

Undoing Erasure Missiology: Immanent Interactions with Indigenous University Students

BENJAMIN N. GARREN*

She said, “When we get back to
our world, can we rent a video
we can all watch?”
“What do you mean, our world?”
This place is your world.
This place of sand, rocks, mesquite,
rattlesnakes, lizards, and little rain.
This is yours.”
“Oh, okay, when we get back to the other
world, can we rent a video . . .”

—*Ofelia Zepeda*¹
Tohono O’odham poet

One of the greatest sins of American Christianity is that we have, for the whole of our history, sought to create the other world of God’s Kingdom but instead have created European Christian societies on foreign soil. It is rare that we have sought, even for a moment, to ask the aboriginal peoples of this land, “Please, will you tell us about your world?” Our tendency has been instead to create a world to our liking, complete with video rental stores, and to disregard aboriginal voices. It was only in 2012, after 223 years of existence in America, that the Episcopal Church passed a resolution seeking to protect the sacred

* Benjamin N. Garren is the Episcopal Chaplain at the University of Arizona in Tucson, Arizona. He has served in several provinces of the Episcopal Church and for ministries within the Church of England and the Anglican Church of Canada. Before entering ordained ministry he worked in homeless services and special education.

¹ Ofelia Zepeda, *Where Clouds Are Formed* (Tucson, Ariz.: University of Arizona Press, 2008), 27.

sites of indigenous peoples.² In that 223 years of ministry the Episcopal Church has been party to the actual and cultural genocide of indigenous peoples. We only began to truly take ownership of our part in this process when we repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery in 2009.³

Like the majority of our resolutions calling us to transformative, on-the-ground ministries, there has been little to no trickle-down effect since the resolutions passed in 2009 and 2012. In fact, many devout Episcopalians who read this essay will have no knowledge of these resolutions, and thus will have taken no actions in the years following their passing to implement them strategically within their ministry contexts. In describing in this essay our community's theology of mission and how we live it out, I present one example of an on-the-ground ministry that is trying to act on such resolutions concerning indigenous populations and other historically oppressed groups.

My context, while not unique in the Episcopal Church, is uncommon. I am the Episcopal Chaplain to the University of Arizona. While the ministry has exceptional relationships with area parishes, we are based in a Campus Christian Center with other mainline denominations. It is there that a core group of ten to twenty students, of the forty-two thousand student body, gather regularly for eucharist and prayer in the Anglican tradition. Less than half of them grew up in the Episcopal Church or another part of the Anglican Communion; many are seekers who have found us during their time on campus. About half our members identify as gay, lesbian, bi, pan, demi, or asexual; about half our members are gender expansive or transgender individuals; and about half our members are from Asian, African, Indigenous, Hispanic, or Latinx backgrounds, or mixed households. The one obvious majority is that most of our members use masculine pronouns. We baptize or confirm around one student a year, but many students are simply Episco-friendly and we are glad for that friendship. Alongside worship and fellowship we also maintain an essentials pantry for students facing food poverty and housing insecurity. From

² Resolution 2012-A132, in General Convention, *Journal of the 77th General Convention of The Episcopal Church, Indianapolis, 2012* (New York: General Convention, 2012), 225–226.

³ Resolution 2009-D035, General Convention, *Journal of the 76th General Convention of The Episcopal Church, Anaheim, 2009* (New York: General Convention, 2009), 371–372.

this we create a network for pastoral care and spiritual friendships across the campus.

We base our ministry on three core concepts. First, we recognize that a relationship with Christian identity is different from Christian profession. Second, we consider formation to be the immanent interaction of profession of Christ Crucified from multiple contexts. As a result, we look at ourselves as change agents, not leaders, in our society.

Expansive Christian Identity

Tucson readily celebrates the Christian conquest of the land, often in ways its general population does not notice. John Kivel, writing about the power and privilege inherent to Christian hegemony, calls Tucson to task specifically for this blindness, noting that “the name of the El Con shopping mall in Tucson, Arizona, is short for El Conquistador, the name of the hotel that earlier stood on that site.” Along with this mall, other area businesses have also decided to honor armed Christian conquerors by naming their businesses after them. This is done without even considering the implications, as Kivel explains: “The secularization and normalization of Christian influence may lead us not even to notice the religious roots of these geographic names or recognize them as legacies of Christian colonization.”⁴ These names, which should evoke the horrors and pain of conquest, become completely normalized.

