

WHY GAPS MATTER—A NEGATIVE HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH TO THE RECONCILIATION PROCESS IN THE DIOCESE OF BRITISH COLUMBIA BASED ON THE EXAMPLE OF BISHOP LOGAN’S “SACRED JOURNEY”

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ABSTRACT

This essay delves into the utilization of a negative hermeneutical approach, focusing on gaps, tensions, and the absence of elements, to enrich our comprehension of reconciliation efforts. It posits that this method aids in discerning more and less appropriate approaches to reconciliation processes. Negative hermeneutics serves as both a technique and an ongoing journey of exploration, self-assessment, and understanding our connection with otherness. By critically engaging with perspectives, it prompts deeper questions and fosters a heightened awareness of the limitations inherent in one’s viewpoint. Drawing from examples within the ongoing “Reconciliation and Beyond” initiative of the diocese of British Columbia, specifically Bishop Logan’s “Sacred Journey,” the essay illustrates how this approach holds potential. It demonstrates how a focus on negative aspects—those initially resistant to conventional academic scrutiny, like silence and materiality—offers valuable insights into critical practices and academic implications. Furthermore, the essay analyses how a hermeneutical process involving receiving, deconstructing, and recreating can introduce innovative perspectives for understanding reconciliation efforts.

KEYWORDS: *reconciliation, British Columbia, negative hermeneutics, philosophy of religion*

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1. Introduction

On Thursday, May 27, 2021, the remains of 215 indigenous school children were found on the grounds of Kamloops's former residential school.¹ This discovery was widely reported in Canadian and international media. The “unthinkable loss that was spoken about but never documented” caused a nationwide response of shock, anger, and grief, and rekindled an interest in the crimes committed at residential schools (The Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc Community 2021). The discovery of the gravesite at Kamloops was only the beginning of a series of findings, and so far, around 1,713 unmarked gravesites at former residential schools have been found (as of March 2022). On many levels, this horrible discovery seems to have been a wake-up call that has reminded the public that the reconciliation process is far from over. At this point in the process, it is not a matter of fine-tuning the calls to action from the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation report. Instead, this discovery revealed that reconciliation and the journey towards a just and respectful future in Canada will require much more work and painful honesty about the past. A decolonial society is not possible if colonial wrongs are not fully acknowledged and vigorously brought to light. The lasting and ongoing harm caused by colonial institutions and structures needs to be recognized.

The cumulative impact of residential schools is a legacy of unresolved trans-generational trauma and has profoundly affected the relationship between Indigenous peoples and settler Canadians (cf. National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, “TRC Website”). Indigenous children were forced into schools that aimed to “take the Indian out of the child” (Churchill 2004)—a form of forced assimilation exacerbated by psychological, emotional, and sexual abuse. According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, large numbers of Indigenous children who were sent to residential schools never returned to their home communities. “The students who did not return have become known as the ‘Missing Children.’ To date, the TRC has identified the names of, or information about, more than 4100 children who died of disease or accident while attending a residential school” (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, “TRC Website”). While these numbers have been known since the beginning of the Reconciliation process, the discoveries since Kamloops seem to have made them more real and tangible to the wider Canadian society.

¹ For over 100 years, Indigenous children were taken from their families and sent to so-called residential schools. The government-funded, church-run schools were situated across Canada and established with the purpose of eliminating community involvement in the spiritual, cultural, and intellectual development of Aboriginal children. “The residential schools were a part of a broader set of policies that have greatly affected Canadian Indigenous communities. These include continued near-universal regulation under the Indian Act, legislation that dates to 1876 and effectively sets Indigenous Canadians apart from the rest of Canada; the Indian Act has resulted in social inequalities including unequal access to health care, justice, and education, inadequate housing, and increased rates of poverty, unemployment, incarceration, child deaths, and suicide” (Quinn 2016, 120).

The undeniable presence of the uncovered bodies shifts the focus from reconciliation as an apology for past events to a necessary reinterpretation of the present (Aguilar 2013, 33–42). The discoveries at Kamloops created a renewed sense of urgency and functioned as a startling reminder that reconciliation cannot be achieved without radical truth-telling. It shattered the settler belief that the truth-telling part was sufficiently completed and that reconciliation would be a linear and predictable process from here on.

The burial sites in Kamloops were discovered towards the end of my six-month research stay at the University of Victoria, and they forced me to reexamine the presuppositions and conditions of my project on the reconciliation process in the Diocese of British Columbia. Can there be any form of reconciliation before truth is completely told? What can an ally do to take responsibility without centering themselves in the process? What role can I, as a visiting White person, play in it? How can my research help distinguish between better and worse attempts of settler apologies, truth-telling, and reconciliation?

