

Troubling Context, New Opportunities:
Theological Education and Formation in Canada
Sarum College, Niblett Lecture
Saturday, October 10, 2015
Richard R. Topping

It is an honour to deliver the Niblett lecture for 2015. Roy Niblett was a teacher, an educator, a Dean, a professor and Director of the National Institute of Education, who invested his life in education and educators.

According to his obituary in The Guardian from 2005, ' he had no enemies outside the ranks of dedicated secularists.' I find this heartening since I will be critical of the all too easy accommodations that theological education in Canada has made to the intellectual and practical ambiance, the 'immanent frame,' created by secularism.

Before I launch into that, however, let me first offer a word of thanks to Mr. Mark Manterfield, to the Fellowship of the Maple Leaf and to Principal James Woodward, in his first week at Sarum, whose hospitality and care have been wonderful. Thank you.

In the next 40 minutes, I will offer an analysis of some aspects of the institutional, political and historical contexts in which theological education and formation for Christian leadership take place in Canada. I will be critical of theological education in Canada - an easier thing to do in England than Canada; but I do so in the interest of a provoking a more robust and engaging practice for the formation and education of Christian leaders for this time. I encourage you to use your analogical imagination to situate what I say about Canada in relation to your own work. I hope we can talk further about this in the time for questions.

Introduction:

A congregation on the Canadian prairies asked me to come and help them do some planning just a few years ago. The congregation was between ministers and wanted to chart a course, set some priorities for their future before they called their next leader. I told them, 'I am not a strategic planner, but as a minister of the Gospel and a theologian I would be interested in helping you address the question of what God might be calling you to do in your neighbourhood.'

At the very first gathering I set out my approach, 'Your plan ought to come out of your discernment of God's work in this part of the Lord's vineyard. God's reconciling mission to the world in Christ is underway and so we want to ask ourselves where do we see that happening and how do we go with the flow of the Spirit's work rather than establish our own priorities? We might also ask today what spiritual gifts you have here in this congregation. That could be a grass roots way of asking the same question about the ordering and so the vocation of this congregation.'

After a few moments of awkward silence, a woman, a professor of English at the nearby University and an elder at that church, stood up and said, 'Thank you for your comments. I sense that you might be correct about the importance of discerning God's work in our locale here in our city. You should know though, and I think I speak for the room, that I have no idea of how to begin answering that question. And I'm not sure any more about what we mean by mission?'

It is rare that we get that kind of honesty in church. It left me fumbling with my notes that presumed the wrong default position for that day. I thought we would push ahead with a Trinitarian missional plan for engagement with the neighbourhood and as the baptized find ways in which to read the world by means of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but I presumed too much in that context.

Changes in Canadian society and cultural life mean that theological educators can often presume too much or embrace the wrong starting points in their work. Too often theological education in Canada underestimates the robust *theological* response that secularity, multiculturalism and the colonial legacy of Christian missionizing practice among Canada's Indigenous peoples require.

Moreover, theological education in Canada, on my view, often evinces a loss of confidence in scripture, central doctrinal loci and historic Christian practices as these could nourish the formation of thoughtful, engaged and generous leaders in the church at this time. Too often liberal (mainline) Protestantism in the Canadian context attaches itself to a series of causes and issues, all of them laudable, and 'strong theory' from departments of critical studies instead of first becoming 'more knowledgeable about the scriptures and traditions,' in order to support spiritual formation for the life of Christ's church and for the sake of the world.¹

What I want to do in this lecture is to survey some challenges to Canadian theological formation and education that arise in the context of secularity, multi-culturalism and the legacy of residential schools, or more accurately to examine some of the challenges particular features of these realities raise for Canadian theological educators. I'll raise along the way some interesting theological and practical responses to these challenges as they are already taking place in Canada. Like all pictures this is a partial one, a limited glimpse largely based on my experience as a theological student and educator in the major centres of theological learning in Canada – in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver.

¹Douglas John Hall, 'The Future of the Church,' 12, unpublished essay 2014. See also Eva Sedgewick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, you're so paranoid, you probably think this essay is about you,' In *Touching, Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 133-136 on strong theory. 'Because of its wide reach and rigorous exclusiveness, a strong theory [like post-colonial theory] risks being strongly tautological . . . An explanatory structure that a reader may see as tautological, in that it can't help or can't stop or can't do anything other than prove the very same assumptions with which it began, may be experienced by the practitioner as a triumphant advance toward truth and vindication.' *Ibid.*, 135.

