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Après Kamloops, le Déluge: Institutional Church, Indigenous Oppression and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition

Michael W. Higgins

Editor's Note: on May 27, 2021, it was announced that 215 unmarked graves were discovered on the grounds of a former residential school for Indigenous ("First Nations") children in Kamloops, a town in the Canadian province of British Columbia. In the following weeks unmarked graves were also found at similar institutions in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and elsewhere in British Columbia. Between 1863 and 1998, more than 150,000 Indigenous children were taken from their families and placed in these boarding schools, which numbered more than 130, many of them, like Kamloops, the largest, operated by Roman Catholic religious orders. Opened in 1890, the school had as many as 500 students when enrollment was at its highest in the 1950s. The Canadian government took over administration of the school in 1969, operating it as a residence for local students until 1978, when it was closed. A commission formed in 2008 to investigate the impact of this system on First Nations communities found that large numbers of children who attended these schools never returned to their homes and families. The historic Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, released in 2015, described the policy as "cultural genocide," as the children were cut off from their traditions and forbidden to speak their own languages in an effort to assimilate them into mainstream Canadian society. The Report also documented widespread physical, psychological and sexual abuse of generations of Indigenous children throughout the system. According to former Commission chair Murray Sinclair, students were often housed in poorly built, poorly heated and unsanitary facilities, and an estimated 6,000 children died while attending these schools. The bodies of many of these children were not returned to their families but buried on school grounds, frequently without identifiable markers. Research in the archives of the institutions as well as testimony of survivors indicate that school officials often provided little information to the families of deceased children, and preferred burials on site rather than bearing the costs of returning the remains of the children to their families and communities. The TRC Report issued 94 Recommendations, with #58 specifically addressed to the Canadian Roman Catholic community: "We call upon the Pope to issue an apology to Survivors, their families





and communities for the Roman Catholic Church’s role in the spiritual, cultural, emotional, physical and sexual abuse of First Nations, Inuit and Métis children in Catholic-run residential schools. We call for that apology to be similar to the 2010 apology issued to Irish victims of abuse and occur within one year of the issuing of this Report and to be delivered by the Pope in Canada.” For years that recommendation has been resisted, creating great soul-searching among Catholics and non-Catholics alike. While some bishops of individual dioceses have issued apologies for the Church’s complicity in these policies of neglect and abuse, higher ecclesial authorities had been reluctant to assume responsibility. Finally, the Vatican and the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops announced in October 2021 that the pope has accepted an invitation and will come to Canada to assist in the healing process.¹ On October 1, the Centre for Christian Engagement at St. Mark’s College, University of British Columbia hosted a lecture by Michael W. Higgins, former president of the International Thomas Merton Society and current president / principal of St. Mark’s and Corpus Christi Colleges, addressing this issue and drawing on the resources of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition to chart an alternative path for future engagement. His presentation, entitled (in English translation) “After Kamloops, the Flood,” is published here for the first time.

* * * * *

Who could gainsay the seismic impact of the discoveries of unmarked graves, first at Kamloops, and then elsewhere? Cumulative horror. But if we were shocked into awareness, should we have been? Did we not know this from the Truth and Reconciliation Report, did we not know this when told by Indigenous leaders, advocates and others? What stilled our tongues, stoppered our ears, deadened our hearts?

With his customary tone of righteous exhortation Toronto *Globe and Mail* columnist Andrew Coyne thundered on the issue of the residential schools policy that it “could not have been sustained all those years without the tacit support, or at least acquiescence, of prime ministers, members of Parliament, civil servants and ultimately general population. The shame of it – the immense, unspeakable shame – must be worn, not solely by the individuals most directly responsible, but by Canada . . . even a great nation must acknowledge its sins, and more than that, atone for them.”²

1. See Michael W. Higgins, “The Wrong Men: Canada’s Crisis of Catholic Leadership,” *Commonweal* (30 July 2021); available at: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/wrong-men>.

2. Andrew Coyne, “The Shame of Residential Schools Must Be Worn by Us All – Not Just Historical Figures,” *The Globe and Mail* (4 June 2021); available at: <https://>



Coyne is right: about the shame and about the need for atonement. There is no path forward without recognizing – individually and communally – the necessity of both for national healing.