2. Situating this Project

This article is based on a research project concerning images and symbols used in the reconciliation process in the Diocese of British Columbia, which I was able to undertake as part of a fellowship at the Centre for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Victoria, British Columbia. This six-month postdoc fellowship was funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (GAES/DAAD). Given the restrictions of an academic short-term appointment and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which further limited opportunities to connect with Indigenous groups during my stay, I decided, in consultation with the University's Centre for Indigenous Research and Community-Led Engagement, to focus my research on publicly available resources and the issue of allies' agency within reconciliation work. While my main research focus lies on the connection between Christian spirituality and political activism, this fellowship allowed me to engage in a field outside of my academic comfort zone. Coming from Europe, I was curious to learn about the historical and present-day approaches to reconciliation, specifically in the ministry of the Diocese of British Columbia which has been very active in this area, and articulate it in terms of and through methods used in my context. A short-term research project like this has all the advantages and disadvantages of a visitor's perspective: in the best case, it allows for a fresh and creative approach to a situation; at the same time, the lack of depth and organically grown connection can put a certain distance and ambiguous detachment between the researcher and their project.

As this paper works at the intersection of different academic disciplines while aiming to reflect on the ongoing reconciliation process, it seems necessary to prepend some considerations on the connection between academic research and reconciliation work. As Sherly Lightfoot puts it: "What is, can

be, and should be the role of the researcher in reconciliation projects between Indigenous peoples and the settler states that now surround them? Activism, advocacy, and politics are traditionally problematic vantage points for most academics, yet this wave of reconciliation is too big and too significant to avoid” (2017, 297–304). I agree with Lightfoot that research can play a critical role in revealing, reporting, and reflecting on historical and present wrongs and possible paths towards reconciliation. Not all research projects and approaches will be equally relevant for immediate action or knowledge gain. Moreover, while any research on reconciliation has a political and ethical responsibility and must be accountable, I suggest that research also functions through concentric circles. In this sense, even projects that are more descriptive and less involved with practical activism can still provide impulses and tools for critical questioning and reflect on the experience of people involved in reconciliation work on various levels.

This juncture is where negative hermeneutics, that is a hermeneutics that focusses on gaps, shortcomings, and incoherencies, can play a crucial role. This article presents negative hermeneutics as a method that has potential for reflecting critically on reconciliation processes and articulating creative and open-ended questions. After a short introduction to the concept, it will give a theoretical outline of how this method can contribute to distinguishing better and worse attempts at furthering the truth and reconciliation process and help articulate critical and creative questions around it. It will then demonstrate the use of negative hermeneutics by applying it to examples of reconciliation within the Diocese of British Columbia, specifically the *Sacred Journey*.

Emphasizing positionality requires an awareness of one’s role in ongoing racism and colonialism (Macoun 2016, 85). For me, writing as an Anglican minister about a church that has historically been involved in cultural genocide and continues to be entangled in ongoing structural colonialism demands a careful discernment of the limits and intentions of my work. This project does not aim to provide any comprehensive analysis or solutions to specific topical issues. As the Australian scholar Alissa Macoun argues, the two fundamental pitfalls of White settler academic work on reconciliation and decolonization are the assumption of our own benevolence and the claim of “neutrality” and moral objectivity (2016, 94). By taking my own standpoint as a White settler and visitor seriously, I admit that I do not have an objective view of the discourse and the implications my research may have. I cannot know whether my research will be at all useful and contribute to reconciliation work on any level. I am hoping to show an approach that keeps the balance between an acknowledgment of limits and necessary perspectivity and an ability not to get caught up in white guilt and colonial self-centeredness (Macoun 2016, 90). I am not in a position to make recommendations on how things could or should be done differently. This project is neither a programmatic suggestion on how to improve the process of reconciliation, nor a detailed ethnographical description of the variety of ongoing efforts

in this area. Instead, I aim to show how a focus on gaps can help distinguish between more and less appropriate approaches to reconciliation and its connection to truth-telling. My hope is that this essay might be a starting point for reflection for people involved on various levels in reconciliation work to think about their experiences and agency and to stimulate creative impulses and discursive questions, even if it is simply by disagreeing and rearticulating their views in opposition to my approach.