This is the difference between Christian profession and Christian identity. We assume, wrongly, that a church must have a Christian identity, but that a mall is incapable of having a Christian identity. The reality, however, is that a church is a place of both Christian identity and Christian profession; a mall, such as the El Conquistador, can indeed have a Christian identity while not having any form of Christian profession. Maia Kotrosits speaks to this reality: “It may be that Christian identity does not work as well as one might like . . . , and what we call Christian identity blinds one to all kinds of intricate relationships around the perimeters of the category ‘Christian,’ or investments in Christian texts and history that both weaken and

⁴ John Kivel, *Living in the Shadow of the Cross: Understanding and Resisting the Power and Privilege of Christian Hegemony* (Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers, 2013), 68–70.

intensify the category's affective pull."⁵ Those of us who take up Christian profession often fail to see how the effects of our faith and history have an impact on those on the periphery of our Christian thinking and practice.

The excessive level of worldly power wielded by Christians over the past centuries in America have left few places and individuals without a Christian identity, whether or not they make a Christian profession. Our society is such that even the most secular of realities, such as a mall, can have a Christian identity. Likewise, the Christian influence so saturates our society that we simply no longer encounter agnosticism, atheism, paganism, or indigenous cultures unmarked by Christian influence. Sandra Harding speaks to this phenomenon, noting that "in societies stratified by race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, or some other such politics shaping the very structure of a society, the *activities* of those at the top both organize and set limits on what persons who perform such activities can understand about themselves and the world around them."⁶ This means non-Christian professions are still enmeshed in Christian identity because the prevalent epistemologies and hermeneutics available to anyone in our society for self-determination are almost exclusively European Christian. Everyone has a relationship with Jesus; the question is if that relationship is healthy, neutral, or perilously unhealthy.

A startlingly unhealthy relationship that European Christian thinking and practice has created and often placed on the periphery is the one with indigenous peoples. While Secretary of State in Canada, Hector-Louis Langevin stated this relationship while speaking in Parliament in support of indigenous boarding schools in 1883. He argued:

The fact is, that if you wish to educate these [indigenous] children you must separate them from their parents during the time they are being educated. If you leave them in the family they may know how to read and write, but they will remain savages, whereas by separating them in the way

⁵ Maia Kotrosits, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity: Affect, Violence, and Belonging* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2015), 40.

⁶ Sandra Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: 'What Is Strong Objectivity'?" in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993), 54.

proposed they acquire the habits and tastes—it is hoped only the good tastes—of civilized people.⁷

This practice of kidnapping children from their homes and forcing them to conform to “civilized” (aka European Christian) norms is a relationship model that has been repeated for centuries between European Christians and indigenous peoples across the globe. Alongside mass murder and outright enslavement, it became a defining reality of Christian profession and violently forced all indigenous peoples to define themselves in relationship to Christian identity. This is true even in cases of identities that define them as antagonistic to that Christian profession. The creation of this other world, the world of European Christian cultural norms, sought to erase the world of the indigenous peoples; here in Tucson, this meant their world of sand, rocks, mesquite, rattlesnakes, lizards, and little rain.

Acknowledging this expansive Christian identity is at the core of my missiology. As a Christian of European descent, I must be aware of how the historic methods of Christian profession have caused an abusive relationship with indigenous peoples, as well as other minority groups. I must begin, even if in the smallest of ways, to work against these highly problematic acts of Christian profession and the weakening of Christianity’s affective pull such acts have caused.

To that end, before our community begins any act of worship we remind ourselves of this reality by saying: “The Tohono O’odham are the people of the land on which we now worship. They were seeking and naming the Holy here long before any Christians came to this part of the world. As we gather we offer respect for their elders, past and present, and any indigenous persons who worship with us tonight.” We do this to remember in solidarity and respect; we do not, for a moment, think that these words undo centuries of rape, murder, kidnapping, and cultural erasure.

Immanent Interaction

We are a small community of worshippers voicing a counterpoint to a prevailing narrative of Christian profession. We acknowledge the historically problematic relationship such profession has created

⁷ *Official Reports of the Debates of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada, First Session, Fifth Parliament, Volume XIV, April 20 to May 25, 1883* (Ottawa: MacLean, Roger, & Co., 1883), 1376.

between Christian identity and indigenous persons and other minorities. We seek to create a space where individuals can choose to be defined outside of any known Christian identity, outside of known Christian epistemologies and hermeneutics. It is only then that they can begin to make a Christian profession outside of the violent forces that have marked their previous relationship with Christian identity.

