ABSTRACT

Seeking “Right Relations”: How Should Churches Respond to Aboriginal Voices?

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What moral and spiritual resources do churches have to open space for transforming and making new relations with and among Aboriginal communities? What values best express justice and are cross-culturally appropriate? Who decides on the terms and how? When are moral agency and responsibility aptly configured within unevenly structured relations of power? With special attention to the United Church of Canada and to voices of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women, I explore elements of an ethical framework in dialogue with the Royal Commission On Aboriginal Peoples. The Commission suggests three roles that religious institutions can play: to foster awareness and understanding; to participate in public discussion; and to advocate at the local level in situations of conflict. On what grounds can each role be adequate in practice and what are some ingredients for ethical guidelines? I suggest what moral agenda and basis might confirm the claims of ecclesial potential.
Seeking 'Right Relations': How Should Churches Respond to Aboriginal Voices?

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Introduction: “The Moment in Our Ribcages”

Of all the non-governmental institutions in Canadian society, religious institutions have perhaps the greatest potential to foster awareness and understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. This potential exists even though the Christian churches' historical role was often that of supporting the dominant society and contributing to the marginalization of Aboriginal people.ii (The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples)

Both church and state officially urge non-Aboriginals to seek right relations with Aboriginal peoples.iii Yet dominant Canadian politics, identities and values are blind to the legacy of colonialism and imperialism that makes the cultural-and hence ecclesial-body of Canada unwell.iv Although in post-Christendom Canada, mainline churches and ecumenical bodies no longer dream of controlling society, some have refused to withdraw from the political realm or have neglected their continuing sense of responsibility in the public arena.v I engage this issue as a fourth generation Canadian of Scottish, Irish, and English ancestry with an abiding concern for women's diverse voices, moral agency, and analyses of justice-making, of seeking “right relations.”vi

There is a developing perception in popular and scholarly imagination that religious bodies have unique social locations, institutional resources, cultural power and presence which can be put in service of a common good. What are “distinctively religious contributions” to current struggles for right relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples? The immediate and ongoing role of churches begins with hearing subjugated voices of Aboriginal people's suffering, struggle, and hope.vii Connie Fife, a Cree poet, issues a call to take seriously “the moment in our ribcages.” She writes:

These are dangerous times
to live without love
to exist without beauty in our eyes.
These are times of hard loving,
the calling forward of regard
untangling of uncertainty
the time of light, star people and beginnings,  
the moment in our ribcages. viii

Connie Fife helps us imagine the ribcages of a common body, full of beauty and regard, light and star people. In this common body, the moral vocation is to breathe new life into “real solidarity ... where it becomes clear that the whole body suffers together” and can be healed and transformed. In facing the legacy of residential schools, the dominant churches are in the process of examining their own positions in the mirror-image of Aboriginal “others.” ix There is still a long way to go to account for Aboriginal people's suffering and loss of land at the hands of European immigrants and the churches' complicity in their domination and exclusion. But for some, the “calling forward of regard” and an “untangling of uncertainty” has perhaps begun.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples suggests three roles that religious institutions can play: to foster awareness and understanding, to participate in public discussion, and to advocate at the local level in situations of conflict. x What unique institutional resources do churches have to open space for reconciling/transforming relations? The purpose of this paper is to explore the adequacy, practice and ethical guidelines of each role. It will also suggest what moral basis might confirm the claim of ecclesial potential.

1) Relationship Building: To Foster Awareness and Understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Peoples

In this section I will sketch some of the historical context of the relationship of First Nations to the rest of Canada, in particular in terms of the residential school system. Then I will turn to consider one ecclesial response to this legacy, that of the United Church of Canada. From roughly the turn of this century it was the policy of the government of Canada to provide education to a portion of the Aboriginal peoples through “Indian Residential Schools.” xi The
schools were part of the colonial will to “civilise" aboriginal peoples, i.e., to become good citizens; to “inculcate a moral sense"; to Christianize. The overall aim of missionary work coincided: to enable Native peoples to assume “privileges and responsibilities of Christian citizenship...carrying demands for conformity to the mores of the majority.” While the missionary movement assumed Aboriginal peoples had a right to education and to hear the gospel, residential schools, run by various church organizations under the auspices of the federal government, were broadly established in the mid-to-late nineteenth century as one strategy to implement the federal government policy of assimilating Indian peoples into wider society. The government aimed to remove Aboriginal peoples as obstacles to the expansion of English-speaking society and to alleviate the resultant needs many Aboriginal communities experienced. The coalescing of these two broad concerns—political and humanitarian—dovetailed with church missions; they bolstered the belief that Western culture was the way of the future and that Aboriginal peoples needed to become Westernized to survive. For these ends, Aboriginal children were removed from their parents and communities, placed in schools at often long distances from their homes, and schooled in foreign ways and language, often subjected to harsh discipline, inadequate food, gruelling manual labour, poor living conditions and emotional and sometimes sexual abuse.

