

Conversion to Wisdom



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Recently I was standing on the very spot where Christopher Columbus landed in the so-called “New World” in 1492. Looking out into the bay, I imagined three tall ships floating on the waves and a rowboat coming ashore. As a Bible professor, I was also thinking about the theological perspective they brought with them. My eyes welled up as I pondered the ongoing impact of this encounter and wondered how it might have been different.

Try as we might, none of us experience life as a “blank slate.” Our senses and observations map onto pre-existing frameworks; like coat hooks in a closet, these help us to organize and make sense of things we experience and people we

encounter. European explorers and Settlers in the “New World” were no exception.

For Europeans of that era, biblical stories provided much of their mental map. And without a doubt, theological perspectives merged with political and economic interests to form a powerful cocktail of perceived superiority and divine right. As representatives of “Christian nations,” explorers saw themselves as the heroes of an unfolding divine drama in which they played the part of contemporary Israelites. In so doing they assumed their superiority as a “civilizing” force meant to bring these folks out of their backward and idolatrous ways. In short, these Europeans brought the “gospel” enmeshed in European socio-economic aspirations.

So much of history in the Americas, from initial European contact to residential schools in Canada, reflects this basic orientation. And now, as a professor in a Christian institution, I face the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) challenge “to develop and teach curriculum . . . on the need to respect Indigenous spirituality in its own right” (*Call to Action* #60).

For me, an integral response requires a few key steps. First, it’s important to try to understand the perspective of my European forebears and to acknowledge the immense role the

Christian tradition has played in providing the logic to justify this history. As a Christian, this then leads me to critique their perspectives and foundational assumptions from within my tradition, and finally, to consider possible alternative perspectives.

While some claim that the Christian gospel is inherently imperial and colonial, I don’t believe this is the case. In fact I would suggest that the most compelling critique of this domineering perspective actually comes from an attentive rereading of the Christian tradition from its original orientation as a minority reform movement fundamentally opposed to imperial aspirations.

The Europeans’ conviction that their role was to “Christianize” has significant roots in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18–20). However, they merged this primary call to “make disciples” (or followers) of the teachings and gospel of Jesus with the idea of a “Christian nation.” Rather than a call to follow Jesus as a countercultural way of life opposed to the trappings of empire, this became a mandate to “convert” the nations (sometimes at the point of a sword). In so doing, they conflated being Christian with nationality or loyalty to a particular ruler.

Perhaps the problem lies not so much in that they *followed* the Great Commission, but that they *did not take it seriously enough*. What would have happened if Christians had modelled Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, including turning the other cheek, loving the enemy, and choosing to serve God rather than wealth (Matthew 5–7)? What might have been possible with a focus on attracting voluntary adherents rather than coercing "conversion"?

I hope the irony isn't lost on us: where Matthew addresses a minority group without military or political clout and calls them to follow a Messiah who consistently rejected the trappings of such power, European explorers linked the gospel with the military might and economic interests of kings. What had been a call to lift the downtrodden and rescue the destitute morphed, shockingly, into a divine duty and a royal mandate to claim land and subordinate peoples.

And what was the gospel to be spread? A far cry from the call to social justice and economic reorientation envisioned in the good news Jesus proclaimed as the blueprint for his own ministry (Luke 4:18–19). The Church has too often functioned as an arm of the imperial project, pacifying Indigenous populations and aiding exploitative colonization.

Rediscovering Biblical Wisdom

If the overarching framework for thinking about the encounter with Indigenous peoples was one of superiority and special status, what other perspectives might be available for envisioning this relationship? Are we forced to either adopt this perspective or leave the Christian tradition behind?

The biblical wisdom tradition has provided me with a helpful alternative framework for conceptualizing this encounter and its ongoing possibilities. Let me explain by way of a few examples.

Recall the ancient story of the Queen of Sheba found in 1 Kings 10. When she arrives to "test" Solomon she's impressed by his wisdom, which is described with a laundry list of categories: architecture, cuisine, administration, fashion, and more. Faced with the extent of Solomon's wisdom, the Queen is left speechless, marvelling as she returns home from this encounter.

While a great account in its own right, two things stand out as particularly relevant here. First, *as an outsider*, the Queen recognizes Solomon's wisdom. She comes

from a far-away place and a different cultural context, but is open to seeing wisdom in the strange new world she encounters. Second, there is no indication that she converts to or worships the Lord after this encounter. In fact, the opposite seems to be the case, since she proclaims, "Blessed be the Lord *your* God," not *our* or *my* God (1 Kings 10:9). This story illustrates that wisdom can be recognized not only beyond kinship, ethnic, cultural, and national boundaries, but even beyond religious ones.

In light of the TRC's *Call to Action* #60, one element here is particularly striking. The list of wisdom-categories ends with "and his burnt offerings that he offered at the house of the Lord." Here *even religious ritual* can be recognized as a type of wisdom without, as we have just noted, conversion to that religious perspective.

