

## CHAPTER IV

# WINDIGO KILLINGS AND THE CLASH OF CULTURES

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### INTRODUCTION – AND SOME PROGRAMMATIC REMARKS

Gilbert Keith Chesterton once remarked to George Bernard Shaw: “To look at you, anyone would think there was a famine in England.” Shaw rejoined: “To look at you, anyone would think you caused it.” How could an Englishman and an Irishman who professed very different beliefs and espoused very different philosophies tease each other as only great friends can?<sup>1</sup> We can learn much about cross-cultural conflict by briefly examining this example of its counterpart: cross-cultural friendship. To one Roman’s famous question “What is truth?” Chesterton and Shaw could both have answered with T.M. Knox and Aristotle: “truth is the greater friend.”<sup>2</sup> Because they were first φίλοι σοφίας (‘friends of wisdom’ – philosophers) and because they constantly sought to *re-ligare* (‘re-bind’) themselves to the truth – to live by it – they could also be friends with each other, not in spite of, but rather because of the very different but sincere answers they often gave to the question: “What is *the* truth ... about God, about morality, etc.?” If their differences of culture, religion and philosophy fostered a ‘clash’ of friendship it was because – at a much deeper level – these ‘fighting friends’ shared a common culture, religion, and philosophy, built on epistemic honesty: the quest for unity of understanding with reality, of action with understanding, and of experience with action. They tried to understand things as they were, to live according to such understanding and to experience – in some form – the results of their action, so as to learn from it, all while learning from others’ experiences, understandings and actions. In contrast, Chesterton would likely have found much more of a cultural clash between himself and another Catholic who, despite reciting the same creed, was seeking uniformity of understanding – either out of insecurity or a desire for power over his own life or others.

It is often in times of great insecurity, or when the power to control our lives (or others) is at stake, that cultural clashes are most pronounced. In the historical North American context, there are few more striking clashes of culture than those arising from incidents of ‘windigo’ possession and execution.

Windigo incidents have usually arisen in the context of starvation: of famine far more real and desperate than the sort that Shaw teasingly accused Chesterton of starting. In the nineteenth and early twentieth-century incidents that will be examined here, European fur traders and the Cree and

Ojibwa of the North American subarctic came face to face with starvation violence, cannibalism, and madness. The Cree and Ojibwa associated such phenomena with the windigo.<sup>3</sup> This mythological monster – with its heart of ice and superhuman strength – most frequently manifested itself as a human being driven to serious loss of self-control, accompanied or followed by violence and cannibalism, particularly in times of starvation.<sup>4</sup> The human person was deemed to have either transformed into, or been possessed by, the windigo. Historically, the Cree and Ojibwa would either try to cure anyone suspected of becoming a windigo, or – if necessity forced their hand – they would kill him, whether a close family member or a relative outsider, such as a European fur trader.

The historical contexts of windigo incidents may appear deceptively distant. On the contrary, however, they bring us to the heart of the problem at hand, and may also point to answers that can help mitigate, diminish, and/or resolve many contemporary clashes of culture, especially on difficult moral issues such as abortion, which, writes Jeff McMahan, “remains one of the most intractably controversial of all moral issues.”<sup>5</sup>

Although the windigo incidents looked at here may initially evoke the notion of a clash between Indigenous North American and European cultures, a closer examination challenges this dominant ‘Indigenous versus European’ interpretive paradigm. Instead, there is a more profound clash of cultures. On the one side are those who seek unity of understanding with reality – firm in their conviction that ‘truth is the greater friend,’ even with its sometimes mysterious and elusive character. On the other side are those who seek uniformity of understanding: who reduce reality to a list of fundamentals that excludes mystery (fundamentalism), or everything except mystery (relativism). In the end, the relativist and the fundamentalist are feuding twin brothers, and although the relativist often claims the moral high ground of tolerance and open-mindedness, accusing his brother of ‘fundamentalism,’ he is in fact the more fundamentalist of the two, for he reduces reality to just one fundamental. In an individualistic society, such relativistic fundamentalism can maintain an illusion of moral superiority and tolerance; however, when the bubble of individualistic freedom is threatened by the reality of our interdependent relationships and the responsibilities that flow from them, the relativist becomes the fiercest and most intolerant of the fundamentalists. For his rejection of religion is very deep: he does not want to *re-ligare* – to bind – himself to any truth or authority other than the law he posits for himself, which is frequently that of his own appetites and self-interest. In this sense, religion – the effort to bind oneself to the truth, to be possessed by the truth – is rarely, if ever, the cause of conflict; rather it is irreligion – the desire to be possessor or controller of the truth, whether fundamentalistic (reducing the fullness of truth to several fundamentals) or relativistic (reducing the truth to only one fundamental) – that causes conflict.