Residential schools for Aboriginal children were mostly absent from Canadian consciousness until the 1990's when headline stories brought to public awareness the abuse of children in the schools where Aboriginal children were often subjected to physical, spiritual, emotional and sexual abuse. A regular response by mainstream Canadians to these accounts, and to the wider complex legacy of hurt, disinheritance and injustice, has been denial or apathy, including how churches were complicit in cultural abuse or genocide particularly through the
eradication of traditional spirituality.

One key challenge to the potential roles of religious institutions and their “unique contribution” is Christian complicity in cultural genocide of Aboriginal peoples. For some, the contradictions “between the claims and intentions that led Christians to become involved in residential schools and the damage that resulted are so massive” have prompted “a legitimation crisis” for Christian ethics. Several churches have issued apologies to begin the long struggle to repair broken relations.

Christians and church institutions are discovering that this is not the result of benign neglect; indeed, the creation of inferior “others” has been and continues to be rooted in and made acceptable, even mandated, as “God's will.” Relations of domination and subordination of Aboriginal peoples were built over time on the racist and economic premises of non-Aboriginal Canadians who assumed they knew what was best for Aboriginal peoples—in collusion with the ruling desire for land and national development. The residential schools experience poignantly bears serious lessons for churches and how they shape and practice religion today which include, as Terry Anderson observes, “that our best efforts may contain destructive distortions, or be harnessed for wrong ends.” In the mounting evidence of the evil perpetrated in the name of good, the churches have received a wake-up call to assess its role, make amends and learn to transform in radical ways.

I will now turn to focus on the United Church of Canada as a case study of fostering awareness and understanding as one dimension of seeking right relations between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal peoples. In its brief to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the United Church has acknowledged that

the Residential Schools were premised on a racist understanding of the superiority of
European civilization as it was being transplanted in North America, and the inferiority of Aboriginal societies. This racist premise was reinforced by the churches in their theology and their attitudes to Native spirituality. Contact between these two ways of living in the world led to a rapid and often brutal disintegration of the Aboriginal way of life. Combined with the relentless economic and social pressure of expansionist European society, the effects of the Residential Schools dealt an almost fatal blow to Aboriginal societies.xix

In 1984 Alberta Billy, a First Nation's woman from Cape Mudge, British Columbia, issued an historic call to the United Church General Council executive (its highest body of decision making). “It is time you apologized to native peoples.”xx On August 15, 1986 the Sudbury General Council responded with an “Apology to Native Congregations” for having failed to respect the depth and richness of Aboriginal spirituality and vision, and for confusing the gospel of Jesus Christ with western institutions and cultures:

Long before my people journeyed to this land, your people were here, and you received from your elders an understanding of creation, and of the mystery that surrounds us all that was deep and rich and to be treasured. We did not hear you when you shared your vision. In our zeal to tell you of the good news of Jesus Christ we were closed to the value of your spirituality. We confused Western ways and culture with the depth and breadth and length and height of the gospel of Christ. We imposed our civilization as a condition of accepting the gospel. We tried to make you like us and in so doing we helped to destroy the vision that made you what you were. As a result, you, and we, are poorer, and the image of the Creator in us is twisted, blurred and we are not what we are meant by God to be. We ask you to forgive us and to walk together with us in the spirit of Christ so that our peoples may be blessed and God's creation healed.xx

The elders' responded, “We must go back and talk to the people.” They acknowledged but did not formally accept the apology—only an apology that is lived out could be real. Such accountability is the enduring horizon of seeking right relations.

This process of accountability holds the United Church responsible, as Stan McKay the first Aboriginal moderator asserts, for a history “for which it must repent.”xxii Reconciliation involves, therefore, not only listening to the suffering caused but evidence that the suffering has been heard, the wrong-doing acknowledged, and steps of repentance and redress taken. If apathy
and denial are structured social sins, the 1986 apology marks a potential new beginning or “new partnership with First Nations communities.” Aboriginal peoples in Canada are in theological terms the sinned against. The recent lawsuits filed by survivors of residential schools—the victims of the best intentions—has sharpened the understanding of the history for which the dominant churches must repent, that of white racism and cultural genocide.

The All Native Circle Conference established in 1988 created some symbolic space to tackle the redress of these wrongs within the church. It is a non-geographic governing body of Native congregations and in-community theological training unit for Native ministry which officially supports self-determination of First Nations peoples within the United Church's structures and ethos. The realities of ongoing marginalization are far less heartening.

In the 1990's the churches and wider Canadian society began to hear and pay attention to the stories of former residential school students and their families. In response, the 1997 *Statement of Repentance* re-committed the United Church to living out the 1986 apology. It states particular actions required to keep open space for restoring a shared and mutual relation: to acknowledge the role of residential schools in the suffering of Native peoples; to express deep regret and sorrow for injustices done and for the role of the United Church in residential schools; to continue dialogue and consultation with First Nations people in order to consider appropriate means to express repentance, and to take further steps along the healing path and towards reconciliation; to learn directly from Native persons about their experiences in residential schools or to study resources such as those provided by the Healing Fund or both (see below); to petition the Government of Canada to accept its responsibility for the abuses of the residential schools and to take meaningful steps immediately to redress those abuses. These resolutions were aimed “to set a positive example that the Government of Canada should be persuaded to follow.”