What we are looking at here is an inherently Pauline model. Alain Badiou asks, “What does Paul want? Probably to drag the Good News (the Gospels) out from the rigid enclosure within which its restriction to the Jewish community would confine it.” Badiou goes on to note that although Paul himself was a Roman citizen, he would “never allow any legal categories to identify the Christian subject. Slaves, women, people of every profession and nationality will therefore be admitted without restriction or privilege. . . . Ultimately, it is a case of mobilizing a universal singularity both against prevailing abstractions (legal then, economic now), and against communitarian or particularist protest.”⁸

What we are attempting to do in our ministry is drag the Good News out from the rigid enclosure of European Christian identity. The goal is to allow individuals previously not admitted without restrictions to finally have a space where they can fully profess their relationship with Christ. This allows us to begin building a relationship with Christ that is beyond the prevailing abstractions, or *adiaphora*, of European Christian cultural norms and also the limitations of any one particular space.

In doing this we are moving toward an experience of the profession of Christ that allows us to engage in immanent critique, the “critical examination of the basic vocabulary of the movement of thought.”⁹ This critique does not want to know how indigenous spirituality can inform European Christianity; neither does it seek to devalue European Christianity. Rather, immanent critique wants to know how indigenous spirituality, and other spiritualities, would profess Christ if European Christianity had never existed. What we want is something different from both the “self-criticism that promises a more democratic and inclusive life for the movement and criticism that seeks to

⁸ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 13–14.

⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 2007), vii.

undermine it altogether.”¹⁰ One of our mottos is, “We don’t believe in the God you don’t believe in either.” We want individuals to place aside apprehension around apologetic theology, to place aside goals to conform for the moment, and to name honestly where they are when it comes to God. What we are trying to do is create a space where we are constantly recognizing the activity of the Holy Spirit in every individual present and allowing that immanent reality to transform both individuals and the community as a whole.

We are longing to encounter the Holy Spirit beyond the limitations of European Christian norms. We are seeking to differentiate between what is Christian profession in truth and what is European Christian identity, with its weaknesses and strengths. We are recognizing in our faith life that “all knowledge attempts are socially situated and that some of these objective social locations are better than others as starting points for knowledge projects.” We seek to enable a variety of social locations to take up knowledge attempts around Christian profession, expecting this will “challenge some of the fundamental assumptions of the scientific world view and the Western thought that takes science as its model of how to produce knowledge.”¹¹ In this community, we believe that no social locations are privileged in regard to Christian profession, and that as a ministry we cannot restrict Christian profession based on social location. Indeed, only if we engage each other with this mindset can we be transformed beyond the context where we are and move more deeply into the context in which Christ calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves.

In our worship life we live this out first by stating it as simply as possible at the beginning of every worship: “We hope that you will be transformed by your time with us and transform our community for the better by being amongst us.” It is one thing, however, to claim we allow for open critique of our community, and another thing to do it. The place where we give this idea power each week is when we reflect on the gospel.

In most Christian communities a sermon is given from a point of privilege: words often coming down literally from a high pulpit, words to be received in silence as having authority. The only place given for the congregation to respond is quickly as they greet the preacher as

¹⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, vii.

¹¹ Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology,” in Alcoff and Potter, *Feminist Epistemologies*, 56.

they leave the church, or by contacting the preacher in private. At the end of every sermon within our community, on the other hand, there is a time for open reflection. I generally open up this space asking for “questions, comments, or hatemail.” What is always made clear is that if anything from the scripture lessons or the sermon felt wrong or was problematic for an individual, then the community wants to hear that objection. We want people to challenge the scriptures, challenge the gospel, challenge the preacher. It does not happen often, but members of our community are given something other Christian groups often deny them: the chance to speak out. We want to know if their identity is suddenly erased by the preacher, or if someone has used a verse of scripture in the past to erase who they are. We also welcome the chance to transform the understanding of the entire community, so that such erasure can cease.

Change Agents, Not Leaders

Our community engages in the struggle to end the erasure of cultures and individuals. We do this because we believe the Holy Spirit is working in those cultures and individuals in ways that are essential to the transformation of the church toward full awareness of the gospel. To do this we have to give up on being leaders and strive to be change agents.