(A whole other paper could be written on the challenges created by the immigration of Christians from around the globe to Canada and the reality that part-time students and student debt raise for theological education and formation.)

1. Secularity

I don't want to engage the whole body of literature on what secularity is and when it came about. For our purposes I'll use Canadian Philosopher Charles Taylor's depiction of secularity. He maintains that secularity in the North Atlantic can be characterized by three things: the loss of God talk or of ultimate reality from the explanatory register, the decline of belief and religious practice (church attendance) and an awareness that belief is an option, an embattled one that is less frequently taken.²

The chief feature for our discussion of theological formation in Canadian theological colleges is the first of these. The loss of God from the explanatory repertoire of our culture. Taylor writes, 'As we function within various spheres of activity – economic, political, cultural, educational, professional, recreational – the norms and principles we follow, the deliberations we engage in, don't generally refer us to God or to any religious beliefs . . .'³ This ambiance puts serious pressure on theological formation where it comes to speech about God and God's agency in Christ and by the Spirit in the word, the sacraments and the world.

In Canada our seminaries and theological colleges are located on the campuses of major universities, with few exceptions. Taylor maintains that talk about God on the university campus, in Canada, is about as welcome as an atheist in the Bible belt. Canadian cultural catechesis in what Taylor calls the 'immanent frame', reduces our explanatory range to humans and artefacts and tends to influence a reductive tendency in theological education and formation. Immanence which admits of no beyond, says Taylor, is hegemonic in the academy.⁴

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 2-3.

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 550. For an articulation of benefit to theological education in the context of a university see Stanley Hauerwas, 'Theological Knowledge and the Knowledges of the University: Beginning Explorations,' in *The State of the University* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 21, footnote 20. 'Freestanding seminaries seem to me to be particularly susceptible to the demand to turn out more 'caring' pastors. They are so because they are too close to their own constituency. University-related seminaries have their own pathologies, but at least being in the university means the faculties in those institutions can give reasons why theology should remain an intellectually demanding enterprise.' In Canada, however, mainline Protestant theological education that is degree granting is almost exclusively on University campuses. While this gives students access to the considerable resources of the university, there is risk of serious alienation from spiritual formation and the subject matter proper to theology. One might say in response to Hauerwas: 'Free-standing seminaries have their own pathologies, but at least they have not become schools of religion' and 'by virtue of its location, the university has been the constituency of university-related seminaries.'

For a discussion of the relative advantages and liabilities of seminary association with a university see John (Jay) Phelan, 'Seminaries and Universities: Challenges and Opportunities,' in *Theological Education* 48:2

This is an important point for theological colleges and seminaries. For not only are they shaped by the university ethos, but very often their degrees are jointly granted with the university. This means that the university often determines the methodological matrix, the course content and the *bona fides* of faculty members for graduate programs. The temptation to adopt a religious studies approach, alienated from the church and fixed on religion as a human and historical phenomenon, or for a theological school to become a school of religion is constant. The tendency in a theological institution on a university campus, especially when enrollment is flagging and we are looking for partners to prop us up, is for theological education to adopt an accommodationist strategy and so lose its essential subject matter. In short, the struggle is to keep theological education theological.

Alistair McGrath accurately summarizes the situation of many theological seminaries situated at Universities in Canada where the default position is the immanent frame. Theological colleges have spent years trying to get their courses cross-listed and making the accommodations necessary to endear themselves to the secular administration. What seminaries are all too often discovering is the university does not 'welcom[e] them with the ecstasy they hoped for,' and some faculties despise them as purveyors of superstition and harm. In response seminaries have turned toward the churches, only to discover that the church is getting along without them. McGrath warns that theological seminaries are in danger of losing their connection with the church, of becoming institutions without 'an audience or a public.'⁵

Please don't misunderstand me. Theological education and formation intersect with a variety of disciplines, and critical cross-disciplinary appropriations are made which constructively serve Gospel ministry and theological formation. I visited in Prof Tim Hoarle's class on Christian Faith and Leadership where he and his class were doing precisely this. Augustine wrote about ad hoc borrowings of philosophical ideas for the articulation of Christian faith in *On Christian Doctrine*, under the rubric of plundering the Egyptians. Theological study and formation involve necessarily inter-disciplinary study in the social sciences and humanities, for example. At Vancouver School of Theology we are looking at a joint venue with the business school for a program in social entrepreneurship and leadership in church-based agencies of mercy and compassion. The articulation of the faith and the formation of the faithful always occur in a time and place with the tools at hand. To say otherwise is naïve, and I think a denial of the grace of God.⁶

(2014): 1-14. For a proposal which (re)imagines the university as a place where difference and particularity can be attended to and crisis provoked free from sanitizing secular reason, especially in the case of scripture study, see Angus Paddison, *Scripture a very Theological Proposal* (London: T&T Clark, Continuum, 2009), 122-144.