Too often, unfortunately, we allow fundamentalism to fight on our behalf against the errors of relativism or we allow relativism to fight on our

behalf against the errors of fundamentalism. This is the real danger, Amy Gutmann points out: that we let them dominate the public discourse.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, in defense of those who earnestly and honestly support opposing positions on such intractable moral issues as abortion, and in defense of all those who are affected by such issues, it is vital that we not be fooled by more visible cultural, philosophical and religious differences, or by polarizing discourses, into misapprehending the true source of the clash of culture, religion and philosophy.

## **WINDIGO KILLINGS**

The Cree and northern Ojibwa are Algonquian peoples of subarctic North America whose encounter with Europeans began with the French penetration of the St. Lawrence valley in the 16th and 17th centuries, and intensified with the advent of French and English exploration and trade expeditions directly into Hudson Bay and James Bay in the 17th century. Charles Fort, the first Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) post – later re-founded as Rupert House – was established in south-eastern James Bay in 1668. By the early 19th century, the HBC had several well-established posts along the James Bay coast, and were expanding inland into the interior. Their transatlantic exchange with the Cree and Ojibwa soon extended beyond furs to intimate connections of marriage and, to varying degrees, mutual recourse for alternative sources of subsistence.<sup>7</sup>

The HBC depended more heavily and regularly on Cree and Ojibwa country provisions, but when these failed – which they did both unexpectedly and periodically on account of fluctuations in weather conditions and animal populations – the fur traders could normally, but not always fall back on their European supplies, and it was the Cree and Ojibwa, having no fall-back option, who turned to the Company for help. In short, they all frequently relied on each other to avoid deprivation and escape starvation in a land that could be very unforgiving.

On September 10, 1817, several HBC servants left Rupert House, the Company's main trade-post in south-eastern James Bay, and travelled upriver and inland.<sup>8</sup> Led by John Greely, their mission was to investigate the feasibility of establishing a new fur-trade outpost in opposition to competing fur traders based out of Montreal. An early onset of cold weather, however, forced them to winter near present-day Lake Evans, some distance from their planned destination of Waswanipi. Hastily building a shelter, they set their nets and hooks, for they had been able to bring food for the outward journey alone. Supplies had been low in James Bay when they left, because the annual HBC supply ships had been forced by another early cold front to pass the winter of 1816-17 in James Bay.

A sudden November thaw led to the loss of some of their fishing supplies, but Greely's letters – delivered to the coast by one of two Cree men who had been engaged to guide the expedition – exuded confidence. Alexander Christie, the Superintendent at Rupert House, moreover, was

“under no apprehension for their safety” for he had been told by the Cree that fish were abundant in that area, and he expected to be able to send sufficient supplies to get Greely and his companions through the winter and on to Waswanipi in the spring.

It took Christie some time to find a Cree hunter who knew the route and was available to bring supplies to Greely and his companions. On February 23, a Cree hunter named Stacimow and his wife left Rupert House with this very mission. Arriving at the camp, however, they found only one survivor: the wife of Henry Swanson, one of Greely’s companions. Her husband, as well as Greely and another man, had starved to death, and the remaining three were missing. Stacemow and his wife began the trip back with the woman, but he killed her before reaching Rupert House. Upon arrival, he reported to Christie that, being deranged, the woman had refused to eat the food he provided, and that he had killed her in self-defence. Christie later commented that he did not think the woman had been insane; yet knowing that the Cree would kill even their closest relatives “when they know of their having been reduced to the dreadful necessity of eating human flesh,” he did not pursue the matter further.

At the end of March, Christie sent several HBC servants with Stacimow’s brother Sheutickush to find the three missing members of Greely’s party: Peter White, his wife and William Laughton. They soon discovered that White – no mention is made of his wife’s fate – had starved to death and that Laughton had been killed by Amoshish, a Cree hunter with whom Laughton had been living. Laughton had left Amoshish’s camp earlier that month to get rum and tobacco from the Lake Evans camp, and when he did not return promptly, Amoshish had followed him. In the words of Christie, Amoshish had “found ... Laughton by himself, at the same time observing that Laughton had been subsisting upon human flesh, he through a superstitious fear, unhappily deprived him of life.” Another Cree hunter named Camitchesit later told Christie that he had initially helped Greely with provisions and in mid-January attempted to convince him to be guided to the coast or to spend the rest of the winter at his own camp. Greely, however, had refused both offers.

