

Book Review: Indigenous Theology and the Western Worldview¹

Mike D Winter

I am fascinated by how Kenarchy could help in healing our relationship with land, but there is a huge disconnect between the Western worldview and our predisposition to dominate the Earth², and that of Indigenous peoples. My scientific background has taught me to see evidence as empirical, to study individual interactions in isolation then record and present tested findings. I perceived an insurmountable barrier between Western science and Indigenous wisdom and realised I needed to be open-minded and prepared to learn new ways of thinking if I wanted to begin understanding the world from an Indigenous perspective. One of the tenets of Kenarchy is, “Re-integrating Humanity and the Environment,” so what does a holistic theology look like for those who have remained integrated and what can we learn from them? I was, therefore, delighted to come across the subject of this book review.

I hoped to find Woodley’s³ book different to other academic theological texts and was not disappointed. He begins by explaining the differences between Western and Indigenous pedagogy, with the latter founded in values rather than pedagogy at all. He sees his students as co-learners with him, and reminds readers that, “ideas of democracy and teaching from an egalitarian anthropology were on this [American] continent long before Europeans arrived.”⁴ Secondly is his emphasis on Narrative Theology; stories are themselves sacred, reinforcing values rather than emphasising or proving prepositions. The book relies a great deal on narrative; opening and closing with interviews, which sandwich three essays presented as a series of Hayward Lectures⁵, each chapter concluding with a post-lecture question & answer session.

The first essay, “Myths of Histories and Progressive Civilisations,” identifies the foundational sin of modern North America, based on the Western myth of Greco-Roman / Anglo-Saxon / White Supremacy – essentially that modern people are superior to those who came before, particularly those deemed to be primitive. Woodley discusses the lens through which he believes Jesus interpreted history, not an ethnocentric one but with an understanding that God has covenant

¹ Randy S. Woodley. *Indigenous Theology and the Western Worldview – A Decolonized Approach to Christian Doctrine*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022).

² Mike D. Winter. Kenarchy as a counterpolitical resource: re-imagining our understanding of land and nature (2020, *The Kenarchy Journal* **1** (4): 46-61).

³ Randy S. Woodley is distinguished professor of faith and culture and director of Intercultural and Indigenous Studies at Portland Seminary.

⁴ Woodley, 2022, x.

⁵ The Hayward lectures are an annual series presented at Acadia Divinity College, Wolfville, Nova Scotia.

relationship with all peoples. The chapter continues with a pre-colonial history, about which the majority in the West know little, and a challenging account of what happened to most Indigenous peoples during and after colonisation. Devastation from disease alone was astonishing, up to 95% of native populations died following contact with Europeans, mostly incidental although some infection was deliberate; resulting in the world population reducing by one fifth.⁶ In the post-lecture discussion on differentiating Christianity from being a follower of Jesus, Woodley states, “I’m not sure that Christianity is compatible with Indigenous values, but I’m pretty certain that following Jesus seems to be [...] Christianity married empire with Constantine and has been unable to separate itself ever since. It doesn’t mean that Christians can’t follow Jesus: you *can* be a Christian and follow Jesus, but it’s very difficult.”⁷ In contrast he offers a wonderful exposition of “Creator”, the being from whom everything exists; Creator is found in all things and, as revealed in scripture, Woodley believes Jesus is Creator and exists within the “Community of Creator”.⁸ A community in perfect Shalom, with preference and deference for one another in unity and diversity, which has its mark on and is reflected throughout all creation.⁹ Woodley believes that when his people pray to Creator, they are praying to Jesus.

The second chapter juxtaposes Western and Indigenous worldviews. Reading the Genesis creation narrative with an Indigenous lens, each part of creation is related to the other. God invites Adam to name all the animals, not for domination, but rather to name them he needs to get to know them and learn their characteristics. This view of the creation story reveals God asking Adam to get to know his relatives and shows humanity is one part of the family tree of the heavens and the earth.¹⁰ Creator gave us land and our responsibility is to be keepers of it, maintaining a harmonious balance across ecosystems. Western Religion sees individuals, distinct from land and nature and understands truth through facts and propositions, whereas Indigenous Theology views people as communal, understanding truth through narrative, finding their place by participating within story itself – contrasting doctrinal orthodoxy with truth as lived experience. Woodley quotes the historian John Mohawk, “I think we need to study Western Civilisation in order to understand when certain narrow and limited thinking first appeared and where we went wrong”,¹¹ highlighting Western utopian belief in a “greater good” justifies any means and that colonisation is the inevitable consequence of such narrow-minded thinking. What struck me deeply reading this chapter was how

⁶ Woodley, 2022, 31.

⁷ Ibid., 44-45.

⁸ Ibid., 48.

⁹ Ibid., 49.

¹⁰ Ibid., 57.

¹¹ Ibid., 60.

European settlers never sought the welcome of the land they colonised, instead holding a dominating, extractive view of land as resource.

The third chapter, Decolonising Western Christian Theology, focusses on “The Harmony Way.”¹² Informed by Brueggemann’s shalom-based theology and numerous meetings with Indigenous spiritual elders and others across forty-five tribal groups, Woodley presents a collection of commonly-held values which he proposes to be humanity’s original instructions.¹³ It is here that we find a significant overlap with values of Kenarchy and I believe there is much to learn from both theological perspectives. Of particular note, Women are Sacred, Children are Loved and, Show Great Hospitality & Generosity – which relate closely with Kenarchy Instating Women, Prioritising Children, Advocating for the Poor and Welcoming Strangers. Woodley’s thesis is that Creator is the most vulnerable being who exists – Creator Jesus, radically expressing that vulnerability, comes from a shalom Trinity to offer us the responsibility to co-act with God through love, along with others different from ourselves, to live in shalom with, for and amongst the whole community of creation¹⁴.

¹² Ibid., 90.

¹³ Ibid., 95.

¹⁴ Ibid., 104.