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Christian Colonial Impacts and Sustainable Reparations: A Comparison of Indian and Canadian
Contexts

Abstract

Colonialist exploits have existed for as long as recorded history. Despite this, the awareness of the impacts of recent exploits has increased and remained impactful with the globalized capitalistic system. This paper will explore the spiritual roots of the Christian capitalistic colonial exploits which have provided the foundation for the knowledge system under which these systems have been perpetuated, and the subsequent spiritual disenfranchisement experienced by Indigenous peoples of both India and Canada. Because the Western capitalistic knowledge system remains dominant, colonialism remains a reality in both Canada and India and thus the question of reparations has been brought to light. The politics of reparations will be problematized, with examples from both Shashi Tharoor and the Self-Governing Yukon First Nations. Issues pertaining to sustainability and reconciliation are spiritually located, and the importance of self-determination in light of colonial oppression will be examined.

Colonial Motivations in Canada and India

Christopher Columbus was a Portuguese missionary looking to find a westward sea route to India [Ref 1]. This journey was one of colonization and evangelization, supported by

Ferdinand II and Isabella I, monarchs of Spain[Ref1]. This evangelical effort was to be effected through learning about Indian people in effort to properly convert them to the holy Christian faith¹. Though in reality Columbus did not reach India, but rather the eastern shores of present-day North America, he was the catalyst to a colonial effort which according to historian David Stannard, was the “most massive act of genocide in the history of the world”[Ref1]. Despite not having initially reaching India, European colonial efforts eventually made it to India. This was first done by Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama in 1498.

In the years following, conversion efforts in India were undertaken by Saint Francis Xavier, with minimal progress until the mission was taken over by Father Roberto to Nobil[Ref1]. The minimal success of conversion was attributed to the missionaries’ lack of understanding the mindset of the Indian people, and thus it was approved by the Society of Jesus in 1606 to study Hinduism to better understand the Indian people and thus market Christianity in their terms[Ref1]. The centre of this effort was in Madura, and while following the social habits of Brahmins, Nobili spent many years learning and eventually participating in the established practice of *Sastrarthaveda* – debating religious topics before an audience[Ref1]. Despite this large effort to uphold Christian doctrine in terms of Upanishadic thought, and the respect from many Brahmins of the court, most Hindus weren’t willing to follow this effort and thus Nobili was sent back to Rom[Ref1].

It is thus evident that Hinduism was recognized to a certain extent as a valid religion given the efforts to conform to the mindset of the Indian Hindus. Though Hinduism has a longstanding oral tradition, at this time accepted canonical texts such as the Vedas and Bhagavad Gita would have been in circulation and thus provided a certain level of credibility to the

Christian mindset. This mindset is largely reliant on orthodoxy and thus informs the textual authority derived from biblical authority which in turn informs the authority of Western knowledge. Despite the presence of canonical texts, conversion was still prioritized but some validity was given in that the colonizers attempted to adapt Christianity to Upanishadic thought. Hinduism had deeper roots than the Christian colonizers expected, thus it was able to be rejected[Ref1]. Such rejecters of missionary efforts include Swami Vivekananda, who stated that “Christianity wins its prosperity by cutting the throats of its fellow men. At such a price the Hindu will not have prosperity... Blood and sword are not for the Hindu whose religion is based on the laws and love” [Ref 1]. The use of the word religion to describe Hinduism indicates that it is well-established and authoritative.

This same authoritative recognition of Indigenous spiritual beliefs cannot be said in the case of Christian conversion attempts in colonial Canada. Though having established spiritual beliefs, Canadian Indigenous peoples have a largely oral tradition. Thus, its lack of textual authority may have contributed to the ease in which Indigenous people were dehumanized and invalidated. In the mindset of the colonizer, this justified hundreds of years of genocide. This was enacted through claims of racial superiority and self-righteous Christian “truth”[Ref1].

With the decline in Portuguese power, Catholic missions also declined in India and were replaced by evangelical efforts of the Protestant churches of England[Ref1]. The British Government of India helped missionaries, and specifically encouraged them to work among the backward tribes[Ref1]. As these are considered to be the indigenous peoples of India, there is certainly similarity with reference to the experience of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Though Canadian Indigenous peoples and the people of India had distinct experiences, what remains similar is how Christianity, land possession, and capitalistic exploitation work hand in hand in creating colonial states and mindsets of economic prosperity over all.

