

Reparations and Worldviews: Challenges and opportunities for achieving racial justice through reparations mechanisms

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I want to talk about reparations and worldviews but even as I begin I am cognizant of the fact that I have fallen into a trap of Western hegemony. For the most part, the modern, industrialized, mechanistic Western worldview begins with the abstract similar to the vortex of a hurricane; it focuses its lenses into ever smaller, extrinsic categories, hoping for what will result in praxis. Indigenous worldviews often begin with the practical, and like a pebble in a pond, the praxis finds its way into ever widening circles of application. To convince Western thinkers of the necessity of reparations concerning racial justice is a near impossible task unless Western thinkers are willing to think differently; namely, from a more Indigenous perspective.

The Western way of thinking and living, though replete with problems, is not completely malicious. Unfortunately, though, the current social-religious-economic systems in operation and the foundations that undergird those systems, is incapable of leading us past the current major hurdles we face such as climate change, racial strife and assumed patriarchies. What is the root problem? The problem is moral and spiritual but even more, it is one of worldview.

The modern settler-colonial cultural morality and spirituality are developed from a particular worldview. For example, how one understands nature is firmly rooted in the particular ways in which one views the world. From a Western worldview, nature is to be studied, harnessed, developed and exploited. Nature, to many a Western mind, is to be objectified, and all its parts are fundamentally, mechanistic. From an Indigenous worldview humanity is formed by nature, not the opposite. In an Indigenous worldview we are intricately related to all other parts of creation, and they to each other. Nature to the Indigene is fundamentally, relational. This natural worldview, when it was the dominant worldview on Earth, though not utopian, generally produced harmony and had a relatively light impact on the earth, at least up until the spread of settler-colonialism and modern capitalism.

When considering the damage done to Indigenous peoples by settler-colonialism there is an informed historical critique to be made. Colonial powers throughout the world disregarded the human rights of Indigenous peoples, committing mass murder, sometimes attempted genocide, rape, and other untold atrocities that not only destroyed families and communities but whole life systems. Both nation-state governments and settlers alike stole Indigenous lands, extracted the earth's resources and framed the Indigene as either noble and naïve at best, or as godless savages in the worst cases. The attempted genocide committed against Native Americans, Aboriginals, and others, was rationalized and defended by Europeans, oftentimes, from the Christian Scriptures. Christians, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, were often not only complicit in these acts but even served as the engine driving genocidal crusades against Indigenous peoples. To say the very least, the Christian church

benefitted momentarily from our Indigenous misery and justified it all through the Doctrines of Discovery and other theological-social rationale such as Manifest Destiny, Residential Boarding Schools and harmful government policies and laws.

The weapon of colonization was driven primarily by greed. Today, with the same genocidal trends, capitalism, especially as fueled by modern industry and the practices of corporate extraction on a global level, is the preferred weapon of warfare against Indigenous peoples. More so, this underlying philosophical worldview has become a weapon of mass-destruction aimed at the earth itself. Blaming an abstracted causality such as humanity or blaming humanity through theological justifications such as sin, easily, and often flippantly, occurs. Indigenous peoples blame the church or the White man, or White man's government and laws, true enough. But, if harmony is to be restored, we must all assume responsibility.

What is at stake now is not one person's problem nor one organization's task to fix; not the religion alone, nor even the responsibility of one individual government. The problem to solve now belongs to all humanity. Humankind must re-think what it thinks it knows, and act differently than it has in the past. We must see things as they are; namely, that the whole community of creation is our relative, as is each race and gender on earth. Our relationship and our concerns go even deeper when we consider our present status is not one consisting primarily of love, but one expressed through the acts of genocide, fratricide, patriarchy and ecocide. These weaponized philosophies are not acts of love and reflect neither a God of love nor a humanity energized by love.

Humanity must stop denying our culpability in our present relationships with each other and creation and face reality. To the earth, and our eco-systems for example, we must begin to accept our current status as it really is. In the eyes of the earth and all her creatures, humankind are criminals of the worst sort. We are the rapist of the earth and we are complicit in the murders of whole species of plants, insects, birds and animals at a wide-spread and unprecedented rate. Men must treat sisters as equals. White people must treat People of Color with the same dignity they afford themselves. The wealthy, must give to the poor and empower them as needed. This is not about socialism or capitalism or any particular social system, it is simply the kind of love taught in every religion and even those who claim no religion.

