

Subaltern Speaks Season 2, Episode 4 Transcript

Christina Shivtahal: Hello and welcome to another episode of Subaltern Speaks. Subaltern Speaks is a podcast created by the Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Toronto for spiritual study and practice, where we explore the legacies of colonialism across religions and spiritualities of colonized peoples, otherwise known as the subaltern in post-colonial studies. I'm your host, Christina, and today we will be unpacking Indigenous [00:00:30] relations and spirituality within a decolonial lens and approach. In practicing collective care, some of the content might be triggering in this episode, so please ensure to prioritize self-care.

Over the last several months, my academic research in Indigenous spirituality as it relates to Christianity, as well as cosmology as it relates to relationship building, as well as Afro-Indigenous relations and solidarity led me to several groups and platforms, including the Indigenous [00:01:00] Education Network at OISE or the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, as well as the Sojourners Magazine and Medicine for Resistance, a podcast that centres on Black and Indigenous relationship and is co-hosted by our guest today. Joining me on the Subaltern Speaks podcast from the Lac Seul First Nation is Anishinaabe and Ukrainian writer, Patty Krawec. Welcome, Patty, and thank you for joining me and sharing space today.

Patty Krawec: [00:01:30] Well, thank you for having me. This is really exciting.

Christina Shivtahal: It's so great to have you here today. Let's just jump right in. Today, I would like to unpack Western Christian theology as it impacts First Nations on Turtle Island. Before we do that, if you would just like to introduce yourself and some of the work that you're involved with.

Patty Krawec: Sure. So yeah, so I'm from Lac Seul First Nation, currently living in the Niagara Region. [00:02:00] My kids are flung all over the country coast-to-coast-to-coast. We joke, I mean, they're centered a little bit more now, but yeah, they're all over the place. And I have a background in social work for 20 years. I worked with victims of sexual assault and then in child welfare. And then I recently retired from that and have since been writing and thinking and just kind of working through the different relationships that I find myself [00:02:30] in, both on my maternal side, I'm the child of refugees who came to Canada in the '50s, on my father's side, I am the child of Ojibwe Anishinaabe people from Northwestern, Ontario.

I have relationships with the church, with social work, with the Niagara region, with the Far North, so just kind of holding all of these different relationships and thinking about these different things that I have inherited and what that means in terms of how I move through [00:03:00] the world and how I understand how settler colonialism has positioned me in the world. So it's been really interesting the last couple of years working on my book and the podcast and how it has really reshaped the way I think about relationships and the different positions that I occupy in this world.

Christina Shivtahal: Wow. That's so fascinating. Thank you for that. And congratulations on your new book, *Becoming Kin*-

Patty Krawec: Thank you.

Christina Shivtahal: ... An Indigenous Call to Unforgetting the Past and Reimagining [00:03:30] Our Future. Do you mind sharing the inspiration behind *Becoming Kin* and whether centering Anishinaabe cosmology including prophecy at the seventh and eight fires to build relations with Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous Peoples on Turtle Island and/or globally was a fundamental consideration in this project?

Patty Krawec: For sure. So what happened, actually, I was sitting in church one day, and the sermon was about identity. And in my experience, when [00:04:00] white men stand up to talk about identity, they really just need to sit right back down again because it becomes this conversation about how we're all the same in Jesus. There's no Jew, no Greek, no whatever. Everybody's the same. And that's nonsense. When I walk into the church, I don't stop being a woman. I don't stop being Indigenous. I don't stop being the child of refugees. I don't stop being any of these things. And so I think that's a really narrow, narrow view of what Paul [00:04:30] is talking about in that text. And I think it can be much more expansive than that. And so I was mad. I was really angry about the things that were said that morning.

And after conversation with a couple of friends, I wrote an article for *Sojourners Magazine* about the church and settlers finding home in a way that unhomed my father's people, my Indigenous relatives, and what that would mean, what that meant for our relationship, [00:05:00] in general, broadly speaking, as well as my relationship with the church. And then an acquisitions editor from *Broadleaf* approached me to see if I had thought about writing a book. And I sent it to a couple of friends to see if it was real because I hadn't been thinking about writing a book. But I certainly was then, I'd often said that, the church needs to think through its own theology and its own beliefs and [00:05:30] how it got to where it is because it's too easy to say, oh, those weren't real Christians, or, Christians aren't really like that, or, oh, those are bad Christians no true Scotsman fallacy, right? Only a true Scotsman would eat his oatmeal or whatever. So those aren't true Christians.

