



Cree children at All Saints Indian Residential School, run by the Anglican Church in Lac La Ronge, Saskatchewan, 1945. From Library and Archives Canada, by Bud Glunz, Flickr Creative Commons: <http://bit.ly/2tpYDhW>

Note on this Case Study:

No religion is inherently violent or peaceful. However, religions are powerful forces. They can inspire horrific violence. They can also inspire nearly unfathomable acts of love and peacebuilding. The Christians described here span a wide range of values regarding the intersection of their religion and violence. Some are the perpetrators of violence, some are working to end violence and promote peace, many more are bystanders, who may build up cultural violence, cultural peace, or even both.

As always, when thinking about religion and conflict, maintain a focus on how religion is internally diverse, always evolving and changing, and always embedded in specific cultures.

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Residential Schools of Canada

For nearly a century, the Christian churches of Canada, with financial support of the government, forcibly removed indigenous children from their homes and families, and isolated them in “residential schools” far from their communities. At least 150,000 indigenous people passed through the system, designed to eliminate the culture, language, and religion of the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples of Canada, and assimilate them into European-Canadian society.¹ The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada has called the residential schools “cultural genocide.”²

Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, United, and Presbyterian churches all participated. These churches gave many theological justifications for this system, but all were undergirded by the Doctrine of Discovery. Rooted in 15th century papal statements, it said that when European explorers found “unoccupied lands”—meaning unoccupied by Christians—they claimed that land for their Christian ruler.³ European conquerors were given permission from Christian authorities to completely ignore the rights and ancestral heritage of indigenous people. While the doctrine is centuries old, it has been used to deny rights to aboriginal people by the Supreme Court of Canada as recently as 1990, and by the Supreme Court of the US as recently as 2005.⁴

Of course, when Europeans arrived in Canada the land was occupied, and problems quickly arose. Indigenous peoples resisted the destruction of their way of life; they refused to convert to Christianity or assimilate into European culture. Canadian colonialists thought residential schools could change this. They had failed

to destroy native ways of life in adults, so they tried to do so by separating children from their parents to stop indigenous culture, language, and religion from being passed on from parent to child. As Duncan Campbell Scott of the Bureau of Indian Affairs said in 1920: “Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed.”⁵

¹ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *A Knock on the Door: The Essential History of Residential Schools* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2015), 5-6, 46.

² Sean Fine, “Chief Justice says Canada attempted ‘cultural genocide’ on aboriginals,” *The Globe and Mail*, May 28, 2015. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/chief-justice-says-canada-attempted-cultural-genocide-on-aboriginals/article24688854/>

³ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *A Knock on the Door*, 19-21.

⁴ *R. v. Sparrow*, (1990) 1 S.C.R. 1075; *City of Sherrill v. Oneida Indian Nation*, 544 US 197 (2005).

⁵ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *A Knock on the Door*, 4-5.

Children at residential schools suffered extreme emotional and spiritual abuse from being torn from their families, and were severely punished for any expression of their language, culture, or religion. Physical and sexual abuse of children was common. By 2015, courts had received 37,951 claims of physical and sexual abuse in the schools, reported by nearly half of all living survivors. Scientists conducted bizarre and cruel experiments with the children's diets. Many children were used as forced labor every day. Malnutrition was common, which led to weakened immune systems, making the schools breeding grounds for disease. Thousands of children died at the schools, and were buried in unmarked graves, their bodies never returned to their families.⁶ In fact, the death rate was so high, it was more likely for an indigenous child to die at a residential school than for a Canadian soldier to die during WWII.⁷

For most of its existence, most Christians supported the system. However, a few Christians spoke out against the cultural genocide. Dr. Peter H. Bryce was an official who was influenced by the Protestant theology known as the Social Gospel. As part of his duties, he toured the schools to assess health standards in the early 20th century. Horrified, he reported the terrors he saw, and demanded the government address the issues. However, many churches disputed his findings, and the Interior minister quickly fired "the troublesome Dr. Bryce," replacing him with a new inspector who stated that the schools were "generally satisfactory."⁸

The last Canadian residential school closed in 1998. Still, damage to indigenous families has continued long after the last school closed. Around 80,000 survivors are alive in Canada today. Despite the incredible resilience of indigenous people of Canada, 70% of native languages are nearing extinction, and many cultural practices have been lost. Alcoholism, depression, drug use, unemployment, and physical and sexual assault are all disproportionately high in Canada's indigenous population. They also make up a disproportionately high share of Canada's prison population. These issues and more all stem in one way or another from residential schools.⁹

