Commodity or common good?
A call to reconfigure land and identity on Turtle Island

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Religion and politics in Canada exist within the reshaped landscape of Turtle Island.[1] While that may seem an odd statement, it is an important one, because progress on many of the problems Canadians face in seeking a common good is thwarted by certain operative conceptions of land. And progress on many of the difficulties we face in seeking authentic Christian community is also thwarted because inherent within these conceptions of land are problematic understandings of what it means to be human. In colonial Canada we engage religion and politics from a particular place, a particular social location—under the influence of what theologian Willie James Jennings calls "a distorted vision of creation." Religion and politics have conspired to support a modern colonial agenda—connected to views of land and human identity—that continues to feed cycles of violence that victimize Indigenous peoples.

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A new map

Understandings of land and natural law are foundational to the European colonial project in the Americas. Requiring particular scrutiny are four legal and religious concepts: the Doctrine of Discovery, *terra nullius*, manifest destiny, and a distinction between general revelation and special revelation. The understandings of land implicit or explicit in these concepts are outworkings of what Jennings identifies as "a theological mistake so wide that it has expanded to cover the horizon of modernity itself."[2] After we examine these concepts, we will listen to community members of Mishkeegogamang First Nation as they talk about experiences of land and identity, particularly using the Ojibway concept of

taashikaywin (literally "where we live" and "who we are"). Their accounts will help us understand the far-reaching effects of these mistaken notions of land and identity.

Conceptions of land and natural law inform our politics, and certain notions lend themselves more readily to seeking a common good. If we care about a common good that embraces all of us, we need a new orientation to land. Or perhaps we need to recover an old one, informed by taashikaywin and by the biblical idea of *nahalah*. But essential to that recovery are the voices of Indigenous people: "The common good can only be discerned through active participation in the conversation by all the members of the community."[3] Yet hearing their voices is impossible as long as a dominant conception of land silences these host peoples. We must find our way out of this vicious cycle. We begin by briefly examining four concepts that have misshaped our society's dominant view of land.

Distorted views of land

The ***Doctrine of Discovery*** was articulated in a series of papal bulls formulated in the fifteenth century by the Catholic church in Spain and quickly adopted by France and other "Christian" nations. The papal bulls gave "Christian explorers" the right to lay claim to any land they "discovered" for their "Christian monarchs,"[4] and identified the conditions justifying seizing the land from people who were its non-Christian inhabitants. The doctrine legitimated European nations' efforts to gain property rights to the land and sovereign power over its native inhabitants. According to the Supreme Court of the United States, Indigenous nations' "loss of native property and sovereignty rights was justified . . . by 'the character and religion of its inhabitants . . . the superior genius of Europe . . . [and] ample compensation to the [Indians] by bestowing on them civilization and Christianity."[5]

The concept of ***terra nullius***—"empty land"—contributed to the triumph of the Doctrine of Discovery. Land was seen as a commodity that was free for the taking "if it is not occupied by white Christians."[6] Legal rights to the land were acquired through discovery, symbolized in acts such as planting a flag, building a settlement, or working the land.[7] Sir Thomas More provided this rationalization in his *Utopia*: "When any people holdeth a piece of

ground void and vacant to no good nor profitable use, keeping others from the use and possession of it," war to confiscate it is justified.[8] This justification became the basis for the development of nation states in North America.

But Indigenous people never gave up their lands, the land was not empty or vacant, and their connection to the land was expressed in covenant rather than domination. It was with the emergence of the idea of terra nullius that "all the cultures of the world were stripped of their humanity."[9] The mistreatment of land and people went hand in hand. The devaluation of Indigenous people occurred alongside the colonists' appropriation of the lands that once signified Indigenous identity—and alongside the shift to viewing that land as a profitable commodity the settlers considered theirs to possess.

