

Congruence Between Indigenous Justice and Biblical Justice

Christopher Marshall, in his chapter called “Restorative Justice” in *Religion Matters: The Contemporary Relevance of Religion*, ed. Paul Babie and Rick Sarre (Singapore: Springer Nature 2020), discusses multiple areas of intersection between religion and restorative justice. The following paragraphs are excerpts from that chapter (pages 109-110). Marshall focuses on how the biblical roots of the initial restorative justice ideal (as seeded in Ontario and passed on to Indiana) are precisely what made it so congruent with indigenous justice.

“...in her recent account of the origins and future of restorative justice, [Carolyn Boyes-Watson] expresses extreme pessimism about the future of restorative justice as a technocratic or managerial solution to the inadequacies of current criminal justice system, as is currently favoured by legislators and policymakers. She is much more optimistic, however, about its future in the new wave of restorative justice activism that is engaging with issues of oppression, discrimination, economic injustice, and environmental abuse. Here there is no separation between politics and ethics, between justice and spirituality, head-thinking and heart-thinking, individual transformation and societal change. The goal is not just to resolve individual conflicts over past harms but to build an all-embracing and enduring just peace. Boyes-Watson traces this holistic aspiration back to the unifying vision of *shalom* and to the “essentially spiritual and ethical understandings of ‘right relationship’” that Howard Zehr originally identified as the touchstones of the restorative justice paradigm, as well as to the movement’s original goal of building the “beloved community”, not simply of forging a more efficient and effective criminal justice system.

These are also the original features of restorative justice that made it so congruent with indigenous ways of seeing the world. There are clear resemblances between restorative justice processes and the mechanisms used in traditional societies for addressing harm and restoring balance, and not a few observers have attributed the emergence of restorative justice directly to the inspiration of indigenous ways of doing justice, especially in

North America and New Zealand. The reality is more complex than that. But the striking similarity or overlap between the two approaches could be explained in terms of the overt role given to spiritual values and beliefs in first shaping restorative justice. In both biblical and indigenous worldviews, there is an instinctive recognition that doing justice in the face of transgression is a deeply spiritual undertaking. It is not simply a matter of assessing facts, determining blame, and allocating penalties. It is also about addressing the loss of what Māori call *mana* or spiritual dignity caused by the offence, a lifting of the shame inflicted on the victim and incurred by the offender and shared by their wider kinship groups, past and present, a repairing of the rupture done to the fabric of the community and cleansing of the land from impurity, and restoring order and balance to the cosmic domain which interconnects all things. While such numinous convictions are largely foreign to the modern secular mind, they are by no means foreign to the Bible or to its conception of justice that inspired the first pioneers of victim-offender reconciliation.”