Today, many Christians have apologized for their role in the system. The Anglican, United, and Presbyterian churches have all issued official apologies and repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery. The Catholic church, which ran most of the schools, has expressed regret, but they have not yet issued an official apology, despite calls to do so from the indigenous community, some Canadian Catholics, and Prime Minister Trudeau.¹⁰ Still, while many Canadian Christians have repented, some continue to defend the schools. In 2017, Canadian senator Lynn Beyak stated on the floor of Parliament that the schools were "well-intentioned," and full of "good deeds" including converting children to Christianity.¹¹ Her comments were quickly condemned by many Christians, including an official letter from the Anglican Church of Canada. The church said they were "dismayed" by the senator's comments, and reiterated that their actions in the residential school system had been "nothing less than crimes against humanity."¹²

⁶ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *A Knock on the Door*, 54-65, 72-85, 91-98.

⁷ Daniel Schwartz, "Truth and Reconciliation Commission: By the numbers," *CBC News*, June 2, 2015. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/truth-and-reconciliation-commission-by-the-numbers-1.3096185>

⁸ Adam J. Green, "Humanitarian MD: Dr. Peter H. Bryce's Contributions to Canadian Federal Native and Immigration Policy, 1904-1921," (master's thesis, Queen's University, 1999), 29, 89, 95.

⁹ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *A Knock on the Door*, 46, 129-141.

¹⁰ Lucy Westcott, "Canada's Justin Trudeau asked the Pope to apologize for residential school abuse," *Newsweek*, May 29, 2017. <http://www.newsweek.com/justin-trudeau-pope-francis-apology-catholic-residential-schools-617147>

¹¹ John Paul Tasker, "Conservative senator defends 'well-intentioned' residential school system," *CBC News*, Mar. 8, 2017. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/residential-school-system-well-intentioned-conservative-senator-1.4015115>

¹² Fred Hiltz, Mark MacDonald, and Michael Thompson, "There was nothing good: An open Letter to Canadian Senator Lynn Beyak," The Anglican Church of Canada. <http://us1.campaign-archive2.com/?u=d120aa8efc4112c7cae41108e&id=782e315885&e=430de8d1a8>

Additional Resources

Primary Sources:

- CBC interviews with survivors about their experience in residential schools: <http://bit.ly/1RqzWtX>
- Official apology from the United Church of Canada to residential school survivors (1986): <http://bit.ly/2qLD2ie>
- Official apology from the Anglican Church of Canada to residential school survivors (1993): <http://bit.ly/2tc1ihF>
- Official apology from the Presbyterian Church in Canada to residential school survivors (1994): <http://bit.ly/2tezg50>
- Official transcript of Senator Lynn Beyak’s comments (2017): <http://bit.ly/2ptb35N>
- “There Was Nothing Good,” The Anglican Church of Canada’s response to Senator Beyak (2017): <http://bit.ly/2sJIR1o>

Secondary Sources:

- The National Center for Truth and Reconciliation, tasked with preserving the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Primary and secondary sources such as the largest database of survivor testimony: <http://nctr.ca/map.php>
- Video, description, and diagram of the “Reconciliation Pole” an artistic work by master Haida carver James Hart recently installed in Vancouver to tell the story of the First Nation experience in the residential school system: <http://bit.ly/2mTY28y>

Discussion Questions

- How does the interaction of various Christian churches with the indigenous community show how these religions have changed over time?
- In what ways is Christianity internally diverse in the context of this case study?
- According to census data, today, most aboriginal people in Canada are Christians. How might their cultural context impact the way they practice Christianity, compared to Canadian Christians of European descent?
- Look at the video, photos, and diagram of the “Reconciliation Pole” by James Hart. How might the installation of this artwork on a university campus be both a recognition of past violence, and an act of present peacebuilding? Why is the totem pole named, “Reconciliation Pole”?
- The direct violence of forcing children into residential schools in Canada ended in 1998. But how does violence rooted in the Christian-run residential schools continue to effect aboriginal people in Canada today?



The dormitory at All Saints Indian Residential School, run by the Anglican Church, 1945. From Library and Archives Canada, by Bud Glunz, Flickr Creative Commons: <http://bit.ly/2sTka56>