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These ecclesial responses confirm the roles of fostering awareness and understanding, participating in public discussions, and advocacy. The commitments also generate conflict and confrontation within religious institutions as well as with the state. Such conflict should not be surprising since religious ethics are enacted in concrete situations where evil is met, in this case dealing with the legacy of the residential schools within the political context of religious institutions, government relations, and the wider society. In this case, the ongoing revelations of physical and sexual abuse of children in residential schools has galvanized some Canadian church awareness, participation and advocacy, particularly at national levels. Issues of redress and reparation (providing compensation for wrongs done) are long outstanding as churches struggle with the government over apportioning responsibility as well as with competing ecclesial claims of risking new relations or maintaining their institutions.xxvii

The values and vision of religious institutions are often expressed in practical efforts of education and pastoral action to address injustices done and to mend relations, for example, in the United Church's *Healing Fund* (1994) and *The Justice and Reconciliation* project (2001). *The Healing Fund* was first initiated in response to the request of First Nations people asking the church to be part of a healing process. It frames the relationship across cultures in theological terms of mutuality and is an ongoing project of practical reconciliation in material and spiritual terms. It is designed to support projects that help First Nations communities respond to some of the painful dimensions of the residential school experience and for non-aboriginal Christians to become aware of the systemic problems at the heart of this broken relationship.xxviii

However, given the depth of white racism and colonization at work in Christian religion, the moral vocation to promote healing and reconciliation has floundered in response to the Healing Fund. The reaction to this initiative across the United Church has been slow and
disheartening, to the point where it has totally withered in some areas. White congregations often resist or reject the idea that healing and justice includes them too, or do not feel morally obliged or otherwise moved to participate in seeking right relations and a shared future. Sherene Razack analyses this blindness as “presumed innocence,” a determined non-involvement in social relations. In this case, such denial is compounded because that non-involvement is also based on a repudiation of culpability.xxix

In recent ecclesial attempts to listen to Aboriginal peoples and to build relationships across cultures and histories, the truth of domination and exclusion by white churches of Aboriginal peoples is being unmasked. The challenge for the dominant culture is to learn to understand how religion and its symbols and practices are socially engaged and located too. In an attempt to foster awareness and understanding and to undertake healing and advocacy, a second project has just been released in the United Church. Justice and Reconciliation: The Legacy of Indian Residential Schools and the Journey Towards Reconciliation (2001) is an educational programme for non-Aboriginal congregations. As white liberal Protestantism struggles to cope with its disestablishment and fragmented lives, the temptation is to seek stability by either retreating to privileged circles where salvation is identified as a purely spiritual experience unrelated to social context or by (re)institutionalizing unjust relations by protecting churches from risking changes required to seek reconciliation. The programme reflects an ecclesial struggle to offer a practical Christian political and social ethic, asking:

How are we to deal with this legacy as church and individuals? Most of us were not personally involved in residential schools, yet we are nonetheless linked to its painful legacy. We are part of a church that participated in residential schools in the name of the gospel. We are also part of a society that implemented and benefited materially from the policies aimed at devaluing Aboriginal cultures.xxx

This resource offers an overview of the history of assimilation and the United Church's
involvement in educating Aboriginal people against their will. It then outlines a three-fold process for dealing with the problem of denial, defensiveness and paralysis displayed by non-Aboriginal Christians if they hear of the terrible pain of the residential school legacy. In the hopes of reconstructing and beginning new relationships, three normative elements are meant to support and interact together:

1. Truth-telling – to hear the stories of Aboriginal peoples in residential schools, to name racism, to see the gospel-culture connection, and to realize truth as plural;
2. Lamentation and repentance– to experience grief and pain, recognize interconnectedness and solidarity, and move towards authentic repentance and transformation;
3. Seeking the Spirit – only the Spirit of God can pull us away from paralysis, and where instead of acting, we need to wait on God, to learn to restore balance.xxxi

Having reviewed and assessed examples in one denomination of attempts to foster awareness and understanding, I move now to the second role of religious institutions in seeking right relations.

**2) Advocacy and Agency: Making Public Space for Discourses of Marginalized Voices**

The Royal Commission is concerned to end the marginalization of Aboriginal Peoples; it also promotes the unique contribution of churches. Advocacy for justice/love is birthed in struggle. Some non-Aboriginal Christians are learning that to heed calls for justice and to respond to the needs of others are expressed through conflicted relationships. Theological ethicist, Gerard Fourez describes conflictual encounters with others as those with potential to become epiphanies. In this meeting God is beyond and yet in this heeding. When others confront and struggle with us, they force us to give our unique response and to risk discovery of ourselves and our humanity.xxxii

Hence, a religious–as distinct from a political–dimension of advocacy is nothing less than a standpoint of openness to “others.” Religious concerns for liberation and community,
wholeness and meaning in life can foster relationships that challenge all to see the world from the standpoints of others. An adequate advocacy stance is informed by keeping together more specific accounts of the diversity of human life with a complex understanding of the roots of suffering. Morally the work of seeking right relations is assessed by asking where are engagement and accountability located? Whose concrete lives are represented? Connie Fife dedicates the poem, “A Mother's Song”, to Connie Jacobs and her son Ty from the Tsuu T'in Reserve who were both shot to death by police after Social Services tried to apprehend her three children and she refused to relinquish custody of them.