3. Why Hermeneutics

Using hermeneutics as an approach in this context seems like a particularly odd choice. Hermeneutics is defined as the method and theory of understanding (George 2020) and, as an approach, is deeply rooted in Western logocentric academia. The need to develop more systematic rules for understanding arose through encountering objects and traditions that were not self-evident yet seemed relevant enough to put effort into their correct understanding, such as sacred or legal texts. While the need to interpret and bridge gaps in understanding and language is as old as human history, the first systematic attempts to develop rules for this process can (in the European context) be traced back to ancient Greece. They developed in the context of the recitation and interpretation of classical texts (such as Homer's *Iliad*). Classical hermeneutics uses the concept of "fusing of horizons" between the subject and the object, the context, or the person with whom we communicate. Through conversations with others, we expand our own understanding and revise our preconceptions. Hermeneutics argues that through this process, both subject and object (for example the reader *and* the text) are changed and, ideally, their interaction expands their own context and reality. This renewed perspectivity leads to additional and more profound questions and a deepened understanding (for example, applications and added layers of meaning for a text, extending it beyond its author's intentions).

Traditional hermeneutics has always emphasized the importance of perspectivity for the process of understanding. This strength can simultaneously be its pitfall: emphasizing the significance of the "prejudices" and "traditions" that shape our understanding can lead to an uncritical repetition of the status-quo and an ideal of "understanding" that eliminates and incorporates any form of "otherness" (Jones and Jenkins 2008, 474). The ideal of a merging of horizons can lead to assimilation of any otherness into the hegemonic view. Alison Jones and Kuni Jenkins argue in this context that the "white desire" for cooperation is shaped by a paradoxical longing both for difference and for its dissolution via communicative relationships (Jones and Jenkins 2008, 473).

More recent hermeneutical approaches aim to counterbalance this dangerous tendency by stressing the importance of otherness and continued self-suspicion. In the case of negative hermeneutics, the focus lies on gaps, breaks,

and tensions within the process of understanding.² This approach can complement and critically engage with traditional hermeneutics and assuage some of its weaknesses and dangers. What would happen if, instead of focusing on understanding based on an ideal of merging and coming to a conclusion, we started looking at the layers of interaction that we do not understand? Is there a meaningful way to communicate about the “outside” of our understanding? How can such an approach deepen curiosity and the ability to leave questions open? How would it shift our own perspective if we emphasized its limits and potential gaps? This article argues that a negative hermeneutical approach helps us ask questions and reflect on our own position within a process of reconciliation for three reasons:

1. The emphasis on perspectivity challenges us to take the position and context of a person into account in terms of their relationships, their traditions, and their expectations. This approach correlates well with a critical decolonizing view that stresses that research does not happen in a void and that the claim of an objective, transcendent position is linked to the ideal of logocentric colonial violence (Macoun 2016, 75). The hermeneutical focus on perspectivity can easily be brought into dialog with reconciliation studies which argue that “self-locating is a key part of decolonizing research methodologies” (Gaudet 2019, 51).
2. Against a traditional hermeneutical blind-spot of power dynamics playing out in a merging of horizons, negative hermeneutics emphasizes the interconnectedness of understanding and its ethical and political implications. As will be shown later, a core dynamic of this approach is the argument that understanding is fundamentally linked to our self-positioning and moral situating. This dynamic makes it a suitable method for contexts where power imbalances and structural oppression have devastating effects.
3. Combining the two previous points, negative hermeneutics accommodates the complexity of identity well, rather than focusing on the ideal of singularity. In the context of reconciliation work, this makes it an excellent approach for valuing narratives and storytelling that allows for gaps and incoherencies instead of filling them or adapting them to fit assumed ideals of coherence.

By focusing on gaps and tensions negative hermeneutics is well suited to complement liberation theology approaches, which aim to be witness to the negation of life through history while also keeping the possibility of a utopia and a better world open. In his *Hermeneutics of Bones*, Mario Aguilar argues that:

² Negative hermeneutics is a philosophical approach which has been proposed and developed by the Swiss philosopher Emil Angehrn. He draws from the tradition of classical hermeneutics (Gadamer) and develops it based on Ricoeur and impulses from deconstructivism.

while forensic science helps us to understand what happened to an individual, hermeneutics help us to understand bones as historical texts, and liberation theology provides a reflection on social processes in which the God of life was ignored. For God, the liberating God, was present in those events but witnessed the horrors of the negation of life and the negation of God in society. . . . One of the greatest possibilities of liberation theology has always been the possibility of utopia, the possibility of dreaming that a better world can eventually come. (Aguilar 2013, 35)

