

**Collective Traumatic Experiential
Similarities Between the Indigenous
Peoples of Canada and the
Gukurahundi Victims of Zimbabwe:
Adopting Jesus' Non-Violence Ethics
as the Panacea to Sustainable Peace &
Reconciliation**



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COLLECTIVE TRAUMA AND NONVIOLENT PEACE

Abstract

This paper offers a postcolonial theological analysis of the collective traumatic experiential similarities between the Indigenous peoples of Canada and the victims of the Gukurahundi atrocities in Zimbabwe (1983–1987). Drawing on cultural trauma theory and postcolonial scholarship, the study explores shared patterns of state violence, cultural erasure, silencing, and intergenerational harm. Through engagement with African postcolonial theologians such as Jesse N. K. Mugambi and Desmond Tutu, alongside broader liberationist readings of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the paper argues that non-violent resistance offers a transformative moral framework for sustainable peace. While non-violence does not replace structural justice or reparative measures, it provides an ethical grammar for reconciliation that resists both retaliatory violence and passive submission.

Introduction

Black History Month invites critical remembrance of racialized and colonial violence across global contexts. This study comparatively examines the trauma experienced by Indigenous peoples in Canada through the residential school system and the victims of the Gukurahundi atrocities in Zimbabwe. Employing a postcolonial theological lens, it argues that both contexts reveal structurally similar patterns of dehumanization, collective silencing, and intergenerational harm.

Contextual Framework: The Gukurahundi Atrocities and Indigenous Peoples of Canada

In this section, the reader is given a brief background of both the traumatic experiences of the Ndebele people during the Gukurahundi ethnic cleansing and the Indigenous Peoples of Canada. The Gukurahundi refers to a series of brutal state-sponsored massacres carried out in *Matabeleland* and parts of the *Midlands* in Zimbabwe between 1983 and 1987, when the North Korean-trained 5th Brigade of the Zimbabwe National Army violently targeted mainly Ndebele and Kalanga civilians and alleged supporters of the opposition party, resulting in mass executions, torture, rape, detention, and widespread destruction; estimates of deaths range widely, with many scholars and human rights advocates placing the total at around 20 000 or more. Ishanesu. S. Gusha (2022), the effects of Gukurahundi have been profound and long-lasting: survivors and communities continue to live with deep **psychological trauma**, grief from unresolved loss, cultural disruption, and social fragmentation, compounded by the absence of official acknowledgement, truth-telling, or reconciliation processes, which has hindered healing and perpetuated fear, mistrust, and identity-based tensions decades later.

The Indigenous peoples of Canada—comprising **First Nations, Inuit, and Métis**—are the original inhabitants of the land now called Canada. These diverse nations possessed rich cultural traditions, complex governance systems, spiritual worldviews, and sustainable relationships with the land long before European contact. Their societies were organized around kinship networks, oral traditions, language preservation, and stewardship of territory. Despite this deep heritage, Indigenous communities have endured centuries of colonization that profoundly disrupted their cultures and ways of life.

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Historical trauma among Indigenous peoples in Canada is rooted primarily in colonial policies aimed at assimilation and land dispossession. Beginning in the 17th century and intensifying after Confederation in 1867, government policies restricted movement, undermined traditional leadership, and displaced communities from ancestral lands through treaties that were often misunderstood, coerced, or violated. One of the most devastating systems was the residential school system (late 1800s–1996), in which Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and placed in church-run boarding schools. There, many experienced physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, and were forbidden from speaking their languages or practicing their cultures. The stated goal was to “kill the Indian in the child,” leading to profound intergenerational trauma.

Additional harms included the Sixties Scoop (mass removal of Indigenous children into non-Indigenous foster and adoptive homes), forced relocations in the Arctic, suppression of cultural ceremonies such as the Potlatch, and systemic discrimination under the Indian Act. These policies disrupted family structures, eroded languages, and contributed to ongoing socioeconomic disparities in health, education, housing, and justice outcomes.

Today, many Indigenous communities continue to confront the lasting effects of this trauma, including higher rates of poverty, mental health challenges, substance use disorders, and violence. However, there is also resilience and renewal. Indigenous leaders and communities are revitalizing languages, reclaiming governance, pursuing land rights, and advancing truth and reconciliation initiatives. Understanding this history is essential not only for acknowledging past injustices but also for supporting healing, equity, and respectful nation-to-nation relationships in Canada.

Theoretical Framework: Cultural Trauma and Postcolonial Theology

Jeffrey C. Alexander’s theory of cultural trauma explains how communities come to understand themselves as permanently marked by catastrophic events. Postcolonial theology complements this framework by interrogating colonial complicity within Christian history while retrieving liberative resources within the faith tradition.