my son
i stopped the bullets
for as long as i could
until my heart was torn from my ribcage
and my shattered bone become flour on our kitchen floor
how i wept going down
down
to the moment when i could no longer withstand their bullets
your youth clearcutting a pathway
back into my arms when i held you up to the sun
singing praises for your birth

now i watch as righteous men
defend your murder
defend the onslaught of sliced corpuscle
and the tearing away of your muscle
and i sing
i sing your name into the mouth of every coming sunrise
and i will continue
until they know the significance of your birth
together with the act of stealing your life

and i will sing
and i will not stop

In the enquiry that followed, the courts found that excessive force had been used by Constable Dave Voller. No charges were ever laid. Connie tried to shield her son from the bullets
which killed them both in the end. In terms of moral agency, she risked all she had to fight for her children—her life.³xxiv The policeman's power, symbolic of the state and criminal justice system, was untouched.

Fife's poetic narrative indicates that there are different risks for specific people in refusing subjugation. The stories of the wide range of abuse of children in residential schools, and the ongoing abuse of many Aboriginal women and children especially in the Canadian justice system, are located in racist and misogynist heritages of religious and social traditions.³xxv

In many women's experience as well as in the experiences of those who are “othered,” freedom to participate in the co-creation of shared meanings has consistently been thwarted by social roles, values and virtues that place them within hierarchies of domination and exclusion. In a liberative theology and ethics, the critical moral task is to uncover the massive social denial and distrust of the moral agency of all those who inhabit “varied positions of outsiderhood.”³xxxvi

Theologically, power is the capacity to act with God, to exercise one's moral agency, always rooted in community, which Ruth Smith declares is radical responsibility:

Agency involves responding to the needs, responsibilities, and choices within the constraints of our experiences and situations. Agency also involves the changing of historical conditions of our particular nexus of relations and the critical self-consciousness and activity through which we become aware of our relations and seek to change them...To become a moral subject is itself a moral task, if not the central moral task.³xxxvii

If this be the case, listening to Aboriginal women's stories of victimization and resistance, suffering, survival and hope is necessary in the healing journey; but simply validating that experience is not enough to refuse or relinquish control and domination.

Janet Jakobsen names three levels of relationality necessary in the moral labour of responsibility required for seeking right relations and the work of advocacy: the interpersonal;
subjective experiences linked with political realities; and the fundamental relatedness of all things. This moral labour has affinity with the teaching of various Aboriginal women's voices on their needs for making right relations.

To move back and forth across different levels of relationships provides various sites of critique necessary for critical awareness and responsible agency. Moral agency, when placed in the diversity of relationships, and the creativity of justice-seeking, enables confrontation of domination as well as maintenance of the type of critique justice is meant to ensure. xxxviii For example, Emma Laroque examines culturally appropriate models in alternative justice work among Aboriginal peoples that will not disregard victims' interests, particularly women's perspectives, in the name of 'restoring harmony' in Native communities. xxxix

When those in religious institutions hear stories of childhood deprivation and abuse in residential schools perpetrated by policies of state and complicity of churches, it becomes clear that many theologians and ethicists have done so because they have overlooked the ways in which our overall horizon of moral expectation is shaped by family patterns and the patterns of our first communities of intimacy. The keen sense of reality that so deeply affects moral development is the interpersonal, the so-called private sphere, where gender and sexual patterns as basic social patterns are learned and construed as given and “natural,” rather than as culturally and socially specific. xli

A social ethic capable of addressing the legacy of residential schools with its effects on generations who were not parented, or cannot now parent well because of the harm done, has to connect the personal and political, the private and public spheres. For religious institutions to realize their potential of being agents of justice and reconciliation, they need to learn about ways women are empowered to participate in shaping their own lives and their communities and to
advocate for their shaping of new relationships, structures and policies. For example, when theological ethics functions publically, women as specific others tend to fade away or become marginal references. However, women have deeply wide experience of working to tell the truth of their lives, to secure their own identities, to heal from trauma, and to acknowledge a history of suffering and hurt – all crucial steps towards reconciliation.

If religious institutions are to advocate for social, political, and economic resolutions adequate to restore right relations with those most wounded and burdened, they must learn to acknowledge that dominant theologies are not only racist but also implicated in state, nation, gender, class and sexual systems. For example, understanding Christianity's deep misogyny and consequent marginalization of women is also required to advocate for those in the margins, particularly women. “Nothing can be said to be “good news” for women, including those who are victims [and survivors] of the racist and classist dynamics of oppression, if a vicious Christian complicity in the historical oppression of women is muted or denied.” Therefore, women's struggles to claim and sustain life need to be heard and brought into public discourse as keen resources for resolving conflicts and finding new ways to relate as persons and peoples.

