



INDIGENOUS VOICES OF FAITH

MELISSA MBARKI

Interview by Andrew P.W. Bennett
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CARDUS
PERSPECTIVES



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Introduction

Indigenous Voices of Faith is a series of interviews conducted by Cardus in the fall of 2022, in which we asked twelve Indigenous people in Canada to tell us about their religious faith and experiences. Since 47 percent of Indigenous people in Canada identify as Christians, Christian voices are the primary but not sole focus of this interview series. The purpose of this project is to affirm and to shed light on the religious freedom of Indigenous peoples to hold the beliefs and engage in the practices that they choose and to contextualize their faith within their own cultures.

Father Deacon Andrew Bennett, program director for Cardus Faith Communities, interviewed Melissa Mbarki in Edmonton, Alberta, on November 21, 2022.

Interview Transcript

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Thanks again, Melissa, for agreeing to participate in the Indigenous Voices of Faith project. It's a real pleasure.

MELISSA MBARKI: Thank you for having me.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Please tell me a little bit about your own Indigenous heritage, and a bit about the work that you do.

MELISSA MBARKI: I grew up in a small Saskatchewan community. My mom's side of the family are Cree, and they spoke two languages. They spoke Plains Cree as well as Saulteaux. My grandfather on my mom's side was a pipe carrier. He was an elder, he was an advisor in our community as well as surrounding communities. I grew up in the traditional faith. I was very close to my grandparents when I was younger. It's not uncommon for grandparents to adopt their grandchildren. When I was younger, I was adopted by my grandparents. They raised me from the time I was six months old, until I was school aged. While I lived with my grandparents, that didn't mean I didn't see my parents and didn't spend time with my parents and siblings. It just meant that the majority of my time was spent with my grandparents, learning.



My parents knew each other from the surrounding community. They didn't go to school together, because there was a bit of an age difference between them. When I was born, everything about me was unexpected. For my grandfather, it was unexpected because usually grandfathers hand down their teachings to their firstborn male grandchild. It was quite interesting for my grandfather to have a mixed Indigenous child. He absolutely did not know what to do with me in the first year. He wasn't sure if he should teach me. He wasn't sure if he should take me to ceremony or what to do with me.

That all changed when I was about a year old. My grandmother said we were at a ceremony, and another elder there must have caught on to my grandfather's hesitation about certain things. And he told my grandfather, "You need to teach her. You need to teach her everything that you know. You need to teach her all that you know," because he said I was going to be able to speak to two worlds. I was going to be able to speak to the Indigenous world and the laws of our land and I was going to be able to speak to the non-Indigenous world and the government laws. I was going to have a place in that.

From that time on, my grandparents taught me the language. They took me out to every ceremony they went to. They exposed me to anything and everything. And that's where my teachings really came from. As a young child, even before I could

talk, I knew the protocol for certain things, and it was quite different for a child to be learning this, but my grandparents just wanted to teach me everything and anything that they could. My grandma often called me her ceremony baby. I grew up in a very traditional way. And by the time I got to grade one, or even nursery school or kindergarten, I didn't know any different. I didn't know about other religions, I didn't know about other languages, and I barely spoke English when I started nursery. I was learning the language at that age. It was actually a bit of a culture shock for me to go from this sort of bubble with my grandparents and then to public school. That was a big learning experience and a transition for me.

When I got to grade school, that's when I started learning about other religions or lack of. On my dad's side of the family, we weren't particularly close nor were they religious. My dad and his parents lived quite a ways from me, so visitations were maybe once a month. I was in school, and I was juggling between my parents, my grandparents, and my father. I was moved from one household to the other on weekends and I was trying to develop a relationship with everyone but I was closer to my maternal grandparents. Everywhere I went, I took my bundle of sweetgrass, my eagle feather and my tobacco/print/ribbon. No one understood the significance of these items but my grandparents and me.

They tried to transition me to my mom around the time I started school. But it was really odd for me, because she lived in a city. I didn't want to live in the city. I didn't want to live in an urban area. I wanted to live with my grandparents on the reserve. That's where my home was. At that point they had a discussion with each other, and they decided that it was best that I live with my grandparents. That's where I wanted to be. That's where my home was.

I went to school and began learning by books, which was also odd to me because prior to then it was all oral teachings. It was stories that my grandparents told me; it was the people they introduced me to and their stories. And there were no books. That was also different for me, having to actually take a book home and read it, or take a book home and study it. That was just so different from being out in nature and learning about the trees, all of the plants and animals. Even to this day, I still don't know what some of the English words are for them, because I only know it in Cree. So it's really hard for me to explain to other people certain trees or plants. I know the general ones, but some of the other ones, I don't know what their English names are. That's something that I'm still working on.