⁵ Alister E. McGrath, *The Future of Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 145.

⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2: The Doctrine of the Word of God, eds. and trans. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Eerdmans, 1956), 729-730. In a discussion of the role of philosophy and systems of thought and of how we inevitably use these in our attempts to interpret scripture Barth writes, 'If we cannot and must not dispute this, if we are not to dispute the grace of God, we cannot basically contest the use of philosophy in scriptural exegesis.' Of course, the philosophy or system of thought is not scripture and scriptural interpretation is finally dependent on revelation and the Holy Spirit but these always appropriate some system of thought.

However, very often course descriptions from mainline theological institutions in Canada evidence a reserve with respect to God and divine agency in the world. God, when God appears in a course title, is often listed as a problem to be solved. Postmodernism has made us quite aware of our perspectives on the world, one should be concerned that western or male or heterosexual lenses are not allowed to distort; but sometimes the adjunct disciplines which instruct such seeing so foreground a particular 'perspective' that the subject matter of theology (God) is eclipsed. We end up studying lenses and not what is looked at. It makes me think of Karl Barth's comment – 'theology is not anthropology in a really loud voice.'

'Strong theories' in which theological educators invest too often provide the basic frame to which the Christian goods are accumulated. Instead of critically appropriating insights from other disciplines, frequently the theological endeavour is appropriated to an outside theory or frame of reference which is comprehensive and exclusive in its reach. Such a strategy is almost required for some advanced degree theological research. Critical reading of the tradition, often exclusively in terms of post-colonial 'power dynamics,' too often eclipses critical reading by means of the tradition or critical appropriation by means of the gospel.

In addition, critical reading is almost confluent with suspicious reading in the academy.⁷ Rita Felski identifies the default position of interpretation in the academy and identifies its alienating functions.

What else could we teach our students besides critical [suspicious] reading? The bemusement likely to greet such a question speaks to the entrenched nature of the scholarly habitus, the ubiquity of a particular form of intellectual life. . . . *Becoming a critical reader means moving from attachment to detachment to disenchantment undergoing not just an intellectual but a sentimental education.*⁸

*The work of critical reading simply is this endless work of estrangement, the labor of disrupting continuities and severing attachments.*⁹

This mode of reading texts, while not without its affective delights – who doesn't like to be thought of as smarter than the author, to sleuth out what is 'really' going on in the text; but this

⁷ Eve Sedgwick and Rita Felski have done important work on the affective enticements of suspicious reading and on the virtual identity of critical and suspicious reading. See Felski, 'Suspicious Minds,' *Poetics Today* (Summer 2011), 215-234, 'After Suspicion,' *Profession* (2009), 28-35 and Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, you're so paranoid, you probably think this essay is about you," In *Touching, Feeling* (Duke University Press, 2002). Paul Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (Oxford: OUP, 1999) has done a masterful job of describing the formative readings practices of Christianity, and Buddhism, and how these practices are jeopardized in a consumptive, and I would add a 'critical' or 'suspicious' frame.

⁸ Felski, 'After Suspicion,' 29-30.

⁹ Felski, 'Digging Down and Standing Back,' in *English Language Notes* 51:2 (Fall/Winter 2013), 21.

approach is so often alienated from loving, Christian reading patterns that seek 'to discern the Word in the words' under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the church. Haunted by a fear of 'heteronomy,' or a paranoia about power and violence, suspicious readers tend to demean submissive readers as either naïve, pietistic or under tutelage.¹⁰ And where that becomes the preferred scholarly style at theological colleges and seminaries, sacramental-prayerful-Spirit dependent formation by the solicitous gospel of peace is jeopardized as low-brow.

Karl Barth advised theological reticence when a specific outlook or philosophy is proposed for *the* understanding of the church's own theological work. He suspected that a secret hankering - after academic glory - and a secret fear - that the church can't live solely by Jesus Christ and the grace of God - were at work here. And when theological educators succumb to this temptation the church is secularized, coopted and absorbed. It loses 'its specific importance and meaning . . .' for the world.¹¹ In other words: very often where theological education aims at relevance it hits redundancy dead centre.