Manifest destiny refers to belief that America is a special nation blessed by God and destined to rule the land and redeem the earth. This belief identified European newcomers to North America as a "chosen people"[10] given the "promised land" and destined by God to create a nation of perfect loyalty to him. Theodore Roosevelt's words reflect this view: "The settler and pioneer have at bottom justice on their side; this great continent could not have been kept as nothing but a game preserve for squalid savages."[11] Similarly, George Washington's 1789 inaugural address gives credit to the Christian God for the birth of the nation: "Every step, by which we have advanced to the character of an independent nation, seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency."[12]

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According to early Puritan clergy in New England, the pursuit of individual interest is blessed by God and contributes to the formation of a nation that is divine—a nation not unlike Israel, that is "blessed to be a blessing to the world." But far from blessing its promised land's inhabitants, the new nation treated them as Canaanites and Amalekites, worthy of annihilation if they were not converted.[13] Peter Berger has written that an emerging alliance between Protestant theology and liberal bourgeois culture made Christian-

ity in North America principally a matter of individual morality which contributes to the progressive improvement of society.[14] The violence that has accompanied these dramatic shifts in ideology and worldview cannot be overstated; its effects reverberate seismically across the reshaped landscape of North America today and in the racialized bodies of its inhabitants.

The theological distinction between general revelation and special revelation privileges knowledge about God that comes by supernatural means, through scripture (special revelation), over knowledge about God that comes through natural means, from creation (general revelation). This distinction set up a false dualism, which solidified the reshaped landscape of North America and reinforced the supposed superiority of "Christian" Europe. It reflects a distorted vision of creation, one that undervalues the place of nature in the way we live in the world.

These beliefs about European superiority were internalized theologically long before they were expressed in the settler Christian ideals of North America. Willie James Jennings suggests that the formation of a racial scale—white to black—developed as the new organizing principle for identity, as bodies became displaced from land. Because Europeans were the ones doing the describing, they focused on skin colour to create a hierarchy that defined identity apart from land.[15] This racial scale also contributed to violence against Indigenous peoples.

A new view of land, an ancient view of land

It is a radically political act to allow a different understanding of land or natural law to reorient our religious understanding in ways that shift our focus towards a common good. I would like to suggest that we adopt a new understanding of land that is—ironically—an old and deeply scriptural one. Land is at the heart of the political and religious injustice Indigenous peoples face in North America. What is equally true, but less present in our awareness, is that "land is a central, if not *the* central theme of biblical faith."[16] Yet rarely does the land itself get our attention. When it does, the lived reality of Christianity throughout the colonial era does not fit with Walter Brueggemann's assertion that the action of God "is in the land promised, not the land possessed."[17] Instead, a distorted understanding of land has focused

on possession and thus replicated conquest narratives and denied the humanity of Indigenous host peoples.

Norman C. Habel also finds resources for reorienting the way we think about land in the biblical narrative. There the Hebrew concept *nahalah*—which Habel translates as "portion," "share," "entitlement," "allotment," and "rightful property"[18]—witnesses to land-God-people all in a symbiotic, covenanted relationship. In particular, Canaan (but not just Canaan) is Yahweh's personal nahalah. In other words, it is Yahweh who holds the rights to land. The prophet Jeremiah conceives of nahalah as an extension of Yahweh's own being. The concept of nahalah expresses the idea that Yahweh-land-people are "united in privileged intimacy";[19] they are "destined to belong together."[20] The land and the people are Yahweh's share, his portion. Likewise, out of the overflow of Yahweh, the Israelites are also given a nahalah: Yahweh and a portion of Yahweh's land. The land is a gift, a conditional grant, given to Israel out of Yahweh's nahalah and held in a treaty/covenant with Yahweh that stipulates how Israel is to treat the land. It is important to note that "violation of this treaty can mean removal or extermination from the land."[21]

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Unfortunately, it remains difficult for newcomers to Turtle Island to see why this way of seeing land matters. We do not know the covenants or treaties our host nations have had with the land. Even though they have welcomed us into these covenanted, symbiotic relationships, we continue to view the land as an entity to be owned, possessed, and reshaped. Sadly, it is often our misguided readings of Old Testament texts about land that have perpetuated this theological mistake. Listening to the experiences of host peoples is vital to fostering our capacity for other ways of seeing the land and its human inhabitants.

"I am Taashikaywin"

Taashikaywin is an Ojibway word that means "land, our identity," or "where we live, where we belong—our home." As part of a qualitative research project for my thesis on land and identity, I

sat with community members from Mishkeegogamang and learned about taashikaywin.

"Well, that's the main thing, taashikaywin, eh?" the Anishinaabe elder said. Later, the former chief would tell me, "Taashikaywin is where we intend to be originated from—that's our identity. Taashikaywin is part of us, a part of our spiritual perspective. When I say 'part of us,' that means air, water, plants, animals, and spirituality. Taashikaywin is everything. It is who I am as you speak to me. I am Taashikaywin ya." With taashikaywin, land, personhood, and spirituality are inseparable.