Advocacy, as one strategy for seeking justice and reconciliation, requires the creation of new relational spaces and a continual checking of strategies and assessment of the consequences of action with those who bear the burden. bell hooks insists that instead of meeting the “other” in the centre, as colonizer, those in the mainstream are called to meet the “other” in the margins:

This is an intervention. A message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category of colonized/colonizer. Marginality as site of resistance. Enter that space. Let us meet there. Enter that space. We greet you as liberators.

Here the colonizers are not only implicated in but are dependent upon the margins where
voices of others, including ancestors and survivors, can jolt us into an awareness of what is really going on in the current political economic context and help us to critically locate ourselves in a world where many are being forced to relinquish valued ways of life.

In responding to this challenge, some links are being made at the margins with Aboriginal communities, both within churches, between Aboriginal groups, and beyond in wider networks. Morally the claim of the other is rendered possible in being at the margins and making space for silenced and oppositional discourses in public. It is hoped that in this back and forthness, moral vision is enlarged and sustained.

For example, some Aboriginal women ask about “justice for whom?” For Patricia Monture-Angus, justice—as distinct from the machinations of white criminal law—must be seen to be a process where harmony and right relations are the ideal. She explains that

Aboriginal women have survived oppression, colonization and abuse. Now we seek recovery. *Recovery and healing will only come when we learn to walk in balance again*, with the men, with the leaders, with the children, with the Elders, and with the many nations that have come to this land. For me, seeking harmony is striving to reach a higher standard than mere justice.\(^{xliii}\) (emphasis added)

The ethical task of “walking in balance” relates to healing power, to promoting health, interdependency, and community; it refers to the balance and harmony attained as a way of life as a path to wholeness which goes far beyond the “mere justice” of the legal apparatus.

What ethical implications for advocacy does “walking in balance” hold? Balance has to do with power and harmony, with respectful regard, with including children and elders, women and men, honouring many nations and learning co-existence and co-operation. To live these values and vision requires naming all that harms relations, learning how to live with ambiguity as well as with some dignity and grace, and transforming structures of oppression and privilege into those of freedom and fulfilment.\(^{xliv}\) The aim of justice, therefore, is not to seek an ideal state of
distribution but to assess how the damage is done and to provide new beginnings for learning to walk in balance.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith, an Aboriginal women from Aotearoa/New Zealand, names criteria for participating in public discourse and working together as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. These include: to revision history; to acknowledge the unfinished business of those still being colonized and still searching for justice; to accompany priorities announced by aboriginal women and men; to heal; and to support land claims struggles as a way of shaping the future. Elly Haney also clarifies a critical and constructive view of justice as the moral and spiritual basis for action. In this ethical framework, justice is both liberation from oppression and violence, and transformation of structures and relationship toward more respectful, nurturing and creative patterns of behaviour. Relationality, walking in balance, interdependency, dignity, and moral agency are key moral norms in this work of restoring right relations among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

In short, advocacy is rooted in a critical epistemology where all moral thinking is considered partial and formed in specific social contexts. The work of advocacy places theological and other cultural traditions under scrutiny to reduce the temptation to make one's own context absolute and to relate across differences towards understanding roots of suffering and sources of hope. To work in solidarity requires development of alternative practices, narratives, theologies, and communities. Take for example, white Christian feminists, who when invited, will enter into alliances with Aboriginal women who may not perceive gender as their primary concern; they will also be mindful of appropriating another's traditions and in the process of alliance-building challenge assigned categories and power relations. Or note how the glossary of terms in Justice and Reconciliation defines “cultural loss” but not cultural genocide.
Why this omission? Whose voice has been silenced? Whose tradition is being protected?

If ethics is to be about more than refusing to be dominated, it is also then about refusing to dominate and working across differences. Some will have to deliver themselves from doing for others in altruistic fashion and answer Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz' call to recognise “common responsibilities and interests which necessarily arouse shared feelings and lead to joint action.”

Seeking right relationship is about making moral claims through a process of asking and responding, of being answerable to those who are unjustly treated and being willing to listen, to be transformed, and to act for change. It involves “untangling” those threads of relation which literally cut off breathing and voice, in households, political economic decisions, and spiritual beliefs and practices.

3) Healing Communities of Reflective Solidarity

To make space for marginalised voices simultaneously means building inclusive communities. The challenge of seeking right relations, given a history of imposed suffering, stolen land, broken trust, hearts and bodies, includes many ethical issues: of whose stories of injustice and from which perspective to listen, of how to discern together the meaning of justice and right relations, of means for atonement, reconciliation and forgiveness. This community-building requires self-critical awareness and the permanent risks of recognizing particularity and connection, of co-operation and sharing power, of conflict and ambiguous outcomes, all the while respectfully sharing sources of hope.

A particular challenge for restoring relations that heal and nurture life, justice and peace is the sharing and reception of spiritual gifts. As Achiel Peelman insists, while interreligious dialogue has become an important factor in the healing of Aboriginal peoples, it may also help the larger Canadian society deal more effectively with the brokenness of its non-Aboriginal
 Nonetheless, given the racist and patriarchal colonizing of Aboriginal peoples by church and state, as well as how these legacies live on in mainstream religions, there is hope in learning how to welcome spiritual and cultural resources that encourage justice, reconciliation and peace and that respect different histories, structures, and identities, and spiritual gifts. What gifts are being offered by Aboriginal peoples for edification of the whole body, to learn “to walk in balance”? How can they be well received and honoured?