So, I was really immersed in our traditional ways. What's really interesting about it is that my grandmother was a residential school survivor and she believed in the Catholic faith. In addition to me learning my grandfather's traditional side of things, I was also going to church with her. She had me baptized, attending Sunday school and summer camps. She believed in the Bible, she studied it and read it. She had friends from the church. That was her community. And I think my grandparents were the first people in my life that showed me what true reconciliation is, because my grandfather didn't force her and she didn't force my grandfather. They supported each other. They didn't try to change each other. They didn't try to change each other's beliefs.



And as I started getting older and I started learning a little bit more about the church, I actually went through a period of where I was conflicted. What's the right way? Is the church the right way for me, or is it the traditional way? And when I was about twelve years old, I asked my grandfather this, and I said, "I don't know which one is right for me. I don't know which way to go." And he told me, it doesn't matter what I believe, it doesn't matter which faith I choose. He said, as long as I believe in

something. And he said, "You can continue coming with me to ceremony, and you can continue going with your grandmother and supporting her when she goes to church events, or when she goes out with her friends, or when they get together for a prayer. You can support her with that too. That's not wrong." He told me, don't let anybody tell me what is wrong and what is right, because whatever I choose is going to be right for me.

I ended up really going towards my grandfather's side. I was really immersed in that culture and traditions. I really got to know a lot of his friends and fellow elders that he worked with. We really built up this big community, and I felt that's where my home was. When I got to be a teenager, I knew where I wanted to be spiritually and religiously. I knew where my faith was. My mom had a period where she didn't believe, and she took a step back from it all. My grandfather respected what she was doing, because I think she was also in a period of questioning as well, what was right for her.

As a teenager, I knew exactly where I wanted to be and I kind of met my mom at that point because she had decided that the traditional way of life was her way too. And so, we met on a similar road, and we started our own journey together, and we started going to ceremonies together. At that point my grandparents were aging, and they weren't getting any younger and they were travelling less, so it was up to us to continue on. It was actually a really good place to be, because me and my mom started learning from each other. I knew things that she didn't, and then she knew things that I didn't, so we learned together. We also made our own connections with elders. We started to pave our own way in all of this.

This is the point where I started to really become involved in ceremony. It's not something that happens right away. When I was younger, we went to a lot of sweats. This is really common. We went to what we call night lodges. I never really got involved in the sun dances or rain dances until I was in my mid-twenties. And that, more or less, is another rite of passage on our journey. We make a commitment for a four-year period. Every summer for four years, we go to a rain dance or sun dance and we dance, we fast, and we do this four days at a time. Everything we do is in fours: four years, four days etc. And a lot of it is not out in the public. It's not like a powwow, where they set a date and a place and that's where everybody shows up. These ceremonies are very sacred. They're not shared with the public.

How it happens is that usually families go together, friends that are interested, people that we know, people that we trust, we extend an invitation to. Because another fear in all of this is having it taken and sold by somebody else. That's always our biggest fear. And I think that's why we keep it so secretive. Not only was it illegal at some point in history, but what we're seeing today is that a lot of people just take it and use it as their own and try to sell it to other people, and that is just not right. It's a very secretive thing. It's hard to explain, because we can't take pictures and we can't take videos when we're there. Some people draw bits and pieces of it, but we can't do this as a whole. We can't take a video of it and say, "Okay, this is day one, day two, day three, day four." We absolutely cannot do that.

And there are protocols before going and after going. There's a lot of strict rules. It scares a lot of people off, because they think, "Well, I can't go sleep in the middle of nowhere with no phone for four days," or, "I cannot fast or not drink water for this amount of time." It is very hard physically but it's also very rewarding as well, because at the end it's almost like you let go of everything holding you down and you came out a different person.

When my mom passed away four years ago, I had committed to these ceremonies and I was on my second year when she passed. What ended up happening was I gained a large group of supportive people behind me and beside me that helped me through it. The ceremony itself and the people in my life really helped me through that grieving process. It helped me understand that I wasn't alone in all of this,



that I had people who were there to help me. There's different phases, different things that we go through at different parts in our life, where these ceremonies help us through that. And I think that's one of the biggest learning experiences that I've had in the last few years, especially with COVID, dealing with family members being sick or getting sick or becoming ill or even being scared. It helped us throughout that whole process of understanding it and just being okay to express those fears. We had a lot of elders that told us, "Don't be scared of this. It's going to pass. Do what you can to be healthy, and everything will be fine." And they really helped us get through those couple of years of just unknowing.

