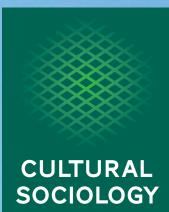

A Cultural Sociology of Anglican Mission and the Indian Residential Schools in Canada

The Long Road to Apology

Eric Taylor Woods

Cultural Sociology

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Cultural Sociology
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For Farah

Series Editor's Preface

Eric Taylor Woods' analysis of the radically shifting relationship between Anglo-Canadian core groups and native peoples on the Canadian periphery provides a vigorous, cultural-sociological challenge to conventional postcolonial theorizing. Under the influence of Foucault, Said, and Bourdieu, postcolonial writings instrumentalized the relationship between dominator and dominated, focusing on power and neglecting the independent power of cultural evaluation. Arguing that cultural structures mediate relationships of power, Woods reminds us that Christian missionaries not only othered native peoples but insisted on their shared humanity as well. This solidarizing aspiration stimulated a range of Anglo-Canadian social policies that aimed to foster assimilation. When less nativist, more multicultural orientations emerged in the 1960s, Canada's core groups began decades of self-criticism, a process that became particularly harsh with the public exposure of predatory sexual practices at the Anglican Church's widespread missionary schools. Woods interprets this surprising critical turn as an explosion of perpetrator trauma, drawing links to Germans facing their involvement in the Holocaust. While giving the agency and courage of aboriginal activists, intellectuals, and artists full due, Woods sympathetically portrays the emotionally searing remorse of Anglican core groups, illuminating its moral basis in an idealized Canadian civil sphere that, despite its manifest contradictions, aspired to equality and solidarity for all. *Anglican Mission and the Indian Residential Schools in Canada* speaks to central issues across a wide range of fields, from sociology to political science, from aboriginal studies to postcolonial theory, from theology to Canadian studies, and to core theoretical issues in cultural sociology and trauma theory.

–Jeffrey C. Alexander

Preface

The writing of this book has taken longer than I care to admit, beginning as a PhD project and then going through several rounds of revisions before taking its present form. When I originally set out to conduct a study of the Anglican Church in Canada, I did not intend to focus on its missionary and educational practices among the indigenous peoples of Canada. My training was in the study of nationalism, and I had been interested in the church's transition from defender of Empire to exponent of Canada. It was only after spending time at the church's archives in Toronto, and interacting with staff members and other visitors that I began to be drawn to the church's conflicted relationship with its missionary past. I found myself requesting archival material relating to the church's work among indigenous peoples and reading all the literature I could find on the topic. I was hooked. The topic also felt emotionally and psychologically right. I had thus far expressly avoided questions of colonialism, religion, and settler-indigenous relations in Canada, despite the fact that my own familial history wends through these topics. My thinking was that I should be appropriately distanced from my topic of research. As it happens, I shouldn't have been so concerned. Like many other social researchers early in their careers, I found that writing about a topic that was close to my heart provided the motivation to carry on when I felt like giving it all up.

My PhD supervisors were surprised at the new direction in my research, but remained supportive. As it happens, one of my PhD supervisors, John Hutchinson, had just read a book on cultural trauma by Jeffrey Alexander and several of his colleagues, and suggested it might help frame my

research. The approach of the book closely resonated with what I had found in my research, and I couldn't put it down from start to finish. Not only was I fascinated with the book, but I was also taken with Alexander's broader cultural sociological endeavour. In short, my empirical and theoretical interests had begun to coincide, and the bare elements of a research project had started to take shape. The long journey towards the completion of this book was begun.

The writing of this book would not have been possible without the generous and unstinting support provided by my former supervisors and now colleagues, John Hutchinson and Eric Kaufmann. I cannot thank them enough for their willingness to continue to provide advice and criticism, even as I journeyed into new terrain. John and Eric provided a model of mentorship that I can only hope to emulate among my students. I am also deeply indebted to Jeff Alexander and Ron Eyerman for their incisive comments and criticisms of my work, and for inviting me to participate in the intellectual life of the Center for Cultural Sociology (CCS) at Yale University. The CCS is a perpetual whirlwind of conversations, late nights, and new ideas, and I consider it the highest privilege to have been able to work there. Thanks are also due to David Martin for his close reading of an earlier draft. I am grateful also to Nancy Hurn and Laurel Parson for their help during my sojourn in the archives. The many suggestions by the two anonymous reviewers were also very helpful, and I am thankful to both of them for taking the time to so closely read the manuscript. My peers have also been an invaluable source of insight, motivation, and stimulation throughout this project. I am especially indebted to Dominik Bartmanski, Mira Debs, Shai Dromi, Barak Levy-Shilat, Chris Moffat, Robert Schertzer, Rachel Tsang, and Margit Wunsch. I will also be forever thankful for the love and encouragement offered by my parents, Dennis and Florence Woods.

