquest that accompanied colonization, the harmony of creation was upended and the world was out of balance. “The Anishinaabe understood medicine power to be anything that brought healing or restored balance and harmony.” (p.33) For a long time, to survive, indigenous peoples accepted that “white men had stronger medicine.” (p.33) That changed more recently.

Resistance and Renaissance have marked the current response of Indigenous peoples. Sr. Solomon’s theology of interculturation in the Catholic community is one important expression. Her theological method employs many central symbols of Anishinaabe culture; Mother Earth, the medicine wheel, the drum, the Pow-Wow (the dance), and the Eagle Feather Staff to mention a few. Many of these are similar to other Indigenous cultures. Many indigenous cultures use a symbolic sacred circle similar to the medicine wheel. It is central to Sr. Solomon’s theological method, and symbolizes a “circle of life” worldview where all creation is interrelated. Sr. Solomon summarizes her theology of interculturation this way,

¹ Brenda Suderman, “Nun Bridges Christianity, Aboriginals: Sister Eva Solomon's work takes her across northern and western Canada.” Winnipeg Free Press, April 5, 2009. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/arts-and-life/life/faith/2009/04/05/nun-bridges-christianity-aboriginals>

“Interculturaion is, therefore, a faithful integration: we are Anishinaabe children of Gitchi Manitou whose Son took flesh and gave us the power of his Spirit to transform ourselves and our culture. The shadow of the cross and the glory of the Son’s resurrection takes on different shapes and colours in the light of our culture. Anishinaabe interculturalization of faith is a dialogue with life, a way of being, understood in terms of the medicine wheel -the sacred circle of life. Interculturalization does not endeavour to cover or conceal a Western European expression of Christianity; rather, it enriches and transforms our being... An integral part of the process of interculturalization of faith thus involves healing, transformation, and reconciliation at the individual, community and cosmic levels.” (p.91)

Sr. Solomon provides many illustrations and captivating insights into this theology of interculturalization. She includes many insights from the participants in the Native Pastoral Seminar themselves. A few of the insights I found helpful were:

- The idea that the myths, stories and spiritual traditions of the Anishinaabe should be interpreted as “our First Testament” which “Jesus came to fulfill just as surely, he did to fulfill the Jewish Testament. Our First Testament God-story must stand side by side with our Christian Old and New Testaments....” (p.53)
- The drum is the “heartbeat of Mother Earth” in essence the presence of God’s Spirit among the people.
- The Pow-Wow is a means of restoring harmony and balance in the universe. The idea of dancing as a form of prayer and healing disharmonies with others and creation.
- The “medicine wheel, as the sacred circle of life is the core organizing symbol of reality” and “the subconscious process of conceptualizing the thought of the Anishinaabe.” (p.146)
- The Sacred Tree is at the centre of the medicine wheel” reflecting the understanding that “*I am because we are* and because of *who God is*, the one who creates and sustains all life, remains at the centre.” (p.147)

In the wake of the 1996 Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2007-2015), and the gruesome discoveries of unmarked graves at former Residential schools in 2021, many Canadians recognize that reconciliation with Indigenous peoples must be a priority for Canada. One important step on the journey of healing and reconciliation will be understanding indigenous worldviews and how they can relate to non-indigenous ones. Sr. Solomon has provided a very helpful resource for her community but also one that is helpful for non-indigenous Canadians as well who may not have examined their own worldview.

I did wonder how such a theology of interculturalization might be received by those who practice the traditional forms of Indigenous spirituality or those from the Pentecostal tradition. In 1995 out of concern for the growing frustration and violence in First Nation communities, former MP Elijah Harper convened a Sacred Assembly of indigenous, political and religious representatives in Ottawa to “search for a common spiritual foundation” to

enable reconciliation and justice for Indigenous peoples². It provided a positive opportunity for listening and learning. Nonetheless, I was painfully mindful of the complex religiously polarized religious environment in many First Nation communities among those from historic churches including Catholics, those evangelicals from the Pentecostal tradition and those who practiced the traditional ways. Sr. Solomon endeavors to build a bridge. However, the question remains, how will such a theology of interculturalism be received by these different religious groups?

Come Dance with Me also challenges the traditional Christian narrative of a transcendent patriarchal displeased God demanding atonement for the sins of humanity through the crucifixion/resurrection of Jesus. Sr. Solomon is not alone in challenging this version of the Christian account. For many, this conventional narrative does not address the questions they are asking. Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong has argued there is a “gap between the academy and the pew” where “clergy are either unable or unwilling to engage the great theological issues of the day because of their perception that to do so will ‘disturb the faith and beliefs of their people.’”³ Spong argues that a new reformation is needed that “includes a radical rethinking in which every symbol of our religious past must be examined, replaced and reconfigured.”⁴ Sr. Solomon’s analysis provides an example of how an Indigenous contextual approach may offer some transcontextual insights.

Likewise, eco-feminist theologian Sally McFague argued that the traditional Christian narrative with its focus on a transcendent Father-Judge God no longer aligns with the evolutionary scientific story in the face of the climate crisis. McFague argues for a transimmanent Divinity or what Paul Tillich described as *panentheism* where God is “in” creation but not identified solely with it. There are resonances with the Indigenous concept of Gitchi Manitou, the Great Creator. This was not the intent of Sr. Solomon’s work. However, it does add another perspective to a reformation process while offering a way of retaining the continuity of the Christian faith tradition. For me, the most important theological question is always “How have we changed our theological minds and why?” The Medicine Wheel method may offer some help.

Sr. Solomon challenges a prevalent public assumption that indigenous spirituality is incompatible with the Christian faith and the churches. Sr. Solomon’s approach affirms the importance of consensus building, particularly among Indigenous believers. As well, it provides a means for the convergence of different worldviews and theological convictions so necessary to reconciliation and rebuilding relationships between European Newcomers and Canada’s First Peoples. We do not need to agree on everything to find common ground to tell our faith stories together. The key is to see ourselves in the worldview and spirituality of other peoples and other cultures. The title of her 2001 Lectures at St. Jerome’s University in Waterloo summed it up nicely, *One God/Many Stories*.⁵

Come Dance with Me is a lovely window into Indigenous spirituality and Christian faith. While it may be particularly useful to Catholics, it is useful for those interested in what

² Harper Elijah and Terry LeBlanc Sacred Assembly: Principles and Priorities for a New Relationship. Assembly, 1995. <https://www.commonword.ca/FileDownload/32887/1995 - Sacred Assembly Principles and Priorities.pdf>

³ John Shelby Spong, *Unbelievable: Why Neither Ancient Creeds nor the Reformation Can Produce a Living Faith Today*, New York: HarperOne, chap 1, Kindle.

⁴ Spong, chap 22, Kindle.

⁵ Solomon, Eva, *One God/Many Stories*. Presented at St. Jerome’s University, University of Waterloo, February 9, 2001. <https://www.sju.ca/one-godmany-stories>

Indigenous Christianity can teach the wider Christian community about life, faith and care of creation. Sr. Solomon offers a generous invitation to join with First Peoples and to *Come Dance with Me*. She quite presciently points out, “As Canadians, we shall never know who we are until we know who we are in relationship to the Indigenous Peoples of this land.” (p.168) To which many of us can say, “Amen!”

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