William Willimon of Duke Divinity School argues that North American theological educators have a responsibility to challenge secularity. 'Seminarions come to us more adept at construal of their world through a-theistic categories, most of them purloined from the reigning social sciences, [rather] than theological canons. Our job is to train the church's leaders in a rigorously theological refurbishment of the church.'¹²

The implications for pastoral practice are important here. What happens when a young person comes to their priest or minister with a sense that God may be 'speaking to them.' In Canada, the clergy might ask, 'did you have a fight with your parents?' 'What did you have for dinner last night?' or 'Is everything ok with your girlfriend?' God becomes a last resort if education and formation are too accommodationist to the immanent frame. Followed to its logical conclusion pastoral theology becomes 'techniques for success, managerial tips, and tricks for effective

¹⁰ Justo Gonzalez, *The History of Theological Education* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2015), 115. Gonzalez maintains that modern theological education, since Schleiermacher, has tended to emphasize the 'critical and scientific' and so to alienate itself from considerations relevant to the life of the church and its ministers. Issues of originality of research reflected in publications came to predominate over 'impact that the graduates of such institutions might make on the church and to society.' Ibid. If seminaries and theological schools are going to be more than 'schools of religion' Gonzalez argues that they are going to have to revision themselves in relationship to the church. Ibid., 127. See also Virginia S. Cetuk, *What to Expect in Seminary: Theological Education as Spiritual Formation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998). 'Unfortunately, many theological schools in the moderate to liberal Protestant tradition seem not to be structured in such a way as to assist or promote students' personal spiritual formation. Rather, the internal (sometime unconscious) confusion over whether schools are properly understood as seminaries or as schools of religion has contributed to a 'hands-off' view relative to inquiry about and support for students' personal practice of the spiritual disciplines.'

¹¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2: The Doctrine of Reconciliation (Eerdmans, 1958), 668.

¹² William Willimon, 'Ministry As Difficult as It Ought to Be,' 4.

ministry; a kind of atheism that ministers as though God doesn't matter'¹³ and imaginative formation in the gospel to attend to the works and ways of God among us recedes.

Secularity has also reduced the cultural prestige associated with ministerial or priestly office in Canada. This break with power is a liberty since with the sociological props kicked out, ministry can actually be theologically guided for prophetic critique. However, awareness of ministry as a calling has fallen off the radar screen and the impression of ministers as 'quivering masses of availability' (Hauerwas) or 'patient guardians of the status quo' (Willimon), rather than impatient instigators, does not get us the right people. Recruitment of suitably gifted candidates is a crisis for Presbyterian, United and Anglican churches. I know bishops who have stopped asking if someone feels called to the ministry and instead ask, 'Have ever lead anything that worked? or 'Have you ever failed horribly and what did you learn?' They are looking for some evidence of calling. Church judiciaries are also taking a much more active approach to recruitment, no longer waiting for people to step forward but summoning outstanding and gifted folks as high-school students and undergraduates to work on formation for ministry prior to seminary.

Denominations in Canada have started their own finishing schools or leadership institutes to engender the formation that is lacking where theological colleges are still intent on wooing the secular academy. This is true of the three denominations formally associated with VST – the Anglicans have diocesan based leadership training in schools of ministry, the United Church has run a leadership school at a retreat centre in BC and runs a major theological conference in the area, and the Presbyterians at St Andrew's Hall are in the midst of developing a five year program, which includes the M.Div., but provides 'scaffolding' in spiritual reading of scripture, evangelism and leadership formation for the church.

Churches in Canada no longer grant their theological schools a monopoly in theological education. Where it is alienated from the public 'church', for the 'general' public or the 'academic' public, denominations in their national, provincial and local judiciaries find alternate means to form leadership skills and *phronesis* for ministry. This dynamic has serious implications for denominational funding of theological education, as you might imagine, and for the quality and depth of theological formation. Seminaries and theological colleges in Canada are going to have to make a persuasive case for an educated ministry that isn't alienated from the church, theological foundations or the social and cultural challenges of our time.¹⁴

I think these challenges are calls for a reformation of theological education that achieves a greater balance between love for God and learning. Piety is quickly crowded out in North American theological schools located on the campuses of universities, in deference to critical and scientific study; and while we don't want to 'canonize ignorance and biblical imperialism,'

