Reconciliation and the residential school

Paul Dyck

During the last decade or so, as Canada has attempted to reckon with its historical and its present treatment of Indigenous peoples, and particularly its treatment of those who attended Indian residential schools, I have looked on with some discomfort. The topic of reconciliation has been a significant focus recently here at Canadian Mennonite University, particularly in light of the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, and it seems a good time to describe this discomfort. I understand that I hold a minority view, but I trust that examining it might do some good, regardless of what readers might think at the end of the day.

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It is not easy to put my finger on the nature of my discomfort with how we think about the residential schools and their legacy. On one hand, I am not interested in defending the schools. At the same time, that is exactly what I want to do. Years ago, when I first read accounts by people who had been students in these schools, I was convinced that attending them involved and even comprised terrible deprivations. I have no confidence that I, having experienced even a suburban elementary school as traumatic, would have survived the breaking of family ties and every bond of intimacy and cultural orientation, which were matters of policy in these schools. I have profound respect for those whose resilience has brought them through this experience. I do not mean in anything that follows to minimize or simplify the residential school experience, or the experience of Indigenous people in Canada generally. Rather, I am concerned about the way the words "residential school" have now become loaded words, and I

am concerned that the particular way in which they are shameful words has the potential to blind us to important truths.

An architecture we still inhabit

Before I worked at CMU, and before I did my doctorate, I worked for a few years in Cree communities in Alberta. In a way, I actually did work in a residential school—or more accurately, in a former residential school building which was then the home of a small college where we taught everything from basic literacy to first-year university courses. The college was owned and operated cooperatively by a number of bands. The building had been—according to popular report—condemned. I also heard that every year, when the fire inspector came, the college's director met him out front and took him out for coffee. We weren't using the building because of a lack of funds. The bands had ample funds from oil and gas royalties, but deciding which band would get the campus on its land had proved impossible. In any case, from the first time I visited the place, I loved its bohemian feel. It was not beautiful, but it felt lived in and lively in a way that no new building could. It was haunted by memories, and reportedly by the ghost of a nun, but it was also living space. It was a place where people were learning and becoming stronger.

An old residential school building seems like it should be exactly the wrong place for such teaching, but that was not my experience. Instead, I had a visceral dislike for the new schools in the community, which seemed to be transplanted from the city. The old building felt truer. Truer to the realities of the situation, realities that included the fact that I was a kind of foreigner, a kind of enemy, a kind of friend-enemy.

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The people who were forced into residential schools have every right to an accounting, a full accounting. I have no quarrel with that. What I do object to is the way that reconciliation is being imagined through a repudiation of the residential schools. We are so fixed on casting out the residential schools as demonic that we cannot bring ourselves to acknowledge that the architecture of the residential

school is an architecture we still inhabit. I've been there in the flesh, but I mean something more: we're all there. And trying to leave cannot work and does not help.

Opening ourselves to bewilderment

One of the acknowledged problems of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is the great imbalance of the testimony—that there was so little testimony from those who ran the schools. (The TRC report does treat the staff of the schools with balance and respect, but that has been lost in the larger conversation.)[1]

The depth of this problem, though, seems to remain largely unfathomed. The hope seems to be, roughly speaking, that if enough white people listen enough to the testimony of the residential school survivors, some level of white understanding will be reached so that a new day of social justice will dawn. When we finally realize how much those who were forced into residential schools have suffered, then things will change.

The critical question is not, how did we end up doing something bad, but rather, how did we end up doing something bad even as we were trying to do something good? We need to understand this bewilderment, because we are still the same people, thinking in the same ways, especially when we are trying not to.

But here's the thing. What else we white people really need to understand is how people like us imagined and taught in these schools, how they were attempting to solve actual problems with what seemed a good approach. I am not talking about the abusers but about the teachers and administrators at their best. We need to open ourselves to their bewilderment. By bewilderment, I do not mean bewilderment at having become the bad guys to society in general. Rather, I mean the more elemental bewilderment of having spent their lives contributing to the good, only to find that on the whole it did not work. Their bewilderment at pouring themselves into a solution that, on the whole, made the problem more complex and worse.

To me the critical question is not, how did we end up doing something bad, but rather, how did we end up doing something bad even as we were trying to do something good? We need to understand this bewilderment, because we are still the same people, thinking in the same ways, especially when we are trying

not to. Like it or not, unless we can think of the residential school as something closer to normal, we are not going to get much insight and we're not going to be much good to anyone. My desire is that we would inhabit the space of the residential school and resist narrating it. The quickest way out of bewilderment is to begin naming things and taking control. And we will find ourselves once again telling a story into which our Indigenous brothers and sisters will need to fit. It will seem like a new story, but it will be the old story.

Reckoning with our present monstrosity

As much as anything, I'm concerned about our tendency to cast shame from one thing to another. Picking up on the work of Julia Kristeva regarding the abject, it seems to be the case that shame is here and it must reside somewhere.[2] We are (rightly) trying to remove it from Indigenous people, but we are doing so by moving it onto others, and those others inevitably are the people who actually did the work, the front-line workers. A whole set of people who devoted themselves to helping Indigenous people now have a status reminiscent of that of soldiers returning from Vietnam: we cast our shame on them, and they bear it. The teachers and administrators of the schools, though, like the Indigenous people before them, have priceless resources and knowledge that holds transformative power, and we cut ourselves off from it when we turn them into the abject other. Ironically, the harder we try to distance ourselves from the residential school legacy by condemning those who taught in and ran those schools, the more deeply we entrench ourselves in the worst traditions of those schools.

