

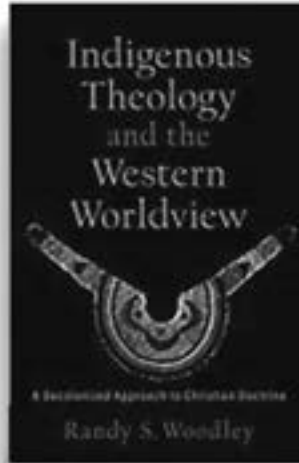
Book Review:

Indigenous Theology and the Western Worldview

By Randy S. Woodley (Baker Academic, 2022)

William David Spencer

This is a remarkable book that, surprising as it may sound from its title, will be of pertinent interest to *Priscilla Papers* readers. Seeking an alternate way to communicate besides the propositional tools of colonial culture, the author has drawn on First Nations' "narrative theology" (xi), interpreting personal experiences and traditional stories to contrast Western and Indigenous thinking. Opening and closing interviews serve as explanatory bookends for three chapters, "The Myth of History and Progressive Civilizations," "Comparing Western Indigenous Worldviews," and "Decolonizing Western Christian Theology," each chapter followed by "Questions and Response" designed to unpack and emphasize what the author is communicating. A final, helpful index completes this engaging and insightful 141-page comparative analysis.



The author, Randy S. Woodley, is Distinguished Professor of Faith and Culture and Director of Intercultural and Indigenous Studies at Portland Seminary of George Fox University (Oregon). A Cherokee elder who cohosts a podcast called *Peacing It All Together*, he balances academics with the practical, co-administrating with his wife, Edith Woodley, the Eloheh Indigenous Center for Earth Justice along with Eloheh Farm and Seeds company. *Eloheh* "is a Cherokee Indian word meaning harmony, wholeness, abundance and peace."¹

The book targets what Dr. Woodley views as the majority, primarily male, "Western worldview," which he characterizes as a fix-it mentality: "European minds first want to know and then they immediately want to fix it, quickly. They believe they can fix everything." His alternative? "Listen for a long time," then "structurally and individually . . . heal the relationships between themselves, Creator, the land, and the local indigenous peoples" (41–42).

What will interest *Priscilla Papers* readers is that a sizable part of his program emphasizes the leadership of women. As any egalitarian should, he begins immediately in the book's dedication, citing a number of women among the "Indigenous elders who took the time to help me find my way" (v). On pg. 1, he announces, "My wife and I are farmers/planters, and we grow our food and seeds, so that others can grow their own food." His wife's presence is

apparent all through this book. She leads off his list of acknowledgements and is followed by more women along with men "whose lives and questions caused me to think better and to become a better human being" (xiii).

His thinking on female/male relationships was shaped by his mother's plight: "She had to quit school when she was thirteen and move to the city to live with an aunt, so she could work and send money back home to her family." The reason, he sees, was the oppression of women: "She was the oldest daughter. Her older brother didn't have to do that, just the girls—totally unfair" (3).

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, this appears to have been a common practice. Like the author's mother, my own mother had to leave

school in her senior year of high school because her father's business failed and her brothers could not find work. She and her mother supported the family; my grandmother by taking in the neighbors' washing, and my mother by working as a waitress, garnering her wages out of tips, which were often stolen by the next patron at her tables. But, despite the necessity that whoever could find work and support the family was pressed to do so, my mother's brothers were always given milk to drink, while my grandparents had my mother drink coffee since her childhood, which ultimately weakened her teeth. Any spare money was saved to send her youngest brother to college. In short, the times called for united measures, but in both these cases, the burden would often fall most heavily on female children, while extra gains were used to benefit sons, not daughters.²

As a result, Professor Woodley draws this conclusion: "women are smarter than men." What is the connection? "Unfortunately, it's still a 'man's world' and women are oppressed, still being denied equal rights or fair treatment." Therefore, "women have had to think with both a male and a female worldview all along in order to make it in this world. Men, well, we have the privilege of just having to think like men. As a result, women must be smarter than men" (3).

This observation links to a key premise that drives this book: the parallel plight of First Nations people in a Western-thinking majority

culture: “What anthropologists call Indigenous Cosmopolitanism. This refers to the ability to understand and act from two different worldviews or the ability to operate in multiple ethnic cultures” (3).