There will be many commentaries to come, tomes of analysis, ceremonies of contrition, commemorations, homages, obsequies for the interred unknown, commissions and inquiries, political lobbying – reckoning long in the making and long in the unfolding. My talk is much less ambitious. I have no special locus, no special right, no entitled moralizing or posturing, only a modest contribution to a conversation delayed if not sundered. I want to address you on the subject of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and how such a tradition could have engendered a different approach from that taken by our ancestors: the road *not* taken.

The Governor-General's Award-winning poet and former Jesuit seminarian Tim Lilburn rightly situates our intellectual and spiritual malaise in epistemology:

Roman Catholics must identify what attitudes in Catholicism instigated the vicious, thanophilic culture in residential schools that religious orders ran over a hundred year period in North America. These dispositions, missiological, ecclesiastical, spiritual, inter-personal and the thought-worlds backing them up, must be purged: much will disappear if this exercise is performed with conviction. Parts of hegemonic whiteness will be disabled and a certain form of religion will become uncomfortable to practice. The roots of all politics, the roots of such deep cultural failures as these two, climate change and ecclesiastical complicity in colonialism, lie in epistemology.³

Indeed, as Lilburn says, it is a matter of knowing, a matter of apprehending, a matter of seeing, and we need to do it differently – this epistemology. Our moral and existential survival depend upon it. And key to this epistemology is the realization that the *other* remains the *other* in our understanding, is respected and valued precisely because the differences that exist in the face of the *other* define the *other*, not be eradicated, the result of the pap and mush that often defines dialogue, but reassured as irreducible. Pierre Claverie, the murdered Bishop of Oran, Algeria, spoke eloquently of referencing the unique in the *other* when he observed of Christian-Muslim dialogue that to

www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-the-shame-of-residential-schools-must-be-worn-by-us-all-not-just.

3. Tim Lilburn, "In the Time of Extreme Heat, in the Time of the Discovery of Unmarked Graves at the Sites of Residential Schools," an unpublished text given to the author.



really have common ground we must leave behind the illusion that our different worlds refer to the same realities. I prefer to say a priori that the other is other. . . . I will never be the other, nor in the place of the other, however much I may desire to enter into communion with him, to know him, to love him; *it's impossible!* . . . Encounter, co-existence, dialogue, friendship are only possible on the basis of difference being recognized and accepted. To love the other in their difference is the only possible way of loving. Otherwise, we tear each other apart.⁴

It is precisely because we, the settlers, the occupiers, the interlopers, have not loved our Indigenous neighbors in their difference but have sought to assimilate them, obliterate the difference, impose an ersatz homogeneity with its univocal culture, and doom a people and a voice to extinction, that we face now the urgent moral reckoning of a church, a government, a country. Thomas Merton and John Moriarty provide us with a map for the road not taken; they allow us to consider what in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition speaks to other ways of co-existing, indeed, of co-flourishing.

Merton (1915-1968) was a French-born, English-reared extraterritorial American Trappist monk, literary essayist, prolific poet, diarist and correspondent of gargantuan energy and output, ecumenist of international reputation, a social justice activist, polyglot and translator, an intellectual who accomplished as much outside his contemplative cloister as he did within – a whirligig with a still point. Moriarty (1938-2007) was an Irish mythographer, eco-visionary, rural philosopher, raconteur and teacher whose influence inside Ireland was magnified by his popularity with the media drawn to an exotic thinker steeped in Hibernian legends and history.

Although Moriarty was aware of Merton and there is ample evidence that he read him widely, Merton was unaware of Moriarty as the former died decades before the latter's first book appeared in 1994. But they were kindred spirits in many ways and on the subject of the subjugation of native peoples and the systematic and ruthless extirpation of their culture, they spoke from a shared text of insight and co-sympathy.

Merton's awareness of the lamentable plight of the Native American may well have predated his reading the sociologist and social reformer John Collier's *The Indians of the Americas*.⁵ One-time Commissioner of Indian Affairs during the FDR administration, Collier's book made

4. Martin McGee, "The Truth that Unites Us," *The Tablet* (7 August 2021); available at: <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/features/2/20416/pierre-clavierie-and-the-truth-that-unites-us>.