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Michael Jinkins, *The Church Transforming: What's Next for the Reformed Project?* (Westminster/John Knox, 2012), 89ff.

neither do we want to 'canonize science' and promote a form of theological education that has 'little relevance for the church and its pastors.'¹⁵ Edward Farley's 1983 *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* still contains a word of exhortation for theological educators in 2015 in Canada. Theological study ought to be 'not just objective science but personal knowledge of God and the things of God.'¹⁶

2. Multiculturalism

Canada's official multicultural posture (1971 Pierre Trudeau, 1988 official government policy), with its implied enfranchisement of all religions troubles assumptions in formerly hegemonic Christian Canada. As Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall writes, 'We know that we can no longer depend upon history and habit to fill our churches and seminaries, and foster our causes.'¹⁷

Two questions for theological formation that come out of this disestablishment of Christianity in Canada are: (1) what will the task of theological formation look like without support from the culture and; (2) what will the relationship of Christian formation and witness to other faith traditions and folks of no faith tradition be if Christian leaders are going to continue to act in the public life of Canadian culture for the common good?

On the first question, I won't develop a detailed response. In short: without the former social and cultural props theological educators are going to have to retool for catechesis prior to criticism. I think this means a subversion of the mode of mastery, especially where the scripture is concerned, by a prior listening. Let me draw an analogy:

A few years back I listened to an interview on CBC radio – that's the public broadcaster in Canada. The interview was with Frank Kermode, literary critic, and the interviewer began with the question, 'What is literary criticism?' Kermode answered, 'it is the evaluation, analysis and description of literary works. We ask questions about style, form and genre, figures of speech and how an author deploys them to achieve a literary end.' The interviewer continued, 'How do you teach that?' Kermode said, 'I don't teach that. I used to teach literary criticism, but now I teach literature. A student can't be critical of what they haven't attended to, loved, what they don't know.'

Kermode, I think, like theological educators in Canada finds that the instructor cannot assume catechesis in the relevant practices and loves. The critic must become catechist first or

¹⁵ Gonzalez, *The History of Theological Education*, 115.

¹⁶ Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 7.

¹⁷ Hall, 'The Future of the Church,' 8.

ministerial students become articulate in their criticisms and tongue-tied about their loves. Students have to be taught to linger with the literature, to be shaped by its moves, to let it recontextualize and master them, shock them, before they simply consume and criticize. In the language of the tradition of *lectio divina*, first students must receive the Word on the palate of the heart (*palatum cordis*) with receptivity and passivity and a teachable spirit.¹⁸ I think that theological education of the future in Canada is going to have to do more catechesis. This will mean attending to the Bible as Holy Scripture; that is, as testimony caught up in the divine economy of reconciliation. For while the rise of ‘critical’ and perspectival biblical studies intends to function as a ‘prophylactic against fundamentalism,’ religious extremism and violence, too often it generates the ‘barbed wire [of suspicion] that holds us back and hems us in, as we guard against being contaminated by the words we read.’¹⁹

And the second question: What ought theological education and formation to look like in a culture that is multi-religious and sometimes anti-religious, especially where formation takes seriously its obligation to shape the baptized for leadership in church and witness in the commonweal? Answers to that question in Canada are not unanimous.

Craving majority status (denial), a residue of Christendom, is not dead in many parts of Canada, and the perception of other religions as a threat to ‘Christian values’ is alive, especially in secular (*laci t *) Quebec, where the crucifix remains in the national assembly! In Cascadia, a term that refers to a geographical region that includes the Pacific Northwest of the United States and the lower mainland of British Columbia, the growth group is the ‘nones,’ people without any religious affiliation. The temptation here is not denial but despair. For many of the ‘nones,’ religion, and in particular Christianity, is regarded as culturally harmful, exclusive in its message, and divisive in its expressions. How do theological education and formation prepare students for significant relationships with people of other faith traditions or ‘nones’ for humane and life-giving action in the world?

In a 2011 article, Dan Aleshire, Executive Director of the Association of Theological Schools in the US and Canada imagines The Future of Theological Education with a Speculative Glimpse of 2032.²⁰ In the article he argues that external factors will influence the future of theological education in North America, the first being the disestablishment of Christianity as the preeminent religion. Aleshire maintains, ‘Culture has reassigned religion (Christianity) from a social role of culture-shaper to one that is more personal and private.’²¹ This means that the

¹⁸ See Wesley Kort, *‘Take Read’: Scripture, Textuality and Cultural Practice* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press), 19-36 for a characterization of late medieval and reformation Scripture reading in which the reader comports him or herself in keeping with the subject matter of the Bible.