African Postcolonial Theological Perspectives on Non-Violence

Musa W. Dube (2000) advances a postcolonial feminist biblical hermeneutics that critically interrogates the missionary and imperial uses of Scripture in Africa. In *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Dube argues that biblical texts were historically deployed as tools of empire, often legitimizing conquest, cultural domination, and epistemic control. Her “reading with” approach invites marginalized communities to reclaim Scripture as a site of resistance rather than subjugation.

Applying Dube’s hermeneutics to Matthew 5:39 reframes Jesus’ instruction to “turn the other cheek” as an anti-imperial strategy. Rather than endorsing passivity, Dube’s method highlights how colonized peoples can reread the text from their own locations of suffering, uncovering its subversive dimension. In contexts such as residential schools in Canada and Gukurahundi in Zimbabwe, this interpretive strategy allows survivors to resist both theological fatalism and violent retaliation. Scripture becomes a dialogical space for healing, dignity restoration, and communal reconstruction.

Dube’s work also insists on gender-sensitive analysis, recognizing how colonial and postcolonial violence disproportionately targets women’s bodies and voices. Integrating her hermeneutics strengthens the argument that Jesus’ non-violence ethic must be interpreted through lenses attentive to empire, gender, and power. Thus, non-violence emerges as a decolonial practice of reading, remembering, and rebuilding.

Exegetical Deepening: ἀντιστῆναι (antistēnai) in Matthew 5:39

Matthew 5:39 in Greek reads: μὴ ἀντιστῆναι τῷ πονηρῷ (mē antistēnai tō ponērō), commonly rendered, “Do not resist an evildoer.” The verb ἀντιστῆναι is the aorist active infinitive of ἀνθίστημι (anthistēmi), which carries the sense of “to set oneself against,” “to oppose,” or “to resist.” In Koine usage the verb frequently bears a confrontational sometimes explicitly military connotation, including the idea of standing in battle formation against an enemy. This semantic range matters: Jesus’ injunction does not prohibit all forms of opposition to injustice; rather, it

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forbids a particular mode of opposition namely retaliatory, coercive, or violent counterforce that mirrors the aggressor's logic.

The dative phrase τῷ πονηρῷ (tō ponērō) is also exegetically significant. The expression may be read as (a) “the evil person/evildoer” (personal sense) or (b) “evil” (impersonal/abstract sense). Either way, the grammar underscores that Jesus addresses the disciple's posture toward wrongdoing and wrongdoers: do not meet harm with symmetrical harm. This reading coheres with the immediately following illustrative sayings (vv. 39b–42), which portray nonviolent actions that expose injustice, reclaim dignity, and interrupt escalation.

Seen through this Greek lens, Matthew 5:39 is best read as a call to *nonviolent, dignity-asserting resistance not acquiescence. In postcolonial contexts, the text can be reclaimed as an anti-imperial ethic that resists the colonizer's script of domination-versus-retaliation. The command μὴ ἀντιστυγεῖν therefore functions as a moral boundary against reproducing violence, while leaving open and indeed inviting creative, truth-telling, and restorative practices that confront injustice without becoming it.

Canaan S. Banana (1996:17), Zimbabwe's first president and later theologian, argued for a re-reading of Christianity in postcolonial Africa that liberates it from colonial distortions. In *Theology of Promise*, Banana contends that Christianity must be reconstructed as a people-centered faith that affirms justice, equality, and social transformation. His critique of inherited missionary theology underscores the need for contextual reinterpretation of Jesus' teachings in societies scarred by state violence.

Ezra Chitando and Isabel Apawo Phiri have emphasized gender justice and contextual African theological ethics, highlighting how violence disproportionately affects women in post-conflict African societies. Their scholarship insists that any theology of reconciliation must confront patriarchy and structural injustice.

Tinyiko Sam Maluleke (1997: 2000) critiques post-apartheid and postcolonial African theology for insufficiently interrogating political power. Maluleke argues that African theology must

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remain prophetically engaged, refusing to sanctify political elites. Applied to Gukurahundi, this perspective challenges theological silence and calls for courageous truth-telling as a form of discipleship.

Elijah M. Gathogo (2008: 82) advances reconstruction theology in the East African context, emphasizing restorative community, memory, and indigenous resources for healing. Gathogo's engagement with African communal philosophies resonates strongly with Ubuntu and supports restorative approaches to collective trauma.

Collectively, these Zimbabwean and African theologians reinforce the argument that Jesus' non-violence ethic must be contextual, prophetic, gender-aware, and reconstruction-oriented. Non-violence in this framework is not passive endurance but courageous resistance to injustice coupled with intentional rebuilding of fractured societies.

Jesse N. K. Mugambi (1995: 23) advances a theology of reconstruction, arguing that post-conflict societies must move beyond liberation rhetoric toward rebuilding institutions, relationships, and moral imagination. Reconstruction theology insists that healing requires justice, memory, and ethical renewal.