That's what this has brought into my life. It's helped me keep grounded, and it helped me navigate my way through life, and it's just one of the most fulfilling experiences I think that I've ever had. I'm pretty young compared to most people in our circle but I'm at the point where I can start teaching others and I can start bringing them on board. Whereas, this doesn't usually happen until you're a little bit older, until you're getting into the elder phase of things. And maybe the whole point of

this was for me to bring young people this way, and to help them, and to show them the way, and to guide them as needed. Maybe that's why we're seeing a lot more younger people coming to ceremonies.

It's definitely a shift that's happening. And I see a lot more people at ceremonies, whereas when I was younger I would only see a handful. Now when I go to a ceremony, we have to accommodate quite a bit of people coming in. We're starting to see a little bit of a change in it, but it's very hard if you haven't been born into it to find it. It's very hard to find those people to help you navigate your way through it. And it's not for everybody. We get that it's not for every Indigenous person out there, but if you really want this in your life and you really want to take this journey, there are people out there that will teach you, who will guide you. And sometimes it feels like it's hard to find the people, but if you reach out, there's always somebody there that will answer questions.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: That's very interesting background about this journey that you took. Now having gone on this journey and embracing this traditional spirituality, tell me about your perception of having that experience of your grandmother's Christian faith. Tell me of your perception of those Indigenous friends of yours, Indigenous people in your circle who are Christians and live out a Christian life or, for that matter, embrace another tradition. How do you see them? Because there's a lot of debate, it seems, these days around authenticity and indigeneity, and what's the role of faith in all of that? Maybe you could speak a little bit about that, given your experience.

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MELISSA MBARKI: I'm going to speak from the experience I've had in my community, where I would say 40 percent to 50 percent were Christians. They weren't of the Catholic faith, but they were Christians. They took up a belief, and it's something that just came naturally within their family. A lot of my friends, a lot of my parents' friends, my grandfather's friends, were Christians, and even family members. For me, I have never seen any animosity towards anybody. They just accepted each other for what they believed in. As long as they weren't forcing it on us, as long as they weren't telling us, "You have to come to church," "You have to be saved," or "You have to read this." As long as it wasn't forceful, we were okay with it. We got invited to different events, we got invited to different kinds of religious gatherings, and if we could make it, we made it.

But it was more of spending time with my friend, my mom going to see her friend. That's the kind of interaction it was. It wasn't necessarily that we were going for the religious side of things; we were just going to see our friends and to spend time with them. I had never really seen that animosity until people were burning churches. It was actually quite hurtful to see that happen. I grew up respecting everyone's religion, and that's what my grandfather had always told me to do. "You respect whatever people believe. Don't ever hurt them, don't ever harm them, don't ever do anything bad to them, don't destroy any of their property," because we always believe

that it would come back to us. He said, “If you don’t want somebody going into your yard and destroying your property, then you don’t do that to anybody else.” And that’s how I grew up.

So, to see that happen, and to say this was because they found unmarked graves . . . If my grandma had seen that happen, she would be really hurt. That would really bother her, because she was a residential school survivor but she was also Catholic and she believed in that faith. And if she ever saw anybody burn down a church that would be traumatic for her to watch. And for them to say that they were doing it on her behalf would even be more traumatizing for her than being in the residential school.

We’re not taught to harm other people, and that’s just not one of our teachings. And if there’s animosity out there between the traditional way of life and, let’s say, Christianity we figure out what the issue is and work on it. We want peaceful, respectful relationships with people of other faiths. I never grew up with hatred and animosity towards another’s religion or beliefs. To see that all unfold, I was speechless for months, because I didn’t know how to address it. And I didn’t know if even anger justified it. Anger doesn’t justify what happened. And if they truly wanted to know what a residential school survivor wanted, they should have went and asked one, and said, “Hey, how do you feel about this?” Or, “What is your take on this?” Because it’s actually really harmful to the communities that do believe in that faith. And 40 to 50 percent of people on reserves believe in Christianity, or some part of it. And nobody ever asked how they felt about it. I can’t imagine what they went through. And I just wouldn’t want anybody to feel attacked because of what they believed in.