And to me, that's such a cop out. And okay, so if your church didn't run residential schools, what argument did your theology put up against it? Well, none. The theology of white Jesus allowed for all of [00:06:00] this. And so I've said that Christians need to be writing about this and thinking about this and talking about this. And then, I mean, you have to be careful when you say stuff like that, right, because the universe says, okay, then do it. And then that's of, you're right. It does need to happen, and you're going to do it. And I mean, I'm certainly not the only person who's writing about these things.

There's a lot of people who are writing in [00:06:30] different ways about this. But what I think is kind of unique about my book is it is about becoming kin. It's not just that angry finger wagging about what the church is getting wrong. It's, is there another way you can understand

your texts? Is there another way you can read these things so that we can be good relatives, which was always what was on offer from the moment [00:07:00] the settlers came to stay, the Two-Row Wampum, the Dish With One Spoon Treaty. Relationship and finding a way to live together in this place is always what was on offer. And so is there a way we can get back to that? Is there a way that we can become kin?

Christina Shivtahal: Yes, indeed. I truly believe that the history of several European [00:07:30] doctrines attributed in the assimilation of Indigenous Peoples. And the encroachment of land definitely attributes to having this type of dialogue today in that unpacking what these relations look like and then leading to unpacking relations with community and Indigenous Peoples across Turtle Island. And if I could be a little bit more specific and get into a little bit of a historical context. [00:08:00] During the 15th and 19th century, the right of preemption to Indigenous territory was facilitated by these European doctrines, such as terra nullius and the Doctrine of Discovery, to claim sovereignty of Turtle Island, which was indeed premised on racial, cultural, and religious supremacy of European Christian nations. And as many of us are aware, these doctrines empowered the church and state [00:08:30] in the cultural genocide, land theft and assimilation of First Nations, Métis and Inuit Peoples that led to deepen loss of languages and ancestral teachings and cultural upbringings that are central to Indigenous relations. Can you describe how Western Christian theology directly impacted your life in the temporal loss of relations with family community and relations?

Patty Krawec: Yeah, well, I mean, [00:09:00] at the most obvious level, my uncles went to residential schools. That was something that happened in Canada for a little over a hundred years. The last one didn't close, and I often say, the Fresh Prince left Bel-Air before the last residential school closed in Canada. So that just makes it feel so much so present. We talk about residential schools as if they were something that happened a very long time ago, and they weren't. [00:09:30] I live in Niagara, and in my book, I talk about a trip to the Mush Hole, I took a trip to the Mush Hole as a social worker with a social worker student. And we toured it, and it closed in 1970. It's in Brantford, Ontario, which is maybe two hours from my house.

And it closed in 1970. I was five when that closed. And then residential schools continued on in Canada for another 26 years, and my uncles attended [00:10:00] those schools. My father did not... Long story about how he lost his Indian status because a band manager was mad at his mother. But that kind of stuff happened, too. All of a sudden, he wasn't an Indian anymore. So they went, and then of course, my mom was a teacher. She went up to Northern Ontario to teach. And although she didn't teach in a residential school, it was part of that process of [00:10:30] white teachers, teaching native kids. And when my parents separated, she brought me down South, which severed all of those relationships with my paternal family. And I don't know if she tried to keep contact with them and they rebuffed her attempts or if there was no attempt or anything.

So then that also separated me from my family, and I was raised in an evangelical family, so all of that, the James Dobson and John MacArthur and [00:11:00] all of those people. And that

shapes how you think of yourself and the disconnection because Christianity is a very unword religion, right? It's disconnected from place. And I talk about that in the original article as well as my book, how it's disconnected from really anywhere, and then it works to disconnect us all and make us all kind of ruthless and [00:11:30] thinking about our home in heaven and disconnected from the world around us and from each other. Yeah, that's all I have to say. Sorry. That was just really rambling. And I'm not even sure I answered your question because all I can really think about in that regard is the impact of the residential schools of those disconnected relationships.

Christina Shivtahal: Yes. The history of residential schools certainly [00:12:00] still continues to have a major impact on Indigenous Peoples across Turtle Island and as well in other parts of the world where similar structures of violence were implemented such as in England.

Patty Krawec: Like you said, the English used it on the Irish and the Welsh kids. Canada and the U.S. used it on Indigenous kids. Separating kids from [00:12:30] their families is a winning colonial strategy. It works. And you separate the kids, you indoctrinate them. A lot of native communities are deeply conservatively Christian to the point that I've made ribbon skirts. And I've made a ribbon skirt for a young woman for whom wearing a skirt in her own community would be an act of resistance. She wanted to wear it to graduate, and she wasn't even sure if she'd be able to wear it at home because it would be seen as this [00:13:00] pagan thing. Sweat lodges and moon ceremony are still disrupted. And that's a legacy of residential schools where you're having the beliefs. Now down here in Niagara, that's not a big deal at all. It's not even uncommon to see churches welcoming, smudging ceremonies and things like that. Philip Cote has done some beautiful murals in Toronto churches, kind of pulling the two cultures [00:13:30] together.