The Cree who had come in contact with the starving HBC servants clearly attempted to help them as best they could. However, by subsisting on human flesh Laughton and Mrs. Swanson had become windigos in Amoshish and Stacimow’s eyes. Christie does not show signs of doubting their sincerity in either case. Retired HBC servant William Weigand, half-brother of Mrs. Swanson, later recalled that Stacimow’s wife had reported that “Mrs. Swanson, when unable to get rabbits, cut a slice of the flesh of [the] dead men.” “This accounts,” he explains, “for the Indian thinking she was dangerous.”

Almost seventy years later, in the winter of 1888, Stacimow’s younger brother, Peetawabano would die at the hands of his sons in another period of starvation.<sup>9</sup> He, his wife, his five sons, their wives, and a number of children found themselves in a dire situation at their inland camp in 1888.

Peetawabano drew his own blood to feed his family, and only one member – a daughter-in-law – apparently refused to partake. Peetawabano was then killed by one of his sons and eaten. Subsequent acts of cannibalism apparently continued through the winter and into the following year. Peetawabano's daughter-in-law, who had been hiding out and surviving some distance from the camp near a travel route where she hoped other Cree families would pass, finally fled to the HBC post at Eastmain in February of 1889, apparently carrying a young child.

One month later, Robert, the youngest of Peetawabano's sons – about sixteen years of age at the time – showed up at the same post; he was the only other survivor. He claimed to have escaped, but his sister-in-law had already revealed quite a different story. And in contrast to her, he had been slow to eat regular food when he arrived (an indication he had resorted to cannibalism). He was held at Eastmain post for a while. According to W.K. Broughton, who was in charge of the HBC posts in that district, if he was turned loose again, "without giving him the means of subsistence ... he might either resort to his practices of last summer again, or he might be hunted down and shot by the other Indians."<sup>10</sup>

Eventually, Robert was brought south to Rupert's House where he was interrogated and finally confessed to participating in the killing and consumption of his family members. He was not killed, however, but was sent far inland to an HBC post at Mistissini. According to Cree elder John Blackned, the HBC trader there "expected him to get crazy again and kill somebody. He stayed there for many years and never did anything bad... Some of the Mistassini Natives were scared of him at first ... because they heard the story. When he first tried to get a wife, the girl didn't want to, she was scared that if she married him he would eat her!"<sup>11</sup> (Blackned's grandfather had previously shared a camp with Peetawabano's family.) Eventually, however, Robert Petawabano did get married, and apparently he later died trying to save the drowning daughter of an HBC trader.<sup>12</sup> In the end, he was deemed cured from his windigo possession.

As mentioned already, not all cases of alleged windigo possession were manifested by cannibalism; this was the case of a very striking incident of 'windigo-killing' that occurred among the Ojibway of northwestern Ontario in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1906, Jack and Joseph Fiddler – two Ojibwa leaders from the northwestern interior of the James Bay lowlands – were arrested by the North West Mounted Police (NWMP) for killing a woman alleged to be transforming into a windigo.<sup>13</sup> She had not resorted to cannibalism, but was nonetheless exhibiting traits associated with windigo possession. Out of fear that she might become dangerous and uncontrollable, the Fiddler brothers had killed her. After their arrest, they were brought to Norway House, where they were held for trial. Jack Fiddler escaped into the woods, and hanged himself. Tried by NWMP Commissioner A. B. Perry, Joseph Fiddler was found guilty of murder and sentenced to death (the only penalty for such a crime at the time).

