



INDIGENOUS VOICES OF FAITH

JEFF DECONTIE

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.

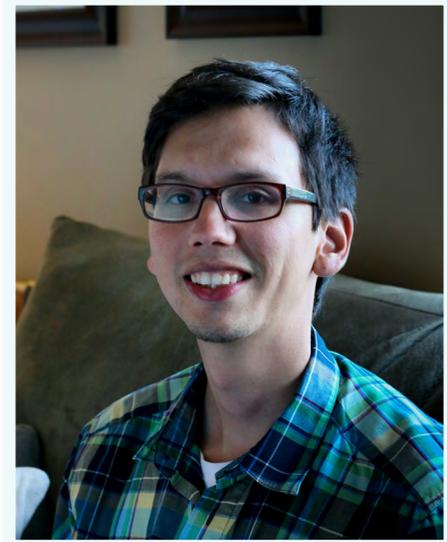
Father Deacon Andrew Bennett, program director for Cardus Faith Communities, interviewed Jeff Decontie in Ottawa, Ontario, on September 29, 2022.

Interview Transcript

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Jeff, tell me a little bit about yourself and your Indigenous background.

JEFF DECONTIE: I'm Jeff Decontie. I was born and raised here in Ottawa. I'm thirty-five years old and happily married. I've got three crazy, crazy boys. So, we're in the middle of this sort of crazy life right now. We're in that stage.

My dad's community, and therefore mine, is Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg. It's about two hours north of Ottawa. My mom's from Kahnawake, and she would be a Mohawk Catholic. She would call herself that. I don't think my dad is practicing. He did go to a residential school when he was five for, I think, eight years. It was just outside of Kenora, St. Mary's Indian Residential School, and then for the rest of his schooling in Pointe Bleue, just north of Quebec City, although I actually don't know where it is because I haven't googled it. So, I was raised entirely in the city, just one of those urban Indigenous people from an Algonquin background. I work for the federal government right now in Indigenous Services. I articulated for the Justice Department, and I'm probably going to be a lifelong public servant.



So that's just a little bit about me. My wife is not Indigenous. She's from just north of Toronto in the Uxbridge area. We've been married for about ten years—twelve years. Twelve. I definitely said twelve. Ha ha.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Tell me a little bit about your Christian faith, what it means for you, and how it shapes your life.

JEFF DECONTIE: As for my faith, it's a big question, right? Yeah, it's a struggle. The first thing that comes to my head when I'm saying that it's a struggle is the Old Testament story of Israel wrestling with the angel or wrestling with God. He's just constantly wrestling and getting hurt by wrestling with God, not physically for me, I guess, but intellectually. It's a struggle because you have all that baggage, and people let you know about the baggage every day, about the baggage of what Christianity has done. But it's what I think of as a calling. I'm like C.S. Lewis. He's just the last Englishman kicking and screaming to the faith who finally just says, "Okay, God, you got me." It's the same thing with me. It's just God plucking me out and then taking me for a ride. It's been a bit crazy. It's not really good for the career, it's not really good for mental health, if you want to call it that, at times. But it is what it

is. He called me, and there's a kind of election mindset that I've had ever since I've entered the faith.

I've had problems with choosing, because I know that choosing doesn't work, and I know that you can be the smartest person in the world, and try to present it to people, and they're just not going to go with you. And so I had to just let it be with the Holy Spirit. He's in charge, and He works with people in His own time. So that's coloured my faith and how I go out and live my faith. I'm probably not as evangelical as I should be, if by that term we mean missionaries.

For me, conversations pop up at work, probably once every three months, and it's just for ten minutes and that's it. That's all the time that person gives. If I walk away from that, I feel bad. So I don't do that. I try to talk, but I don't actively go out and try to convert people because I don't know whether you can do that as a public servant. Outside of lunch hour, maybe. I don't know.