The ongoing effort among First Nations to renew Native spirituality is evident as they aim to harness their resources and develop their capacities and communities. The traditional prayer in many Aboriginal cultures that summarizes human connection to all life is the phrase “All my relations.” This is at once spiritual and practical. It is a call to live with respect in creation in the circle of life, to attend to human needs for dignity, food, shelter, health, community, bodily integrity, nonalienating labour, and cultural and spiritual creativity. There is also responsibility in receiving Aboriginal teachings of the circle of life (a place where everyone is welcome and everyone is necessary to complete the circle as the basis of creation) to reshape all concepts and practices, theological and political, that exclude and marginalize some and harm the earth.

Christian churches are realizing that solidarity with First Nations’ struggles for land claims and self-government involves respect for traditional spiritualities. It also includes support for those Aboriginal Christians who wrestle with how to be both Christian and Native. For example, Nanette McKay names four gifts Aboriginal peoples learn and practice within the circle of life: generosity, patience, transformability, and consensus. Generosity is the secret of giving everything away and becoming more; patience, not acquiescence but practice of quietness, is the recognition that balance not force, propels transformation, and theologically patience is a trust
that our own createdness is beloved; transformability is awareness of the fluidity of the whole universe which eliminates the need for artificial boundaries and structures to trust that we were created fluid and dynamic; and consensus is the traditional basis for Aboriginal community, what the Anishnawbe describe as Pimadaziwin, the Good Life.

"The Good Life," she writes, “is a constellation of values which honours the fullness of life for the whole community." In Christian terms, the good life is understood through Jesus Christ who came that all might have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10). This contemporary Aboriginal theology reframes ethical virtues and norms for practicing religious life that in the Spirit of Jesus welcome all those in need of healing, justice and love. It also exposes the ongoing need for an ecclesial presence that counteracts virulent forms of exclusive fundamentalist Christianity that function as new forms of colonization of Aboriginal peoples.

The ecclesial work depicted here shares an assumption that spiritual life and the wider public sphere are genuinely connected. That is, for religious persons and institutions, like political persons and institutions, transformation comes through a genuine moral resistance to oppression and not through consensus on ideal principles for reconciliation. Obligations of engagement and advocacy for restoring relations are especially underscored in coalitional movements such as the Canadian Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative and its focus on Sacred Land, Sacred Earth. The Ottawa-based Aboriginal Rights Coalition works in partnership with Aboriginal peoples and community organization. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal spiritual leaders are present to deepen reflection on Aboriginal justice concerns. These radical ecclesially-sponsored, broad-based movements have provided other forums for public discourse of justice and reconciliation and influence the agendas of mainstream churches.

Conclusion
The key contribution for churches in keeping with the hopes of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples is this: to attend to justice and reconciliation in ways that embrace political economy (land claims, resources, and social infrastructure) as well as spirituality and culture in a reflective and compassionate solidarity. The struggle to understand and seek right relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples is also necessary to renew religious commitment to a public ecclesial role of raising moral concerns about injustice and the common good; it has potential to open spaces for more supple, hospitable, and pluralist forms of ecclesial and common life.

If religious institutions are not going to betray their stated allegiances to the neighbour/the other who stands as mutually in need, they will encourage a moral horizon of inclusive and healing communities in service of a new commons of civil society. Facing public moral deficits, renewed moral communities would themselves need to be created along lines that account for the deep and connected critique of patriarchy, of white supremacy, of cultural imperialism, and of the capacity of globalized economic power to re-colonize nature/land and peoples. Elizabeth Bounds depicts this vision as "a heterogenous public where different groups with different life experiences can participate in the policies affecting their lives." As George Erasmus co-chair of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples recently asserted, what is needed is a completely new relationship of Aboriginal peoples with the rest of Canada that builds up peoples, their capacities, and a shared future among peoples of many nations within a nation.

To build this participatory capacity for right relations, alliances are crucial:

Alliances have special characteristics: [first] they demand commitment; [second] they begin to break down dividing walls of hostility by forcing participants to address inequalities of power and unearned social advantages and to work through stereotyping
and suspicion toward honesty and trust; [third] they create a broader and more coherent challenge to oppression and violence; and [fourth] they set the context and condition for faithful theological and ethical reflection.\textsuperscript{lx}