¹⁹ Felski, ‘Digging Down and Standing Back,’ in *English Language Notes* 51:2 (Fall/Winter 2013), 20. See also Michael Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (OUP: Oxford, 2011).

²⁰ Daniel O. Aleshire, ‘The Future of Theological Education: A Speculative Glimpse at 2032,’ *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* (50:4, Winter 2011), 380-385.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 382.

Church and theological education will increasingly focus on the cultivation of Christian virtue and identity rather than shape public life.

I do agree that theological schools should teach students in ways that enable them to instill Christian formation in congregations (I teach the Lord's Prayer and the Creed - that's catechesis). Ironically, however, I think that this sort of formation will broker a greater concern for the common good as well as for mission. Catechesis begets love for the world, formation begets fire. How can you say the prayer - 'thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven' and let it seep into your life and not be moved to address disparity on earth? I can't imagine an inculcation of Christian identity through teaching, preaching and liturgy that isn't for the sake of the world that God so loves. Prophetic witness and speech and action in the public sphere are ingredient to the Gospel, even if some forms of multicultural policy would like to police them out.

Just because Christian leaders are no longer the go to people for public policy doesn't mean the churches and their leaders ought to get all quietist. Let's face it: on issues like pipelines and ecology, economics and justice, church and its leaders have a humanizing take and a grateful responsibility as disciples of Jesus Christ. We envision life in the detoxified kingdom of God, and it has a certain critical relation to the current arrangements. Imagination fired by a vision of the way the world might be – lions and lambs lying down together – brokers a prophetic de-realization of current arrangements. The world is not hardened, dried and gelled. We can hope for more, live toward a world on the way. We believe the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof and so it matters what happens to the earth. And it's worth saying so, in public, often, even if it is annoying to those who would like, in good enlightenment fashion, to censor religious talk out of our common life. We can be witnesses without privileged access to power.

I think what this calls for is a theological education that is inter-disciplinary and that encourages risk. That way we don't embarrass ourselves by turning out graduates that either can't or won't engage the issues with intelligence. I think Michael Jenkins, president of Louisville Seminary is right: one of the reasons for the failure, where it comes to the engagement with culture, is that too often Christian social witness has been either mean or ignorant, and sometimes both.²² I think he might have also added cautious to that list. Most traditional seminaries don't turn out church leaders who are public intellectuals because radical cultural engagement necessitates a repertoire of knowledge converted to Christian use. This requires both robust Christian formation and then interdisciplinary engagement.

At the Vancouver School of Theology we're working together with other faith traditions and Indigenous peoples, i.e., those who have been minority voices a longer time than we have. They have things to teach us about participation in a majority culture from the margins. They are teaching us how to find partners for humane action in the world; how to find overlapping consensus and work with others for the good of the world that God so loves. We are learning

²² Jenkins, *The Church Transforming*, 93-96.

that because of an unconditioned commitment to the good news of Jesus Christ, Christian leaders and communities are able to make provisional commitments to a whole variety of life-giving initiatives in the world.²³ Following Jesus is bringing us into the company of all kinds of people in pluralistic Canada who, for reasons particular to their deep commitments, seem also caught up in God's reconciling work. And here the resources of Missional theology, with its view that the church doesn't have a mission but God's mission has a church, are important. God is working God's moves on the world, and many people are potential partners as Christians learn to go with the flow of the Spirit at work in the world.

3. The Legacy of 'Mission'

On the wall of the Vancouver School of Theology hang three statements of apology to Indigenous peoples – from the United Church of Canada, the Anglican Church of Canada and the Presbyterian Church in Canada. Each of these statements recognizes the complicity of the church in explicit government policy to 'eliminate Aboriginal government; ignore rights; terminate the Treaties; and, through a policy of assimilation, cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as a distinct legal, social, cultural, religious and racial entity in Canada. The establishment and operation of residential schools were a central element of this policy, which can best be described as cultural genocide.'²⁴ The churches participated in these policies throughout the 19th and 20th centuries in Canada when over 150,000 Indigenous students attended residential schools administered by the churches. With the churches' cooperation native children were separated from their parents and sent to residential schools. The goal of these schools was not simply to educate Indigenous children, but, in the words of Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Minister of Indian Affairs, speaking in 1920, 'To break their link with culture and identity' and 'to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic.'²⁵

