CANADA WAS NEVER A SECULAR COUNTRY

Award-winning essayist and novelist, **John Ralston Saul** is the only Canadian elected as President of PEN International, the writers group with 146 chapters in 104 countries. His 14 works have been translated into 28 languages in 37 countries.

Canada has never been a secular place. It is not today. In Quebec, many people insist that it is a secular society, but I think this is very much a misreading of their own history. Or it may simply be that they have been watching too much television from Paris... Some of the evil done to Indigenous peoples was by serious churchgoers — Methodists, Presbyterians, low Anglicans and, of course, Catholics. The Protestant northern Irish of the Orange Order brought much disturbance to this country.

Le Canada n'a jamais été un endroit laïque. Il ne l'est toujours pas aujourd'hui. Au Québec, beaucoup de gens insistent sur le fait que la province est une société laïque, mais je crois que c'est une mauvaise lecture de leur propre histoire, ou l'influence de la télévision de Paris... Le mal fait aux peuples autochtones a été en partie orchestré par les pratiquants sérieux, c'est-à-dire les méthodistes, les presbytériens, les anglicans et, bien sûr, les catholiques. Les protestants du nord irlandais de l'Ordre d'Orange ont eux aussi causé beaucoup de perturbation dans ce pays.

You have heard the land acknowledgment and also the Indigenous blessing by Elder Clayton Shirt. They are more than politeness and protocol. They open our minds to the possibility that our relationship to the land is not limited by the very simplistic and barbaric approaches of common law and the civil code. This acknowledgement and blessing, and your acceptance of them, opens all of us up to a non-European, Indigenous and spiritual approach to the relationship between people and place. I take this as a rejection of the European, Manichean approach towards human domination over place; a rejection of the Platonist view of how the world works, with human beings at the top of a pyramid and the land and everything else at the bottom. The spiritual-Indigenous approach is not reductionist. It is not binary. In the midst of an environmental crisis, in particular global warming, this Indigenous, inclusive, spiritual approach is far more sophisticated than anything imported from Britain and France.

Fifty years ago, what I've just said would have been rejected by all of our universities, to say nothing of the universities in Europe, as pagan talk! Until twenty-five years ago, animism was looked down upon throughout the Abrahamic world, demeaned with phrases such as "don't tell me you believe in talking to rocks!" That was the leftover of the old, imperial racist period of the empires, particularly the British empire, in which social Darwinism — that is to say, scientific racism — held sway as a justification for Europeans to treat other people badly.

Richard Atleo, also known as Umeek, who's here tonight and from whom you'll hear from tomorrow, is a remarkable philosopher, who builds his ideas around the concept of *Heshook-ish Tsawalk*, which means, everything is connected, everything is one. It is a philosophy that could be called the exact opposite of the Platonist approach, which puts human

beings at the top. Instead it is an inclusive philosophical concept, which builds human beings into an integral picture that includes the earth and the other living forces on it.

There has been a great deal of movement in terms of non-Indigenous Canadians trying to understand and listen to Indigenous ideas (philosophical and spiritual.) We are willing to understand the great intentional damage done by residential schools and other racist programs. But we have not really tried to understand why that racism and those programs came about, and how closely they are tied to a large Western view of itself in which the utilitarian, meritocracies and rationality were blended into the Abrahamic religions as a justification for doing wrong.

Let me turn to an area where we have done a bit better. Perhaps the most important non-Indigenous philosophical school to come out of Canada came out of the University of Toronto. It is called the Toronto School of Communications, or just the Toronto School. Its members were Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, Northrop Frye and Edmund Carpenter. And you could say that Glenn Gould was an honourary member.

Harold Innis' seminal book, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, showed how the fur trade was built to a great extent on spiritual, spatial, non-linear Indigenous philosophy, which was the only way that you could build an enormous economic and often military structure in which people saw very little of each other and yet were loyal to each other. Innis pushed this much further with *Empire and Communications* in 1948, and with his seminal work *The Bias of Communications* in 1951. Marshall McLuhan openly spoke about his debt to Innis and you can see it in such books as *The Gutenberg Galaxy* in 1962. Northrop Frye's work on colonialism and his masterpiece *The Great Code* in 1981 fit very much into this whole picture of a different approach towards communication. In other words, the roots of the modern communications philosophy, which is used around the world, lie very much in Indigenous spirituality and philosophy.