In religious terms, the process of seeking right relations—or moving towards new relationship—is conversion to the “Other.” This other is not an object of charity or a salve for guilt but a means of grace where the divine is encountered in relationships of mutual healing and liberation. The theological basis, for instance, of the Healing Fund appeals to mutual solidarity. Simultaneously, as cumbersome legal matters proceed, it calls upon the wider church body to maintain connection with Aboriginal peoples who are subjugated and seeking healing both inside and outside the churches. The difficulty of engaging non-Aboriginal members of religious institutions and their congregations in social movements remains huge. Face-to-face relations are key nonetheless, especially because religious interaction is meaningful precisely when it draws upon our capacity to engage communicatively with another. Such openness, to going beyond alienated otherness and to taking risks of vulnerability towards relational empathy, is empowered and sustained in relations of compassionate diversity and with all living things.\textsuperscript{lx} Stan McKay announces this prophetic task: “The real challenge is to take that reconciliation [experienced in the circle of healing] out into the world when the world doesn't want to have any part of the process.”\textsuperscript{nlxi}
Endnotes

i. I am grateful to Cree poet Connie Fife for inspiration and to Susan Gingell who encourages me to read women's voices as sources of moral wisdom, in this instance, Fife. The introduction title is from “The Call,” Poems for a New World, (Vancouver, B.C.: Ronsdale Press, 2001), 12. I thank also the energetic audience for constructive discussion at my SCE presentation in Vancouver and the peer reviewers and JSCE editors for their careful work.

ii. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, vol. 5, (Ottawa: 1996), 97. Royal Commissions in Canada are a mechanism of liberal democracy whereby the state inquires officially into a matter of public concern, for example, the Status of Women, 1968-1970 and Aboriginal Peoples, 1991-6. They solicit a broad range of input and make a report with recommendations to aid the generation of more effective public policies and practices. A Royal Commission has wide-ranging scope, from ordering new research and studies to holding public hearings across the country for citizens and non-governmental organizations to participate. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was created in the aftermath of the August 1990 violent conflict at Kanehsatake (Oka) over a golf course expansion into land claimed as Aboriginal. A police officer was killed and armed Mohawk warriors stayed behind barricades for over 100 days. The United Church, which has Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal congregations there, reiterated its stand in favour of self-determination and of the urgent need to find just and non-violent resolutions. For highlights of the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, see www.inac.gc.ca/ca/ch/rcap/rpt/index_e.html.

iii. While my ancestors used the term “Indian,” in Canada today we speak of Aboriginal, First Nations, Native Canadian, and Indigenous, often interchangeably.

iv. Canada is both a colonized and imperialist nation. Its status as a cultural satellite of the United States makes us dependent and subordinate to American political, economic and cultural interests. And at the same time, for instance in relation to Aboriginal peoples and Latin America, the Canadian state is imperialist, attempting to create false unity among classes and cultures at the expense of different and diverse cultures, all in the name of increased security and wealth. See, for example, Judith Emberley, Thresholds of Difference: Feminist Critique, Native Women's Writings, and Postcolonial Critique (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) and M. Nourbese Philip, Frontiers: Essays and Writing on Racism and Culture, (Stratford, Ontario: The Mercury Press, 1992).

v. See Roger Hutchinson, Prophets, Pastors, and Public Choices: Canadian Churches and the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Debate, (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press for Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, Comparative Ethics Series Volume 3, 1992), 92. For example, in the highly charged political debate over the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline, Roger Hutchinson proposes a dialogical ethical method and assesses the churches' contributions in developing public awareness, advocacy of native people's position, and pressing ethical and religious questions throughout that case.
vi. Following a feminist liberationist approach to theology and ethics, I frame my treatment of seeking right relations, church, public, and community with specific interests: Where is engagement and accountability located? Whose concrete lives are represented? Is there a kaleidoscopic analysis of the causes of suffering and sources of hope? Are critical perspectives being developed? Do moral norms include relationality and interdependence, dignity and moral agency? Are private and public spheres connected? Does attention to justice embrace political economy as well as culture in a reflective and compassionate solidarity? See Elizabeth M. Bounds, Pamela K. Brubaker, and Mary E. Hobgood, “Welfare Reform: A War against the Poor,” in Welfare Policy: [feminist critiques], Elizabeth M. Bounds, Pamela K. Brubaker, and Mary E. Hobgood, eds. (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1999), 12-17.


viii. Connie Fife, op.cit.


8. “Religious institutions can make a unique contribution today and in the future for several reasons. They are physically present in most communities across the country, through their organizational structures they can participate in public discussions at every level of Canadian society, from the neighbourhood to the national scene. They can also engage in advocacy at the local level, particularly in cases where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are becoming polarized around conflicts relating to lands or resources.” Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, vol. 5, (1993), 97.

x. The term “residential school” only came into formal use in the 1920's prior to then such institutions were official called “industrial” or “boarding” schools. See Why the Healing Fund? The United Church Response, 2.


xii. Most of the schools were managed for the government on contract by four churches: Roman Catholic church through some of its orders, Anglicans, Presbyterian and United.
It is estimated that 100,000 children attended the schools, about twenty percent of all status Indian students. For example, the United Church of Canada participated in the operation of a maximum of 13 residential schools from the 1920's until the last school closed in 1969.


For example, relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples sharpened the vocabulary of Canadian law and public policy when a 1973 Supreme Court judgment acknowledged that the Nisga'a of British Columbia had aboriginal title to their traditional lands, based on their use and occupancy of those lands from time immemorial. The Nisga'a had never entered into treaties with the British colonial government of Canada and a resolution of the land question was achieved only after much waffling by the government in the signing of a treaty in 1998.

