

## **Aboriginal Relation to Mother Earth: Dehonian Reconciliation in North America**

*The participation in the Seminar An Economy for all led to a reflection of the impact of Gael Giraud's Common Goods theory on Dehonians living in North America. Because of recent events regarding the relations with the aboriginal peoples in Canada, the North American Dehonian Theological Commission opted to reflect on our relationship to the common good of the earth, recognizing the different perspectives offered by the aboriginal peoples and the settlers.*

On May 23, 2021, there was a report on the major networks in Canada of the discovery of two hundred and fifty unmarked graves of indigenous children on the property of a former Indian residential school in Kamloops, British Columbia. The report shook the country and made Canadians newly aware of a dark moment in their history – what became known as Canada's cultural genocide of its original nations.<sup>1</sup> It also made urgent a renewed effort to implement the ninety-four calls to action of the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada report. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, initialed in 2008, dealt mainly with the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. Between 1830 and 1996 the Government of Canada seeking to assimilate the aboriginal nations into the two primary settlers' cultures took 150.000 aboriginal children from their homes and settlements and placed them in residential schools. Commonly these schools were far removed from their aboriginal homes. The government had designated mainly Christian Churches to run these residential schools.<sup>2</sup> This removal of children from their homes had a deep psychological and cultural impact on aboriginal nations and has become a major stumbling block to the relations between the aboriginal peoples and the

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<sup>1</sup> The paper addresses the situation of the relation of the indigenous peoples to the settler population in Canada. At the time of writing, the issue is just beginning to come to the fore in the United States. In February 2023 the archivists for U.S. Congregations of Religious Men were requested by the U.S. Department of the Interior to make available archival materials on their involvement in Native American Boarding Schools. The religious archivists said in their note: "While religious involvement in the schools often came from good intentions, the impact of the policy has been widely recognized as one of cultural genocide and intergenerational trauma." (North American Boarding Schools and Religious Archives: A Brief Resource Guide," p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> The first schools were established in 1830. Their main purpose was to convert indigenous children to Christianity and to strip them of their culture, their values and social behaviours, allowing them to be assimilated into Canadian society. The last residential school Kivalliq Hall in Rankin Inlet closed in 1996.

settlers. The Truth and Reconciliation report outlined the scars from this displacement. It made clear that Canada cannot go ahead as a nation, as a people, unless it returns to its roots, uncovering the colonial past of Canada and reset the relationship of the settlers with the original peoples. The peoples of Canada have become painfully aware of the impact the process of reconciliation will have not only on their relationship to the First Nations but also to their relationship to the land.

There was an almost immediate repercussion of this recent uncovering of the past. Throughout the country the practice was initiated of acknowledging at the beginning of meetings – also liturgies – that this gathering was taking place on undeeded territory.<sup>3</sup> This means that this territory where the meeting was taking place had not yet been subject to a treaty between a particular indigenous nation and the Crown. Prior to 2022 there were 11 Numbered Treaties, mostly in Western Canada, and 26 modern treaties signed between 1975 and 2022. The treaties cover 40 percent of Canada’s land mass. It means that 60 percent is still undeeded. The Canadian Government has promised to give priority to negotiations with the other First Nations to settle the residual claims. It is important to note that these treaties deal with all sorts of matters such as the ownership and use of land, water and natural resources, the management of these resources, environmental protection, economic development, governing structures, employment, and capital transfers.

The discovery of unmarked graves on the properties of the former residential schools sharpened the resolve to deal with the destructive experiences. The first focus became the implementation of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement – the largest class-action settlement in Canadian history – seeking to reconcile the former students and their families and communities with the colonial settler communities of Canada. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission had already identified this experience of the residential schools as a “cultural genocide”. In 2008 the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement had already led to a formal apology by the Prime Minister of Canada. The report had clearly memorialized the experiences of the so-called survivors of these schools. However, the report on the

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<sup>3</sup> Becca Whitla, “The Theological Challenge of Territorial Acknowledgments in Liturgy”, *Worship* 96 2022, p.55 -74

Residential Schools' experience reached much deeper and requires a much more incisive shift of perspective in Canada. And it is upon this that I want to reflect in this paper.

The Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission<sup>4</sup> calls for a radical shift of perspective: reconciliation between the First Nations and the settlers. One of the first reactions to the report was the following announcement from the Prime Minister:

that Canada will work with leaders of First Nations, the Métis Nation, Inuit, provinces and territories, parties to the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement, and other key partners, to design a national engagement strategy for developing and implementing a national reconciliation framework, informed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendations.

This “national engagement strategy for developing and implementing a national reconciliation framework” is much more than seeking to find ways to deal with the harm caused to individual aboriginal people at the residential schools or with the discovery of unmarked graves. Reconciliation is a process of healing of relationships. The process, the commission says, is about “public truth sharing, apology, and commemoration that acknowledge and redress past harms”. The healing of memories of the survivors and a public acknowledgement of the harm inflicted became movingly expressed in the apology to the assembled First Nations in Maskwacis, Alberta, by Pope Francis on July 25, 2022, where he said: “I am sorry. I ask forgiveness.” The apology was only a prelude to the opening up of another dark presence in this history: the Doctrine of Discovery.

### *1. The mental attitude of colonialism*

When I studied Canadian history at the University of Ottawa in 1961, I found it somewhat surprising that this history began with the arrival of Europeans to Canada. The first historical narratives concerned John Cabot's explorations of the coasts of Newfoundland and North America in 1497 and the three exploratory journeys of Jacques Cartier of the Saint Lawrence

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<sup>4</sup> The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in six volumes was published in December 2015 (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company Ltd., publishers).

River starting in 1534, and the voyage of Samuel de Champagne and with the settlements of the French explorers on the Island of Saint-Croix in Passamaquoddy Bay, Hochelaga and Quebec. Canadian history began with the discovery of Canada by Christian Europeans who because of the so-called Doctrine of Discovery could lay claim of these lands for King Henry VII of England and later for the king of France.<sup>5</sup> This version of Canadian history was a colonialist version of history. It read the history of Canada from the perspective of the European exploration and claim on this land. It was the understanding of these early explorers and those who sponsored them that because of the Doctrine of Discovery, the first European Christians who “discovered” this land could lay claim to the possession of these lands. In this case, the country later known as Canada, became a possession first of the king of France and later after the Treaty of Utrecht (1713) a possession of the king of England. There was no consideration given to the peoples who lived on these lands and who expressed their ownership in ways not recognized by the colonists. The colonists designated these lands as “terra nullius”, a land belonging to no one. Through the Doctrine of Discovery, the original inhabitants lost their claim to these lands.<sup>6</sup>

The Doctrine of Discovery has become the foundation of international law even though it has been repudiated by the United Nations Declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples of 2007. The declaration established that indigenous peoples have an inherent right to their ancestral lands and a right not to have their lands taken from them without their free, prior, and informed consent (Articles 4,5,18,19, 20, 23, 33).<sup>7</sup> Until now this decision of the United Nations has not been fully acknowledged in Canadian law. The default owner of the land and the holder of legal jurisdiction in Canada remains the crown. In the *R v Sparrow* case of 1990,

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<sup>5</sup> At the time (1961) and even today the much earlier encounter of the Norse to Vinland in the 11<sup>th</sup> century had not yet entered the historical narrative. Nor did it have the same impact.

<sup>6</sup> The doctrine of discovery of land by European nations became international law, recognized even today by many countries. It based on three papal Bulls (*Dum Diversitas* (1452) *Romanus Pontifex* (1455) and *Inter Caetera* (1493)). These two Bulls gave Spanish and Portuguese monarchs the right to lands and jurisdictions over any lands that they discovered, based on the idea that the spread of Christianity to non-European peoples gave them the right to do so. In a statement on March 30, 2023 the Vatican rejected that this theory was not a part of the Church’s teaching: “The Catholic Church repudiates those concepts that fail to recognize the inherent human rights of Indigenous peoples, including what has become known as the legal and political ‘doctrine of discovery’”

<sup>7</sup> The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada asked the Churches to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery. In 2016 there took place the *Long March to Rome* at the end of which the participants formally asked Pope Francis to rescind the “Bulls of Discovery.” But no public action was taken.

the Supreme Court of Canada refused to overrule the Doctrine of Discovery. It stated: “It is worth recalling what while British policy towards the native population was based on respect for their right to occupy their traditional lands, [...] there was from the outset never any doubt that sovereignty and legislative power, and indeed the underlying title, to such lands vested in the Crown.”<sup>8</sup> It meant that if there was to be reconciliation it meant a reconciliation of the Aboriginal Peoples with the sovereignty of the crown. Their inherent right to the land until this day has not been acknowledged, although the land rights of indigenous peoples persisted in law despite the assumption of sovereignty by the settlers.<sup>9</sup>