Another community member commented, "Basically, it is where you do stuff. That's where I hunt, where I fish, where I live, where I go trapping." One man named taashikaywin as "a traditional cultural value area. For example, wild rice harvesting, moose hunting, blueberry picking, or sturgeon fishing down the river—there's only certain areas where you can go do that." He said,

> *It's a place where people migrated to in order to live really—it was a way to survive. In Anishinaabe culture we have the four seasons. In the wintertime, families would gather in one area so that they can challenge the winter together. Taashikaywin really means a place—a sense of belonging and a sense of knowing that you will survive within that area. . . . It meant the coming together of people, the coming together as one.*

Separation of land and people

The Anishinaabe elders told me stories of growing up on trap lines on the land. Adults shared stories of childhoods spent mostly on the land, which for some were interrupted by residential school. I began to understand that the youth are among the first generations not to grow up on the land in the way many of their parents did.

Willie James Jennings suggests that "the white presence first interrupted the connection of land to identity, and then very quickly reconfigured both."[22] The reshaping of land from taashikaywin into commodity—and the subsequent reshaping of what it means to be Anishinaabe came out with particular clarity in one community member's story:

> *Where I reside now is where I grew up as a child, . . . where I seen the Sixties Scoop happen,*[23] *as my older siblings were swept away in a loud bird in the sky, let's say—that's the way I understood it. In that area, we had names for . . . I don't even know what the name of my area is in Ojibway. I just know that it's Fitchie Lake because some prospector or somebody [re]named it. I remember the name of the white man that approached my dad [saying,] "Either you take these kids to the reserve—put them in school—or we'll take them away." That's how we ended up being on the reserve. My dad didn't want to lose his last small ones. When I came [to the reserve], I received a name. The commissioner gave my dad his name. But I already had a name. My name is Nuteemgeesic: the very first light you see in the morning. That name was given to me when I was nine years old. I had a task to do, and I completed that task. And I know that each individual Anishinaabe person in this community does have an Anishinaabe name.*

Disconnected from taashikaywin

The people I interviewed experienced the move onto reserve lands as disconnection from taashikaywin. An elder told me that taashikaywin is a sacred cycle, and that

> *without the connection to our traditional land and territories, we break that bond. If you break that cycle with an Ojibway person, that's the reason there's a lot of confusion and oppression. That's the reason why you see suicides going up, why you see people hitchhiking on the highway and on Front Street idling without knowing what to do next. 'Cause there's a cycle, a sacred cycle, that's been broken, and [there's] a very confusing spirituality too.*

Another community member told me, "Growing up here my whole life, I've always felt like I was really lost, like I have no purpose. . . . I feel like I'm supposed to do something, but I don't know what it is." Many people spoke of confusion and loss, especially with regard to the youth. One community member who

was raised on the land by her grandparents said, "Somewhere along the line, I think I could already see that we're losing it, losing our identity, because our children have become confused even to know and to understand the meaning of life: to respect life, and the person that you are; to find your purpose in life."

A distorted, commodified, and racialized reconnection of body to land

Community members drew sharp distinctions between taashikaywin and reserve life. One said, "This is not taashikaywin. This is colonization of the white man, and that's where drama unfolds." One member reflected, "Going by what my parents used to tell me, sure there was a reserve here, but they spent all their time out there. . . . But now everybody's on the reserve, and nobody is really out there anymore. So it's got a big effect on this generation. And when I think about it, it doesn't make sense: nobody goes out now; they're all right here." One community member summed it up succinctly: "Now there is a new tradition: money."

All the elders who spoke with me narrated the shifts that happened as the welfare system was introduced. Treaty number 9 was signed in 1905, and by the 1920s the area was opened to mining and resource extraction. When mines required electricity, without warning Hydro installed a dam that flooded out traditional food sources, burial grounds, gathering places, and homes.[24]

The elders' stories recount the forced separation of people from land, followed by the reshaping of land into a commodity, and the reshaping of identity into a racialized way of being and a commodified existence on the reserve, As Jennings asserts, it is the displaced body that comes to represent a natural state, and "from this position they will be relocated into Christian identity."[25] Documents from the 1930s describe the religious affiliation of "Osnaburgh Indians," naming all non-Christians as pagans.[26]

"Indian" is the political term that marks the shift from being taashikaywin to bearing a racial designation. Canada's "Indian Act" legislation not only reordered people's identities but also reordered land on the basis of this racial designation of Indigenous people as inferior. This process of transforming land and identity is ongoing.