The author observes that all women, as well as First Nations thinkers of both sexes, find themselves needing to think in two worlds, while men in the Western worldview, as forged by men, usually perceive only one perspective. Hence, the need for consciousness-raising. This is a small and over-populated planet that needs everyone to share perspectives if all are to survive. At the same time, we might add, while valuable for survival, this extra depth of perception can also marginalize both women and consciousness-raised female and male First Nations people with what has been called a Cassandra complex. In Greek mythology, Cassandra, the daughter of King Priam of Troy, “had the power to tell the future, announced to all that disaster was nigh, but no one listened.”³

Reflective of this reality is Elder Woodley’s highlighting of the crucial need for communal thinking over individualistic thinking. He contrasts Western thinking, summarized as “We are, because I am,” with indigenous reasoning, “I am, because we are.” Thus, he observes, Jesus established “alternative communities.” If all human thinking agreed, it would eliminate “abuse of the female gender [which] cuts across all ethnicity and race as well” (83). As we can see, mutuality, respect, and neighborly care are central to his view of right thinking.

Communal thinking is also illustrated in the author’s approach, couching much of the key teaching in presentations and interpretations of stories. For example, his lesson about respecting tribal (and all wise) elders is conveyed in a Cherokee story about Grandmother Turtle, who volunteers to plunge into the sea to secure mud at Creator’s command in order to raise gratitude for the gift of land on which to live. Disparaging her offer because of her age, the animals run through all the other options, male and female, until they finally return to the now very aged turtle, who succeeds, but at the sacrifice of her life. Teacher Woodley notes, “When I tell that story to little Native kids, do you know what the first thing they say is? Can you guess? They say, ‘They should have listened to Grandmother Turtle! She was the elder’” (41). In response, we might add: how much wisdom have we in the church lost by ignoring the wise women among us? This is a mistake the wise OT city Abel Beth Maacah avoided and thus saved its people from annihilation (2 Sam 20:16–22). Do we do the same for our gifted Christian women and for the people groups who are our neighbors?

As far as Woodley and First Nations thinking is concerned, “Women are sacred because they can bring forth children,” an observation he links to Paul’s description of the earth groaning in labor pains (Rom 8:22). This gift is a reflection of the image of Creator (as God is called throughout the book), and “giving birth to new life” is, in Woodley’s view, what “Mother Earth” “is all about” (75). Being part of the earth is essential to his thinking, and he expresses it both in his teaching and in his and his wife’s seed company because “we owe it to ourselves, future generations and the earth to be responsible co-sustainers.”⁴

Toward the end of the book, he summarizes “the values that I found to constitute the harmony way.” In this three-page list, he features the following values: “Community is essential, women are sacred, children are loved, elders are respected, family is vital,

everyone is integrally related.” Therefore, “We are remarkably related to everyone and everything, so accept your huge family. ‘Increase your friends and family’” (93).

So endemic in his thinking is the egalitarian perspective that he often (though not completely, e.g., see pg. 20) discards terms like pedagogy and student, since “pedagogy implies that one person, the teacher or adult, has knowledge to share with the other, the receiver or the child,” and “in my graduate and undergraduate courses, I have always referenced my students (another word that implies the former inequality of positions) as “co-learners” or “collaborative learners,” implying “we are positionally equal, learning together” (ix–x).

As readers can gather from these quotations, the author’s style is relaxed and conversational. We readers will benefit most from Prof. Woodley’s book if we enter it with the following attitude: this book is, essentially, the opportunity to sit at the feet of a respected First Nations elder as he sifts through his thoughts on his experiences, his biblical knowledge, and the jewels of his treasury of traditional stories.

Notes

1. Randy Woodley, “Eloheh,” Randy Woodley: Truth in Story. Accessed July 18, 2023. <https://randywoodley.com/eloheh>. *Eloheh* is also reminiscent of the Hebrew word *’elohe* found in Gen 33:20, “mostly in poetry” designating “the one, true God.” See the entry in Karl Feyerabend, *Langensheidt Pocket Hebrew Dictionary to the Old Testament* (McGraw-Hill, 1969) 17. The word is used in the name Jacob gives the altar he builds on land he has just bought outside of Shechem in Canaan to pitch his tent, before the disaster with Dinah forces him to move again.
2. In my family’s case, my mother’s older brother, John, who was very kind, took on the role of protector, often taking the punishment for the misdeeds of his younger brother and sister, being boxed on the ears, which was common punishment in those severe days, a pernicious form of discipline that eventually left him deaf in one ear. When he finally found work, he too contributed what he earned to his younger brother’s going to college. So not all men were insensitive or oppressive.
3. Maria Mavromataki, *Greek Mythology and Religion: Cosmogony, The Gods, Religious Customs, The Heroes* (Haitalis, 1997) 241.
4. Randy Woodley, *Eloheh Seeds*, Eloheh Indigenous Center for Earth Justice. Accessed July 18, 2023. <https://elohehseeds.com/index.html>.



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