Finally, and most importantly, I want to acknowledge the love of my life, my wife, Farah Jamal. Today is the first anniversary of our wedding, which was truly the happiest day of my life. But instead of celebrating that happy day with Farah, I am alone, wrestling with an endless, searing sadness. Several months past, Farah died while pregnant with our son Aaron, the little babe who I already loved so deeply but never got a chance to hold. Every night since the tragedy I have been awakened by a vision of Farah with Aaron in her arms, smiling and cooing, and patiently awaiting me. I think, then, of all our plans for the future, so lovingly crafted, but now lost forever. But when I find that I am slipping into a sadness too

painful to bear, I try to remind myself how lucky, how blessed, I am. Farah had so much love to give, and she gave it to me. Even if my time with her was so much shorter than I thought it would be, I cannot put into words how deeply I feel blessed to have been the object of that love. And even if I never got to hold Aaron, at that first scan, when I saw him moving and kicking for the first time, I was blessed to have experienced the bare slightest taste of what it means to be a father, and to love without reservation.

Although Farah died before the publication of this book, her presence – her endless generosity, support and love – is written into every page.

I love you, Farah. It is to you that this book is dedicated.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

From the eighteenth century onward, the British Empire, in common with other European empires and their various settler offshoots in the Americas and elsewhere, was routinely justified by reference to its role in 'uplifting' colonized peoples from their savage primitivism through the introduction of European civilization. This justification of colonialism was informed by an ethnocentric view of human development in which Europeans perceived themselves to be at the vanguard of progress while non-Europeans were considered a throwback to an ancient past. Accordingly, Europe had a moral duty to impart its culture and practices to the rest of the world. The French referred to this curiously benevolent perspective on domination as *la mission civilisatrice*—the civilizing mission.

The Anglican missionary enterprise was deeply implicated in the British civilizing mission. Indeed, it was largely through the work of Anglican missionaries and their Protestant brethren that the British government envisioned that colonized peoples would be civilized. Missionary practices reflected this undertaking. Even if the missionaries often stressed their independence from government, rarely did they see their mission to be merely the saving of souls; as the representatives of English/British civilization, they also sought the 'social betterment' of the 'savage heathens' of the world. The teaching of the Gospel was thus combined with an education in English/British practices and culture.

Since the dissolution of Empire, the Anglican civilizing impulse has been greatly criticized as a corollary to colonialism. This criticism has not

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only provoked deep reflection on what is appropriate missionary practice in a postcolonial world, but has also breathed new life into old debates about Anglican identity. Many Anglicans have sought to articulate an identity shorn of its mooring in British culture, so as to accommodate non-British expressions of Anglicanism. This, however, has raised questions about whether Anglicanism can be defined on a purely theological basis. As noted theologian Paul Avis puts it, 'is Anglicanism merely the decadent legacy of unprincipled Anglo-Saxon imperialism, or is it able to take its stand on, and find its justification in, the essence of Christianity, the Christian gospel?' Interestingly, the effort to construct a 'postcolonial' Anglicanism has been given added impetus by ongoing demographic changes in the worldwide Anglican Communion, in which the main source of growth in recent decades has been overwhelmingly non-British while the British element has undergone precipitous decline. In other words, now that most Anglicans are not British, what is the place of British culture in Anglicanism?

The confrontation with the possibility that the civilizing mission was an ethnocentric ideology aimed at legitimizing Empire has been particularly pronounced among the Anglican churches in the former 'White Dominions'—colonies that were characterized by mass settlement from Britain, where indigenous peoples found themselves dispossessed of their homelands and living as minorities. It is in the settler colonies where Anglicanism was perhaps most implicated in the civilizing mission, often working in partnership with fledging states that sought to establish the dominance of British culture over the cultures of the original inhabitants. As a consequence of these partnerships, the settler churches have been at the receiving end of much anger and bitterness since the great cultural and political resurgence of indigenous peoples began to gather force in the 1960s. The sense of anger has also originated from within the churches. While many indigenous Anglicans left the church, others stayed. But if they opted to remain as Anglicans, they have not been silent. Indeed, demands that the upper echelons of the settler churches confront their collusion in colonialism and acknowledge the value of indigenous cultures have been intense.