Our concepts of leadership are enmeshed in the problematic systems described above. As Justin Lewis-Anthony explains, “‘Leadership’ in our society is fatally flawed by its roots in violence, the will to power and destruction.”¹² He goes on to say:

Any “leadership” exercised by a Christian must be based, not on personal skills, not on innate traits, not on charismatic authority, not [on] a will to power, not on a willingness to exercise violence, nor on a manipulation of others’ fears and fantasies. The end result of all those strategies is to become complicit in the monomyth of redemptive violence. Rather, the “leadership” exercised by a Christian must be based firmly, wholly and completely under the authority of Christ.¹³

¹² Justin Lewis-Anthony, *You are the Messiah and I Should Know: Why Leadership is a Myth (and Probably a Heresy)* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 263.

¹³ Lewis-Anthony, *You are the Messiah and I Should Know*, 274–275.

Lewis-Anthony calls us to look at the following stanza of Bonhoeffer's poem "Stations on the Way to Freedom" to define leadership:

Daring to do what is right, not what fancy may tell you,
 valiantly grasping occasions, not cravenly doubting—
 freedom comes only through deeds, not through thoughts
 taking wing.
 Faint not nor fear, but go out to the storm and the action,
 trusting in God whose commandment you faithfully follow;
 freedom, exultant, will welcome your spirit with joy.¹⁴

While this stanza does not provide a clear action plan, it does provide an ethos that I hope to instill within myself, the community I serve, and the individuals who take part in it.

What Bonhoeffer's poem calls us to do is consistently ask, personally, how can we step outside of the cycles of violence, oppression, and erasure around us and be part of creating something of the gospel. An example of this is the work of an Episcopal indigenous student on our campus. In conversations with other indigenous students of various faith affiliations, what kept being mentioned was how they could not readily access blue corn. The life cycle of blue corn, from its pollen to dried kernels being used in stew, plays a significant role in the traditional spirituality, community building, and mutual pastoral care of these students.

Consider how important the fir tree is for our celebration of Christmas. We green our parishes with its branches, adorn it with family heirlooms, and gather under it material representations of our love. Now we could indeed celebrate Christmas without the fir tree, but to do so would disrupt many of the patterns of our lives during Christmastide. This type of pattern disruption, but to a much greater extent, was what indigenous students were experiencing on our campus throughout the year due to the absence of blue corn.

Our ministry did not need to know the specifics behind this. What we needed to do was support these student as they professed Christ from their context and the need indigenous students have to gain

¹⁴ Lewis-Anthony, *You are the Messiah and I Should Know*, 283–284; Hans G. Ulrich, "'Stations on the Way to Freedom': The Presence of God—The Freedom of Disciples," in *Who Am I? Bonhoeffer's Theology through His Poetry*, ed. Bernd Wannewetsch (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 149.

access to blue corn. To this end, we worked to find financial support to allow indigenous students to grow blue corn and take up the spiritual, pastoral, and fellowship potential it provides them. We then trusted the Holy Spirit to be present amid this potential and bring about the nourishment of spirit and discernment of faith for those students.

We did not try to control it. We did not try to legitimize it with appeals to European Christian theology. We did not seek to be given the title of “most inclusive.” We simply empowered a follower of Christ in the midst of their community of context to engage the spiritual needs of that context.

This is the difference between asking how we can be seen as leaders for Christ in the world around us, and how we can engage the change Christ is bringing to the world. The question of whether we are seen as “leaders” under European Christian norms is irrelevant, and possibly a great hindrance, to simply being agents for change in the world around us. As Christians we are called to become agents serving the change Christ brings to the lives of those around us, not leaders as defined by one specific set of cultural expectations, especially when that set of cultural expectations is too often defined by racism, sexism, heterosexism, cissism, and other forms of systematic violence and oppression.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay we have been struggling with the reality that European Christians have consistently sought to create another world, one that erases indigenous cultures and denies voice to other oppressed groups, while severely hampering our ability to encounter the gospel because we have enmeshed it within a very specific cultural context. To overcome this problematic and abusive reality, the ministry I work with attempts three things.

First, we name the reality itself. We recognize the problem of European Christian identity and how it has caused systematic oppression and abuse of many individuals and groups. We then recognize the need to encounter the Christian profession outside of that specific cultural identity, trusting that by doing so we will be brought to a deeper understanding of the gospel. We then seek to place aside concepts of leadership prevalent to our culture and instead seek to be agents serving the change Christ brings to the world. This allows us to create an environment that anticipates the

need to renounce the Doctrine of Discovery, to value the sacred sites of indigenous persons, and to take the many other actions necessary to renounce the trappings of European Christian identity for the sake of a more robust and deeper Christian profession.