4. Reconciliation in the Diocese of British Columbia

Reconciliation in itself is a complex and multilayered process. As a political concept, it was first applied to societies transitioning from periods of authoritarian rule or civil war and has since been applied to efforts in societies still grappling with the historical wrongs of settler-colonialism. More recently, it has become a commonplace term expressing a regulatory ideal in political discourse. However, there remains a significant lack of agreement as to its meaning. Much research has attempted to define the concept in an effort to boil it down to an agreed upon policy framework (Clark et al. 2016, 2; Renner 2012, 55). Within the Canadian context, scholars have questioned whether reconciliation is a suitable orienting goal for future relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The Indigenous Governance Program at the University of Victoria, also known as the “Victoria School,” describes reconciliation, at least as reflected in public discourse, as acquiescence to settler-colonialism that distracts from and undermines “deep decolonizing movements” (Denis and Bailey 2016, 140; Coulthard 2014). Reconciliation is contrasted by a radical demand for a “regeneration and resurgence of Indigenous nations, and the creation of sustainable alternatives to hetero-patriarchal colonial-capitalism” (Denis and Bailey 2016, 141). From a radical perspective, some scholars even argue that it is impossible for settlers to be allies and take Indigenous claims seriously while they remain on occupied land (Denis and Bailey 2016; Memmi 1965). This lack of a unanimous understanding of what reconciliation is, how it can be achieved, and whether or not it is a desirable goal at all, applies to a Church context as well. In addition to practical and political dimensions, the Church has had to grapple with additional spiritual layers of the process. I argue that the ambiguity of the concept of reconciliation is one of the strengths and challenges of a renewed understanding of the relationship between First Nations people and settlers, as it is open to more than one meaning and requires an ongoing reinterpretation and shift of perspective.

In the late 1980s, The Anglican Church of Canada started a process of reconciliation with Indigenous groups and began to take responsibility for the injustice, violence, and oppression of indigenous people it had been involved with since the first missionaries entered the land. The Diocese of British Columbia used to run one of the largest residential schools in Canada: St. Michael’s Indian Residential School, which was closed in 1974. The building was demolished

with a ceremony on February 18, 2015, with Bishop Logan in attendance (cf. Anglican Diocese of Islands and Inlets, “[TRC Calls to Action](#)”). The names of fifteen students who died while attending this school are published on the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation’s website (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, “[St. Michael’s](#)”). On its website, the Diocese emphasizes the importance of reconciliation for its ministry. It describes “reconciliation [as] an ongoing process that is deeply related to our baptismal covenant and the unique role the church played in the history of colonization in our country, including in residential schools” (Anglican Diocese of Islands and Inlets, “[TRC Calls to Action](#)”). It describes this process as a journey of listening, truth-telling, repentance, and healing with Indigenous Peoples, both within and outside the Church, and recognizes a need for further healing and justice-seeking across the land. One of the driving forces of on-the-ground reconciliation work in the Diocese of British Columbia was “Aboriginal Neighbours.” First formed by a group of concerned Anglicans in 1996 and later joined by local members from the Victoria Presbytery of the United Church of Canada and the Vancouver Island Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), Aboriginal Neighbours works to organize and equip conversations and work related to reconciliation and to be an ongoing source of opportunity and support for the work of reconciling. In 2017, the Diocese announced a year of reconciliation and began identifying and implementing reconciliatory initiatives at the local and diocesan levels. Since then, the Diocese has actively pursued the process of reconciliation on various levels. Examples of this work are the financial support of local reconciliation projects through the Vision Fund (established in 2016), the establishment of a Vision Implementation Team organizing workshops on the ninety-four “Calls to Action” across the Diocese, and the establishment of an Indigenous Elders’ council in the Diocese as well as programs for deepening knowledge about intersectionality and racism. These efforts are coordinated by the diocesan ministry of “Reconciliation and Beyond,” implementing the Anglican Church of Canada’s fourth “Mark of Mission” to “transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation” (Anglican Diocese of Islands and Inlets, “[Reconciliation & Beyond](#)”).

A particularly notable example of the Diocese’s work has been the “Sacred Journey” of Bishop Logan in 2016. In March 2016, during the liturgical church season of Lent, Bishop Logan walked 480 kilometers from Alert Bay to Victoria, seeking permission from First Nations representatives to enter and stay on their traditional lands. The Diocese described this as a symbolic penitential journey undertaken as a personal act of repentance by the bishop and on behalf of all Anglicans in this Diocese. Talking about the experience of his journey, Bishop Logan states that: “We, through our forebears, entered this land the first time, we failed to see that the Creator was here before us. Now we, in our generation, need to reenter this land in a new way,” thus contrasting the way the Church initially entered these same lands (Anglican Diocese of Islands and Inlets, “[Sacred Journey](#)”). Many First Nation Leaders welcomed the bishop; some denied him entry. His walk manifested the

image of reconciliation as an ongoing journey. The journey was part of the Diocese's acknowledgment, as the Anglican Church, that they entered these lands as colonists, asserting a right to ownership of the land and domination over its Indigenous peoples. On its website, the Diocese states that it will need to move beyond apology towards a renewed and right relationship with the First Peoples of these Islands (cf. Anglican Diocese of Islands and Inlets, "[Sacred Journey](#)"). Reconciliation work on a diocesan level brings additional changes and challenges and raises specific questions. What is its specific potential compared to a centralized national process? What are the specifics of reconciliation work within the Church and of an apology from some of its members to others in comparison to an apology towards people who do not see themselves as its members? How can this perspective challenge our understanding of the Church and its dynamics?