The history of Anglicanism in Canada is bound up with the civilizing mission. Anglican missionaries long sought to impart British culture alongside their religious beliefs among the indigenous peoples of the vast territory that now comprises Canada, and were only too happy to work with the colonial state in doing so. As the consolidation of Canada progressed

in the nineteenth century, state elites became convinced of the merits of the civilizing mission as a way of resolving the so-called 'Native Question'. A system of boarding schools, now referred to as the Indian residential schools, was created in the 1880s as a way of assimilating indigenous peoples into the working classes of Euro-Canada. The residential schools involved a church-state partnership, in which several Christian denominations, including Anglicanism, were responsible for its operation, while the government was responsible for funding and oversight. The residential school system had surprising endurance; it was not until the 1970s that the Canadian government began to distance itself from an assimilationist education policy, and the last residential school did not close until 1996. The role of the churches in the school system was terminated in 1969.

The Indian residential schools were an expression of the civilizing mission *par excellence*, drawing on hard power to impose a purportedly humanitarian project. They were framed by their architects as redoubtable mechanisms for the entry of indigenous peoples into Euro-Canadian civilization, yet for much of their history, attendance was mandatory. Indigenous parents were compelled to accept the ostensible beneficence of church and state, and send their children to institutions that were often located far from their communities, irrespective of their views on the matter. Moreover, if the school system was framed as a humanitarian enterprise—albeit a paternal and racist one—in practice it was often something else entirely. Over the long period that the school system was in operation, the experiences of many of the students give the lie to its inherent contradictions. Many of them suffered a brutal regime of forced assimilation that included cruel and unusual punishment, as well as being subjected to the corrupted sexual desires of their carers. It is in the dark reality of the residential schools that the civilizing mission is revealed as the hard edge of colonialism, and where the lofty ideal blurs into a more prosaic desire to eliminate the potential problems that cultural difference poses for an emergent national state.

In recent decades, the Indian residential schools have become a major source of contention in Canadian politics. At the outset of the 1990s, thousands of former students came forward with allegations that they had been sexually and physically abused during their time at residential school, which in turn triggered a political movement demanding redress from church and state. The school system has since become the pre-eminent symbol of the maltreatment of the indigenous peoples of Canada, triggering, among other measures, numerous apologies from political and

religious leaders, the largest financial compensation regime in Canadian history, and the creation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

Notably, although it was the allegations of abuse that provided the trigger for the residential schools coming to the fore, a key locus of dispute has always been their underlying rationale as a mechanism for assimilation. It is their assimilationist logic, for example, that distinguishes the Indian residential schools from other types of boarding schools throughout the West which have also lately become rocked by allegations of abuse. With the recent release of the final report of the TRC, which explicitly refers to the residential schools as a cultural genocide, and which makes recommendations affecting nearly every aspect of Canadian society, it seems certain that the school system will remain at the centre of debates over settler-indigenous relations in Canada for the foreseeable future.

Canadian Anglicanism was involved in the residential schools from the outset—readily agreeing to the prospect of stable funding for carrying out work in which it was already engaged. This enthusiasm translated into a relatively high number of Anglican-run residential schools; after the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church was responsible for the second highest number. Indeed, until the government terminated its partnership with the churches in 1969, the residential school system was the main expression of Anglican mission to the indigenous peoples of Canada. In other words, from the perspective of the representatives of Anglicanism in Canada, the residential schools had become synonymous with mission.

In 1967, shortly before the churches' role in the residential schools was terminated, Anglican leaders disavowed the paternalism of their predecessors and committed their church to work on behalf of indigenous peoples (to 'listen') rather than the Canadian state. However, this modified approach to mission was not to be enough. The rising chorus of abuse allegations in the 1980s and 1990s intensified questions over the meaning of the church's historic work among indigenous peoples. Several church leaders became convinced that the church needed to confront head-on the deleterious impact of their long involvement in the residential schools and strive to make amends. In 1993, former Primate Michael Peers performed an apology to indigenous Anglicans for the church's role in the residential schools and its attempt to 'remake [indigenous peoples] in our image'. Following Peers' apology, church leaders set out to convince the Canadian government to do the same, while seeking to make amends among former students and their communities. Later, the church threw its support behind the TRC.