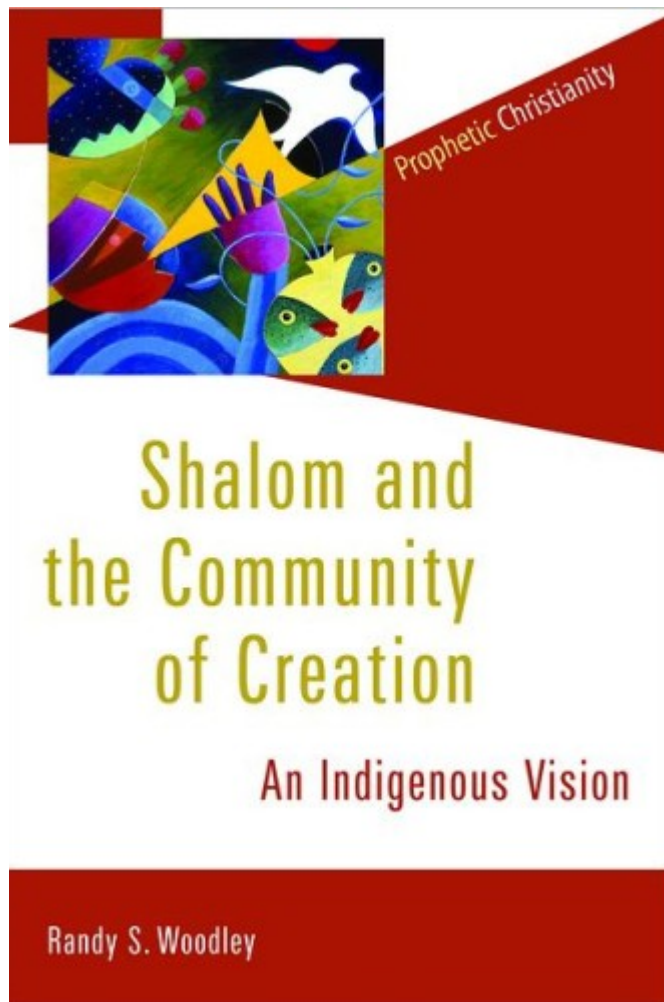


Shalom and the Community of Creation, by Randy S. Woodley

reviewed by [Daniel G. Deffenbaugh](#) in the [March 6, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Shalom and the Community of Creation

By Randy S. Woodley
Eerdmans

For close to 50 years, Americans committed to both economic growth and the daunting goal of “saving the planet” have placed their hopes in a highly stylized image of First Nations peoples. The “ecological Indian” has become the mascot of

our eco-nation. If we could simply adopt a Native American worldview, the reasoning goes, we could travel a long way toward pulling ourselves out of our current environmental crisis. Authors with exotic pedigrees introduce us to the esoteric wisdom of native shamans and offer to clear our heads of the dross of Euro-American civilization. There are a lot of these texts—enough to line the shelves of the spirituality and metaphysics sections of our bookstores.

Some who have followed this trend will be wary of any book claiming to offer an “indigenous vision” for the church. Will this author, like so many others, try to convince us that Christian faith is the real source of our malaise, that our hope lies not in the dogma of tradition but in a liberating turn to “the Great Spirit”? Am I going to be cajoled into buying another dream catcher for my bedroom window?

Thankfully, *Shalom and the Community of Creation* is short on romantic visions and long on rich theological discussion. The genius of the text lies in Randy Woodley’s ability to help readers understand the connections between God’s original vision of shalom, as affirmed throughout the scriptures, and what he has encountered in the distinctive narratives of native North Americans. A Keetoowah Cherokee, Woodley has spent the past 25 years reflecting on the interface between his faith and the traditions of his own and other First Nations peoples. The result of this spiritual journey has been a keen appreciation for the prophetic voice in scripture—a tradition that has too often been lost in the triumphalism of the church—and its similarities with the values of the indigenous people he has served as pastor.