For the aboriginal peoples this Doctrine of Discovery is unacceptable. They see themselves as the First Nations. Prior to the so-called “discovery”, they were the people living on this land, “owning” it in a way not recognized by the Europeans. For the aboriginal peoples these newcomers were “settlers”: they were guests to the land. Colonialism reversed this view. One of the foundational pillars of the British North America act of 1867 was to give the founding members of the Canadian Federation the exclusive control of the lands and the peoples. For this reason, the first thing that the Canadian Government must do, according to the Truth and Reconciliation Report, is to “repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous peoples and lands and must reform those laws, policies, and litigation strategies that rely on such concepts”.<sup>10</sup> The report furthermore calls “upon the church parties to the Settlement Agreement, and all other faith groups and interfaith social justice groups in Canada who have not already done so, to formally adopt and comply with the principles, norms, and standards of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a framework for reconciliation.” In the pre-amble of Bill C-15 the Canadian Government has accepted that this doctrine of discovery was “racist, scientifically false, legally invalid, morally condemnable and socially unjust.” Bill C-15 officially passed on June 16, 2021.

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<sup>8</sup> *Sparrow*, p. 1103.

<sup>9</sup> The abovementioned papal bulls became the foundation of international law but did not take away the anterior rights of aboriginal peoples.

<sup>10</sup> Call to Action # 48.

The practical repercussions are far from being worked out. The colonialist mindset is difficult to budge.

## 2. *Two different relations to the land*

What is at stake in Bill C-15 and in the Call to Action # 48 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is an attempt to reconcile two radically different understandings of the relationship to the land and ownership of the land. For the aboriginal peoples the relationship to the land is not one of private property which developed in Europe in the beginning of modern times. All of the Western notions of rights – including property rights – have come about with the gradual stripping away of the rights of the Magna Carta in the 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>11</sup>. With its emphasis on private ownership of property and resources, capitalism is far removed from the underlying vision of the land of aboriginal peoples. The capitalistic system that governs Canadian ownership is monopoly capitalism. In monopoly capitalism ownership is not absolute. All ownership is conditioned by limitations imposed by laws. But these settler laws have basically disowned the First Nations. The limitations on ownership have not prevented the massive accumulation of wealth by fewer and fewer people. Capitalistic economies have shown increasing inequality of ownership.<sup>12</sup> Transnational corporations have created a process of globalization which has basically left the aboriginal peoples out of the economic exchange and placed them at outer edge of economic activity. The governments have promoted a free market where the distribution of goods is determined by the profit motive and private interest. Government interference in economic activities is avoided, if possible. This capitalistic system has not benefitted the Aboriginal peoples. They may have sovereignty over the lands of their reserves, but that sovereignty has not been economically beneficial. It has excluded them from an equitable benefit from the land. No wonder that they ask how the settlers have become so rich and they have so little.

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<sup>11</sup> Gael Giraud, *Composer un monde en commun : Une théologie politique de l'Anthropocène* (Paris : Seuil, 2022) p.81-114.

<sup>12</sup> See F. Alvaredo, T. Atkinson, T. Piketty and E. Saez, *World Top Incomes Database* (<http://topincomes.parisschoolsof economics.eu>).

For the aboriginal peoples this land was given them by the Creator, and they were given the task to safeguard the land: Mother Earth. Even prior to the arrival of the settlers, the aboriginal peoples did not *own* the land. It was a gift from the Creator. For them the relationship to the land is their most important relationship. As Jeanette Armstrong of the Okanagan Nation says: “In the Okanagan, our understanding of the land is that it is not just that we’re part of the land, it’s not just that we’re part of the vast system that operates on the land, but that the land is us. In our language, the word for our bodies contains the word for land.”<sup>13</sup> It means that it is almost impossible for the aboriginal peoples to conceive of private ownership of the land, as Westerners do. That is why they abhor the way the settlers can gouge the earth with big machinery, scar the earth as in the tar sands of Alberta or the ways of modern agriculture. The earth gives us food and riches, but it remains a gift which humans must share with others. The earth must be respected as our “Mother.” For this reason, individuals cannot own the land. It is a gift that we must respect.