While Joseph Fiddler was in prison awaiting the imposition of the sentence, fur traders, missionaries and even a NWMP officer came to his defense and campaigned for his pardon. The Canadian authorities, in fact, had no intention of hanging him, but wanted to make an example of him. Commissioner Perry, at the trial, had rejected the argument that Joseph had acted according to customary law. Perry wanted to apply a harsh sentence in order to make an example of the accused. After the trial, however, he wrote privately to the Minister of Justice urging commutation of the sentence. Joseph Fiddler, he explained, “believed ... that insane persons were dangerous to the well being of his tribe and that unless they were strangled they would turn into cannibals ... It is clear that it has been the custom of the tribe from time immemorial to put to death members of their band, and other bands, who were thought by them to be insane or incurable.”<sup>14</sup> Joseph Fiddler’s sentence was commuted to life, and he was eventually transferred to the Stony Mountain Prison in 1908. In September of that year, the Governor General ordered his immediate release, but he had already died in prison, three days earlier.

These are very good examples of philosophy, religion, and the clash of cultures, but not necessarily in the way would be inclined to think. At the most profound level, the dividing line was not between those who believed in the windigo and those who did not, but between those who incarnated windigo traits (without necessarily believing in the windigo) and those who did not.

## **WINDIGOS, PHILOSOPHY, RELIGION, AND CULTURE**

Imbued with a profound sense of interpersonal contingency, of dependence for survival on other persons – both human and non-human (animals and spiritual beings) – the Cree and Ojibwa traditionally saw their “environment” largely as a cluster of interpersonal relationships in which they are fully implicated. They thus gave paramount importance to personal virtues required for competence in interpersonal relationships, both to avoid and mitigate hardship, or for maintaining self-control in dire circumstances that defied control. In short, emotional, epistemic and ethical competence was more important than technical hunting competence.

The windigo, therefore, epitomized and embodied extreme emotional, epistemic, and ethical incompetence or perversion. The human being who was possessed by, or transformed into a windigo exhibited an extreme lack or loss of self-control (emotional incompetence); a disconnect with – or perversion of – reality, especially the distinction between edible animal persons and non-edible human persons (epistemic incompetence); and a rejection of relationships and their corresponding responsibilities (ethical incompetence). Dehumanizing the other and the self, the human-turned-windigo was the antithesis of the competent hunter: a cannibalistic monster of superhuman strength, uncontrollable, difficult to kill, provoking fear and evoking chaos.

The Algonquian understanding of the windigo was born out of their particular experiences, their environment, and from the drastic actions they were sometimes forced to take in order to protect themselves. In times of starvation or deprivation people might lose self-control and resort to cannibalism, or resort to cannibalism and then lose self-control, becoming dangerous. With no mental asylums or modern medical sciences, how else could they cope with the traumatic and monstrous transformation of a friend or relative, who could not be left with other family members while a hunter went to hunt? If necessity forced their hand, it was easier to kill a monster that had possessed a family member, than to kill a family member. If anyone manifested windigo-like traits (loss of self control, disconnect with reality, rejection of relationship) – even outside the context of famine and cannibalism – it provoked great fear of windigo possession, and called for drastic measures. On the other hand, cannibalism without windigo-traits could also occur. This explains why one man who ate his children – already dead of starvation – and saw his actions for what they were – showing no disconnect with reality and others, or loss of self-control – was not deemed to have become a windigo at all.<sup>15</sup>

As noted already, the Algonquian understanding of the windigo and of the practical and ethical dilemmas provoked by starvation cannibalism was rooted in their particular historical circumstances. As R.G. Collingwood writes, in *The Idea of History*, “It is only by historical thinking that I can discover what I thought ten years ago, ... or five minutes ago ... In this sense, all knowledge of the mind is historical.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly, John Lukacs points out that since “the present is no more than an illusion, a moment that is already past in an instant,” and since we cannot know the future, all knowledge is therefore knowledge of the past, however immediate that past may be.<sup>17</sup> This point applies especially to our knowledge of the particular, but it also applies analogously or indirectly to our understanding of the abstract or the universal. In this sense, therefore, our understanding of ethics and other universal concepts are rooted – as they were for the Algonquian – in knowledge of the particular, and we are all – to some extent – historians.

Yet in drawing understanding of the universal from our experience of the particular, we are also all philosophers, and our philosophies all carry religious implications. If we allow a gross oversimplification, we could say that religion permits faith in other authorities as a bridge between our experience of the particular and our understanding of the universal, whereas philosophy systematically seeks to avoid acts of faith in any authority other than experience and reason. Both apply reason, even if sometimes in very different ways. Both also call on us in different ways to *re-ligare* (re-bind or reconnect) our actions to our understandings of reality: to live according to what we believe to be true. In reality, the dividing line between philosophy and religion has long been hazy, certainly in Indigenous North American traditions, but also in Western traditions.