The Christian Mindset

It is evident that Christianity played an inseparable role in colonial expansion. This is necessarily implicated in the production of a certain mindset. It has been proposed that many issues the world is facing are not solely environmental, social and economic issues but much more deeply rooted in spirituality and subsequent mindset production. The way in which the world is studied and categorized, though providing ease of understanding and learning, in actuality serves to disconnect issues from one another and from their root. Gus Speth, founder of the Natural Resources Defense Council and dean of Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, explores this perspective:

“I used to think that top global environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address these problems, but I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy, and to deal with these we need a spiritual and cultural transformation. And we scientists don’t know how to do that.” [Ref 2].

Speth is not alone in this thought. One must look only to indigenous leaders to find similar perspectives on the disconnect of people from the “categorized” issue of climate change. Take for instance Chief Seattle, *“Man does not weave this web of life. He is merely a strand of it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself” [Ref 3].* It is thus evident that these issues go much deeper than science, but in the minds of the people who share in collective identity which is informed by and reproduced through spirituality.

Given that efforts were largely motivated by evangelism and Christian conversion, mindset derived from this Christian thought which justified the colonialism synonymous with genocide and exploitation must be brought into question. One must only look to the creation story, Genesis 1, to find roots to such a mindset. Genesis 1: 28 states “God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’”[Ref 4]. This story thus provides a narrative which informs a mindset of possession and entitlement: land, earth’s resources, and authority over these things. This is a stark contrast to the mindsets created by and through indigenous knowledge systems around the world. This is evident in Chief Seattle’s comment, that humankind does not stand outside the web of earth’s ecosystem but within it. Indigenous peoples lived in a harmonious relationship with the land and with physical, spiritual, emotional and intellectual well-being [Ref 5].

This “othering” of humans from the environment necessarily creates a hierarchy where “anthropocentrism, environmental racism and sexism are tied to colonial assumptions grounded in a history of ecological subjugation” [Ref 6]. Postcolonial ecology has thus emerged to better explore the nature of this relationship of colonial humans with the natural world. This further supports the assertion that ecological issues are not rooted in science alone, but are necessarily products of colonial exploitation: “post-colonialism’s concerns with conquest, colonization, racism and sexism, along with its investments in theories of indigeneity and diaspora and the relations between native and invader societies and cultures, are also the central concerns of animal and environmental studies” [Ref 7].

This hierarchical perspective on the relationship of humankind with the environment is thus deeply spiritual. At the time of Spanish conquistadors, spiritual power was understood as

wealth, and therefore colonial conquests in the name of religion were undertaken [Ref 5]. This idea of wealth was perhaps translated by Columbus in stating the wonder of gold as a way to open the soul to paradise. This mindset thus clashed with existing Indigenous cultures in the Americas and continues to create a “conquest of wealth and division of spirit” [Ref 5].

As European explorers and Spanish conquistadors continued their colonial expansion, governments and corporations formed which served to continue the erosion of indigenous knowledge and ways of being [Ref 5]. The traditional way of life was challenged with the deliberate introduction of diseases, values, technology, and material culture [Ref 5]. Thus, the hallmarks of Western knowledge such as economic growth, land possession and textual authority are rooted in biblical authority. Missionary efforts to change the values of the so-called “savages” were initially well-received as Indigenous peoples had existing spiritual beliefs and believed the missionaries were heavenly people. This quickly shifted to a loss of trust as missionaries enacted hundreds of years of cultural genocide which continues to have intergenerational traumatic effects on Canadian Indigenous populations in continuing cycles of abuse and isolation [Ref 5]. Evidently, colonialism has lasting impacts which stem from a deliberate imposition of a vastly differently founded knowledge system.

Reparations Post-Colonization

A distinctive difference between Indian and Canadian contexts is the lasting nature of colonialism. In Canada, Indigenous peoples were, and continue to be affected by settler colonialism – it is an active process to this day. In India, the nature of colonialism was exploitative, as it was in Canada, but the colonizers did not settle. Though India did not experience settler colonialism and thus could be argued that the colonial experience was not as impactful, many Indian people, informed largely by nationalism and anti-colonialism, believe

that Britain owes India reparations. This prominent figure of this movement is Indian politician Shashi Tharoor, who delivered a powerful speech at the University of Oxford which subsequently produced large anti-colonial and nationalist reactions among Indian people.