Aboriginal people enter the bush or nature with great care. They are always observant of the presence of power. Everything that is unusual is a possible manifestation of this power: an unusually high, crooked or lone-standing tree; an unusual rock; an animal acting strangely; a sudden appearance of a bird; a unique encounter with an animal; and extraordinary events, such as a dead branch landing in front of a hunter, a falling rock coming to a halt in front of you or seeing an eagle feather falling from the sky. From these events, Aboriginal people draw messages. Such events are signals of the Great Spirit. As Walking Buffalo, a Sioux, said, “Do you know that trees talk? Yes, they talk; they talk among themselves and to you if you take pains to listen.” If people know how to listen to this force, it is beneficial. Not to be attentive may lead to destruction and even death.

Each person has only a certain amount of this power: not enough to survive on his or her own. For this reason, people must search constantly for new power, to surround themselves with objects or be in places where this energy is present. It is found mostly in nature, which is an infinite reservoir of this energy. That is why it is important to have a helper Spirit, a power in nature (a rock, a mountain, a tree, a special place) with which people make a pact – usually by giving a gift –

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<sup>13</sup> As it does in the biblical tradition where “Adam” is red earth from which he was made.

so that this spirit assists them when they are in need. Aboriginal peoples are always careful when approaching these Spirit-filled places or objects. They will purify themselves beforehand. This is done especially by smudging.<sup>14</sup>

This spiritual force is pervasive in all things. For most Aboriginal people, the spirit force is fluid. It is there at specific moments. For example, it is there when the eagle is in flight high in the sky, but not when the eagle is asleep. Asked whether stones are alive, or touched by spirit, an Ojibwa elder replied, “No! but some are.” Aboriginal peoples believe in a Great Spirit who inhabits all things: rocks, land, water, plants, animals, fish, birds and people. They encounter these forces in everything, They often address this Great Spirit as the Creator. For them there is a highest God, the Creator, who is one.<sup>15</sup> Their universe is a complex assembly of powers or spirits – small and great, beneficial and dangerous. Humans do not control these spirits.<sup>16</sup> To live, humans must ally

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<sup>14</sup> Serge Bramley, *Terre sacrée* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1992) p. 36-44.

<sup>15</sup> Aboriginal traditions, like those of most indigenous religions, are oral traditions. Aboriginal peoples rely on memory and memory keepers – people who have received the sacred stories and myths from the elders and other spiritual leaders. There are few written texts, few authoritative books. The traditions are kept alive by being told by elders and by being acted out continuously in the rituals of life. During the time when Aboriginal customs and spirituality were being actively suppressed by the government and by the churches of Canada, the memory went underground. While outwardly compliant with the attempt to suppress, many communities kept their traditions alive in secret. And so, many Aboriginal peoples who have been Christian for a long time also practice traditional ways. There are at least fifty-six aboriginal traditions in Canada.



<sup>16</sup> *Shaman's ride* is an image created by the Anishinaabe's artist Norval Morrisseau. In this painting a person being given a spirit-ride on a two-headed bird with a smiling fish in its stomach. The rider and the bird are surrounded by a closed circular line of power held together with three mysterious spirit-circles. For Morrisseau all things are held together by spirit.  
[www.kstrom.net/isk/art/morriss/art\\_morr.html](http://www.kstrom.net/isk/art/morriss/art_morr.html)



themselves to these spiritual powers, to keep harmony between the different forces. That is why humans need to learn how these powers act.

The aboriginal spirituality does not start with a statement of belief in a God who created them. They start with what the people experience of this creation. Aboriginal peoples believe that the world around them is always changing from within. The forces of this transformation, which live among us and within us, seem to work independently from one another. They oppose, collide with, chase, flee from and unite with each other in a constant movement. They show themselves in the rising of the sun, in the movement of the clouds, in the coming of the first frost, and in the growth of plants and trees. For Aboriginal peoples, these forces derive their power from a common origin. In other words, the same energy inhabits things.<sup>17</sup> Learning the power of each thing is central to Aboriginal life. The rituals of Aboriginal peoples reveal this spirit as it interacts with humans.<sup>18</sup>

The arrival of Europeans, in the words of Black Elk, a Sioux spiritual leader and Catholic, broke the sacred circle of life: “The Wasichus [white men] have put us in these square boxes. Our power is gone, and we are dying, for the power is not in us anymore.” When he speaks of “square boxes,” Black Elk refers to the different ways in which the Aboriginal peoples were approached by the “white men.” They were to be “civilized,” that is, to adopt European ways. They were to be “assimilated,” that is, to drop their differences. For this reason, they had their children taken away, sometimes by force, and placed in residential schools so that they would unlearn the ways of their people. They were to be “integrated,” that is, to accept the same values as the white people. They were placed on reservations and had little power over their own lives.