5. A Negative Hermeneutical Approach

A hermeneutical approach to reconciliation needs to move beyond traditional ideas of verbal communication and propositional understanding. Negative hermeneutics is an approach that focuses on elements of difference and otherness within the process of understanding and learning. It analyzes gaps and different forms of non-understanding within meaning that shape the communication process. This orientation makes it not only a suitable framework for discussing issues and topics that evade traditional academic paradigms but also a framework for disruptive and unsettling elements. It grapples with phenomena that elude a narrow concept of (verbal) understanding (for example, material presence, relationality, dreams, and land).³ This approach, while being deeply rooted in colonial discourse, can lead to a greater awareness of this positionality without trying to transcend it (Macoun 2016, 85–102) and in this way, foster a humble and self-aware attitude to reconciliation and the role academic research can play in it. In the context of reconciliation studies, its emphasis on disruption is a unique way to confront a prevailing discourse and focus on less dominant dynamics within it.⁴

In the next section, I will show how negative hermeneutics offers a three-step approach to understanding based on its focus on gaps. To show the potential of this method for discerning appropriate and less appropriate approaches to reconciliation and to help articulate open questions about them, I will apply these three steps to examples from the reconciliation process in the Diocese of British

³ "Keeoukaywin assures that knowledge, teachings, dreams, and stories are mobilized through social and political relations, social values, life cycles, and language; it is therefore a living, creative, and holistic practice" (Gaudet 2019, 59).

⁴ Cf. "If we think of territorial acknowledgments as sites of potential disruption, they can be transformative acts that to some extent undo Indigenous erasure. I believe this is true as long as these acknowledgments discomfit both those speaking and hearing the words. The fact of Indigenous presence should force non-Indigenous peoples to confront their own place on these lands" (âpihtawikosisân 2016).

Columbia (BC), mostly to the “Sacred Journey.” Bishop Logan does not use the language of negative hermeneutics himself, however, this article aims to show how analyzing his actions through this academic approach can deepen the understanding of the dynamic of reconciliation.

5.1 *Understanding as receiving*

Negative hermeneutics suggests an attitude of receiving as a first step in the process of understanding. This approach includes both an awareness of one’s own perspectivity and tradition as well as an awareness of the gift of otherness for the process of understanding. Taking seriously a postcolonial paradigm shift, negative hermeneutics does not aim for an ideal of timeless, abstract knowledge but works from the assumption that understanding is always shaped by context, experience, history, and society. Through this emphasis on the culture and historical situatedness of understanding, negative hermeneutics aims to foster growing openness towards various paradigms of knowledge, bodily practices, and presence, valuing individual accounts and the process of learning. Reconciliation work, but also the desire for reconciliation in the first place, is situated in its context and narrative. It is received but also developed and established over time. Negative hermeneutics offers three focal points for this reflection on reception (Angehrn 2009, 325–38).

5.1.1 *Subject*

This category emphasizes the importance of our own individual and collective history, perspective, context, and learning. Who is involved in the process of reconciliation? Who is not? What desires, narratives, and preconceptions do these people bring? How can we move away from generalized ideas of what reconciliation looks like to focus on individual stories and truths explored through listening and personal encounter? This perspective emphasizes that reconciliation does not happen in a void but values the process of accepting and admitting our own limitations and imperfections, acknowledging frustration, and finding new sources for a desire for reconciliation.

At the same time, a focus on the subject can remind us that there is no such thing as a forced reconciliation; the process needs to work with individual and collective boundaries and expectations. It also wrestles with the question of who can reconcile and be reconciled in the first place. Is there such a thing as a vicarious reconciliation? Is reconciliation possible only between individuals or also between institutions and organizations? What are the implications for transgenerational harm where some (many) original perpetrators cannot be involved in the process? What are the limits of guilt, complicity, innocence, and responsibility?