While there is plenty room for blame to go around, I do not wish to dwell on that; only to say, the dire situation demands we must all accept responsibility now if we intend to make a change. We must see beyond the self-reflecting mirror pointing to our culpability and be willing to see the monster standing behind us, namely, the monster is the Western worldview which has affected us all. Incremental successes are not nearly enough to make the drastic changes needed on our planet now. We must seek traditional Indigenous values, which seem like a radical change, though they be aged in millenniums past. In order not to make the same mistakes of the past we must examine the "DNA" of the worldview that made us captive to our

genocidal tendencies. We must ask ourselves, what monster would turn those who say they follow love, to commit the heinous atrocities of the past?

There are glaring differences between the worldviews of Indigenous peoples and those whose worldviews developed under the direct influence of Western Europe. The “age of discovery” brought the Europeans to our Indigenous shores, and while many of the theologians and discoverers attributed their discoveries to God, they immediately acted in the most ungodly manner. These so called “discoveries” created not only wealth by extraction in previously co-sustained Indigenous lands, but along with the exploited slave labor and capital resources, came perverted national myths and twisted theological accounts of conquest. These myths have continued to be told time and time again, and with each generation they are reified, built upon and codified into our society’s collective mythologies and memories. I am willing to concede that Creator had a hand in the meeting of the two worlds but I think it has been largely misinterpreted by the Western nations and religious bodies. I think the Europeans were brought to our shores to listen and to learn, not to teach.

The Europeans came to many of our Indigenous shores at a time when their natural resources were fading away. Their oak forests were decimated in order to satisfy their desires for projects like weapons for war, castles, forts and churches. Western Europe was experiencing serious land concerns with unhealthy soil as a result of poor agricultural practices. Their fisheries from local bays and rivers were becoming fished out through over consumption. Fresh water was rare because their springs and streams had become largely despoiled. Classism, caused by feudalism (a failed system of hierarchy) was causing constant political unrest and maintaining hierarchical systems in both church and state were a constant concern of the ruling class. Cities were overcrowded. Waste and refuse lined the streets of European cities creating unsanitary conditions followed by disease. Western Europe had become a political hot zone and an ecological dead zone that was in desperate need of a new worldview, but instead of embracing a new worldview, they convinced themselves they only needed new lands.

Would that the Europeans had observed, listened and learned a new way of life compatible with co-sustaining the earth, the whole community of creation could have been treated with respect and dignity. Their true purpose was never to rule over Indigenous peoples nor to subjugate our lands. In my estimation, the Europeans who invaded our shores, blinded by theological hubris and greed, simply could not accept the said terms their God had in mind. The result was what has been dubbed “the Columbian Exchange” but for Indigenous peoples and our lands, it was no exchange; it was “the Apocalypse.”

At the time of European invasion Indigenous peoples were not living out a utopian vision of perfection. We too, still had much to learn. But the Western worldview that was so devastating in Europe; depleting the community of creation there of its natural abundance, did not fare well in our lands after much time passed because, unwilling to learn and unwilling to change, they repeated the same mistakes of the past. The same worldview that despoiled

Europe, sought without respect or regard, to despoil our great lands and once again it has succeeded to bring misery to land and people. The notable difference today, from the past, is that because of the worldwide spread of the Western worldview, we all now find ourselves in global peril.

Indigenous peoples continue to hold many of the solutions to our current climate difficulties. Indigenous peoples, in spite of post-colonial maladies, remain on the land stewarding traditional earth and people knowledge and the wisdom attained from millenniums of trial and error. A bandage will not fix our current crisis. Good intentions and ethical teaching will not heal us. It will take a new view of the world to restore harmony on the earth. The myth of the West as savior of the world; solver of all the world's problems, which is endemic to the Western worldview, has now passed its expiration date. Perhaps the best way to dispel a false narrative is to tell a better, truer narrative. Who best to make that corrective than the Indigenous peoples of the earth who have been observing the bad narrative brought by the Europeans, and whose mistakes they have noted for hundreds of years. Our Indigenous cosmologies are written in the land and they guide us in our responsibilities towards the land and to the community of creation.