For the last six years a Truth and Reconciliation Commission has held hearings across Canada to listen to survivors of residential schools. It is a component of the Indian Residential Schools Agreement made with survivors by the Federal Government, which involved a financial settlement and an apology from the government. The Commission had a mandate to inform Canadians about what happened in Residential Schools and to document the stories of survivors so that the financial settlement was not simply hush money. The Commission presented its report in Ottawa in June of this year with recommendations. These 94

²³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, IV/4 Lecture Fragments: The Christian Life* (Eerdmans, 1981), 267ff, makes this distinction. "In regard to every cause, they [Christians] simply look and ask whether and how far it will relatively and provisionally serve or hurt the cause of man and his life." Throughout volume 4 of the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth also speaks of how people of the light are able to recognize truth and humanity in 'lesser lights' and to spot parables of grace in the world and to hear free words of grace from outside the church.

²⁴ *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Volume 1, Honouring the Truth, Reconciling The Future* (Toronto: James Lorimer and Co., 2015), 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

recommendations, just one short of Luther's theses, call upon multiple cultural and government agencies to enact new policy for the sake of reconciliation (right relationship) with Canada's Indigenous people. Recommendations 58-61 are specifically directed to the churches.

Recommendation 60 states:

We call upon the church parties to the Settlement agreement . . . in collaboration with Indigenous spiritual leaders, Survivors, schools of theology, seminaries . . . to develop and teach curriculum for all student clergy. . . who work in aboriginal communities, on the need to respect Indigenous spirituality in its own right, the history and legacy of residential schools and the roles of the church parties in that system, the history and legacy of religious conflict in Aboriginal families and communities, and the responsibility that churches have to mitigate such conflicts and prevent spiritual violence.²⁶

You could understand that the history of the churches in Canada with Indigenous peoples has resulted in serious theological reserve about mission and evangelism. These were the words used by colonizers to rationalize the cultural imperialism of emissaries from the churches to Canada's indigenous peoples. In Canada we have been reflecting on the relationship between Christ and culture and on the nature of mission in the light of our colonial legacy.

Indigenous Anglican Bishop Mark McDonald identifies a pathology in European mission to the Americas. 'The basic operating assumption of the colonial mission in North America has been that the land and the history that produced European Christianity was sacred, having a privileged role in the development and communication of Christian faith. This privilege is so deeply ingrained in the churches of the West that many native people assume that Christianity and Euro-American Culture are inseparable . . .'²⁷ McDonald maintains, however: "It is wrong to hope that normative experience in one context will become identical or normative reality in a new context. Incarnation means local."²⁸ The attitude and the actions sponsored by Eurocentrism and the doctrine of discovery²⁹ have done great harm among Indigenous peoples; for this churches have rightly apologized, repented and are active seeking a better, more respectful, future together with Indigenous people.

²⁶ Ibid., 330.

²⁷ Mark McDonald, 'The Gospel Comes to North America,' *Journal of the North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies* (4, 2006), 131.

²⁸ Ibid., 132.

²⁹ Simply put the doctrine of discovery 'presumes that civilization is not present if the institutions of Western Culture are not available. A land that is discovered without Western Institutions is considered 'Terra Nullius', an uninhabited land, even if peoples and cultures are present. The right of discovery then grants to the one who discovers a right to control, exploit, and rule in the name of a supposed beneficial progress for the discovered.' Ibid., 130.

Canadian Theologian Ross Hastings in his book on mission in post-Christendom Canada draws on a distinction missiologists make between 'inculturation' and 'enculturation.' Inculturation is used to describe how the Gospel and Christian worship go local (are incarnate and embodied) for the sake of communication and cultural connection. Enculturation, on the other hand, refers to the times and places where the Gospel, Christian practice and formation have been assimilated to the prevailing culture chameleon-like.³⁰ Where citizenship and discipleship are confused.

We are learning a great deal from our Indigenous brothers and sisters in Canada about eurocentrism and the ways in which mainline Christianity in Canada is 'enculturated.' New insights and a more profound appreciation of the Gospel take place when mainline Protestant churches observe it embodied in cultures other than their own. Our own failings are exposed by more faithful embodiments of the good news.