But in Northern Ontario. I support a number of things through my foundation in Northern Ontario in part to offset the harms of what the church has done up there, particularly with Two-Spirit and queer youth, how isolated, and the message that they get is just so destructive. And so many of these things are connected to charity, charity which is badly needed [00:14:00] food banks, soup kitchens, medical assistance, all of those things. It's very badly, badly needed, but it comes packaged with this terrible toxic theology around Two-Spiritness and gayness. And so my foundation tries to help and do what it can, but it's not very big. So I work hard, and maybe that's part of a reaction to my own upbringing, recognizing the harms that I may have contributed to [00:14:30] and then wanting to do what I can to mitigate those harms now, understanding that what I had been part of in the past was harmful and wanting to do something about it now, so.

Christina Shivtahal: And I think that really speaks to, I mean, within your identity as Anishinaabe and Ukrainian woman, just really acknowledging also, too, that we hold these positions of privilege in terms of being able to [00:15:00] just unpack the legacies that have impacted the lives of First Nations people across this country. And one of the things that in my academic study is I seek to rather discuss collective care and collective access and how that can

be redistributed in terms of ensuring that all people, [00:15:30] particularly First Nations, Métis and Inuit, across this country have equal access to healthcare, to education, and to cultural programming because there's still a gap there. We have these legal doctrines of reconciliation that spell out how we can begin to reconcile Indigenous relations between Indigenous [00:16:00] and non-Indigenous Peoples.

But then yet there's still continues to be this gap in terms of ensuring that the distribution of funding is there because we continue to see disparities across this country in terms of ongoing boiling water advisories, ongoing lack of access to healthcare and education. And so for me, as a student, [00:16:30] that's what really informs my work and my study, is ensuring that we can really just best amplify the voices of Indigenous Peoples as our allies to ensure that access is provided across the board. And when you were just speaking about advocating against protection of harm for Two-Spirited [00:17:00] Peoples, perhaps I can ask, how does your advocacy towards the legal, spiritual, and cultural protection of Two-Spirited Peoples and the LGBTQIA community influence your writing, if any, and your community engagement?

Patty Krawec: Well, yeah, I mean, I think about how they're being impacted by different policies and the things [00:17:30] that I'm writing about. I use social media very intentionally to make sure that I'm following people who I may not come across regularly in my daily life, but also it can be some... So when I'm writing, I'm thinking about making sure that I'm considering how things impact Two-Spirited people, I have, through the podcast, and then I had a year-long book club series of panels that I created to talk about Indigenous literatures throughout the year. [00:18:00] I made sure that we didn't have to be talking about queer things in order to make sure that I had queer panelists on, right? I don't want to be around to talk only about Indigenous things. Every issue is an Indigenous issue. And so every issue is a queer issue. Every issue is a disability issue. All of these things impact people.

I was really struck. I read a blog by Lynn Gayle, and she talks about the Turtle Principle, and you get behind the turtle. So who is the slowest moving? [00:18:30] Who is experiencing the most harm in this moment? Get behind that person. If that person is okay in your church, in your protest, in your policy that you're developing, if this most impacted person is okay, everybody else will be okay. So I try really hard to do that. And it's even as simple as, I belong to a hand drum group. And we were starting to get asked to [00:19:00] perform at events, to participate in ceremony. And I noticed that one of our members was often holding back, not sitting in the circle for the ceremony. It happened one time. And it was because she doesn't wear a skirt. She's Two-Spirit. And it's not a blanket thing. Oh, there's a lot of Two-Spirited people who do wear skirts. And there's a lot of complicated reasons why Indigenous women may not want to wear [00:19:30] a skirt.

When I think back about how Woodlands people existed 400 years ago, an ankle-length skirt is not practical for the Northern Woodlands because it caught on everything. So the ankle-length skirt is clearly a colonial adaptation, something that we've done. But still, it's become part of our ceremony that women wear skirts to ceremony. And so we talked about that, [00:20:00]

myself and another woman, in the drum group and say, "What are we going to do? Are we going to be somebody that includes or excludes? Is this woman going to have to sit outside the circle, or are we going to adapt ourselves so that she doesn't have to?" And what we decided on was that the fundamental teaching of the Anishinaabe cosmology is one of community and relation. And if our traditions caused somebody to be excluded, then those traditions need to change. And so [00:20:30] we had kind of adopted a policy in our group that skirts were admired but not required.

