When Sorry is Not Good Enough: The Displaced Christology of Canada's 2008 Apology

Jane Barter

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in Canada was marked by several key theological assumptions and that it specifically retained a decidedly christological understanding of reconciliation. In the place of Christ as agent and medium of reconciliation stood the nation of Canada, which sought to bring together indigenous and non-indigenous parties under its sovereign control. Further, through the mechanism of the Government of Canada's apology of 2008 to survivors of the Indian residential schools, Canada sought to offer a vicarious form of atonement, which would solve the so-called 'Indian problem'. In the place of Jesus's and universal victory, the TRC problematically positioned the nation state as the saviour who would broker reconciliation within its boundaries.

KEYWORDS

ATONEMENT, CHRISTOLOGY, CONFESSION, INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF CANADA, RECONCILIATION, TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION OF CANADA

AUTHOR

Jane Barter (she/her) is Professor of Religion and Culture at the University of Winnipeg, Treaty One Territory in Manitoba, Canada. She is author of several works on theology including *Thinking Christ: Christology and Contemporary Critics* (Fortress 2012).

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In December of 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), a commission that was created to address the history of residential schools, issued this surprising challenge to Christians:

> That Christians in Canada, in the name of their religion, inflicted serious harm on Aboriginal children, their families, and their communities was in fundamental contradiction to what they purport their core beliefs to be. For the churches to avoid repeating their failures of the past, understanding how and why they perverted Christian doctrine to justify their action is critical knowledge to be gained from the residential school experience. (TRC 2015: 98)

Surprising because the TRC acknowledged how profoundly theology influenced politics in Canadian colonial history as it distinguished between Christian doctrine and its perversion and Christian core beliefs and the harm that ensued from them. In this essay, I wish to examine the manner in which Christian doctrine – specifically christology – continues to exert a profound influence upon indigenous and non-indigenous engagement within the Canadian nation state. I argue that the infliction of harm continues through various tacit theologies that prevail even within a secularised Canada in spite of the supposedly ameliorated relationships that have been forged between indigenous and non-indigenous people in Canada since the TRC. I also argue that what is required is not the harmonising of belief and practice, as the TRC maintains, but rather an eradication of secularised versions of Christian doctrine, and particularly christology, which sublates Christ's atoning and universal victory for that of the nation state that brokers reconciliation within its boundaries. In other words, this essay wishes to undermine one of Canada's most cherished theological concepts, which is that the nation state will be the salvific answer to its so-called 'Indian problem'. In the wake of worldwide decolonial movements in the 1950s and 1960s, Canada became increasingly self-conscious about what was often dubbed its 'Indian problem' on the world stage (see Million 2013: 82).

The TRC, which ran from 2008 to 2015, was the outcome of the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) between the Government of Canada and over 86,000 indigenous survivors of residential schools that existed in Canada from 1834 to 1997. Residential schools were state-sponsored residential centres that were run by several historical churches in Canada – Anglican, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic and United. Indigenous children were required, by force of law, to attend these schools whose goal was assimilation into Christian-Canadian culture. In the schools, students suffered abuse of all kinds, including widespread sexual abuse, forced removal and long-term separation from their families, loss of language and culture, and exposure to hunger and disease. The commission's task was to hear survivor testimony

through private and public hearings in order to bring to awareness this bleak period of Canadian history. This national event was to usher in a new era in relations between indigenous and non-indigenous persons and, as in South Africa and Australia, reconciliation was the key metaphor that was employed to imagine the new nation state as the division between indigenous and non-indigenous persons was to be overcome as a result of this process.

As many have argued, reconciliation as an ideal relies upon a host of assumptions that are theological in nature (see e.g. Schwöbel 2003: for a critical view, see Bracken 2015). Within the New Testament, reconciliation connotes the universal and once and for all act that God has accomplished in bringing humans to Godself through Christ. Or, to cite Paul:

> All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5: 18 – 20, NRSV)

This passage underscores several key features of reconciliation. First, the sovereign God is unique agent of reconciliation, whose singular work in Christ affects the overcoming of distance between persons and God. Second, the work of reconciliation is universalist in scope. God's work that is accomplished in Christ has the capacity to unite all the nations to God (Schwöbel 2003: 16). Third, the work of reconciliation is contingent upon vicarious exchange; that is the exchange of Christ's righteousness on behalf of the unrighteousness of sinners.