To Indigenous peoples, the problems of a Western worldview are obvious and conclusive. The way of life demonstrated by Western peoples leads to alienation from the earth and from one another. It creates a false bubble called Western civilization of which the West feels will protect them from calamity. This false hope is built on age old philosophical ideas handed down from Greece, Rome, England and other Western civilizations. They consist of Dualism, Hierarchy, Compartmentalization, Anthropocentrism, Racism, Individualism, Competitiveness, Intolerance, Utopianism, Greed and Control which are now all embedded into the Western worldview.

In my particular tradition, the role of human beings is to repair disharmony, whether that disharmony be human to human, human to the community of creation or any other disruption. Reparation is therefore, a lifestyle. For the Western mind to grasp this lifestyle of reciprocity and reparations, it must first understand what has for so long, impeded the view to date and work to dismantle and decolonize Western thought processes that are based on false realities and false narratives, including what is perhaps the foundational fallacy, dualism. While there are many fallacies in place of Western thinking I will only mention what I believe are the top four most related to dualism.

Dualism

The foundational fallacy of dualism embedded in the Western worldview is directly and indirectly linked to many of the other fallacies present. A dualistic worldview causes people to invest in the ethereal (in the spiritual/metaphysical realm) or abstract (as in academia) to a higher degree than the physical realm. In a dualistic worldview our thoughts, philosophies and

theologies become disembodied. Dualism especially causes religious people to believe that their God is at work uniquely in their religion more than God is at work in the world, but which most believe their God created. This often has led to their inactivity in the “outside” world through complacency brought on by our own religious pride. Dualism causes us to neglect the truth found in most religions; that God is at work in the whole world. Physical/mental or physical/spiritual dualism results in there being no certainty of one whole reality but rather living into the parts as if they were the whole; not see the humanity nor the needs outside our own bubbles, creating blindness to the needs of those outside our own group, or even outside our own selves.

In dualistic systems, abstract reality is thought of as more real than physical reality such as land, or even one’s own body, which in dualistic thinking, is considered abstract and less important. Western dualism is also apparent on the plane of morality. Western thinkers tend to think in binary positions like, either right or wrong; either legal or illegal; either heaven or hell; either sin or holiness; success or failure; civilized or primitive; introvert or extrovert; saved or lost; clean or dirty; weeds or plants; animals or varmints, et.al...This type dualism makes it difficult for Western thinkers to hold two seemingly incompatible things in tension without having to find a resolution and it creates the false assumption that all things may be understood and every problem solved. Even the best knowledge, without traditional wisdom, and experience, only creates more problems.

Compartmentalization

Similar to a sacred/secular split mentioned above, compartmentalization stems from dualism, in that it allows Western thinkers to create extrinsic, often unrelated categories that are only parts of the whole of reality. This kind of reductionism divides and classifies life into many parts with little attention to whole. Again, the part can often become a false reality because it is removed from the whole. One example of compartmentalization is the inability for North Americans to understand how the economics of extracting natural resources from the earth affects climate change. The Western dualist simply classifies economics and ecology into two realities, neither of which is, in reality, whole without the other.

Another example is that of medical specialization. A patient may have a General Practitioner, a Cardiologist, a Gastroenterologist and a Podiatrist but if each only relates to the patient from their own area of specialization, without regard to the others, the patient will be the poorer for it. Compartmentalization can be a great asset under certain circumstances. To use the above analogy, a physician who specializes in cardiology may be able to offer help that other medical professionals don’t see, but she will choose to ignore the rest of the body (including thoughts, psyche, emotional state, etc.) at the patient’s peril.