I don't have to explain how Glenn Gould fits into all of this — you can see it very much in his profoundly non-linear approaches towards music, his years of explaining music through CBC programs and his compositions such as The Idea of North.]

Richard Atleo and many other great Indigenous philosophers in Canada can add to what I've just said. Two others rush to my mind — the remarkable Leroy Little Bear from Lethbridge and Taiaiake Alfred who teaches at the University of Victoria.

I'm not suggesting that Indigenous spirituality and spatial approaches cannot be found in Christianity or Islam or Buddhism or Judaism or Hinduism, just to name a few. You could call all of this an approach towards humanism. You can certainly find strong examples of it in Socrates but also in the great Giambattista Vico, who in the 18th Century put forth a philosophy which would be, I think, entirely recognizable to Indigenous philosophers today.

We all know that there has been a great deal of slippage backwards into a period in which religious extremists have allied with political extremists and ideologues – extremists who believe in race as a way of structuring society and people who believe in an authoritarian view of society in which exclusion and extremism are happy partners. It is as if we are seeing a return of the late 19th-century imperial policies, which often rested on "God is on my side". We're seeing extremes, very loud extremes, in virtually every religion. You have only to think of the Buddhist persecution of the Rohingya, of the revived racism of many Christian groups in the Southern United States, of the extreme political movements in Islam, of the violent nationalism in Hinduism in India today, of the extremists in Judaism, and on and on. They are all involved in what I would call the promotion of morality over ethics. Of course, the morality is not moral, but they can't handle ethics, so they kidnap moralism. Much of this outbreak has come as a direct result of forty years of the world being dominated by globalist theory, which has promoted a dominance of utilitarian approaches. A borderlessness which attempts to eradicate the idea of people belonging anywhere in order to replace it with simple self-interest. The dominance of the market view as the leader of civilization.

All of this has led intentionally to the demeaning of ideas of citizenship (which require belonging and social engagement), the demeaning of empathy, of responsible individualism, and therefore the idea of society as a place of sharing. And all of this has clearly involved an attempt to undermine spirituality in order to facilitate the kidnapping of formal religions. I don't think this has succeeded but it has created extremist minority movements. While the mainstream in most religions has largely resisted this politicization and backwards approach, the success of the extremists has led to a return of the fear of the Other, of populism, racism and indeed an expectation of violence, even if that violence is very small in comparison to the real relative stability, certainly in the West. In other words, what we're seeing is an attempt to exploit religion as a way of justifying violence, racism and exclusion.

I began by talking about the influence of Indigenous ideas as they are intimately tied to spirituality, place and protocols, and how these three elements fit together. I then suggested that there are two opposing forces at work – one I would call humanist, which involves religion and spirituality as it relates to Richard Atleo's concept of oneness, to ethics and to a spatial idea of human relationships; and the other force is the use of religion by political movements to advance their ideologies, and their ideas of authoritarianism, linearity. There is a great deal of talk of faith, but when you examine it, what you see is that this is a faith not in the public good or in the human well-

being or in a humanist approach towards spiritualism. Rather it is extreme faith, which enables certain kinds of violence and hatred.

When faced with these two forces, the sensible approach is one of acceptance of complexity and contradiction, in order to leave the door open to ethics and humanism.

Let me throw in something perhaps surprising and certainly contradictory when we think about some of the evil done to Indigenous peoples, and indeed to others by the Fathers of Confederation. They were all serious churchgoers — Methodists, Presbyterians, low Anglicans and Catholics. A great deal of their religious language built into the creation of Canada was drawn from Psalm 72, which was widely understood to be the most egalitarian and justice-oriented Psalm in the Bible. It was the Psalm which put forward ideas of responsibility.

PSALM 72: KJV

> [4] He shall judge the poor of the people, he shall save the children of the needy, and shall break in pieces the oppressor.
> [12] For he shall deliver the needy when he crieth; the poor also, and him that hath no helper.
> [13] He shall spare the poor and needy, and shall save the souls of the needy.

It was and remains the left-wing Psalm. Coming from Canadian colonial leaders, it was a vicious attack on the British class system and also on the fundamental ideas of the British Empire.