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The secret heart of our current order is that it desires an Indigenous victim. A victim to defend, yes, but a victim nonetheless. Such victimhood is produced when we assume the role of advocate for Indigenous people, against ourselves. Put another way, the former students of residential schools must talk through and against the deep damage that that project and its policies

caused, but when white liberals demonize those same programs and policies, something else is going on, something insidious. Unless white liberals remember that they speak in the same tradition that produced the residential schools, and that their most fundamental ways of thinking about the world still reside in those schools, there can be no possibility of reconciliation. We can't just switch sides, and if we think we can, all our positive sentiment is only a cover for an engine of dominance. We are the monster. I think of Jeremiah, the main character of Tomson Highway's novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, encountering his own potential to be Weetigo, the cannibalistic monster of the Cree world: an actual reconciliation can only follow a reckoning with our present monstrosity, not just with a past one. Evil is not so easily cast out.

So we find ourselves in an awkward spot. Does one apologize for running the residential schools? Obviously, yes. For what exactly? For several things in particular: the conscious and systematic attempt to suppress Indigenous languages and cultural ways, and the establishment of institutions that unintentionally made students profoundly vulnerable to abuse, and especially sexual abuse. But after that, things get complicated. When the residential school idea was invented, the Indigenous people in Canada were not understood to be flourishing, and in fact by any standards, many were not flourishing. Then as now, people saw education as a critical tool for improving life. Education itself is a treaty right. The inventors of the residential school aimed for the full participation of Indigenous people in Canadian political life. They did not aim for racial segregation, but putting Indigenous children in mainstream schools could not have been seen as a practical option.

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In retrospect, the insistence on an English Canadian monoculture was deeply mistaken, both ideally and predictively: between my mother's generation and mine, Canadian identity has shifted from an emphasis on perfect, unaccented English, to a vision of a country of many languages. My parents did not teach me their

first language, but my children are learning their mother's (Japanese). My point is that some of the worst damage to Indigenous culture was done by reasonable people thinking normally. I say this not as a defence but rather out of radical skepticism, and I think that it is a skepticism to which the church is called. The church cannot simply align itself to the normal thinking of reasonable people. Rather, the church must understand that sometimes we are at our worst when we think that we are at our best.

The skepticism to which the church is called

At the same time, we must allow our wounds to stay open. One medieval motif that stays with me is the image of the church proceeding from the wound in Christ's side: the wounded body of Christ is the salvific space of the church: in Christ's wounds we live. Or as George Herbert writes,

> *Love is that liquor sweet and most divine,*
> *Which my God feels as blood; but I, as wine.*[3]

Eucharistic theology meets real life in our response to wounds, ours and others'. Even now, Canada feels itself wounded and understands that the woundedness of Indigenous people is in some profound way the nation's woundedness. But even now, as we see the need for reconciliation, we rush to it, condemning the past and putting into operation what one friend of mine has called a "reconciliation industry," an industry dominated by lawyers and policies, and also an industry that many Indigenous people do not—and should not—trust. The present nation-building project is to reconcile, but anyone close to the wound will know that it is not going to heal on any nation-building timeline. The question is not how we will solve this problem but whether and how we will be present to each other's tragedies, even in our own irresolvably compromised positions, implicated in the wounding of the other. I do not know what other body besides the church can proclaim this message.

Why am I still committed to the church as the body that can address our present need? Ideally, because it most deeply disrupts the binary, making it impossible in the present moment to speak coherently of "us and them." But we must ask: what do we mean by church? I was struck recently by a well-intended church synod

motion proposing an act of reconciliation between the church and Indigenous people. How it is possible that we still draw this division, when for centuries there has been Indigenous Christianity in Canada? The dominant narrative insists on Christianity as a colonial imposition, and this has some obvious truth. But it ignores a long history of Indigenous Christian faith. For example, most of the Indigenous Anglican church in Manitoba was evangelized by Indigenous catechists, a fact that Indigenous bishop Mark MacDonald has made clear repeatedly and for good reason: the Indigenous church is not the property or the fault of the white church. Again, in the dominant narrative there is no room for the Indigenous church, and in some communities there is real tension between Christians and traditionalists. It seems to me that the white instinct is to feel bad about this, for what we have done, but to adopt this position is to be ashamed of Indigenous Christianity. Rather, let us deeply consider and live the theology of the church, acknowledging both the differences across the body and the unity of that body. The body of Christ which is the church is awkward, often embarrassing, and bears wounds that have been self-inflicted. It is tempting to close our eyes to it, to look to clean, well-dressed models. But they may just be another form of whitewashing.

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We inheritors of the European colonial legacy are both obsessively fixated on our guilt and feeling a desperate need for a scapegoat. We want to be the pronouncers of our own guilt, the makers of our own sentence. Let us rather walk alongside our Indigenous brothers and sisters, open to judgment, allowing our bewilderments to meet theirs. We might be surprised at how the conversation goes.

A prayer

Creator Lord, source and lover of life,

Let us always remember
that by your wounds we are healed.

Give us grace to acknowledge
the wounds we have received
and those we have made.

Give us grace to understand anew the whole church,
a body that trespasses the many boundaries of this world,
a body of strange fellowship.

Help us turn from our own judgment,
which is a judgment of death,
to await your judgment,
which is a judgment of life.

And finally,
make us partakers in your ministry of reconciliation.

Amen.

Notes

[1] See *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* at http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Final%20Reports/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf. The entire report is an important starting point for understanding the history and present legacy of the schools. See pages 14–15 in particular on the balance of testimony, and pages 121ff. on the staff of the schools.

[2] I have encountered Julia Kristeva's theory through Virginia Burrus's remarkable book, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

[3] George Herbert, "The Agony," in *George Herbert: The Complete English Poems*, ed. John Tobin (London: Penguin, 2005).

About the author

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