5. John Collier, *The Indians of the Americas* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1947).



a deep impression on Merton, which he records in his diary of April 25 and 29, 1958:

Have we ever yet become Christians? . . . we have sought to bring to birth in the world the image of ourselves and of our own society and we have killed the Innocents in doing so, and Christ flees from us into Egypt. . . . Until the beginning of the century it was assumed that the Indian problem and the harm done to the Indians arose from *corrupt individuals* in the government. But after 1909 the individuals concerned were honest and upright – and things went on as before for the policy, the system, the philosophy and the laws were themselves corrupt. Collier says, “It was not individual corruption but collective corruption: *corruption that did not know it was corrupt and which reached deep into the intelligence of the nation . . . collective corruption is more effectively carried into deed through agents not personally corrupt.*”⁶

Merton’s interest in Indigenous peoples, their maltreatment and the scurrilous Catholic theology that defined the church’s approach would become an abiding passion for him in the remaining years of his life. Throughout the 1960s he was immersed in various anthropological, literary, sociological and historical studies that brought him into intelligent engagement with the multifaceted reality of indigenous life. Published essays flowed generously as he moved to better appreciate the urgency of understanding, redress and right visioning. “The Shoshoneans,”⁷ “War and Vision” (*IMM* 17-24), “Ishi: A Meditation” (*IMM* 25-32), “The Cross-Fighters” (*IMM* 35-52) and “The Sacred City” (*IMM* 53-71), scrupulously surveyed the history of suppression, extirpation, lethal incomprehension, theological myopia and error characteristic of the many conquests that reduced the Americas to a nightmarish dystopia for the conquered. Merton observes that when an American radio station congratulated a native tribe for their war dance, it was in fact congratulating them for “accepting an identity imagined for them by somebody else and performing a meaningless, perhaps slightly nostalgic act which defines them as non-persons. The war dance is permitted as an admission of failure. One admits failure by admitting that one is an Indian. A situation worthy of Kafka. To be

6. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk’s True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 197-98.

7. Thomas Merton, *Ishi Means Man: Essays on Native Americans* (Greensboro, NC: Unicorn Press, 1976) 5-16; subsequent references will be cited as “*IMM*” parenthetically in the text.

an Indian is a lifelong desultory exercise in acting as somebody else's invention" ("The Shoshoneans" [IMM 11]).

His allusion to Franz Kafka is especially illuminating given his creative turmoil in giving shape to his own identity while a graduate student and aspiring writer in the 1930s culminating in the eventual and posthumous publication of his novel *My Argument with the Gestapo*,⁸ a work redolent of Kafka in theme and style. Merton's pre-monastic identity struggles adumbrated by his endless monastic struggles to know his identity as a monk nicely positioned him to feel in his own skin the alienation and marginalization of Afro-Americans and Indigenous peoples.

In a letter to the Argentinian writer Miguel Grinberg, Merton confesses that it would be his "fondest ambition to become a Guarani poet. I would like to just go and take over a parish in some Indian village in the Andes and just give them everything free the way it is supposed to be, and also help them get more to eat. For this I would probably be poisoned by the priest in the next parish. Or by the nearest *hacendado*, who would not however have me poisoned but just shot."⁹ This somewhat playful badi-nage with Grinberg – mildly Swiftian in tone – belies a deeper truth: his profound visceral, as well as cerebral, spiritual and imaginative insertion into the plight of the other. This insertion was in no small part the result of his close relationship with his former Trappist novice and fellow-poet the Nicaraguan priest Ernesto Cardenal. He saw his own task of reparation – sacerdotal and poetic – parallel to Cardenal's, a task of reconciliation and healing grounded in truth-telling, and most importantly constructed on a foundation of genuine communication rooted in respectful listening:

It is first of all important to listen to the silence of the Indian and to admit to hearing all that has not been said for five hundred years. . . . The things you wrote about the San Blas Indians were marvelous. There is no doubt that you have a providential task in this work of understanding and love, a profound work of spiritual reconciliation, of atonement. It is wonderful to realize the full dimension of our priestly calling in the hemisphere. Not the ridiculous and confused activities based on meaningless presuppositions, but the activity of true atonement, a redemptive and healing work, that begins with *hearing*. (CT 146 [12 July 1964])

8. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo: A Macaronic Journal* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969).

9. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 199 [12 July 1964]; subsequent references will be cited as "CT" parenthetically in the text.

There is a sour irony in these words in that *both* Merton and his former monastic disciple were censured by their superiors, Merton by his Trappist overseers who forbade him to write about peace (a censure that was eventually lifted) and Cardenal by no less a superior than Pope John Paul II, appalled by Cardenal's refusal to abandon his political life as a Sandinista cabinet member, and was therefore publicly reprimanded and his priestly faculties suspended. Pope Francis, the Latino pontiff, restored them.

To be fair, John Paul was the most vigorous papal defender of aboriginal rights in centuries, if occasionally European tone-deaf on accepting full ecclesial complicity in the invasion of the New World. Merton was not tone-deaf. In fact, as revealed in a letter to Latin American writer Rafael Squirru he dissociates Catholicism from its univocal pact with Europe and advocates for a broader understanding of *catholicus* as universal: "there is more to Christian faith than this limited ideology [Catholicism in European dress] and true Catholicism (which has yet to rediscover itself in our age . . .) is indeed universal" (CT 233 [12 July 1964]).

A major English translator of Latin American poets and essayists for New Directions in New York – best represented by his 1963 publication, *Emblems of a Season of Fury*¹⁰ – Merton was no apologist for a church polity that sat too comfortably with power. No throne and altar alliance for him. The explicit endorsement of President Donald Trump and his myriad policies of discrimination and nationalist triumphalism by various Protestant denominations, and the implicit endorsement of same by significant numbers of right-wing Catholic power brokers and conservative prelates, would have been abhorrent to the rebel monk. In *Emblems* Merton underscored the dangers inherent in failed communication, the desperate if not apocalyptic polarizations to be found in Gog and Magog (the U.S. and USSR at the time) all originating in the spiritual pathology that fears the alien, demonizes the stranger and erases the differences that enrich, nay define our humanity:

The desecration, desacralization of the modern world is manifest above all by the fact that the stranger is of no account. . . . There is more than one way of morally liquidating the "stranger" and the "alien." It is sufficient to destroy, in some way, that in him which is different and disconcerting. By pressure, persuasion, or force one can indoctrinate him, brainwash him. He is no longer different. He

10. See Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 93-103, 114-49; subsequent references will be cited as "ESF" parenthetically in the text.

has been reduced to conformity with one's own outlook. ("A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra concerning Giants" [ESF 83])

In an effort to move beyond exhortation and analysis to a new stage of offering a way forward Merton turned his intellectual energies to creating a template of human unity. To do this he conceived of a long epic poem rooted in his wide anthropological readings, sustained by his Blakean vision. Merton saw the only antidote to Western society's enthrallment by Reason and Abstraction, its entrapment by the tyranny of Logic and the life-constricting Sanity that has no place for Feeling, Imagination and Vision, in the wisdom poetics and visual artistry of that heterodox Christian genius, William Blake. The indigenous cultures offered an alternative to the suzerainty of Bacon, Locke and Newton. This epic poem, *The Geography of Lograire*, his "apocalypse of our age," is built on four cantos – North, South, East and West – and explores with an electrifying temerity the possibilities for humankind's integration in part by recovering the "archaic wisdom" of indigenous communities eradicated by Western rapacity. Perhaps no more ruthless a suppression of an ancient culture and its wisdom can be found than the conquest of Mexico. The South Canto serves as a redaction of pre-Hispanic legends and chronicles recorded in its sacred texts. Western society's – the invaders', the occupiers', the settlers' – inability to understand the First Nations' sensuous contact with reality diminishes his own relationship with reality. Out of intolerance and spiritual blindness our society condemns the archaic wisdom of early cultures and in return there can only be the indignation of the despised and suppressed. The peoples of the Yucatan taste firsthand the horrors of sword and cross:

Arrival of the turkey cocks
 Strutting and gobbling
 Redneck captains with whips
 Fire in their fingers
 Worse than Itzaes
 Friars behind every rock every tree
 Doing business
 Bargaining for our souls
 Book burners and hangmen
 Sling the high rope
 They stretch the necks
 Lift the heads
 Of priest and noble
 Our calendar is lost

Days are forgotten
 Words of Hunab Ku
 Counterfeit
 The world is once again
 Controlled by devils
 We count the pebbles of the years
 In hiding:
 Nothing but misfortune.¹¹

In the North canto, while speaking of the enslavement of blacks by whites Merton reminds his readers that the destiny of the conqueror is inextricably bound to the destiny of the conquered, the dominant culture's moral salvation dependent upon the willing offer of reconciliation from the dominated or otherwise we will remain forever estranged from each other. This moral seeing, however, is dependent on our capacity to recognize the divine child in the other, an innocence Merton calls *le point vierge*, "that little point of nothingness which is the pure glory of God in us."¹² This isn't a mushy sentimental theology but rather a radical summons to acknowledge the sacred otherness of the stranger, to know as Blake knew that a right balance of humanity – the coexisting of the Four Zoas – Instinct, Emotion, Reason, Wisdom – is the pre-condition of Fourfold Vision, Final Integration, Universal Brotherhood.¹³

But for this to happen – a visionary's map not a sentimentalist's dreamscape – we must accept how we have to adjust our thinking, an adjustment that is wrenching but necessary, an adjustment in keeping with Lilburn's summons to a new epistemology. As Merton observes:

the real confinement, the real reduction . . . of the Indian is the reduction to a definition of him not in terms of his essential identity, but purely and simply in terms of his relations with us. . . . In putting the Indian under tutelage to our own supposedly superior generosity and intelligence, we are in fact defining our own inhumanity, our own insensitivity, our own blindness to human values. ("The Shoshoneans" [IMM 9])

And is this not how we have behaved in relation to our own indigenous peoples – patronizing, dismissive of their unique culture, incarcerating

11. Thomas Merton, *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969) 37-38.

12. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 142.

13. See Michael W. Higgins, *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998).



their children in residential schools to “save” them, obliterating their vital connection with their heritage, diminishing us all by erasing difference in the interests of an imposed homogeneity of creed, behaviour, right thinking?

As he did, for instance, when he reclaimed the tradition of Origen over St. Augustine, of pacifism over the just war theory,¹⁴ Merton’s exploratory work in *ressourcement*, going to ancient texts and forgotten sources, enabled him to re-conceive, think anew, Catholicism’s sorry history of imperial dominancy. This too is the Catholic Intellectual Tradition – fecund not moribund, critical and engaging and not a mere prop and rationalization for ways of thinking contra the Gospel.

And now to Moriarty. An Irish adventurer of the spirit and the imagination, John Moriarty was reared in County Kerry, educated in Dublin and then began a series of travels that took him to diverse parts including a stint as an English literature lecturer at the University of Manitoba in 1965-1971. It was during this period that he would have a nerve-shattering experience with nature at its fiercest and in doing so have an epiphany that would prove a defining moment in his life and thought. One Manitoba March he had his first taste of a prairie blizzard:

My first impulse was to go out into the fields beyond the university and experience white-out. . . . It was instantly and breathtakingly confusing. . . . I realized there was no way I could experience white-out and not die, and so, if only to salvage something of my self-esteem, I turned and faced into the blizzard as a buffalo would and I asked it to reave and bereave me of the old ideologies of domination. . . . In this blizzard, it was somehow clear to me that we ourselves are the iceberg into which we will crash. Or no. Rather did it seem the case that we ourselves are the iceberg into which we have already crashed. At our very origin as a species that’s when we crashed.¹⁵

Winnipeg in the winter solidified Moriarty’s geological and poetical intuition that Darwin was right. It consolidated his view that, disengaged from our primal instincts, our companions in creation and our humble if noble birthing as a species, we are solely heirs to the constrictive reasoning of Bacon, Locke, Newton and their Enlightenment disciples. Like Merton, Moriarty was a student of Blake’s new epistemology, a new way

14. See “The Christian in World Crisis: 3. War in Origen and St Augustine” in Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 134-51.