Woodley is inspired by the early narratives of the faith—for example, Abraham’s call to be the father of a priestly people, a nation whose concern for the poor, the widow, the stranger and the orphan is evident in every aspect of its being. Central to his argument is the notion that God’s covenant pertains not only to the human inhabitants of Israel but to the whole of creation, and it is here that the author elucidates the first point of contact with native traditions.

Woodley draws on the Jubilee legislation of Leviticus to emphasize his point. Just as the people of God were charged by their Creator to restore shalom—not just peace but an abiding sense of well-being—in every aspect of the Promised Land, so the indigenous communities of North America have long seen themselves as important participants in a great society whose care is directed by a concern for what Woodley refers to as “the Harmony Way.”

A problem for Christians, Woodley argues, has been their inability to draw a clear connection between this holistic vision and the words and actions of Jesus. Too often ideas about salvation have been informed by the Greek notion of achieving a sense of harmony or peace in some transcendent realm. But Jesus was concerned first with justice; indeed, the announcement of his ministry at Nazareth drew on the image of Jubilee, the year of the Lord's favor in which captives are freed and good news is preached to the oppressed.

In other words, in Christ, the covenant and its central focus of restoring shalom has become incarnate; the church, as the body of Christ, must remain faithful to this Harmony Way. To this end, Woodley suggests an alternative to the imperial metaphor of the kingdom of God:

I would like to see us move from a first-century military framework, of "king" and "kingdom" (with which Americans have no lived experience), to our present context of global awareness, pluralism, and holism. . . . I suggest that the greater context for primary consideration might be "Community of Creation."

Since 1967, when Lynn White Jr. published his landmark essay "The Historical Roots of Our Environmental Crisis," theologians have often found themselves in a defensive position. White claimed that Christianity was the ultimate source of the ecological woes that were besetting the country, and evangelicals responded with appeals to their own tradition, which did not allow for much in the way of interdisciplinary, let alone interfaith, discussions.

Woodley's response, 45 years later, is much more sophisticated. If Christianity can be seen as in many ways consistent in tone with the indigenous Harmony Way, then where does the problem lie? The source of ecological and social disruptions, Woodley claims, has less to do with the fundamental tenets of the faith than with the uncritical adoption of Enlightenment principles, which have perpetuated a destructive anthropocentrism, European cultural hegemony and a dualism between beliefs and practices, thinking and doing. It is these values, Woodley argues, that are in conflict with the shalom theology of Christianity. Such deep-seated ideas must therefore be challenged for the ways in which they have falsely legitimized the injustices that all indigenous peoples, and many Christians, have experienced over the past four centuries: colonialism and neocolonialism, racism, predatory capitalism, and violence as a mechanism for maintaining the status quo.

This is a courageous book. Woodley is trying to create fruitful dialogue where in the past only condescension and distrust prevailed. A mediator who seeks common ground between two parties cannot but become vulnerable to attacks from both sides. Woodley will no doubt hear from some indigenous people who will take umbrage at the way he tends toward a kind of anonymous Christianity when considering some Native American practices. When discussing Native Americans' worship of the Creator, for example, he surprisingly implies that their devotion is unwittingly directed toward "the Creator-Son": "Put simply, if indigenous peoples have been praying to the Creator and the Creator is Christ, to whom have they been praying?"

On the other hand, Euro-American Christians will no doubt bristle at the unspoken reality that has long lingered just below the surface of any dialogue between First Nations peoples and European immigrants: "Americans' wholesale belief in the American dream makes it difficult for us to face the truth. The truth is, the country that most Americans hold so dear is mostly stolen property." Such assertions are rare in Woodley's text, but they are not absent. To expect as much would be to suggest that this urgent topic—living faithfully in the community of creation—be relegated to the category of polite conversation. That was not the Harmony Way of Jesus, nor should it be our own.

This timely text may not always tell readers what they want to hear, but that is precisely the point. Christianity in the United States has for too long ignored or patronized the profound insights that have been offered by the indigenous cultures of this land. Woodley, a thoughtful and informed mediator, is promoting a dialogue that needs to take place. To wait any longer would be foolhardy. Despite the claims of apocalyptic prognosticators, God does not will that creation meet its end in fire and destruction, but that we as a church fulfill our calling as tillers and keepers of shalom in the community of creation.