Prophets of the land

I reiterate: religion and politics in Canada exist within the re-shaped landscape of Turtle Island. Rarely do we understand the political task of loving our neighbour as a task connected to our conception of land. Like the Anishinaabe experience of taashikaywin, the Haudenosaunee of the Six Nations speak of their formation out of the ground, of being brought to life through breath.[27] Their future generations are known as "the faces coming out of the ground." Land and people are not two distinct categories.

Norman Habel contends that as Jeremiah cries out over the breaking apart of nahalah, the prophet is expressing Yahweh's own anguish.[28] Idle No More, Black Lives Matter, Standing Rock protesters, and other land protectors today voice prophetic cries of anguish over this same breaking apart and its effects on the bodies of people of color. As Habel summarizes succinctly: the people suffer exile, and the land suffers desolation—but ultimately it is Yahweh who suffers both. Informed by the rich tradition of nahalah and taashikaywin, may we recommit ourselves to a common good born of an ancient vision of land, energized by the Spirit of our creator, who longs to reconcile and renew the whole of the beloved, groaning creation. After all, we are dust and to dust we shall return.

Notes

[1] Turtle Island is the name some Indigenous groups use for North America.
[2] Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 43.
[3] Stephen J. Pope, "Natural Law and Christian Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Robin Gill (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 93.
[4] Harley Eagle (director, Mennonite Central Committee Anti-Racism and Indigenous Relations), personal communication, March 13, 2013.
[5] Robert J. Miller, "The Doctrine of Discovery," in *Discovering Indigenous Lands: The Doctrine of Discovery in the English Colonies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4.
[6] Vandana Shiva, "Earth Rights Are Human Rights," Fragile Freedoms: The Global Struggle for Human Rights lecture series presented by the University of Manitoba Centre for Professional and Applied Ethics, Canadian Museum of Human Rights, and Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Winnipeg, MB, March 28, 2014.
[7] Boyce Richardson, *People of Terra Nullius: Betrayal and Rebirth in Aboriginal Canada* (Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre Ltd., 1993), 29.
[8] *The Utopia of Sir Thomas More* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 110; cited in Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, *Eco-Feminism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Zed Books, 2014), 32.

[9] Shiva, "Earth Rights Are Human Rights."
[10] Reginal Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 3.
[11] Shiva and Mies, *Eco-Feminism*, 32.
[12] Washington's inaugural address of 1789, quoted in Elizabeth M. Bounds, *Coming Together/Coming Apart: Religion, Community, and Modernity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), 31.
[13] There are historical records of Puritan preachers referring to Indigenous host nations as Amalekites and Canaanites. See Robert Allen Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," in *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada*, ed. James Treat (New York: Routledge, 1996), 99.
[14] Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1968); cited in Bounds, *Coming Together/Coming Apart*, 31.
[15] See Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 30–31.
[16] Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 3.
[17] Ibid., 27.
[18] Norman C. Habel, *The Land Is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 35.
[19] Ibid., 79.
[20] Ibid., 76.
[21] Ibid., 53.
[22] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 53.
[23] "The term **Sixties Scoop** refers to the practice of taking ('scooping up') children of Aboriginal peoples in Canada from their families for placing in foster homes or adoption beginning in the 1960s and continuing until the late 1980s"; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sixties_Scoop.
[24] Marj Heinrichs and Dianne Hiebert, with the people of Mishkeegogamang, *Mishkeegogamang: The Land, the People, the Purpose: The Story of Mishkeegogamang Ojibway Nation* (Kelowna, BC: Rosetta Projects, 2003), 201.
[25] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 22.
[26] The Department of Citizenship and Immigration, "Religious Affiliation of Osnaburgh House Indians," cited in Heinrichs and Hiebert, *Mishkeegogamang*, 201. "Mishkeegogamang First Nation, also known as New Osnaburgh, Osnaburgh House, or Osnaburgh for various settlements, or 'Oz' for short, is an OjibwayFirst Nation band government in the Canadian province of Ontario. Until 1993, the band was called the Osnaburgh First Nation"; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mishkeegogamang_First_Nation.
[27] Leanne Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Recreation, Resurgence and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2011), 23.
[28] Habel, *The Land Is Mine*, 87; see Jer. 4:19–20.

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