Bishop Logan’s journey is a prominent example of an effort made in the process of reconciliation that combined both personal and institutional elements. Intending to bring together elements of Western-Christian heritage and the traditions and beliefs

of First Nations peoples, the idea of a pilgrimage is a fitting example that draws from different traditions and oscillates between personal and symbolic meaning (Anglican Diocese of Islands and Inlets, “[Sacred Journey](#)”). In a Christian context, pilgrimages are closely linked to ascetic but also penitential traditions (Anglican Diocese of Islands and Inlets, “[TRC Calls to Action](#)”). After the decommissioning of St. Michael’s Indian Residential School, the “Sacred Journey” was a way to embody the Church’s desire for forgiveness and establish a new narrative within it. Bishop Logan emphasizes the role of a bishop in asking for permission and forgiveness on behalf of his people. He gives an interpretation of his own responsibility within the process, the symbolic, vicarious, and inspirational function of his journey for the wider community.⁵ As he states: “it is the Si’em’s responsibility to undertake such a journey on behalf of his or her people” (Anglican Diocese of Islands and Inlets, “[Sacred Journey](#)”). The focus on negative structures within tradition also raises the question of how the understanding of reconciliation within the Diocese repeats binary thinking (Church vs. First Nation people) and how a shift towards intersectional experiences would open up additional layers of intersectional identities and their potential for reconciliation (Jones and Jenkins 2008, 475).

5.1.2 *Language*

A second focal point for negative hermeneutics is language: hermeneutics argues that understanding is closely linked to language. It is important to ask ourselves where our concepts of reconciliation come from and in which language they are expressed. How has history shaped the term reconciliation? Which other words are used synonymously? How does the term carry the danger of wearing off or being used homonymously by different people and thereby losing its truth? Where does the potential of varying concepts of reconciliation and forgiveness lie? What role can extra-verbal expressions, bodily practices, physical presence, art, images, and rituals play? Was Bishop Logan’s journey reported in languages other than English? Which language did he use when asking for permission from the different tribes? How do spoken words, silence, and gaps relate in an act like the “Sacred Journey?” How much of its meaning is transmitted through the verbal request for permission, and how much is the patient silence of walking alone the key to its understanding?

5.1.3 *Sense/Meaning*

Finally, *sense/meaning* presumed and created in the process of reconciliation comes into view: a crucial contribution of reconciliation studies for a wider academic discourse is the insight that there is a variety of ways of knowing and that decolonized knowledge needs to draw from sources and work with paradigms

⁵ “Beyond those empathetic champions, the development of thin sympathy among a critical mass of the population—that is, the smallest number of people needed to make something happen—is essential” (Quinn 2016, 128).

other than one that is Western logocentric. Both understanding and reconciliation require a shared interest in truth. Reconciliation emphasizes the importance of individual truth and the process of truth-telling and listening for the development of shared meaning. This methodological shift towards a growing openness towards a variety of paradigms of knowledge challenges us to acknowledge the political and ethical implications of the construct of knowledge. It reflects on questions such as: whose voices are heard in the process? Who is counted as an expert? Who is worth listening to?

One of the advantages of a symbolic act like Bishop Logan's journey is its openness to various interpretations that do not narrow down its meaning to a unified, coherent explanation. It is open to the messiness and uncertainty of reconciliation; there is no directive on how reconciliation will look and when it will have been achieved but rather change and a shared understanding within the process.

5.2 Deconstruction—*The taking apart*

After receiving these different elements that shape our understanding and our questions, a second step is to take the truth we have received in this process apart and ask ourselves where our own perspectivity and our traditions have caused harm and where they continue to do so. It is important to note at this point true reconciliation is not possible without a full and comprehensive assessment of the damage that has been done; otherwise, it is simply glossing over individual and collective pain. Deconstruction as the taking apart of our understanding of reconciliation emphasizes the political and ethical implications of the construct of knowledge.

This process includes deconstructing and criticizing harmful colonial paradigms. However, it does not stop there but also questions the very presence of a settler understanding for the process of reconciliation. A negative hermeneutics goes beyond Ricoeur's concept of a "hermeneutic of suspicion" towards a practice of "self-suspicion" (Angehrn 2018, 69–81). Based on a specific encounter, it aims to establish a connection between the hermeneutical and ethical that can acknowledge failures and limits. Thus, against a hermeneutical claim of universality ("anything can be understood"), it focuses on the importance of negative spaces in the process of reconciliation that are withheld from a colonizing desire. By building upon principles of respect and self-critique, it articulates a hermeneutical approach that knows its limits and knows when it is not welcome anymore. This possibility of an ultimate "not-knowing" and "not being invited" into an intellectual or physical space is particularly hard to tolerate in a Western approach shaped by ideas of universalism and enlightenment (Jones and Jenkins 2008, 481). Such a hermeneutic of self-suspicion requires a profound critique of ongoing privilege and benefit, infrastructure, assets, self-image, and academic paradigms. How do we benefit from not knowing and not understanding? Where is it easier to turn a blind eye to protect the status-quo?

