



Spiritual Reflections

Reflecting on Early Encounters

By Rev. Dr. Karen Hamilton

The history of our country that we are taught in school when we are young, particularly of the Indigenous peoples, can be easily misleading. Rev. Hamilton reflects upon the importance of our own initiative as adults in overcoming these limitations through seeking for ourselves the true image of our Indigenous neighbours... based upon our own personal encounters in relationship with them.

Session Six of *Listening to Indigenous Voices: A Dialogue Guide on Justice and Right Relationships* states that “We all know about Columbus...” While commending this superb resource for being a vital way forward in reconciliation in this Land, I must beg to differ on this point. “We all know about Columbus...” Well actually, most of us do not.

What we did not learn in school, or at least I did not learn in school, is that Columbus knew a great deal about Islam. Before his ships set sail to find a trade route to the Indies, those ships traded around the Mediterranean in Muslim ports. As Alan Mikhail points out in his new book, *God’s Shadow: Sultan Selim, His Ottoman Empire, and the Making of the Modern World*, Columbus’ own writings begin with a discussion of Islam and not a favourable one. What he then did was import his sizable prejudices about Muslims right on to the Indigenous Peoples of this part of the World. Columbus had a concept of “the other” that he brought with him to dire effect and he was not the only one who did this. Some of the explorers/traders of the time actually called Indigenous People’s “Moors.”

Columbus encountered the Indigenous Peoples of this Land with a preconceived very negative set of beliefs about “the other.” I grew up with a preconceived set of beliefs about Indigenous Peoples as a part of this Land’s past history rather than as a living, vital, present and future reality with deep roots in this Land’s history, geography, culture and economy. I grew up so proud of the fact that my family cottage of a century and more was close to the Indigenous portage route from Lake Ontario to Georgian Bay. I was so interested in the history of the

Land. But it did not occur to me to go and visit the living, breathing, active Reserve that was mere minutes away or to buy gas from its gas station. I missed the potential of “Early Encounters” in my childhood and youth, viewing Indigenous Peoples from an abstract, distanced, historical only point of view.

“So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27, NRSV). In the biblical text, beginnings and endings of books are very important, the books that begin and end the whole canon, the Old and New Testaments are very important and their placement is a very deliberate strategy to guide our reading and our faith. We are to read, pray and live the text in the light of the ways in which its beginnings and endings reveal and proclaim the Divine Will. This text in the very first chapter of the very first book of the Bible proclaims, “off the top,” so to speak, that all humankind is in the image of God.

There is no mention of white skin, blond hair and blue eyes, all of which became too prominent in later Christian art and thinking although were not at all prominent in the first three centuries of our faith. All people are in the image of God.

Sometimes we forget the biblical witness to the Divine Imperative, sometimes we mistranslate or misinterpret as in the English language choice in verses around this text about our relationship to all of creation – the word “dominion” having been chosen as a translation of the Hebrew when “stewardship” is not



only a better translation from the Hebrew but also a more appropriate one contextually.

All people are created by God in the very image of divinity. We know we are to love our neighbours as ourselves. The question of this resource, the question to each other, the question of God to us today is what those two truths look like in concrete terms - the fulfillment of the Calls to Action of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, justice for the Mi'kmaq fishers of the eastern part of this land, and/or visiting the Indigenous Reserve that is just a few minutes away.

God is calling. As the Prophet Isaiah said, "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I, send me!". (Isaiah 6:8, NRSV) May it be so. Amen and Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Karen Hamilton is an ordained minister in The United Church of Canada and served for 15 years as the General Secretary of the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC), the broadest ecumenical council in the world. With extensive experience in interfaith and ecumenical dialogue, relationships and joint initiatives, Dr. Hamilton is committed to speaking about and working for ecumenism, inter-faith relations, the use of the Bible in the Church and local and global justice.

Questions for Reflection

1. *What struck you most?*
2. *Hamilton states, "All people are created by God in the very image of divinity. We know we are to love our neighbours as ourselves.... what do these truths look like in concrete terms?" After reflecting on Session 6, how do these truths call your community to action?*
3. *Share a quote or insight that sticks with you.*