Hierarchy

Hierarchy is another major fallacy of the Western worldview. Western thinkers, including Western systems of governance, appear to believe equality is wrong, or at least not a preferred system, even if they call it democratic. The results of historical Western structured systems have created de-humanization by class, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, nationality, etc. Because of the influence of structured hierarchy, the Western worldview is easily able to classify persons and people groups, one above the others. To classification by rank or function does not mean leadership must be absent, nor anarchy present. Innate hierarchies to the Western worldview have followed the path of social Darwinism, creating cultural others who must be ranked accordingly such as the scientific racism popular in the 19th and 20th centuries. Other hierarchies have included Heteropatriarchy, White Supremacy, and measures of blood quantum.

The kinds of Eurocentric White Supremacy that developed through the mythologies of Greece and Rome, Anglo-Saxonism, (i.e., against the savage, the barbarian) was propped up by Western European and American pseudo-science and has been culturally reified as White Normalcy and White Privilege long after the science was disproven to be based upon facts. In European based, hierarchical worldviews, it is assumed that White people are deserving of ultimate control of all knowledge, wealth, resources and power. White Supremacy, and its modern expressions of White Normalcy and White Privilege are particularly embedded in the history of the formation of the North American soul, but I know our experience is not isolated in the world.

Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism, borrowing thought from compartmentalization, dualism and hierarchy, allows classification of humanity outside of the created order to the point where human beings are seen as existing over creation, and apart from, creation. A Western anthropocentric view understands humans as having the right of supreme rule over all creation, to the point where all creation is subject to humanity. Anthropocentrism allows human beings to view the resources of the world as commodities made for their pleasure or for extraction, without thought of the whole of the eco-systemic reality. An anthropocentric worldview misses the intimate relationship humanity shares with all creation in the web of life. In the words of Indigenous activist and planter Winona LaDuke, “Regardless of whether or not they have roots or fins or legs or wings, they are all our relatives.”

In a recent book by biologist George David Haskell, *The Song of Trees*, the author gives an example of the Indigenous Waorani people in the Amazon rainforest. When asked to describe specific trees by their general type, they could not do it. In order to describe the tree, it was necessary for the Waorani to also describe the tree’s ecological context. In the minds of the Waorani, like many Indigenous peoples, the tree does not stand alone in creation. Each

tree, like every other creature, exists in relationship to its surroundings. We are all intricately linked to all of creation. We are related to the world around us as necessary family.

Can We Change?

Worldviews are not immutable but they are difficult to change because they are “caught more than taught,” but as much as possible, they may also be taught. Worldviews are primarily taught through what I call, “bad narratives.” Bad Narratives uphold the fallacies listed above. As I stated earlier, Perhaps the best way to correct a bad narrative is to provide a better, more true narrative. Today, in our world, it is Indigenous people, women, people of color, the poor, the marginalized and other oppressed peoples, who are able to offer up a better, more true narrative than those for whom the West has justified as heroes in pursuit of capitalistic and imperialistic goals. The Western worldview has not only helped to destroy tribes, nations and whole people groups but it is destroying the earth itself. In the Pacific Northwest, the area in which I live, this destructive worldview was obvious from first contact.

In the early days of the fur trappers in the Pacific Northwest, my wife’s people group, the Shoshone, inhabited much of Oregon, Idaho, Nevada, Wyoming and parts of Montana. They made their living primarily by hunting big game such as deer, antelope, bison and Big Horn Sheep. In the early part of the 19th century Fur companies from Britton, the United States and Canada began sending out fur trappers and establishing forts as centers for business. As these Europeans traveled the Indian trails and followed rivers and streams, the Shoshone (and other Indians) could not believe what they saw.

The malicious destruction of big game for no other reason but sport was inconceivable to the Shoshone and other tribal peoples who themselves, depended on nature’s abundance for their survival. But for the Westerners, as long as there were animals left to kill, they would kill them all the day long and leave the majority of the meat to rot on the prairie.¹ The Shoshone, and other tribes, understood the disruption and knew, if left unchecked, eventually such practices would lead to starvation. Their attacks on the newcomers were most often simply to preserve their own survival and that of the natural ecological system as they understood it.