In that case, how can we explain their betrayal of the treaties, their residential schools, their attempt to eliminate culture and language, and their other expressions of racism and exclusion?

Well, that is the challenge of reality. Politics is filled with these flagrant and often disgusting contradictions. They represent the complexity of human actions — you might say the lack of consciousness, the greed. That justifies nothing. It is simply important to identify this complexity.

I think it helps if we can consciously break down the two religious groupings I mentioned — one spiritual, the other not. One is about connection to place, the other is about human domination. Think of the banning of the potlatch. It was driven by church leaders who clearly were not spiritual and who sought power. They wanted to destroy the spirituality of Indigenous peoples. They also wanted to destroy the independence and even the economic success of the Indigenous people in the fishing industry.

Through this simple act of banning a spiritual, philosophical and social tradition and practice, they were aiming to humiliate another civilization and to deny the possibility of its spirituality, let alone its religion.

We could also say they simply wanted the business and the land and this was the easiest way to knock Indigenous people out of their role and their reality. We could simply say that the colonials were racists. All of that is no doubt true. But it's important to stick with the complexity because the very act of banning showed that the formal, power-driven religious movements feared the power and influence of Indigenous people, their spiritual reality and their understanding of place. In other words, the very act of banning showed the power of those who were banned. Even though Ottawa, John A. Macdonald and the formal religious groups had the power to do this, you feel in their action a deep weakness and a deep sense of insecurity.as to who they were, and why they were doing it and what their right to do it was.

You might say that an underlying message in everything I'm saying is that Canada has never been a secular place. It is not a secular place today. In Quebec, many people insist that it is a secular society, but I think this is very much a misreading of their own history. And it may simply be that they have been watching too much television from Paris.

An example of the extent to which spirituality has always played a role in Canada is the way we have welcomed immigrants. It was the Indigenous approach towards welcoming that has firmly put in place the best of what we now think of as our immigration citizenship policy. We owe an enormous amount to the Indigenous peoples for the way in which they reshaped the thinking of European Canadians on immigration. The other obvious point is that most immigrants who came to Canada came in religious groups. They depended on the support they received from their faith groups. It was more often than not the religious or the faith groups that helped people to get settled — helped them to find jobs and to organize themselves in a new and difficult country.

New immigrants being so dependent on their religious groups always came with the risk that people would get locked into a romantic notion that they could simply transport their notions of society to this new place. Certainly, the worst example were the Protestant northern Irish of the Orange Order, who used their relationship to the British Empire as a tool to gain as much power as possible for themselves under the guise that they represented a language, a culture and a religion that were proper to Canada. Nobody has ever outdone the influence of the Orange Order and the disturbance it brought to this country.

But in general, what we've seen is a gradual balancing out between what people bring with them and what they find here. Again, the religions and the spirituality have largely played a positive role in the building of that citizenship and the gradual evolution of a Canadian's idea of who they are

and what this place is.

This is not entirely changed today. Yes, there are all the immigration and settlement systems, and the three thousand citizenship ceremonies every year. And there are the civil society organizations that help immigrants. But at the same time, the humanist side of the religions of many immigrants have continued to play an important role. The humanist side: the side of empathy, the side of engaged citizens. I think one of the exciting things today is that this mixing – particularly in the cities and towns – of many, many sets of religions has meant that all groups have become used to working together, used to the idea that their spirituality can fit together with the spirituality of other religions, of other spiritual groups. So curiously enough, this old idea of spirituality being at the centre of building citizens has found a new energy, thanks to diversity. In many ways, it is coming more and more to resemble the complexity which the Europeans were very fortunate to be part of with Indigenous people in the 16th, 17th, 18th, and early 19th centuries.

I think that the next step really is to pay a great deal of attention to these Indigenous ideas of complexity and oneness that will allow us to build an increasingly complex and unusual society.

Don't think for a moment that I'm being a romantic. All of this does require a great deal of attention from all players. What we are trying to build requires the acceptance of a delicate balance, and above all it requires enormous citizen efforts and citizen engagement. All of this will succeed or fail on the basis of citizen engagement as a partner of laws and programs and official structures.

This has always been and will increasingly be a constant test for each of us. We will always have to work out where our faith can serve the greater good – not block it, and not create divisions.