While one hesitates to invoke the dubious figure of Carl Schmitt once again, it remains an important insight that '[a]ll significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are theological concepts' (Schmitt 1985: 36). These three features of Pauline conceptions of reconciliation remain salient even as they are transformed into political discourse. In Canada's theology of reconciliation the Crown (or Canada) becomes the agent of reconciliation through the apology given by Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the subsequent national public events that constituted the TRC. These events were touted as having profound effects, which were said to alter radically indigenous and non-indigenous relationships for posterity. Second, this work was universalist in aim. It promised to unite all *Canadian* subjects to the Crown, thus overcoming the distance at which indigenous persons once stood from citizenry and thereby conferring on them a new standing within the nation state. And third, this

work was mediated by vicarious exchange between innocent and guilty, so that representatives of innocent and the guilty were engaged in a public ritual of debt and forgiveness. It is through the ritual enactment of confession through national apologies and the public performance of forgiveness that reconciliation was produced and reproduced within the Canadian public sphere.

The Sovereign

In the Pauline understanding of reconciliation, there is a 'strict asymmetry', in which the reconciling act is exclusively the work of God in Christ, directed to the world (Schwöbel 2003: 20). According to Paul, reconciliation in Christ is construed as an event that signals an ontological change from the past, while it also announces the continued conferral of future grace. Or, as Schwöbel puts it, 'reconciliation-language refers both to an event in the past and to an enduring relationship in the present, which is claimed to be eschatologically ultimate' (Schwöbel 2003: 20). There is a transformation of relationships after the cross such that the distance between God and humans and among humans is now overcome.

On 11 June 2008, just prior to the launch of the TRC, former Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued an apology on behalf of all Canadians to survivors of the residential schools. In his speech he emphasised the dramatic change of relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous persons that was at hand as a result of the TRC. In Harper's words, the TRC would forge 'a new relationship between aboriginal people and other Canadians, a relationship based on the knowledge of our shared history, a respect for each other and a desire to move forward together' ('House of Commons Apology 2008': 335). As in Pauline soteriology, the prime minister articulated a vision of the breaking down of walls and the changed relations that would ensue. In Canada's case, salvation would consist of transformed relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. So far so good. But who is the agent of this reconciliation? And what is its sphere?

The Universalistic Nature of Reconciliation

In Ephesians 2: 14–18, Paul expands the notion of reconciliation to include human relationships as Christ's blood brokers a new union between the Gentiles 'who once were far off' and the Jews. Jews and Gentiles have been made one as Christ has 'broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between [them]' (v. 14). The eventful character of reconciliation means that there is no going back to old ways of enmity between Jews and Gentiles. Canadian conceptions of reconciliation echo this for reconciliation here is not that of two sovereign

parties freely meeting through their own accord, but rather that the sovereign, i.e. 'the nation', brokered the exchange by issuing the apology and setting the mandate of the TRC. The mandate of the TRC was limited to educational and therapeutic interventions rather than material and substantive reparation, and was focused on the healing primarily of indigenous subjects. As Dale Turner argues: 'The TRC's idea of reconciliation focuses on resolving historical injustices in order to heal "unhealthy" Aboriginal communities' (Turner 2013: 100). Thus the First Peoples of Canada, although denied citizenship rights throughout most of Canadian history, were to be grafted on to the nation state and share equal standing with non-indigenous peoples.

Because reconciliation was construed primarily as indigenous people healing from past events, Canada could excise the residential school experience from its ongoing history of other forms of colonial violence. As Eva Mackey puts it:

> The erasure of links between residential schools and the larger land theft process allows the apology to be appropriated into the kind of unifying and future looking discourse we see here because it does not require Canada or Canadians to account for the ways that intersecting processes of colonial theft of land and cultural genocide are foundations of the modern nation-state, or to recognize that non-Aboriginal Canadians are all contemporary beneficiaries of this process. (Mackey 2013: 50)

By setting the terms by which both history and reconciliation were conceived, the sovereign state could indeed claim that a new relationship was founded as a result of the TRC, even while the nation state continued to bring indigenous lands and rights under ever more stringent regulation and control. Similarly, the sphere of reconciliation was profoundly limited in Canada's version of the TRC, which allowed victims to tell their truth but not subpoena abusers. Such a view precluded any view of reconciliation that might involve political conceptions of reconciliation, such as nation-to-nation agreements, and set the terms of healing so that indigenous subjects and communities could be rehabilitated and subsumed into the Canadian fold. As Mackey puts it, 'apology is an expedient arrangement in which relationships of mutuality are subsumed for the so-called greater good of the nation as a whole' (Mackey 2013: 53).