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Stan McKay uses the word genocide to account for the ongoing destruction of a people. “No one can explain to me the tremendous Indian population in the prisons, the large number of Native young people in juvenile detention centres or the overwhelming number of tiny babies being removed from Native homes and put in non-Native foster homes or adopted. This trading and exploitation of Native children is, for me, the final step in the genocidal process. In “The
Church Has Some History for which it must Repent," in *Stories of Survival: Conversations with Native North Americans*, Kathleen and Remelt Hummelen (New York, Friendship Press, 1985), 64.


xv. See, for example, Connie Deiter, *From Our Mothers' Arms: The Intergenerational Impact of Residential Schools in Saskatchewan*, (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1999).

xxvi. The 1998 *Moderator's Letter of Apology* from Bill Phipps to former students of United Church Indian Residential schools, and to their families and communities, reflects the growing awareness of the evil perpetrated over time as well as the commitment of the church to hear and help carry the burdens, whatever the cost. This most recent apology moves the manner of repentance from a general to a more face-to-face and tangible connection. For example, ways to assure survivors that their abuse was not their fault and that they have been deeply wronged are being explored as part of a healing process.

xxvii. The struggle over responsibility is currently ruled at 70% the government of Canada and 30% the United Church. Are the plaintiffs any further ahead given this ruling? David MacDonald, negotiator for the United Church thinks not. “If everyone thinks a solution has been found, who's going to challenge Ottawa to return to the negotiating table with an open mind?”


xxv. See for example, Connie Deiter, *From Our Mothers' Arms: The Intergenerational Impact of Residential Schools in Saskatchewan*; Anne McGillivray and Brenda Comaskey, *Black Eyes All of the Time: Intimate Violence, Aboriginal Women and the Justice System*; Jocelyn Proulx and Sharon Perrault, eds. *No Place for Violence: Canadian Aboriginal Alternatives*, (Halifax:
This term is from Cherrie Moraga, *Loving in the War Years* (Boston: South End Press, 1983).


See Eleanor Haney, *The Great Commandment: A Theology of Resistance and Transformation*, (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press), 1998. In relation to truth-telling as an aspect of self-criticism and accountability, Sharon Welch offers a pragmatic way to overcome the fear of and to live with moral and political ambiguity. She writes that “there are three criteria for the truthfulness of our analyses and strategies: (i) their actual effect on the lives of people, (ii) their openness to further critique and hence modification, and (iii) their resiliency in the face both of critique and unintended consequences—positive and negative, unpredictable opportunities for further acts of responsibility and creativity....Basically, we become ready to clean up after ourselves, to reevaluate actions, all with the style of humour and openness to failure.” *Sweet Dreams in America: Making Spirituality and Ethics Work* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 34, 123.


Ada Mari Isasi-Diaz, “Solidarity as Neighbour love in the 1980's” cited in Bounds, 120.

On the deep cultural epistemological rupture and consequent challenge to honour Aboriginal
spiritual gifts, Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes: "The arguments of different indigenous peoples based on spiritual relationships to the universe, to the landscape and to stones, rocks, insects and other things, seen and unseen, have been difficult arguments for Western systems of knowledge to deal with or accept. These arguments give a partial indication of the different world views and alternative ways of coming to know, and of being, which still endure within the indigenous world. Concepts of spirituality which Christianity attempted to destroy, then to appropriate, and then to claim, are critical sites of resistance for indigenous peoples. The values, attitudes, concepts and language embedded in beliefs about spirituality represent, in many cases, the clearest contrast and mark of difference between indigenous peoples and "the West" and which "the West" has not yet been able to decipher, understand or control ...yet." In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 74. See also Andrea Smith, "Walking in Balance: The Spirituality-Liberation Praxis of Native Women" in *Native American Religious Identity: Unforgotten Gods*, Jace Weaver, ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998), 178-198.


xliv. See, for example, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 171.


xlvi. *Sacred Earth, Sacred Community: Jubilee, Ecology and Aboriginal Peoples* (Toronto: CEJI, 2000) is the third volume of theological work by the Canadian Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative which as of July 1, 2001 is part of Kairos. See www.kairos canada.org.

xlvii. The Aboriginal Rights Coalition stands in the radical faith-and-justice tradition of Canadian ecumenism and the advocacy and educational mandate of its predecessor Project North (1975). It was conceived as a three-way partnership consisting of 12 participating churches and religious bodies, Aboriginal political organizations, and regional groups throughout the country. It works on public education and action programmes designed to support Aboriginal peoples, especially to recognize rights of Aboriginal peoples to land, treaties and self-determination; to enhance the economic and political bases of Aboriginal nations; to oppose the erosion of social rights, such as adequate housing, education, health care, and appropriate legal systems; and to seek and clarify the moral and spiritual basis for action towards Aboriginal and social justice in Canada. See www.home.istar.ca/~arc.

xlviii. See Norah McMurtry, "Churches Work on Right Relations with Aboriginal People," *Making Waves*, vol 1, no, 3 (Spring 2001), 24-27.


\textsuperscript{lxi}Stan McKay, in “A First Nations Movement in a Canadian Church,” in \textit{The Reconciliation of Peoples: Challenge to the Churches}, Gregory Baum and Harold Wells, eds., 187.