In the debate, Tharoor states that British colonialism decreased India's share of the world economy, and de-industrialized India to support the British industrial revolution [Ref 8]. He names specifically that social traditions and property rights were undermined, and thus issues persist with ethnic/religious tensions due to this colonial experience. He suggests reparations as a means to atonement, not empowerment – that it is enough to simply state and accept that reparations are owed [Ref 8].

Though a very powerful message that resonates with the experience of many Indian people especially in terms of nationalist identity, the politics of reparations are difficult to navigate. One must ask what apologies realistically accomplish other than obtaining the moral high ground. If the argument is that people continue to suffer due to impacts of colonization, how will an apology help this suffering unless it is active? His argument is largely based on the military contributions of India to Britain in the World Wars, but also mentions the social and spiritual tensions between ethnic groups that have resulted because of colonization [Ref 8]. Tharoor's message has certainly been a tool to stir guilt, with no proposed productive avenue to give people the means to move forward from colonial impacts. He makes a valid point in that no monetary sum could adequately represent the loss of lives and social/spiritual capital. However, for many this doesn't negate the need for action. The type of action that's needed isn't action that exists within the Western colonial knowledge system – that's the whole problem in the first place and would serve only to perpetuate neocolonialism. The type of action needed will be further explored in the Canadian context in a later portion.

Though it was mentioned that India was not a settler colonial nation and thus may have had a different experience in terms of colonial impacts, a study by Lakshmi Iyer of Harvard Business School finds that areas of India in which experienced direct British rule continue to lower access to education, healthcare, and infrastructure [Ref 9]. This ultimately contributes to poverty, and higher infant mortality rates. Despite this, Iyer notes that “explicit post-colonial policies designed to equalize access to schools, health centers and roads” can be a means in which the impacts of this colonial governance period can be reduced [Ref 9]. It is thus evident that specifically targeted work must be done to address the impacts of colonization on certain populations.

To further explore the politics of reparations, the Canadian context can be used as a means to compare ideas of what reparations can realistically do. In recent years, reconciliation with Indigenous peoples has been at the forefront of Canadian politics. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has offered numerous apologies for the atrocities Indigenous peoples have faced in the colonialism that led to the creation of the nation Canada. Despite what Tharoor suggests in his speech, apologies never go far enough and don't produce the change that is needed to address the lasting realities of colonialism.

Self-Governance: An Avenue for Reconciliation?

As aforementioned, many issues of the world are informed by the capitalistic, colonial mindset which has served to exploit and spiritually disenfranchise Indigenous peoples in both Canada and India. Any amount of reparation accomplished by the Western capitalistic knowledge system will thus only serve to reproduce colonial ideas and provide solutions within the colonial knowledge system.

In Canada, this issue is being addressed through efforts in self-governance. The Indian Act, which as served to largely keep Indigenous peoples in place within this knowledge system, has been destabilized and ceased to have authority in areas such as Yukon, a Canadian territory. It has been replaced with Self-Governing Yukon First Nations (SGYFNs). SGYFNs are autonomous, recognized government bodies with rights and benefits, and power over the land, resources, and management [Ref 10]. Beginning in 1995, this system has been thriving in many First Nations communities, mainly in the Yukon territory. Those who participate report pride in having the ability to determine their futures through their principles, values, language, and overall traditional government. It is an opportunity to become self-sufficient and thus sustainable, in creating and restoring a strong cultural community while sitting at the same table as federal and provincial governments [Ref 11].

Conclusion

Colonialism, though often treated as history, has lasting impacts in both Canada and India. Though the experience is distinguished not only between these two nations, but also within the diversity each of these nations houses, it nonetheless has contributed significantly to a spiritual disenfranchisement with the imposition of Christianity, capitalism and the overarching knowledge system. Because this knowledge system remains dominant, the impacts of colonialism continue to be realities. It is thus evident that reparations should occur to address these lasting impacts. The Self-Governing Yukon First Nations provide an example of a means in which reparations can occur: they must occur from the people, for the people. Self-determination is crucial if colonial impacts are to be equitably addressed in working toward a meaningful, sustainable solutions. It is evident that many issues that have been raised due to colonial capitalistic exploitation such as climate change are due in part to clashing mindsets and

the location of humankind outside the network of the Earth's environment. Sustainability is thus a spiritual issue, and through reparations where self-determinacy and self-governance is allowed, social and spiritual capital can be restored to those who have been disenfranchised by colonial exploits.

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