And then there was a pipe ceremony several months later. And I asked the elder who was leading that ceremony, I said, "Look, this woman member would like to come, but is there a skirt requirement?" And he said, "Well, everybody will assume she's Two-Spirited if she doesn't wear one." His only concern was that people would assume she was Two-Spirited and, "Is she okay with that? Is she okay with [00:21:00] effectively outing herself in the community?" And I'm like, "Yeah, it's not going to be a problem." So it's important internally that we have those conversations about who's being included, who's being excluded, thinking through our traditions and our ceremonies. And some of these conversations are also very familiar within the church as well, about who's included, who's welcome, who's just being tolerated. Nobody wants to be tolerated, as opposed to just being welcomed and accepted.

[00:21:30] And so when I write, when I participate in things, when I speak, I try very hard to remember who is out there, and are they being harmed by what I'm saying? And I don't always get it right. Sometimes I get it wrong. I exclude people, or I make mistakes. And then it's being willing to listen to that when somebody says, "Okay, that thing you said was really good, but wow, ouch, you could have phrased it better," or, "You really [00:22:00] ignored this." And so I try really hard to be open to hearing that from people because the Anishinaabeg vision is so expansive, so big, and so welcoming. And our kinship relationships are kind of huge networks, I think, compared to citizenship, right, which is just so narrow and tightly defined. [00:22:30] Kinship relationships cross all of these boundaries. So I want to model that in what I do. I grew up in a very tightly defined world, and I don't want to carry that forward into my Anishinaabe relationships. I want to leave that behind.

Christina Shivtahal: Yes. One of the things that really resonated with me in the Medicine [00:23:00] for Resistance podcast is that relations are not linear and that there's this ongoing process of unlearning and learning colonial harm. And it's appearance is different for every single person because it is an ongoing process of healing. And it impacts worldviews, [00:23:30] women's empowerment, Two-Spirited relations, addressing intergenerational harm and disrupting those cycles of colonial violence that for many people are still struggling to unpack that because they're not quite detached from the assimilation that was inflicted by the church. Perhaps I'd like to maybe discuss a little [00:24:00] bit about reconciliation and what reconciliation means and how you might view the reconciliation of taking the first step to apologize of the church and to accept responsibility for the wrongdoing, because that is the first step in reconciliation.

We know that in 2015 in Bolivia, the Pope offered an apology to Indigenous Peoples of America by acknowledging the [00:24:30] failures of the church, including, quote, "many grave sins that were committed against Native Peoples of America in the name of God," end quote. In 2018, the Canadian Parliament asked the Pope to apologize to residential school survivors for which the Pope declined. And subsequently in 2021, the Pope expressed his quote, "sorrow," which frankly is not good enough, it's not an apology, for the ongoing rather recovery [00:25:00] of Indigenous children in burial grounds of residential schools across this country. He is yet to offer an apology to residential school survivors for the physical and cultural genocide in close to 100 residential schools run by the Catholic church.

So I'm interested to know, Patty, what is your view of the refusal of the Pope to apologize and to initiate reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples in Canada and delay no further the healing of thousands of survivors [00:25:30] and families? And perhaps we can discuss land acknowledgements later on because I'm interested to know where land acknowledgements, are they appropriate in terms of reconciling relations when federal title is still not upheld. So I know it's a bit of a two-part question, but just, it's a lot to think about. And please share what you'd like to.

Patty Krawec: No. Well, [00:26:00] I appreciate that. And I'm actually going to tie those two things together because to me, they're very connected. And I think a big part of it is that Indigenous Peoples, and I think those of us who have been marginalized in different ways, think of apology much different than the Western colonial, particularly the church does. Like you said, it's the first step. It's the first [00:26:30] moment where you admit that something is wrong and something needs to change. And I think for the church, Protestant and Catholic, it's the last step. And I kind of reach backwards into my evangelical upbringing. It's the sinner's prayer, right? I acknowledge that I've sinned, and I get forgiven, and boom, grace has made it as far as the east from the west, and whatever. It's all gone. It's all over. It's all done.