For example we are learning that:

- The attachment of Indigenous peoples to the land as a gift of God and the sense of the Spirit as all-pervading has helped us all to recover a sense of the same from the longer and broader Christian tradition. It could be an important critical resource as the dominant culture begins to rethink its relationship to the land and the role of humans as 'tenders' of God's garden (i.e., an ethic of care and stewardship rather than domination).
- The use of senses other than hearing in Christian worship is encouraged by Indigenous practices such as smudging and drumming. The passing of the prayer stick and the talking stone involve tactile engagement and deliberate encounter with others in worship.
- What's more, the talking circle involves a more 'porous' experience of Christian fellowship (there is no back pew to sit in) and could be a resource for a less 'individualistic' buffered experience of Christian worship.³¹
- It is important to acknowledge that some Indigenous practices are contested in First Nations congregations and so are a matter of ongoing negotiation (e.g. the use of tobacco and wine at communion).

Indigenous Bishop Mark McDonald writes an essay in 2006, to which I have already referred, with the ironic title: 'The Gospel Comes to North America.' McDonald envisions a theological re-reading of the North American context in terms of a missional theology with colonial blinders lifted. He argues that God's Word was present in North America before the missionaries arrived. Indigenous practices of hospitality, connection to the land and faith in God, 'echoed so surprisingly and powerfully the Gospel missionaries carried.' Moreover, he notes that the resistance of First Nations to some missionary practices and values indicate a 'laudable allegiance to Gospel values' over western enculturations. McDonald makes the point that the

³⁰ See Ross Hastings, *Missional God, Missional Church* (IVP, 2012), 78.

³¹ See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 37-43. A bounded or buffered self can frequently disengage 'with one's whole surroundings, natural and social.' A porous self inherently lives socially and there is a deep sense of the spiritual forces that impinge on life.

survival of Aboriginal peoples in North America is itself a witness to God's deliverance, and that despite colonialism, the Gospel of Jesus Christ 'found a home with some quite unexpected promise among the People of the Land in North America.' He gives examples of prayer meetings gone local among the Ojibwe, of Gospel based prophetic resistance to colonialism in Canada's west, Louis Riel being the chief example, and in the Arctic region of Canada and the U.S. among the Gwich'in. "The Gospel,' he concludes 'has power to convey liberation that transcends the intent, capacity, and experience of its preachers (and I would add teachers).'³²

At the Vancouver School of Theology, which is unique in North America, we have an Indigenous Studies program which influences the curriculum of the whole school and has its own integrity. For over 30 years, the school has done theological education with First Nation's peoples of Western Canada, the pacific North West of the U.S. and Hawaii both on site and by extension, where it is supported by tutors and attentive to the local.

When the Truth and Reconciliation Commission came to Vancouver in the fall of 2013, our school closed to allow full participation in the whole event. Stories of abuse and suffering were told and we listened and learned in healing-listening circles specifically for the churches. As part of a plenary session, our school offered a spoken confession and a gesture of reconciliation in the form of a First Nation's made ceramic canoe. It is now held in the Canadian human rights museum in Manitoba.

We also held a course at VST to remind students and ourselves of the robust theological heritage of reconciliation in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and of its pertinence to the moment. The Truth and Reconciliation event was formative and transformative for students and faculty alike. We felt as though we were receiving a witness which we ought to know ourselves. As Barth said, 'Jesus Christ is . . . over all . . . and as such he is not idle even *extra muros ecclesiae* . . . ' and 'it may sometimes happen that . . . the children of the world (in this case the government of Canada no less) prove wiser than the children of light . . . so that the church has reason to learn from the world . . . receiving from it the witness it ought to give.'³³

In conclusion:

I was sitting with a Cree woman at a service in a Chinese Presbyterian Church. The children were singing a gospel song that was written and composed in Chinese. She turned to me and said, 'I wish our children could do that.' 'What do you mean?' She explained how in the residential schools, children were punished for using their own language and how the Cree language was, at least at one point, in danger of being lost. She also said, 'but we are teaching the language to our children and soon they will write songs of praise and sing to Jesus in their native tongue.' That Indigenous people in Canada are still interested in faith and life,

³² McDonald, 'The Gospel comes to North American,' 133.

³³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 724-725.

leadership and formation, in Christ's church is something of a miracle, given the history. A piece of good news for us at VST is that we have just hired a Cree First Nation's man to direct our Indigenous Studies Program. He's already educating our students, Indigenous and non-indigenous, about how the gospel continues to come to Canada and is going local among his people often for the first time with a new sense of integrity.

Thank you for your attention.