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<sup>17</sup> The Siouian peoples of the plains call this energy *Wakan*. The Iroquois call it *Orenda*. The Algonkian-speaking peoples call it *Manitou*.

<sup>18</sup> This understanding of the earth is close to the Judeo-Christian understanding of creation. According to the Judeo-Christian notion, creation of the earth is a relation to God not an ownership. At most humans are stewards of the earth. Hence, also in Judeo-Christianity there is never an exclusive ownership of goods and of the earth. The earth exists for the sake of the common good. In the Christian tradition there is a universal destination of goods or a common stewardship. The Catholic tradition maintains a right of private property as a way of assuring that each one can meet his or her private needs. And if it is given to all equally.<sup>18</sup> Hence, ownership is always subject to the well-being of all. Like in the native traditions, the earth has a direct relationship to the creator.<sup>18</sup> It has its own dignity that is not derived from humans but from itself.

In recent years, however, the situation has changed. In 2008, the Canadian government solemnly apologized for the federal effort to wipe out Aboriginal culture and assimilate the Aboriginal peoples into European ways. On behalf of the government, the Prime Minister of Canada, Stephen Harper, asked “the forgiveness of the Aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly,” and added, “We are sorry.” In part, this apology was due to the increasing interest and success of Aboriginal Canadians to rediscover their traditional spiritual roots. When in 2022 Pope Francis travelled to the traditional lands he expressed deep sorrow for what Christians, and particularly Catholics have done: “I am sorry, he said, I ask forgiveness, particular for the way in which many members of the Church and of religious communities cooperated, not least through their indifference, in projects of cultural destruction and forced assimilation promoted by the governments of that time, which culminated in the system of residential schools.”<sup>19</sup>

### 3. *Reconciliation: the role of treaties*

For reconciliation to take place between the aboriginal peoples and the settlers, it will be necessary to reconcile the difference between the aboriginal view of nature and their relation to the land and the understanding of ownership and private property on the part of the settlers. In the *Dialogue Guide of the Jesuit Forum for Social Faith and Justice* we read:

European writers and politicians often arranged racial groups in a hierarchy, each with their own set of mental and physical capabilities. The ‘special gifts’ of the Europeans meant it was inevitable that they would conquer the lesser peoples. Beneath the Europeans, in descending order, were Asians, Africans, and the Indigenous peoples of the Americas and Australia. Some people held that Europeans had reached the pinnacle of civilization through a long and arduous process. ... Through a civilizing process, Europeans could, however, raise the people of the world up to their level.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Pope Francis’s apology to the First Nations at Maskwacis, Alberta, on July 25, 2022.

<sup>20</sup> *Listening to Indigenous Voices: Jesuit Forum for Social Faith and Justice.*

Because the indigenous peoples were not using the land according to European standards, the land was taken over by the settlers. This "civilizing process" has led not only to the ecological disaster facing North America but also to the immense ethical issue of the inequality of reaping the economic benefits of the earth. The impasse of the aboriginal relation to the earth and the settlers' concept of possession of the land led not only to the "Indian Act" of 1876 but also to the severe impact on the economic well being of the first nations. The right of conquest and the Doctrine of Discovery have become so settled in the conscience of Canadians that it will be difficult to abrogate it from their consciousness. Philosophically it is difficult to harmonize the relation of the aboriginal peoples to the earth with the economic order of the settler population. How to resolve it? The Commission Report opens up a practical resolution to this economic dilemma. What it proposes is not to act as if the settlers never arrived. There is no demand to return to the original moment of encounter. In other words, no attempt is made to resolve or mitigate the ethical disproportion. Only a political solution is offered. The "assimilation policy" of the residential schools may have been rejected, but the underlying clash of the incompatible relations to the earth was not resolved. That is why the Commission did not touch on the provisions of the "Indian Act"<sup>21</sup> with its provisions for the governance of the reserves.