To reiterate, our philosophical and religious understandings are embedded in our historical knowledge or experience of the particular, but

our historical experiences of the particular also become embedded in our philosophical and religious understandings. The relationship between them is one of constant ideological dialogue in which they inform, form, and reform each other. Simply put, our understandings shape the way we experience reality at the same time as our experiences of reality shape our understandings of it. But what is meant by “ideological dialogue”?

John Lye explains that:

Ideology is a term developed in the Marxist tradition to talk about how cultures are structured in ways that enable the group holding power to have the maximum control with the minimum of conflict. This is not a matter of groups deliberately planning to oppress people or alter their consciousness (although this can happen), but rather a matter of how the dominant institutions in society work through values, conceptions of the world, and symbol systems, in order to legitimize the current order. Briefly, this legitimization is managed through the widespread teaching (the social adoption) of ideas about the way things are, how the world “really” works and should work. These ideas (often embedded in symbols and cultural practices) orient people's thinking in such a way that they accept the current way of doing things, the current sense of what is “natural,” and the current understanding of their roles in society. ... ideological structures appear to be natural, “according to the order of things” (naturalization); ... the logical conclusion to an historical development (historicization); [and] ... there is an assumption that now that this (natural) state of affairs has been reached, things will be that way, barring regression (eternalization).<sup>18</sup>

Ideology can certainly be all this, but there is another, more positive and indispensable form of ideology – regardless of what label we give it.

Ἰδεα, the Greek word for “form,” comes from the verb εἶδω, which means “I see.” Yet the primary meaning of the perfect tense of this verb, οἶδα, is not “I have seen,” but rather “I know.” Implicit here is the notion that ideas or forms are the very means by which we know, the means by which we process our experiences of reality. Ideology – defined as a reasoning (λογος) of forms (ἰδεαί) – is necessary. Without a reasoning of forms, we cannot form reasons. If we acknowledge the existence of ideology in the Marxist sense, therefore, we must also acknowledge its indispensability in this other sense. Otherwise, we will fall into deconstructionism, the threat of which, writes Amy Gutmann, is “twofold: (1) it denies *a priori* that there are any reasonable answers to fundamental questions, and (2) it reduces every answer to an exercise of political power.”<sup>19</sup>

T.S. Eliot wrote in 1942:

. . . History may be servitude  
History may be freedom. See, now they vanish,  
The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,  
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.<sup>20</sup>

Ideology also may be servitude, or it may be freedom. How willing are we to allow the faces, places and self, all of which we love imperfectly, to become renewed, transfigured in another pattern? Ideology can be a way of formatting experience in an honest and demanding search for unity of understanding with reality. It can be fluid and dynamic in its constant interaction with experience, changing shape, like the eye, in order to focus and clarify one's understanding. Ideology can also be like a distorted glass lens, used to impose an immutable and universal truth, or to deny the possibility of discovering any measure of immutable and universal truth. One form of ideology allows for mystery; the other does not permit it (fundamentalism), or permits nothing else (relativism). One allows for knowledge; the other obstructs it. One is living; the other is dead. One seeks unity of understanding with reality while recognizing our experiences of reality are limited and different; the other seeks uniformity of understanding. One recognizes complimentary understandings and seeks to resolve contradictory ones; the other is indifferent to contradictory understandings or attempts to resolve them by imposing its own.

Our ability to be competent (technologically, socially, economically, but above all ethically), is contingent on our ideological dialogue with reality and the understanding that it fosters. Yet competence is more than knowledge or understanding. Competence is understanding *cum potentia* – with the potency to live it, to *re-ligare* – to bind – our actions to our understanding.

### **CLASH OF CULTURES – QUESTS FOR UNITY VERSUS UNIFORMITY OF UNDERSTANDING**

Within all our cultures we find both unity and tension among experience, understanding, and action – the constitutive elements of culture – and between them and extra-mental reality. Philip Salzman writes that “culture is [and needs to be, I would add] integrated into a whole that tends toward consistency” and conversely, Philip Rief writes that the “death of a culture begins when its normative institutions fail to communicate ideals in ways that remain inwardly compelling.”<sup>21</sup> Essentially, we and our cultures suffer if we cannot connect our understanding of reality to our experience of it, if we cannot connect our action to our understanding or do not act as we understand we should, or if we never experience the results realized and/or intended by our actions. In other words, our psychological well-being and competence (practical and ethical) are largely dependent on our ability and

willingness to seek unity between: our understanding of reality and our experience of it; our experience of reality and our action on it; and our action on reality and our understanding of it.