How does this understanding also require a critique of one's desire for reconciliation? What are the motives that started the process? How have they changed over time? In the context of a diocesan reconciliation, this requires a suspicion towards any form of missionary zeal. How is our approach to reconciliation driven by the desire to "do it better this time around?" Are we driven by a naïve ideal that the Church will get it right and preach the "true" Gospel this time (Tinker 2013, 65)? It further asks where the desire for reconciliation came from. How is a will for reconciliation always shaped by an anxious attempt to keep up our own self-image or dwell in generational guilt?

The strength of a negative hermeneutic is that it can admit when its attempts to understand have reached their limits and thus leave space for an outside. In a Christian context, this could help us to discover the potential and the spiritual value of silence as well as the confession of guilt as an individual and communal practice. How could these traditional ritual expressions be rediscovered as an admission of faults and failures before God and neighbor? How could they be useful to rediscover the confessional potential of the Church and emphasize the fundamental need for forgiveness over missionary and colonial actions?⁶ These considerations are not promoting some sort of self-centered guiltiness but a willingness to hand over and admit harm caused in the past and present and an honest acknowledgment of the limits of our understanding. Even when we commit to attentive and open listening, we will never be able to fully understand the extent of hurt that another person has experienced.⁷

For Bishop Logan's journey, a negative hermeneutical reading would stress the importance of rejection in the process. Not all leaders welcomed the bishop on their lands (cf. Anglican Diocese of Islands and Inlets, "[TRC Calls to Action](#)"). While traditional hermeneutics would interpret this as a failure of reconciliation and a short-coming that would need to be overcome by improved communication, a negative hermeneutics is interested in the question of what the speaking and the hearing of a "no" contribute to understanding and the redefining of relationships.

Interestingly, it was the *demolition* of St. Michael's School that stood at the beginning of Bishop Logan's "Sacred Journey." From a negative hermeneutical perspective, this raises the question of how the physical destruction of a building became symbolic for a new paradigm of relationships between the Church and the First People of the land. How did it mark a new self-understanding of the presence of the Anglican Church on Vancouver Island? How does a less visible presence carry the danger of concealing ongoing colonial power structures? How did the

⁶ One example of a "confessional structure" in the Reconciliation Process in Canada is the Archbishop's Apology for Spiritual Harm (Hiltz 2019).

⁷ Archbishop Fred Hiltz response to the Truth and Reconciliation Report has the title "Let Our 'Yes' be Yes" (General Synod Communications 2016). The response was presented at Her Majesty's Royal Chapel of the Mohawks, Six Nations of the Grand River on Saturday, March 19, 2016. From a negative hermeneutical perspective, it would be important to add "let our/your 'no' be no."

gap left by the demolition become a starting point for school survivors to articulate their experiences and traumas and for the Church to confess guilt but also seek reconciliation and forgiveness?

While negative hermeneutics emphasizes the importance of leaving space, it also realizes the ongoing responsibility that history and the Church's role in it demands. On the "Reconciliation and Beyond" website, the Diocese defines reconciliation as "the area of our work where we commit to an ongoing shared journey with First Nations and people of all nations and cultures, especially those who feel hurt or abandoned by the church" (Anglican Diocese of Islands and Inlets, "[Reconciliation & Beyond](#)"). In this sense, the desire for reconciliation has to walk a fine line between leaving space and acknowledging an ongoing responsibility.

5.3 *Recreating understanding*

From a position of ongoing self-suspicion, a negative hermeneutics is finally interested in creative in-between spaces that may emerge in the process of reconciliation (Angehrn 2011, 327–35). The recreating of understanding and relationships aims to establish an understanding that allows us to articulate renewed ideas of and hopes for shared spaces. As a non-possessive attempt at understanding and relating, it is interested in practices that allow us to stretch narratives of identity and articulate ongoing colonial complicity and at the same look for renewed ways of relating and establishing a creative way of "sharing space and time" where this is desired by both parties. Ry Moran, for example, emphasizes the importance of "wee tiny reconciliations" (Moran 2016, 189) as steps on a much greater journey that still lies ahead.

Where this apology is accepted, and a mutual desire for growing understanding is welcomed, negative hermeneutics does not remain in its deconstructive stages but looks towards creative encounters with contextual and liberating paradigms. This shift of perspective can build the basis for an understanding that recognizes our role as a guest and fosters an attitude of curiosity and respect. I would argue that Bishop Logan's journey represents a good example for this shift towards politely asking for permission rather than insisting on privileges or self-centered assumptions. Classical hermeneutics argues that there is no method to create questions. Similarly, negative hermeneutics will emphasize that there is no method to make creative dynamics and encounters happen. However, it argues that it is possible to facilitate them and increase an awareness and sense for their patterns. How can we further grow an understanding that offers hospitality but is also able to gratefully receive hospitality? How can a focus on gaps help develop creativity and move away from a dichotomy of injured and healed? How can it contribute to a shared journey and help articulate authentic questions?