When the Commission Report talks about Reconciliation, it recognized that the basis for the relationship with the settlers would have to be based on a process recognized by the aboriginal peoples, namely, a treaty between the Native band and the Crown. These treaties were an age-old way of dealing with conflicts by the Indigenous Peoples between their nations. Without Treaties, the Aboriginal peoples maintain, Canada has no legitimacy as a nation. The Aboriginal peoples understand Treaties as a sacred obligation that commits both parties to maintain respectful relationships and share lands and resources equitably. That is why the Aboriginal peoples hold that the Royal

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<sup>21</sup> The long title of the Act is "An Act to amend and consolidate the laws respecting Indians" passed in 1876. The Act defines how the Government of Canada interacts with the 614 First Nation bands in Canada. It has been amended many times since 1876. It defined who is a "registered" or "status" native, the election of Councils and chiefs to govern the reserves, and the power of band councils and ownership of the land. There have been many attempts to amend the Act or even to repeal it, but it is still in force today. According to the Act: "No Indian is lawfully in possession of land in a reserve unless, with the approval of the Minister, possession of the land has been allotted to him by the council of the band" (Indian Act # 20)

Proclamation of 1763, in conjunction with the Treaty of Niagara of 1764, are the legal and political foundation of Canada, not the despised “Indian Act” nor the Act of Confederation in 1867. What the First Nations seek today is a “nation to nation relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the crown.” A proclamation to this end “would ... reconcile Aboriginal and Crown constitutional and legal orders to ensure that Aboriginal Peoples are full partners in Confederation, including the recognition and integration of indigenous laws and legal traditions in negotiations and the implementation processes involving treaties, land claims and other constructive agreements.”<sup>22</sup> Treaties are not intended to change ownership, giving up their relation to the land or a right to do with the land as one pleases.<sup>23</sup> Aboriginal peoples maintain that the right to self-determination<sup>24</sup> is a central right for indigenous peoples from which all other rights flow. While the settlers considered the treaties as an agreement of the aboriginal peoples to sell or extinguish their land rights, such was not the understanding of the aboriginal peoples.<sup>25</sup> The lands were never ceded; they were to be shared: treaties were intended to create mutual recognition and respect, not land transfer.

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<sup>22</sup> Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996 stated: “The parties to a Treaty need not surrender their fundamental cultural precepts in order to agree to coexist. They need only communicate their joint desire to live together in peace, to embody in their own laws and institutions respect for each other, and to fulfil their mutual promises.” The commission insisted that the recommendations be fulfilled by 2016. The process, however, has not been completed.

<sup>23</sup> Treaties are “a set of solemn, oral and mutual promises to coexist in peace and for mutual benefit... Indian Treaty Nations naturally approached the Treaties they made with Europeans on the same basis as the Treaties they made with each other...To the Treaty Nations, the making of a Treaty affirmed their nationhood and their rights to territory. They created sacred relations of kinship and trust.” *Canada, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Partners in Confederation: Aboriginal Peoples, Self-Government, and the Constitution*, (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 1993).

<sup>24</sup> S. James Anaya, UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: “Self-determination requires confronting and reversing the legacies of empire, discrimination, and cultural suffocation... to build a social and political order based on relations of mutual understanding and respect”

<sup>25</sup> A good example of this mutual misunderstanding can be found in the Douglas Treaties covering Vancouver Island between 1850 – 1854: “The condition of our understanding of this sale is this, that our village sites and enclosed fields are to be kept for our own use, for the use of our children, and for those who may follow after us; and the land shall be properly surveyed hereafter. It is understood, however, that the land itself, with these small exceptions, becomes the entire property of the white people for ever; it is also understood that we are at liberty to hunt over the unoccupied lands, and to carry on our fisheries as formerly.”

According to the aboriginal peoples, reconciliation will be a much more complex renegotiating of the historical relationships. It will also imply reparations for historical injustice. This reparation must include not only an apology, but also financial redress, legal reform, and policy change, and more specifically the rewriting of the national history and public commemoration. As is clear from this, reconciliation will be a multi-generational journey that involves all Canadians.