People need to stop looking at us like we’re a monolith. People need to stop looking at us like we all hate the church.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: That seems to be a really important issue to address, because I think the media certainly didn’t address that. They didn’t seek out those voices. And so many of these churches were on First Nations territory, and they’re predominantly the churches of that community. And somehow, there was justification to burn these churches down because, again, there’s a sense that “Well, this is inauthentic, it’s colonialist,” or what have you. And where do we find, both as Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, an ability to really bring forth what is true and the true experience of people? There seems to be a preferred narrative out there that we see in the media and amongst a lot of elites, both Indigenous leadership, non-Indigenous leadership, where there’s one narrative that gets advanced. Is that a challenge? How do we address a singular voice, when in fact that’s not maybe exactly what the reality is?

MELISSA MBARKI: I think what needs to happen is people need to stop looking at us like we’re a monolith. People need to stop looking at us like we all hate the church. A lot of the survivors that came out of the residential schools took Christianity or Catholicism as a faith. They took it as their own, not realizing this is what was portrayed in the media, that we were all angry and that we all wanted churches to

burn. That was really hurtful. And I think what needs to happen is that if you want to write a story about reconciliation, or if you want to have an opinion on it, talk to a residential school survivor first. Talk to a few of them, because what I've seen throughout the years of having a residential school on my reserve is that we are all in different phases of healing.

Not everybody is coming from an angry place. There are a lot of us who are advocating for mental-health services. A lot of us are advocating for things in our community that could help our people. It just sets us back when people resort to vandalism and do this on our behalf.

The ones that were abused left these schools very angry. They struggled later in life with mental-health issues and addictions, so they're going to have a different story. There are others who healed along the way, and they had chosen a particular faith to believe in, and that's what helped them through addictions. Each of those adults are going to have different stories, and not all of them are coming from an angry place. My grandmother had her issues. She wasn't diagnosed until later in life with PTSD. And this explains a lot of things that happened in our household. When a car came to our home, for example, if she didn't know who was in that vehicle or she didn't know who the driver was, she was on high alert. She literally made us hide.

When she was younger, she made her way through addictions, and she went to school and she became a social worker, and she came back and she helped tried to help our community as much as she could. She was physically and mentally abused, but not sexually abused, whereas some of her friends were sexually abused. Many people have healed from this trauma but they didn't heal without some sort of religious or spiritual belief system in place.

And I think that's a story that should get out there, that not everybody is coming from an angry place. There are a lot of us who are advocating for mental-health services. A lot of us are advocating for things in our community that could help our people. It just sets us back when people resort to vandalism and do this on our behalf.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Thank you for that. Any last thoughts, Melissa, that you'd like to offer?

MELISSA MBARKI: We're in a place where we're having these uncomfortable conversations about residential schools. I've been trying to advocate for services in my community that would actually help survivors of these schools, because I've seen the impacts and the devastation that they've done to my people. But I think what we're wanting now is we're wanting to heal, and I think we have to bring awareness to the services that we don't have and that we need [to] enable for us to heal and for us to move forward. I think that has to be the conversation. I think the longer we stay stuck looking at the angry part of this, the longer we're going to stay there. But if we start thinking about how we're going to move forward, that's actually what reconciliation is right there, because then we can have outside groups come in and help us figure out what we need and help us get what we need. And I think that has

to be the bigger story now, is how are we going to help communities, and how are we going to help Indigenous people transition into their healing journey?

FR. DCN. ANDREW: And as you mentioned, faith and spirituality plays a big role in that.

Religion and spirituality is important, regardless of what you believe.

MELISSA MBARKI: It definitely does. When I grew up, my grandfather always told me that if something is going wrong in my life, it means that I'm imbalanced somewhere. And he said, when I figure out where I'm not balanced and I start to work on that and I start to fix it, that would bring me to a more balanced place. And a lot of the times it could be different things, like it could be mental health, where I'm just really stressed out and run down. If I don't address that right away, that could turn into sickness down the road. He taught me, to always stay in balance. Spirituality and religion is a part of that, because it's a part of who we are. Prayer is important, regardless of what you believe, and that will carry us through

the day and through the week, just like smudging. Smudging is part of my daily routine. I do it in the morning, and I pray for a good day, and that if I am speaking to someone or if I'm doing an interview, that I do it in a good way where people understand my message or intent. Religion and spirituality is important, regardless of what you believe.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful. Thank you, Melissa. Thank you for giving me some of your time.

MELISSA MBARKI: Thank you for having me. I've been looking forward to this, so thanks for inviting me.

Photos provided by Melissa Mbarki.