Bishop Logan's journey expresses a renewed understanding of presence of the land in a creative and open way. It shifts paradigms of reconciliation from a

theoretical language-centered practice or even political endeavor to a concrete encounter based on humility and principles of hospitality.⁸ A negative hermeneutical approach helps raise questions and make relationships visible. It allows for a reinterpretation of set structures: Where did the journey allow for shared time, experiences, laughter, and learning? How did it help to engage a variety of people in the process? How did it rekindle interest in reconciliation in a way that a statement or a less visible act might not have allowed? What does the singular action not achieve? How did it not only allow a rearticulation of narratives and relationships between the bishop and First Nation Leaders but also between people involved in the wider Church? What could a sacramental understanding of the journey contribute to wider efforts of reconciliation (Anglican Diocese of Islands and Inlets, “[Sacred Journey](#)”)?

6. Conclusions

Through the example of Bishop Logan’s “Sacred Journey,” this article has shown how negative hermeneutics can structure questions and, by focusing on gaps, show hidden layers of relational dynamics. In the context of reconciliation work, this three-step approach of receiving (as growing awareness of perspectivity and context), deconstructing (as a move of “self-suspicion”), and recreating (as focus on creative and renewed ways of relating) can be a fruitful approach for deepening research and distinguishing between better and worse (more and less colonialist) approaches to reconciliation. However, despite its potential, negative hermeneutics is fundamentally rooted in a Western colonial paradigm and will therefore need to thoroughly explore the limitations of what it can express and convey. As an inherently critical approach, it needs to remain vigilant to its own positionality and attendant to potential power dynamics with which it is complicit. Negative hermeneutics is both a method and an ongoing process of exploration, self-critique, and discovery of our relationship to otherness. This approach resonates with F. Nicoll’s argument “that white people know Indigenous sovereignty exists because they cannot know it” (Macoun 2016, 99; Nicoll 2000, 369–86).

I suggest that this approach of “stepping-back” can become the starting point for a renewed understanding of what diocesan reconciliation can look like and how we can articulate new and open-ended questions within it. On its website, the Diocese of British Columbia stresses that the “work of reconciliation is generational, and we are just beginning. As we continue to heal from the past and work to create a faithful future, we pray for wisdom, grace, and gratitude”

⁸ “*Keeoukaywin* [“the visiting way”] should not be confused with the notion of ‘relationship-building’ embedded in the principles of community-based and participatory action research methodologies. Relationship-building in a Western context focuses more on problems and how to arrive at better solutions or outcomes, rather than trusting in a process with unforeseen or unscripted outcomes” (Gaudet 2019, 59).

(Anglican Diocese of Islands and Inlets 2021). How can this approach be a starting point for an ecclesiology that focuses on the movement of turning to God as a core movement of Christianity? How can the practice of confession and asking for forgiveness help renew and widen our understanding of what a decolonized Church could look like? Jones and Jenkins write about the relational character of this process as a “hyphen”—“the hyphen as marking a difficult yet always necessary *relationship*” (2008, 475). It also marks a relationship to difference. For reconciliation work, this necessary “hyphen” can be understood as a moral and spiritual responsibility to confess its failures as well as acknowledge the uncertainty of whether or how this confession (and the necessary penance!) will be heard (Jones and Jenkins 2008, 475).

This approach challenges religious studies to look more closely at the potential of prayer and ritual for practical action as well as for spiritual healing. What has not yet been done? Where do human works reach their limitations, and when is all that is left is a hope for a greater truth that allows for reconciliation and forgiveness beyond human terms (“with man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” [Matthew 19:26])? Which questions have not yet been asked? Whose voice has not yet been heard? When is all that is left is an apology and a respectfully leaving of place? Where do we find space for creativity and curiosity? What can the Church learn about itself through a deeper understanding of reconciliation? How can it work with a progressive desire for reconciliation that might always be based on fantasy and hope rather than reality? How can it deepen its understanding of individual and collective faith and trust in God? How can these reflections reinforce reconciliation as an ambivalent and “unromantic pragmatic engagement,” (Jones and Jenkins 2008, 483) that does not shy away from uncomfortable truths.

So, where does this article leave you? I hope that this venture into the world of negative hermeneutics has given you a taste of the importance and the potential of gaps for discerning attempts to reconciliation. Maybe it has given you some impulses about what to ask next and how to gain a new perspective on what you already knew about reconciliation? Maybe you are disappointed by being left without a clear answer? Maybe this disappointment or disagreement can be a creative impulse and a starting point for shared reflections and an increased sensitivity to the gaps in our understanding?

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