Vicarious Atonement

Harper's apology did not only articulate such aspirations; it also performed them, as reconciliation – which was begun on 11 June 2008 and continued in the public hearings of the TRC – was enacted in a liturgy-like spectacle in Canada for the ensuing seven years. The liturgical aspects of this public event

are noteworthy. Harper's apology was hardly a spontaneous movement on the part of the Conservative prime minister, whose record on indigenous issues is universally criticised by indigenous scholars and activists. Harper and the Conservatives initially refused to offer an apology, but later bent to public pressure and timed the policy as a commencement to the TRC in order to 'close this sad chapter in our history' (Miller 2017: 189). After the apology, Harper went on to underfund health care, education and housing in northern communities; he also broke several promises to indigenous people with respect to water protection, refused to implement any of the 94 recommendations of the TRC and refused to call a national inquiry on missing and murdered indigenous women and girls.

The dramatic nature of this public apology was unprecedented in Canadian history. J. R. Miller describes the event:

> Leaders of all the national Aboriginal organizations [...] entered the Commons chamber in traditional garb and took their places together in the centre of the room between the government and the opposition benches [...] The galleries were full, many of the observers Aboriginal people, including a good number of former residential school students. Other survivors and family watched events from remote viewing facilities that were set up in an adjacent room. (Miller 2017: 192)

There can be no mistaking the intent of Harper in issuing this apology. Not only did he wish to close this 'sad chapter in Canada's history', he claimed to save indigenous people from their suffering by allowing the nation state to take it *on their behalf*. Stephen Harper's words in the apology highlight the Canada's salvific role: 'The burden of this experience has been on your shoulders for far too long. The burden is properly ours as a government, and as a country' ('House of Commons Apology 2008': 336).

Surely the prime minister did not mean the burden of indigenous suffering at the hands of 400 years of colonial genocide could be lifted? Instead, he ascribed to indigenous Canadians a lighter burden that he felt conmagicallyfident Canada could carry. Through the process of public truth telling he imagined that the burden of indigenous experience in this country could magically be lifted.

Harper's performative display was received positively by the indigenous people gathered in the House of Commons on that day in June 2008. Phil Fontaine, the former chief of the Assembly of First Nations, a survivor of residential schools, wearing full Anishinaabe headdress and regalia, reasserted the miraculous nature of the event, claimed that 'this day testifies to nothing less than the achievement of the impossible' and concurred with the redemptive

trope: 'What happened today signifies a new dawn in the relationship between us and the rest of Canada. We are and always have been an indispensable part of the Canadian identity' ('House of Commons Apology 2008': 337).

In this ceremony between representatives of the guilty and victims, there was a complex interchange. In official apologies in which heads of states ask for forgiveness from their victims, representatives stand in for the victims and perpetrators of history and vicariously ask for forgiveness or vicariously forgive. This ritual hearkens to atonement liturgies, especially the eucharistic sacrifice in which Christ's taking upon himself the world's sins is recapitulated in the liturgy. Jacques Derrida alerts us to these parallels in the secular sphere:

> In all the scenes of repentance, confession, forgiveness, or apology which have multiplied on the geopolitical scene since the last war, and in an accelerated fashion in the past few years, one sees not only individuals, but also entire communities, professional corporations, the representatives of ecclesiastical hierarchies, sovereigns, and heads of state ask for 'forgiveness'. They do this in an Abrahamic language which is not (in the case of Japan or Korea, for example) that of the dominant religion of their society, but which has already become the universal idiom of law, of politics, of the economy, or of diplomacy: at the same time the agent and symptom of this internationalisation. (Derrida 2001: 28)

These 'scenes of repentance' have proliferated because they make a claim that is rooted in faith; the spectacle, which is often shorn from any form of material redress, is thought to be efficacious in itself. The public performance becomes the means of reconciliation in lieu of other forms of redress such as the settling of land claims and resources, or the honouring of treaties. (This is not to claim that there were not material forms of redress for individual survivors, including the Common Experience Payment and an Individual Assessment Process, and various government initiatives to support healing.)