This same pattern was repeated in various forms throughout history and regardless of geographic location, but, because of the hubris of the Westerners, only false narratives were constructed; framing the Indigenous peoples as blood-thirsty, homicidal savages. The tribes became the bane of the settler’s reports simply for trying to ensure their own survival. In the words of Hudson’s Bay Northwest Proprietor, Major James Mcloughlin, “I have never known an Indian to kill a game animal that he did not require for his needs. And I have known few white hunters to stop while there was game to kill.” The same wonton attitude towards our natural environment still exists today and can be found in the Western worldview.

There appears to be a correlation between treating nature as the “other” and treating people in a similar manner. These practices, effectively stemming from what we would later call, White Supremacy,” began with the earliest explorers and pilgrims in the Americas and in most parts of the world. One local Northwest example is that of a fur trapper, Jim Beckwourth, who recorded his party taking 488 Bannock Indian scalps in one day, of all ages and genders, leaving not one man, woman or child alive. Beckwourth, wrongly assumed, he had wiped out the whole Bannock tribe.ⁱⁱ This pattern of the destruction of Indigenous peoples has been repeated both before and after Beckwourth all over the world. When Indigenous people resist their own destruction, subjugation and the theft of their lands, they are considered to be a problem.

Those who oppress others create narratives that justify their own actions and these narratives become myths which inform the worldview of the colonizer. The attempted genocide of Indigenous peoples, naturally incited resistance and retaliation. The West, and the Western Church, must own its horrible participation in the history of genocide of various people groups, attempted genocide on the natural community of creation, the oppression of women, etc. Time, for reparations and restoration of our place on earth as human arbiters, is running out.

Today, all creation is demonstrating that the enemy of the Western worldview is more formidable than the Indigenous tribes, and this enemy does not discriminate between the innocent and the guilty! The Western worldview and its pattern of destruction has created so much damage that it has caused the earth herself to fight back—to defend herself from humanity and from all the current damage taking place on earth, in the waters and in the skies! Earthquakes, hurricanes, tornados, floods, forest fires, are all increasing in frequency and severity because humans, who up until recently have been only tertiary consumers of energy, are now the primary consumers.ⁱⁱⁱ In order to heal herself, the earth must destroy those who are attempting to destroy her. What I believe we are witnessing is our Mother Earth “spitting out her inhabitants,” similar to what is described in the Hebrew Bible, Leviticus 18:25. This complete imbalance must be corrected radically and quickly.

This is where the earth-wisdom and people wisdom of Indigenous peoples is so needed. Indigenous people of the world offer traditional knowledge and wisdom that have helped to sustain them on the earth for untold millenniums. I am reminded that we are all Indigenous from somewhere, at some point in history, but much of the insight that was gained in the past has been lost. Among many Indigenous peoples of the world this insight is still intact. We must avail ourselves to it before this gift to humanity is eventually lost to the planet. Not only should Indigenous peoples be shown “special care” but they must be restored to become the West’s primary teachers.

Most of the capital which the West, including the Churches, Synagogues, Mosque and Temples, now possesses, comes as a result of the oppression and attempted destruction of

Indigenous peoples. The debt owed to Indigenous peoples not only includes “special care” but empowerment to positions of authority. The concern now goes well beyond Indigenous sovereignty, restitution and restoration, as fundamental as these issues are, and without which makes the process meaningless. Indigenous peoples must be placed in positions of decision-making when it comes to securing humanity’s privilege as the primary caretakers on the earth and in helping to solve the other problem’s humanity faces.

How then can a foreign (to the earth and Indigenous peoples) hegemonic system be radically transformed into a more natural, cooperative way of living? Reparations must become a lifestyle, not simply isolated actions. Only through adopting Indigenous values and wisdom will this be possible. Only through the West, using its ill-gotten power and gain to lift up the Indigenous peoples of the world will we begin to see healing. Enough talking. We must now, do.

ⁱ See Gale Ontko, *Thunder Over the Ochoco: The Gathering Storm*, Maverick Publications, 1993.

ⁱⁱ *ibid.* p. 295.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Randy Woodley, *Living in Color: Embracing God’s Passion for Ethnic Diversity*, Intersarsity Press, 2004.