#### 4. Reconciliation with the Churches

The Churches who played such a central role in the residential schools were assigned a central role in the reconciliation process. In the 1980's various denominations of the Christian churches outside of the Catholic church, apologized for their participation in the assimilation process. By running the Residential Schools, they realized they had given moral justification to the colonization of other peoples' lands and the assimilation process. The Churches had become compromised in the European strategy of spiritual and cultural conquest. They had become part of the European colonial project. Assimilation to the white man's culture took place through the proclamation of the Christian message. The assimilation process was a dismal failure. Reconciliation is the only way forward.

For Dehonians in North America there is the additional recognition that Léon Dehon was deeply supportive of the colonial project of Europe and the role of missionaries in this project of "implanting faith in its regions" (CH 1890/68) He berated Spain for not sufficiently supporting this role by refusing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to call upon missionaries – "their best agents of influence" (CHR 1901/85) – to collaborate with colonialist project (CHR 1890/78; CHR 1901/85)<sup>26</sup>. Dehon calls this evangelization of the aboriginal peoples a "crusade" and a "conquest" (CHR 1892/167) For him colonialism and Church were inseparably united. He saw it as an opportune field of action also for emigrants to countries like Canada (CHR 1899/160). In this he was clearly a Frenchman of his time.

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<sup>26</sup> In 1890 he writes in *Le Règne*: "If only our governments understood better the civilizing influence of our missionaries" (CHR 1890/78)

The work of reconciliation is an arduous process. It relies on a lot of good will and generosity of spirit. It is not clear whether there will be enough good will to work out the numerous treaties that still need to be made. Thus far the existing treaties have had little impact on the way Canadians have incorporated aspects of the Aboriginal relationship to the land. The initial steps of the process of reconciliation have been limited to the request for an official apology from the Canada Government and the churches, acknowledging that they have inflicted suffering on the aboriginal peoples. From 1986-1998, all four Christian settlement churches of Canada have offered apologies or statements of regret in one form or another, for their attempts to destroy Indigenous cultures, languages, spirituality. Because of the understanding of “local church” by the Roman Catholic Church, there was no single spokesperson with authority to represent all these local churches (dioceses). The result has been a patchwork of apologies or statements of regret. That is why the Report insists that there be a “clear and emphatic apology in Canada for the abuses perpetrated in Catholic-run residential schools throughout the country” by the pope for the “spiritual, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse in Catholic-run residential schools.”

The churches were asked to develop and sign a Covenant of Reconciliation that would identify principles for working collaboratively to advance reconciliation. And, together with the other parties, the Church was asked to “repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands (Doctrine of Discovery and terra nullius) and [to] reform those laws, policies, and litigation strategies that rely on such concepts.” They were asked to develop “ongoing education strategies to ensure that their respective congregations learn about their church’s role in colonization.” And “in collaboration with Indigenous organizations, [they] must develop on the need to respect Indigenous spirituality, the history of residential schools and the roles of the church parties in that system... and the responsibility that churches have to mitigate such

conflicts and prevent spiritual violence. And as party to the Settlement Agreement the Church must establish permanent funding for Aboriginal people.”<sup>27</sup>

The indigenous relation to the land touches on a most basic relation. Most of the current reflections on ownership and possession of the land overlook the foundational issue which indigenous spirituality has captured so well. Westerners have assumed that humans have a right to ownership, that the land belongs to human owners. They do not reflect sufficiently on the dignity of the land outside of human beings. The indigenous peoples are more respectful of the earth, acknowledging its own dignity and its generosity to people. For them the land is Mother Earth – the giver of life and filled with spirit power. For them North America is Turtle Island, the mythological space of their creation stories where the land came to exist on the shell of a great turtle after a great flood had purged the old world. The suffering of the native populations and the recent process of raising consciousness may lead to a reconsideration of the relationship to the land. We too remain guests of the land.

John van den Hengel scj

May 7, 2023

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<sup>27</sup> Church signatories to this apology were the Presbyterian Church of Canada, the Anglican Church, and the United Church. Unlike the Protestant churches, the Roman Catholic Church in Canada’s approach to Indigenous spirituality has emphasized decision-making at the local diocesan level. There has been aboriginal resistance to a gesture of reconciliation by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. Ultimately, the aboriginal peoples demanded that the apology be made by the Bishop of Rome as the first among bishops. Pope Francis fulfilled this act of penance in July – August 2022 during a visit to Canada.