

## Christ, These Wolves are Ill-Behaved: Satirized Christianity in *Empire of Wild*

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Cherie Dimaline's *Empire of Wild* presents a harrowing story about love, loss, and neo-colonialism. Tragic and comic in turns, the novel follows Joan Beausoleil in her quest to restore the memory of her husband Victor, who has been missing for a year only to turn up in the unlikeliest of places: as preacher in a travelling ministry. Joan's efforts to jog Victor's memory are thwarted by members of the ministry, her family's refusal to believe what has happened to Victor, and the actual head of the ministry, one Mr. Heiser. As the plot unfolds, it becomes clear that Mr. Heiser is the one responsible for depriving Victor of his memory, as well as for negotiating favourable (for his company) land deals with Indigenous Elders across the country. As can be discerned from even this brief plot summary, Dimaline's book grapples with numerous themes, from the worldwide obsession with transformation myths (of particular relevance is the Métis myth of the rogarou: a creature one transforms into when one has lost connection to community, be it through violence, selfishness, or endangerment of others) to the ways in which grief manifests. These myriad themes, however, are borne up by the central satire that forms the spine of the novel. As Joan follows around the revival tent, Dimaline's gift for satire becomes a source of amusement as well as horror. The role of the Church in the initial colonization process by which our country was made is well-known, and as *Empire of Wild* unfolds, Dimaline makes it clear through her masterful satire that that initial Church involvement has not stopped, merely shapeshifted.

*Empire of Wild*'s penchant for satirical representation of Church-Indigenous relations is present throughout the entirety of the novel, and for very good reason. Joan and her family are Métis, descendants of "French voyageurs and First Nations mothers," leading them all to a complicated relationship with both organized religion as well as (for Joan, at least) Indigenous spiritual traditions (Dimaline 2). This interplay of spirituality, fraught with conflict for anyone involved, is first given the spotlight at Sunday dinner with the Beausoleils. Joan has been missing more family dinners than attending in the wake of Victor's disappearance, and so when she and Zeus arrive at Flo's (Joan's mother and Zeus' great-aunt) it does not take long for tensions to flare. As Junior, Joan's brother, intimates that he's considering working for the mines for the winter season, Mere asks, "The mines? You gonna work for thieves? That's going from making things all day to taking things all day," highlighting the tension that the ongoing colonization effort places on those who live with the reality of it (18). That reality being, of course, an ongoing struggle to find balance between traditional Indigenous values of connectedness with and respect for the land with the ever-present demands of daily life under capitalism. Mere's solution to this ongoing struggle is presented succinctly just as she wins the argument: "We are supposed to stay right with community. That's how we know we are Indian enough. The companies are out to take it all, you know. We shouldn't just hand it to them" (21).

As the rest of the novel will illuminate for us, Mr. Heiser understands this point of view, and sets to changing the communities themselves, rather than using force.

After Joan has her initial re-connection with Victor, Mr. Heiser's strategy begins to become clear: by converting the holdout Métis communities to Christianity, aided by his new, handsome, and most importantly visibly Indigenous preacher, he can then exploit the shift in worldview among the Elders for the gain of the company for which he works. In the lead up to Victor's sermon, Joan and Zeus are perusing the pamphlet handed out in the ministry tent, giving them their first glimpse of what Mr. Heiser is up to: "Inside were pictures of people who looked like they came from a stock photo search for 'Indians: smiling, laughing'" (117). This is the first time in the novel that the specific target demographic of the revival ministry is made clear, and one cannot help but be made uneasy by the final line of the pamphlet: "*PROGRESS* in bold letters" (117). The undeniably saccharine pleasantness of the pamphlet is quickly undercut by both Zeus and Joan as they snigger about it, and if pleasant thoughts were the only weapon of Mr. Heiser's ministry, they would have brought the tent down. Unfortunately for everyone involved, the promise of a brighter future for Indigenous people (if only they'd convert) has been both made and broken before. An oft-repeated goal of our country's residential schools was to assimilate Indigenous children into wider (or whiter) Canadian society, so it is with great suspicion that Joan and Zeus receive these words. And well they should, as when Victor takes the stage, the iron hand inside the velvet glove begins to press at the seams.