Desmond Tutu (1999: 102), drawing from Ubuntu philosophy, articulates reconciliation as grounded in shared humanity: 'A person is a person through other people. Ubuntu resists dehumanization and undergirds restorative justice processes such as South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Allan Boesak (1984: 74) further argues that Christian discipleship requires active resistance against oppressive systems. Non-violence, in this tradition, is not passivity but prophetic confrontation rooted in love.

Anchored in Matthew 5:39 "But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" Jesus' ethic proposes a third way beyond violent retaliation or silent submission. Within African postcolonial theology, this becomes a strategy of dignity-restoring resistance and moral reconstruction.

Toward Sustainable Peace

Sustainable peace requires more than the cessation of violence; it demands the transformation of relationships, institutions, and historical narratives that have sustained injustice. In contexts marked by deep collective trauma, such as the experiences of the Ndebele people during the Gukurahundi atrocities in Zimbabwe's Matabeleland (1983–1987) and the Indigenous peoples of Canada during and after colonization and the residential school system, non-violence must be embedded within a broader framework of dignity, accountability, and structural reform. Authorities entrusted with governance bear a moral and constitutional responsibility to move beyond silence or symbolic gestures toward restorative, survivor-centred, and justice-oriented reconciliation.

In the case of Gukurahundi, state violence inflicted profound physical, psychological, cultural, and socio-economic harm on Ndebele communities. Survivors continue to carry unresolved grief, intergenerational trauma, stigma, and mistrust toward public institutions. Similarly, Indigenous peoples in Canada endured dispossession, cultural erasure, forced assimilation through residential schools, family separation, and systemic discrimination—traumas that persist in patterns of social marginalization, loss of language, and intergenerational psychological distress. In both contexts, the wounds are not merely historical; they are embedded in contemporary inequalities and strained civic trust.

A sustainable peace policy must therefore affirm the following principles:

1. Truth as a Foundation for Healing.

Authorities must create safe, independent, and transparent mechanisms for truth-telling that centre survivor testimony and community memory. Truth commissions, public archives, and educational reforms must acknowledge historical atrocities without denial or minimization. Public recognition restores dignity to victims and affirms a shared moral narrative that rejects violence as a political tool.

2. Restorative and Reparative Justice.

Reconciliation without justice risks perpetuating harm. Governments should implement reparative measures that address material loss, psychosocial trauma, and cultural disruption. This includes compensation frameworks, community-based healing programs, restitution of land or resources where applicable, and sustained investment in affected regions. Reparations must not be symbolic; they must tangibly restore opportunity and well-being.

3. Institutional Accountability and Reform.

Lasting peace requires credible institutional transformation. Security forces, judicial systems, and public administration must undergo reforms that guarantee non-recurrence. Oversight mechanisms, human rights protections, and transparent governance structures should be strengthened to ensure accountability and prevent future abuses.

4. Survivor-Centered and Culturally Grounded Healing.

Policies must prioritize the voices and leadership of survivors and affected communities. Healing initiatives should incorporate culturally meaningful practices, such as traditional ceremonies, language revitalization, and community dialogue—alongside professional psychosocial support. Recognizing cultural identity as central to dignity fosters resilience and restores communal bonds fractured by violence.

5. Structural Transformation and Equity.

Historical trauma often intersects with economic marginalization and political exclusion. Sustainable peace demands equitable access to education, healthcare, employment, and political participation. Structural transformation, rather than isolated interventions, signals that reconciliation is not merely rhetorical but transformative.

6. Intergenerational Responsibility and Education.

Peace building must extend beyond the present generation. Educational curricula should integrate accurate historical accounts to cultivate empathy, critical awareness, and a culture of non-violence. A society that learns honestly from its past is less likely to reproduce it.

Conclusion

The Indigenous peoples of Canada and the Gukurahundi victims of Zimbabwe share collective traumatic experiences rooted in both colonial dispossession and postcolonial state violence, where political power was exercised in ways that dehumanized, silenced, and structurally marginalized entire communities. In both contexts, trauma is not confined to the past; it is intergenerational, embodied in social inequities, cultural disruption, and persistent mistrust of state institutions. Sustainable peace, therefore, cannot emerge from silence, denial, or symbolic reconciliation alone. It requires truth-telling, reparative justice, institutional accountability, and structural transformation that restores dignity and affirms the full humanity of survivors.

African postcolonial theological resources strengthen this policy vision by insisting that reconciliation is inseparable from justice and reconstruction. Drawing on the non-violent ethic of Jesus, an ethic grounded in truth, solidarity with victims, restorative justice, and moral courage. Peace is understood not as passive coexistence but as active restoration of broken relationships and systems. Such a framework challenges authorities to move beyond rhetoric toward ethical leadership that confronts historical wrongs, protects the vulnerable, and rebuilds institutions on principles of accountability and equity. When non-violence is paired with concrete justice and societal reconstruction, it becomes a transformative force capable of fostering sustainable peace, healing collective trauma, and securing a future grounded in dignity for all.

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