The spectacle of expiation of a nation's guilt did not end with Harper's apology or Fontaine's words. For the next seven years, Canadians heard first-hand testimony of survivors. While I do not wish to deny the educational and the therapeutic value of such 'truth telling', I do, following indigenous scholars, wish to ask if the hearing of these stories satisfied indigenous rights to justice and relatedly whether they served to reinscribe a notion of indigenous personhood as traumatised victims in need of further management and control. Roger I. Simon's discussion of the TRC sounds this word of caution:

> Rendering the people who come forward to speak to the commission as victims living a damaged life beyond repair risks inflicting [...] wounds of

> mis-recognition. In such mis-recognition there is the danger that inter-generational Aboriginal life will be reduced to images of a problem-ridden, broken existence serving to confirm stereotypes offered as explanations for the marginalization of native populations within Canadian society [...] Furthermore, this mis-recognition risks reducing the political to the therapeutic so that restorative justice is defined solely within support for personal healing from the wounds of colonialism. (Simon 2013: 132)

Some have argued that the conception that acts of confession or grief within the public sphere are inherently Christian practices in themselves. In the early Middle Ages, public confession had the effect of reconciling members who had committed sins to the community. Such performances were made public because they were thought to have an edifying effect upon witnessing members of the community. One important development that Michel Foucault traces is the degree to which the Carolingian penitential practice involved the production and managing of affect. In standing before the confessor, Alcuin urged the penitent to divulge as much about their internal condition as they were capable of remembering. Importantly, the concomitant emotional state of shame was viewed as coterminous to the penitent's restoration, or as Foucault puts it: 'Because if it is true that the act of confessing is already the beginning of expiation, could we not conclude that in the end a sufficiently costly and humbling confession is penance in itself'? (Foucault 1999: 173) The sinner's shame was considered to be evidence of his or her reform. To be shamed before a court or a judge had, as Abigail Firey writes, 'the curious effect of orienting judicial assessment around that pain of the culprit, rather than the pain of the offended, and thus directed ideals about atonement toward rehabilitation rather than retribution' (Firey 2008: 180).

Stephen Harper's emotional plea in the House of Commons and before indigenous officials and survivors was an uncharacteristic display for the Conservative prime minister. Repeating, 'we are sorry' and 'we apologise' six times, Harper concluded the litany with these words:

> You have been working on recovering from this experience for a long time, and in a very real sense we are now joining you on this journey. The Government of Canada sincerely apologises and asks for the forgiveness of aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly. We are sorry. ('House of Commons Apology 2008': 336)

Harper at once stood in for the people of Canada, ostensibly non-indigenous citizens joining indigenous persons 'on this journey' of 'recovery', while he also represented the nation, which performs apology, even while it sets its very terms. In seeking forgiveness as though he were the direct perpetrator of historical harm, and on behalf of non-indigenous Canadians, Harper made

an empty gesture of healing, which was rather remarkably centred on Canada's shame, and in so doing, sought to expiate its guilt.

Some Concluding Remarks

Within secular politics reconciliation remains a key trope for the overcoming of division between two estranged parties. Yet in the secular translation of the biblical idiom of reconciliation, it leaves much of its theology intact. As Giorgio Agamben once put it, 'Secularization does nothing but displace the heavenly monarchy onto an earthly monarchy, leaving its power intact' (Agamben 2007: 78). The Government of Canada was remarkably adept at maintaining the power of the heavenly monarchy in its recent history of apology and reconciliation. Rather surprisingly it also displaced the person and work of Christ to the nation state, which would seek to unite two alienated parties through a dramatic and ostensibly history-altering event. This was done through the sacrificial work of apology, which was to become the affective agent for transformation independent of political forms of justice or redress. Much is lost in translation.

What I have argued may be seen as Canadian prolegomena to christology rather than a theology proper. If a constructive Canadian contextual theology were to be articulated, it would need of course to consider the manner in which Christ, not the nation, is the centre of reconciliation. At risk is not only the Christian kerygma of the one whose sacrifice on humanity's behalf was 'once for all' (Hebrews 10: 10), but also lost is the capacity of the beneficiaries of that grace in a vexed country like Canada to see their indigenous neighbour in ways that extend beyond enmity or fellow citizenry within the nation state. A robust christology, one that distinguishes clearly between the sovereign God and the pretences of the state, is one that recognises that the salvation that we proclaim (and that indigenous peoples of Canada deserve) extends far beyond the performative.

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