As the undeniably handsome Reverend Wolff takes the stage, it does not take long for his sermon to be revealed as a mirror image of the pamphlets. That is, where the pamphlet shows the results for the Indigenous convert as happiness, Reverend Wolff paints the current plight of Indigenous peoples in Canada as a result of their "allow[ing] themselves to be led astray" (120). This is high-Swiftian satire in its wide-reaching inversion/reproduction of the colonization efforts Dimaline takes pains to illustrate as ongoing. Rather than beat, abuse, molest, or emotionally scour his congregants into conversion and repentance, Reverend Wolff engages in high rhetorical trickery to drive home Mr. Heiser's method: convince the congregants that it isn't the fault of colonization that their plight is so miserable, but that the traditional Indigenous spirituality is a product of the devil and thus responsible for their current-day situation. It takes an extremely thorough grasp of rhetoric and satire to come up with an entirely different argument that reaches the same conclusion, and Reverend Wolff's sermon demonstrates that Dimaline is in possession of both. To phrase the differences between the historical arguments for residential schools and Wolff's argument in a reductive way, one might say it's the difference between "you'll do this if you know what's good for you," and "haven't I shown you that this IS good for you? You want to do it, right?" A rather fine difference, this matter of where the stick is in relation to the carrot, but the result is the same: a land-grab for rich white people.

The only woman in the ministry established as a major character is Cecile, the volunteer coordinator who has developed an infatuation with the Reverend Wolff. Initially seen through Joan's eyes as a potential temptress of Victor, Joan's intuition proves her right when Cecile tries to tempt Victor into a sexual relationship with her. A deeply troubled woman with a penchant for attaching herself to whichever spiritual movement catches her quickly enough, Cecile belonged

to a community of methamphetamine smokers in California before eventually moving home to go to rehab (158-162). Cecile's proclivity for hyper-attachment is cautiously attributed to a potential diagnosis of bi-polar disorder by her psychologist, from whom she departs to join Mr. Heiser's ministry. In establishing Mr. Heiser's ministry as manipulative and unhealthy even for a so-called true believer like Cecile, Dimaline sets the stage almost perfectly for Cecile's final act. When the ministry takes a pitstop Lord's Lake, Cecile is struck by what she interprets as divine inspiration (208). Eventually, after seeing a tree struck aflame by lightning, Cecile fully grasps the divine plan (231). Only, it seems that God has thrown in with Joan and Victor, imbuing her divinely inspired arson with a thick coat of irony. Having cast herself as "strength in the form of a woman" against the Reverend's "weakness in the form of a woman," does indeed accomplish what Joan could not: create the circumstances in which the Rogarou's hold over Victor can be broken (207). Cecile's arson sits comfortably in satire just the same as the ways in which Reverend Wolff inverts the old colonial arguments into neo-colonial justifications. Cecile is described by her father as a "throwback," and in this fiery crescendo of *Empire of Wild*, that term takes on a whole new meaning (157). Cecile, in her final act of purging a ministry of false prophecy, has far more in common with any number of brutal Old Testament Judges than she does with Jesus, and it is this alignment that belies the justified satirical treatment of Christianity throughout the novel entire.

Cherie Dimaline takes extensive pains to satirically skewer Christian/Indigenous relations as a product of the never-ceasing appetites of colonialism, and it is not difficult to understand why. Indigenous spirituality, with its stewardship of the land, importance of all relations, and connectedness to one's people, does not inherently clash with Christianity. It is only the ones wearing Christianity as a cloak for their true desires (land, wealth, power) that would dare to assert otherwise. *Empire of Wild*, while satirizing the manipulative methods of colonizers, never sets its sights on Christianity itself, as that would put it in the same position as the colonizers. Rather, by satirizing the historical ways Christianity was bent to fit horrific deeds, Dimaline draws attention to the ways it is still being bent.

## References

Dimaline, Cherie. *Empire of Wild*. Vintage Canada, 2019.