As a Christian, I may be happy to recognize this since the Queen was recognizing the wisdom of the Israelites, God's special and chosen people (according to the witness of the Biblical tradition). This is why a second, and much less widely known, example of recognizing wisdom proves so interesting.

The book of Proverbs is a collection of sayings meant to provide guidance for life. Intriguingly, scholars are virtually unanimous in agreeing that one section of this book (Proverbs 22:17–24:22) actually draws upon an older Egyptian document, the *Instruction of Amenemope*. This was not a simple cut-and-paste job (multiple Egyptian gods are omitted in Proverbs, etc.), but a process of selecting, shaping, and reorienting this material to fit within the Israelite tradition. But the key thing for us here is that this example reflects a recognition of wisdom from a different culture and religious tradition – the "outside" – *within the Bible itself*.

Though often downplayed in favour of narrative material, the wisdom tradition reflects an international, intercultural, and interreligious exchange over what it means to live well in the world. This was not, and is not, a one-way street where "everyone recognizes the wisdom of *my* tradition but there is no revelation outside of it." And I for one don't think we should be surprised by this. If I truly believe that all people are created in the image of God, then I should *expect* to see reflections of the divine in the different people and peoples I encounter, as well as within their social, cultural, and even religious understandings.



Solomon receiving the Queen of Sheba.

ART: GUSTAVE DORE (C. 1866) / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Recovering My Own Tradition

I find it helpful to think of wisdom as an aura around the specifics of particular beliefs, stories, and convictions of a given tradition. If you think of it this way, various religious traditions and their wisdom reflect something like the intersecting circles of a Venn diagram, with elements that are very different but others that overlap. In other words, it is possible to recognize wisdom in a different tradition, and even agree with and cooperate on areas of mutual interest and concern, without becoming an adherent of that tradition.

For instance, learning from Indigenous perspectives,

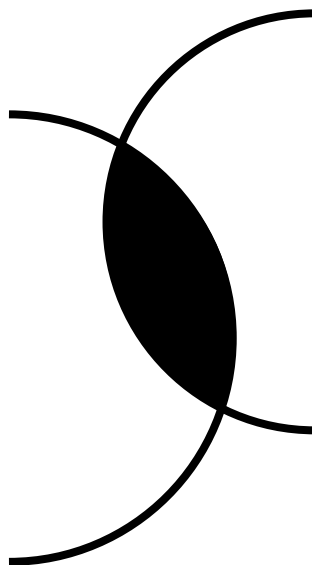
- I consider it very wise to make decisions today based on how they would affect people seven generations down the line.
- I resonate strongly with an emphasis on care for the land and the conviction that humans and our activities are part of the natural world, not hovering over or emerging outside of it.
- I am impressed by the wisdom of making decisions or dealing with problems in a circle process where everyone is given a voice and everyone's concerns and suggestions are heard.

Rather than simplistically defending or rejecting my faith, encountering these convictions has helped me to recognize, reconsider, and recover aspects of my own tradition. Like the ancient Israelites, contemporary Christians are also part of an international, intercultural, and interreligious dialogue about what it means to live well and wisely in the world. This is not a one-way street where God's wisdom flows through only one particular group to everyone

else, but a mutually challenging and reinforcing dynamic. Christians certainly have much to contribute, but also a great deal to learn.

For me this has been a helpful way to frame *Call to Action* #60 and the "need to respect Indigenous spirituality in its own right." This call challenges me to recognize the value of these traditions, not simply as initial stepping stones or pale imitations of something else, but rather to respect their own distinctive logics and ways of being, lived and embodied in the world.

The irony may be that freeing the Christian tradition from the expectation that everyone needs to



adopt it (or that making this happen represents its primary calling) allows me to dig deeper into my faith and ponder what could (even should) make me strange or stand out as a Christian. How does *my* life and *our life together* embody a unique wisdom that may be recognized and even attractive to someone beyond my tradition?

At the end of the day, I must ask

myself if I am willing to

- give up a sense of control and the assumption that everyone should think or believe as I do,
- recognize wisdom that emerges from and lies beyond my own tradition, and
- look for the image of God in others instead of expecting to find a mirror reflection of myself.

A powerful memorial at the site of Columbus's landing symbolically depicts the disruptive entrance of the ship of European civilization into a circle of Indigenous tradition. Describing it as a "commemoration," a "remembering together," our guide clarified that this monument does not celebrate but rather acknowledges the fact of this encounter.

Imagining three ships floating in that bay, I felt a sense of sorrow and shame for the trajectory that Columbus's voyage, emboldened by my faith tradition, set into motion. Yet I also wondered: what might be possible if, for the next five hundred years, interactions between Indigenous and Settler peoples were characterized by mutual respect and a desire to encounter divine wisdom through each other's traditions?

There is hope for a better future together. But for me this lies not so much in the idea that all will eventually convert to my tradition. Rather, I hope and pray for my own "conversion" (turning), and that of members of my own faith community, as we seek to truly live out the gospel in our time and shared place.

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