15. John Moriarty, *Introducing John Moriarty in His Own Words*, ed. Michael W. Higgins and S. Aherne (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2019) xiii; subsequent references will be cited as “Moriarty, *Introducing*” parenthetically in the text.



of seeing that shattered the “poverties and impoverishments” of Single Vision, Blake’s Urizen.

But it wasn’t only Manitoba’s geography and weather that engaged Moriarty. He was seduced by the offerings outside its boundaries, drawn to the imaginative landscape of Canada rooted in its Indigenous peoples – their legends, their stories, the residual aftershocks of conquest: “Yellowknife, Moose Jaw and Medicine Hat. What an unforeseen opportunity and challenge to find myself living in a country that had towns with such names. Living in any one of them, I might one day walk free from the ideological tyranny of Jerusalem, Athens and Rome.”¹⁶ Persuaded that Western humanity is in deep trouble because of the direction it has taken – a direction best embodied in the reigning philosophies that calculate and measure with mind only – Moriarty’s quest to repair the damage caused by the sundering of humanity’s relationship with nature would be nurtured and matured through his encounters with the First Nations and Métis.

He travelled throughout Saskatchewan and Manitoba during vacation and semester breaks, dipped down into the American Midwest, explored the riches and mysteries of the Grand Canyon – in the course of which he had a theophany, or at least an epiphany or two – listened with uncommon reverence to the stories told by the Indigenous, esteeming their oral traditions in a way only a Celt like Moriarty could, amassing legends with his synthetic ability to see parallels, tropes and conceits in common with the literary histories and sacred rituals of cultures past and present. Joseph Campbell + Northrop Frye = one Kerry peregrinator.

On one occasion, listening to a Blackfoot story about the buffalo, he found himself “surrendering to it and letting it redesign some of the deeper dispositions of my European mind, I thought of it as a *Mayflower* that might yet bring me to the New World or at least to a new way of being in the world I was already in” (Moriarty, *Nostos* 241). Persuaded that the sacred stories of the Indigenous peoples are a portal through which we can enter and thereby escape the tyranny of the *Cogito*, Moriarty discovered in the creation narratives of the Inuit a way of moving forward culturally “from them and with them.” They can liberate us from the shackles of our physics and our metaphysics. At one point, presciently and provocatively, he writes:

more than once, I had heard Canadians regret that they didn’t have a great self-imagining novel, as Russians had, as the French and English had. How could they, I now thought, given that they think of theirs

16. John Moriarty, *Nostos: An Autobiography* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2011) 312; subsequent references will be cited as “Moriarty, *Nostos*” parenthetically in the text.

as an east-west country, as a thing strung out along the TransCanada Highway. . . . My mind still flowing in its direction with the blizzard it occurred to me that when it comes, its great book will re-imagine Canada as a country coming down from the Inuit north. (Moriarty, *Nostos* 258)

Pretty bold claim for a wandering *clerk* who had only alighted on Canadian shores for a short time, and yet Moriarty recognized the Canadian angst of the 1960s: its nationalist Centennial fever and accompanying sense that for all its brim and brio the country was adrift. If Canada was to reclaim its soul – and thereby know something of its destiny – then listening to the stories of its original peoples wasn't therapy, a cultural trendiness or a religious sop. It was a moral and spiritual urgency. Moriarty knew in his bones what Canadian Catholic political philosopher Charles Taylor would observe in *The Language Animal*: "It is through story that we find or devise ways of living bearably in time."¹⁷

And so we tell stories to soothe, to entertain, to explain, to *construct* ourselves. By listening to the *other*, *the stranger*, Moriarty was drawn into their mythic universe, not as a subject for European dissection, but as an encounter: "By the end of my second year in Canada I felt I had walked half way to the Cree who had ferried us to an island in the Lake of the Woods. Hoping that they would redesign my mind and my way of being in the world, I had allowed myself to be conquered, to be conquistadored, by some native myths" (Moriarty, *Nostos* 285). And indeed he had.