A competent relationship between understanding, experience and action, therefore, is circular and it revolves around reality. Reality, however, is permeated by mystery. Furthermore, as noted earlier, it is through imperfect understandings that incomplete experiences continue to inform and reform what remain imperfect understandings. No human being can understand, experience, or act upon reality in its fullness. This is why our quests for understanding lead us back to others, especially – in some cases – those whose very different understandings and experiences can help us address the limitations of our own.

Yet we do not choose merely to have recourse to others. Our actions, experiences, and understandings are not formed in isolation from – or in complete unity with – others, and it is in the formative years of our life that this is made most clear. Contact and contingency are at the origin of our being and remain a part of it. These words draw their root from the Latin *contingere* – literally “to touch together,” a meaning not so different from its homonym which means “to bathe together.” We come into being from contact between and with our parents. We are conceived and born from their relationship and in relationship to them. Insofar as we “bathe together” with them and others in the same river of reality, we form with them a common culture, a collection of shared understandings (from how to use a fork to the nature of divinity) based on shared experience and action.

Nevertheless, we always remain distinct. Even if we “bathe together” with others in the same river of reality, we are nevertheless cultured (formed and informed) distinctly. Culture lives in each of us, and it evolves as our understandings evolve. It is only to the extent to which we share understandings with others that we share a culture with them.

When we speak of “cultures” as independent entities, therefore, what we are referring to are clusters, held and renegotiated by persons-in-representation, of shared understandings embodied and shaped by our experiences and actions. These clusters have mass, however, that exert gravitational pull. Within these cultural centres of gravity, therefore, some understandings are closer to the core and many others may be more peripheral. We can therefore participate in numerous cultural centres of gravity simultaneously, but some of those clusters of shared understandings define how we participate in others.

When contact with people of other cultures demands co-action, however, we need to form a common understanding. Yet in order to evaluate each other’s understandings we often need to comprehend (*cum-prehendere*, “to grasp together”) each other’s experiences. The less we have in common, the more sharing of “experience” (evidence) we require. However, when the record of such experience is framed and communicated in an understanding very different from our own – the very understanding we seek to verify – we can only evaluate its merit by somehow living new

experiences together or stepping into each other's shoes. This was the challenge faced by those involved in the windigo killings. It can be very difficult to "learn to move," as Charles Taylor suggests, "in a broader horizon, within which what we have formerly taken for granted as the background to valuation can be situated as one possibility alongside the different background of the formerly unfamiliar culture."<sup>22</sup> Cross-cultural credibility gaps are to a large extent inevitable and natural simply because of our epistemological limitations. It is our ethical choices and habits, however, that prevent us from closing these gaps and preventing them from turning into enduring clashes of culture.

Malice, egoism, and fear can lead us to seek unity of understanding with our actions rather than unity of understanding with reality, as we experience it. The result is a break with reality, where – like the windigo – we misconstrue or ignore our experience of it or avoid experiencing the results of our actions on it. The resulting culture loses its unity and may often be unethical, sometimes to the extreme. If we do not seek unity of understanding with reality in our own life, moreover, we will not seek it in our relations with others. Like the windigo, we may try to isolate ourselves from others, cutting off relations with those who expose our lack of unity of life. If we cannot live in such relative or complete isolation, however, we may instead demand uniformity of understanding or at least of action from those around us. We cannot bear to have anyone challenge explicitly or implicitly the skewed understanding of reality that we have adopted in conformity with our immoral or defective actions (often habitual) that we fear changing or, from malice or egoism, refuse to change. And if others do not conform (or simply are not in conformity) to ourselves, if we cannot assimilate them, we often completely "otherize" them, sometimes forcefully.

Extreme otherization is the de- or sub-humanization of people. It is the denial of our relationship of common humanity. Polarization and dichotomization are necessary prerequisites to such dehumanization, and unfortunately, our positivist legal frameworks facilitate such polarization, because they predispose us to think of society in terms of individuals and groups. As a result, we often lose sight of the fact that relationships between individuals are much more binding and complex, and that boundaries between groups much more permeable and fluid.