So [00:27:00] we hear these apologies. "We're very sorry for the bad thing that happened to the Indigenous People," whether it's, excuse me, the Canadian government or the Pope or different churches. But I've noticed they still have the land. They're very sorry, but they still have the land. I think it was the Archbishop in Toronto, he had said that the reason the church couldn't apologize for what [00:27:30] happened in residential schools was each diocese operates independently. And so each diocese would have to apologize for the residential school that happened within their borders. And that is just nonsense. I mean, the Catholic church is so completely hierarchical that this is absolutely the Pope's responsibility. But if you're going to acknowledge responsibility, then you have to take action to make things right. [00:28:00] And you can't give back the children, but you can give back the land.

The Catholic church can give back the land. The Presbyterian church can give back the land. Any church that is sorry can give back the land. And imagine, there's a thought exercise in my book where I'm talking about... Because I've talked about land acknowledgements, and I do see them as a beginning. If you're willing to make that a beginning [00:28:30] to recognize whose land

you're on and to think through your relationship with those people, then yes, do it. And if you have no relationship, then say that in your land acknowledgement. Say, "I understand that this is the land of the Mississaugas, Anishinaabeg. I don't have a relationship with them, and I'm going to do something about that. And these are the steps that I'm going to take. This is the thing I'm going to do in order to develop relationship," because we're everywhere. [00:29:00] There's reserves everywhere. There's friendship centers everywhere. So we're not that hard to find. You can build relationships with us. You can show up through events and offer to help wash dishes. You can volunteer and make friends that way.

But there's a thought exercise in the book where I say, "Think, if you deeded the land back to the people of your area, so if you're in Toronto, it may [00:29:30] be the Mississauga Anishinaabeg, if you deeded the land back to them, which there is a process, you can do that, with an agreement that you would then lease it from them because you've got this church building or this university or whatever, you've got all these buildings that are already there and you want to keep using them, so you make the agreement that you're going to give them back the land, and you're going to lease it from them. You're going to do a one-year lease or a five-year lease or a 20-year lease." How are [00:30:00] you now motivated to not be evicted? Because your lease is going to come due, whether it's a one-year, five-year, 10-lease that you've signed, that you've agreed to. It's going to come due. And now how are you motivated to adapt your relationships, your policies, your priorities to make sure that when your lease comes due, you don't get evicted? Everything changes.

Christina Shivtahal: It certainly does.

Patty Krawec: Everything changes. And so if the church is so sorry, [00:30:30] if the organization is so sorry, if they're willing to acknowledge that they're on Indigenous land, then give it back. Give it back. It's not that hard. It can be done. And then you can lease the property and keep using your buildings. But if you're not willing to even entertain the idea of giving the land back, then what's the point of apologizing? What's the point of acknowledging? What's the point of any of these things, if you're not even willing [00:31:00] to entertain the notion?

Christina Shivtahal: Absolutely.

Patty Krawec: But that shows the Catholic church's priorities, right? There's a lot of wealth tied up in it.

Christina Shivtahal: And I think that if the Catholic church would really take responsibility and take the first step in apologizing and accepting responsibility for the atrocities and the cultural genocide inflicted by the residential school, it will encourage individual churches to implement their [00:31:30] own forms towards reconciliation and expanding on building relations with Indigenous Peoples collectively. When we're talking about land and the land ceded as, quote, "crown land," we're speaking about close to 90% of Canadian territory with only a 0.2% that's allocated to reserves. So I [00:32:00] totally agree. And thank you so much for sharing your

viewpoints on this because I've been very skeptical myself, even in working on this podcast and introducing the podcast with a land acknowledgement.

Yes, it is a decolonization effort, but then considering that the Canadian state really has shown no interest in returning [00:32:30] federal title to Indigenous Peoples in this country, makes me very hesitant to state a land acknowledgement just because we can do our part, but then I am a settler. And I uphold the position of privilege, and I don't want to be complacent in that type of behavior where state is just refusing [00:33:00] to return the land. And I know that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada has included this as one of the Calls to Action among the 94 Calls to Action of nulling the doctrines of terra nullius and the Doctrine of Discovery and developing a new understanding of the Royal Proclamation to reaffirm nation to nation building between Indigenous Peoples and the state.

[00:33:30] Thanks for joining me on part one of this episode on Indigenous relations and spirituality from a decolonial approach. In our next episode, we will continue part two of this conversation where Patty and I discuss reconciliation by the repatriation of land and unpack the disparities in social and public services for Indigenous Peoples on Turtle Island, as well as the impact of cultural competency training and programming across public and private sectors. In the interim, [00:34:00] I like to thank you for joining me on part one of this episode. And as always, head to Anchor, Spotify, Stitcher, RadioPublic, Apple, or Google podcast to tune into our latest episodes. Please be sure to join us for part two of this series. Until then, be safe, and thanks for joining us.