He found experiences, anecdotes, data, that would be critical for the edifice of his life story, his self-chronicled record replete with psalm-like repetitions, ruminations mystical and scientific, philosophical musings wedded to narratives of the ordinary, conversations in pubs, gardens, church rectories, lecture halls and RTE studios recounted in exacting detail. Canada – and more specifically the Indigenous peoples – gave him something that had previously eluded him: "In Canada, for tundra reasons, it was the most elementary forms of culture that I was happiest with and, among them, crying for a vision was as far as I could go. . . . I came thinking of a future. That it gave me. But, as well, it gave me a past, an alternative to our European past, to go home with" (Moriarty, *Introducing* xiv).

In addition to an emerging epistemology, a clarity of vision in no small way generated through a respectful and creative listening and dialogue with Indigenous peoples, Moriarty brought back with him to Ireland many

17. Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016) 319.

of the nascent ideas, subsequently refined and deepened by his several decades of life back in his home country as a poet, gardener, raconteur and exotic national personality, that would become foundational to his myth of human-remaking. These include such concepts as the “bush soul,” “commonage consciousness,” “inapprehensive perception,” “somatically sensuous deprivation” and “silver branch perception.” These seminal ideas, if not yet cast in the creative neologisms that defined his emerging eco-philosophy, nonetheless can be gleaned as operative during his formative Canadian years, principally because of his encounters with Indigenous peoples. He listened to their legends, tasted in his skin their histories of suffering, endurance and heroism, marvelled at their capacity to break through the Cartesian strictures of Western thought, and was inspired by their capacity to *see* Creation whole, not subservient to a species hierarchy that relegates all non-human life to a subordinate functionalism.

Moriarty’s intellectual and spiritual forays took him outside the conventional Catholic boundaries, and in this he was a mystic pioneer. He dabbled with heterodoxy, as all credible Catholic thinkers do, he sought intellectual and spiritual convergences where others preferred their cloistered securities and he tread terrain that connected him intimately with non-rational sources of wisdom. At one point in his life he observed that “it isn’t only houses that shelter us. Only a great story can shelter us” (Moriarty, *Introducing* xx). He spent his life making sense of that great story, expanding its horizons, connecting physical and planetary evolution with spiritual evolution, shades here of the Jesuit mystic-palaeontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and purifying his interior life via John of the Cross. Steeped in his Catholicism, he was not reduced to its limited historical and cultural iterations. Like Merton he stretched the Catholic Intellectual Tradition by feeding its genius, recognizing its capacity for dialogue and learning from alternate world views.

Clearly, their respective encounters – either directly or mediated by reading – with indigenous peoples enriched their self-understanding, nurtured their compassion and enlightened them – with stark ferocity – on the inherent weaknesses of the church and society when dealing with the policies and attitudes that defined both governmental and ecclesiastical strategies of cultural absorption, of cultural genocide.

Although official Catholic thinking on matters of missiology, interfaith sensitivity and religious freedom have changed profoundly as a consequence of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), centuries of encrusted prejudice, racial superiority and ecclesial triumphalism retain their residual power. This must end.



And although it is true that Catholic teaching as framed by the Spanish Borgia pope, Alexander VI, with his bull *Inter Caetera* (1493) enshrining what we know as “the principle of discovery,” acquired outsized political validation, it is also true that the reforming pontiff Paul III issued his bull *Sublimis Deus* (1537), ordering that the conquered peoples of the New World were not to be in any way enslaved, deprived of their property or their liberty. Unfortunately, we know which pope won out.

Faced with our tragic history of residential schools and their embodiment of a culture of contempt, we need to accept with contrition and humility – qualities much prized in the tradition of Catholic piety – our personal and collective responsibilities. And to that end, as comforting as it may be to think of the church in the context of the heroic Jesuit defense of the Guarani against the Catholic imperial powers of Spain and Portugal in the eighteenth century and as so movingly recounted in the film *The Mission*, the larger reality eclipsing such instances of spiritual valor, the pathologies of institutional power are consistently the victor, and we must accept that.

But the Catholic Intellectual Tradition – as embodied by Merton and Moriarty – allow for a different reading of our history and out of that reading a glimmer of hope in a dark landscape, an aperture for credible reconciliation with our First Nations, Métis and Inuit sisters and brothers.