What we call groups are intertwined and overlapping clusters of persons-in-relationship, and individuals only exist in relationship, multiple and fluid. We are persons-in-relationship; this conception of society – predominant in Cree culture – captures the reality of who we are much better. While some of our relationships are contextual, temporary and/or chosen, others, like our common humanity and filial ties, are not necessarily of our own making or choice; moreover, they are or become a permanent part of who we are. We can be healthy and competent if we acknowledge and seek to understand our relationships, but if we begin denying some of our relationships and the responsibilities that flow from them, our moral

grounding is lost. Unfortunately, the dominant rights-based discourse does not encourage us to think in terms of the responsibilities that flow from our relationships, and this has grave ramifications on how we address the moral dilemmas we face.

Some forms of otherization can be used as an effective means of deterring, punishing, and correcting illegitimate or immoral behaviour. Thus, the windigo becomes an unacceptable “other,” at least until he reforms or is reformed. The Algonquian did not always consider such “otherness” to be absolute; reform or recovery was often deemed possible. Within the mind of a human-turned-windigo, in fact, there might still be a degree of unity between experience, understanding and action, even if it was isolated from others and from reality. The perverse understanding (of human beings as edible) had been brought into unity with action (the loss of self-control in eating others) in a perverse reversal of the quest for unity of action with understanding, with the help of others; nevertheless, with the help of others, a windigo might regain unity of experience with reality – experiencing the results of one’s monstrous actions – or be force-fed human food, and this could overcome the windigo possession. Such was the case of one man, who after receiving such treatment, was cured and would often be heard crying lamentably over the loss of the wife and child he had killed and eaten.<sup>23</sup>

In Cree and Ojibwa cultures, the concept of madness, as something medically and scientifically definable and treatable, is only a relatively recent importation from Western culture. It was the concept of monster that was used to understand and cope with all forms of deviant behaviour that were harmful to society. The windigo was the monster that epitomized such behaviour. Windigo possession could imply culpability – if one wilfully engaged in actions that were wrong, but it could also be used to preserve the innocence and humanity of someone who committed a monstrous act. Imagine your loved one, a brother, sister, spouse, parent or child losing self-control, killing and eating someone, or eating dead human flesh and losing self-control. How would you understand and cope with the shocking transformation that has occurred? And how would you take the necessary measures to protect yourself and others from further violence in a society without institutions we take for granted? As a hunter, would you leave your possessed wife at camp with your children while you go to get food? As noted earlier, if necessity forced your hand, killing a windigo that had possessed your loved one would be easier than killing your loved one.

Those who killed the allegedly insane women in 1818 and 1906 thought they were killing windigos in order to protect themselves and their families. Those who disagreed did not condone these actions, but to the extent that they were seeking unity of understanding with reality, they recognized that the killings had been done without malice. They knew that beneath very significant differences of culture and understanding, there was a shared culture of epistemic honesty founded on a shared quest for unity of understanding with reality. In short, even though they were certain that the

Algonquian understanding was wrong, they recognized that their intentions were right. They did try to challenge the Algonquian view, however, both in 1889 and in 1906.

As a result of their interactions with Europeans, few, if any, Cree or Ojibwa today would reject what medical sciences have taught us about mental illness. If they did so contrary to their better judgment – for the sake of reintroducing old cultural practices in the name of cultural preservation or renewal – they would risk becoming windigos themselves. For although such cultural practices might appear similar to those practiced by their ancestors, beneath the appearance of cultural renewal and continuity there would open a deep chasm between their own culture – founded now on a quest for uniformity of understanding (across time) – and that of their ancestors – founded on a quest for unity of understanding with reality. In such a case, only an external cultural relativism could condone such an internal cultural fundamentalism, which highlights the insanity and monstrosity to which both relativism and fundamentalism can lead.

Monstrosity and madness appear to have in common an inability to seek unity between understanding, experience and action, and – more importantly – with extra-mental objective reality. However, in the case of madness, the inability stems from circumstances primarily beyond our control, in cases of desperation, and often has potential for treatment. In the case of monstrosity, the inability stems from a persistent epistemologically dishonest and willful break with reality – a lie insisted upon to the point that the ability to see the lie as a lie has been lost, and we have become monstrous.

Cree and Ojibwa cultures may no longer have or need quite the same notion of the windigo, and it may have incorporated the medical notion of madness, but the notion of the windigo and of the monstrous is perhaps still needed in their culture and especially in western culture, in which – as Rieff argues – the therapeutic has triumphed.<sup>24</sup> In short, if we lie to ourselves enough about reality – especially on the ethical plane where it affects our relations with others and our ability to appreciate and fulfill the responsibilities that flow from these relationships – then we risk becoming monstrous windigos. And that is something we should fear no less than the Cree and Ojibwa feared windigo possession. In our twenty-first century society – no less than for the Cree father in the 1910s who, for fear of turning windigo, cut a hole in the lake ice to dispose of the dead body of his starved child<sup>25</sup> – avoiding or curing windigo possession may require painful acts of detachment or painful reunifications of understanding with reality. This is perhaps why moral dilemmas such as abortion remain so intractable.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Daniel H. Strait, “‘Fighting Friends’: The Chesterton-Shaw Debates,” *SHAW: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies*, vol. 23 (2003), pp. 47-57.

<sup>2</sup> T.M. Knox, preface to R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946 / Oxford University Press, 1961), p. vii. Knox was citing a Latin maxim that paraphrases a line from the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1096a15) where Aristotle criticizes some of Plato's views.

<sup>3</sup> *Wihitiko* is the Cree term; English has borrowed the closely-related Anishinabe (Ojibwa) term, 'windigo,' which is used here for simplicity's sake. Other alternative transcriptions include "witiko," "wendigo," "witigo," "wintiko," "windigow," "wihtiko" and "wiitiko." Other Cree terms include "atuush" and "ochiskwachiwak." See C. Douglas Ellis (ed.), *Atalohkana nesta Tipachimowina: Cree Legends and Narratives from the West Coast of James Bay* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1995), p. 78.

<sup>4</sup> Regina Flannery, Mary Chambers, and Patricia Jehle, "Witiko Accounts from the James Bay Cree," *Arctic Anthropology*, vol. 28, no. 1 (1981), pp. 57-77.

<sup>5</sup> Jeff McMahan, *The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2002), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Amy Gutmann (ed. and contributor), in Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> See Douglas Francis and Toby Morantz, *Partners in Furs: A History of the Fur Trade in Eastern James Bay, 1600-1870* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> For precise historical references for this incident see Cecil Chabot, "Merging Amerindian and Euroamerican Understandings of a Shared Past: the 1832 Washaw Conflict" (MA thesis, Université de Montréal, 2002), pp. 149-152. Some additional references not found in this source are provided as needed.

<sup>9</sup> The main primary source for this second incident is an account from Cree elder John Blackned, recorded in Richard Preston's *Cree Narrative: Expressing the Personal Meaning of Events*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), pp. 133-145.

<sup>10</sup> Hudson Bay Company Archives (HBCA), B.135/e/28a, August 20, 1890.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Preston, *Cree Narrative*, p. 144.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Preston, personal communication, August 8, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> For precise historical references for this event see Sidney L. Haring, *White Man's Law: Native People in Nineteenth-Century Canadian Jurisprudence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), pp. 227-234; and, Thomas Fiddler & James R. Stevens, *Killing the Shamen* (Moonbeam, Ontario: Penumbra Press, 1985).

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Haring, *White Man's Law*, p. 233.

<sup>15</sup> Regina Flannery, Mary Elizabeth Chambers and Patricia A. Jehle, "Witiko Accounts from the James Bay Cree," *Arctic Anthropology*, vol. 18, no. 1 (1981), p. 70.

<sup>16</sup> Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, p. 219.

<sup>17</sup> John Lukacs, *A Student's Guide to the Study of History*, ISI Guides to the Major Disciplines (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2000), pp. 1-3.

<sup>18</sup> John Lye, "Ideology: A Brief Guide." At URL: <http://www.brocku.ca/english/jlye/ideology.html> Accessed 1/7/2012.

<sup>19</sup> Gutmann, *Multiculturalism*, p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," *The Four Quartets* (London: Faber & Faber, 1944), pp. 162-165.

<sup>21</sup> Philip Salzman, *Understanding Culture: An Introduction to Anthropological Theory* (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, 2001), p. 69; Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> Taylor, *Multiculturalism*, p. 67.

<sup>23</sup> Flannery, "Witiko Accounts," p. 75.

<sup>24</sup> Rieff, *Triumph of the Therapeutic*.

<sup>25</sup> Library and Archives Canada, RG 10, vol. 3174, file 432,659: letter from Magdelene, Mother Superior of Nazareth to Lord Stamfordham, August 8, 1913.