But it's also time-consuming, and I've found that when people ask questions, they're more open to hearing. This is what I've been starting to write about and wrestle with in journals. When I'm engaging with people who are secular, if you want to call them that, in the cities, it's hard to actually present Jesus rising from the dead or talking about the supernatural, until they actually believe in something as crazy as people manipulating the weather, people praying for things like changing the weather. If they're not even there, if the secular mindset has actually influenced them so much that they don't even believe the supernatural, there is very little ground that I can make with presenting the gospel. It's going to be inevitably intellectual. It's going to be cold and post-Descartes.

And I can't even talk to them about stuff that the church fathers were seeing every day or what we're seeing in Asia or in Africa right now that we don't see in the West anymore. Because we've killed the supernatural, in cities anyways. So, if I'm talking to the average person under the age of forty, they are supernaturally dead almost.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: And do you think there's a distinction between urban areas and rural areas in this regard?

JEFF DECONTIE: Absolutely, absolutely. When I went to a northern reserve with my wife ten years ago we taught there for part of the summer. We saw some weird stuff on the land, weather changing, and then right around the corner in Kenora, it's not the same weather at all. We saw people under an influence, not just drugs, but just something was going on in terms of demons sticking to people, playing with, just attacking people. And that would have been normal, a normal understanding of people. You can't prove this stuff; it's just by experience. You see what nature can do, the possibilities. Compare that with being educated in the city, with five years or six years studying critical theory, engaged with the text in this small room, thinking, and then you start asking yourself some questions. If it's all Western thought, then it's all about the individual in you, and you're outside of your community. And so this has been my intellectual walk the past year: How is secularism affecting Indigenous identity? Most people wouldn't admit that it does. Most don't care. They're not

even naming it, because it's this big thing that's non-judgmental in the background; secularism is neutral. And of course anybody who studies it knows that's false, but it's influencing Indigenous identity I think particularly for the younger folks. With more of us growing up in the cities, in multicultural environments outside of our community, listening to individualism pumped through our media and our books, to say that that's not going to influence the minds of Indigenous people I think is really naive.



We're not saying we're less Indigenous, because I know that that's false too. It's a changing Indigenous identity that's becoming a little more married to Western thought. I think that affects identities. I think that affects sexualities. I think that affects how Indigenous individuals express themselves. I think that's going to influence family life. It's going to be huge, and if religion's gone, something else is going to replace that. And if it's idol worship, it's going to be media culture that we really start to worship.

So, the big bad beast that I'm zeroing in on is no longer Christianity. I think that Christianity is the big bad wolf now among some circles, but that sounds like the golden oldies. I think most youths wouldn't even declare themselves traditional or Christian.

They would say, "I'm nothing, I'm different, I don't care." Well, they are something. They would be secular, and they would be something of a utilitarian "Whatever makes you happy." That's the dominant expression for Indigenous youth, just like other non-Indigenous youth.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: So it seems like there's not much to distinguish between youth that are Indigenous or non-Indigenous in that respect.

JEFF DECONTIE: I don't think so. That would be controversial to say. I think it's going to change depending on what city you're in. I know in Winnipeg there's way more of a collective identity among Indigenous people. It's not the same kind of urban life as in Toronto, say.

Now, I'm one to talk, because I'm born and raised in the city and I speak English. Most of my problems, I think, for mental health and wellness come from the fact that as a teenager I was alienated and isolated and not really attached to not only community life but family in general. There's this lie of freedom that if you're just yourself you can express yourself and know your culture. It becomes all about you and you choosing. You can just plug yourself in and you'll be fine. Well, I tried that, and it didn't really go well. I had to actually keep searching for something truer

and something more ancient. It involves not just a text, it involves people. And so, if we get a little too individualistic in academia or Indigenous thought or how we express things, and we turn it into only about ourselves, I don't think we're going to be talking about either religion or traditionalism. I don't think we're going to be talking about that. I think we're going to have a lot more problems in Indigenous communities if we go the isolated individualistic route.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Can you maybe tell me a little bit about that coming into faith that you experienced, and in particular your own Christian community and how that has nurtured you?

JEFF DECONTIE: Okay, so basically there's very little Indigenous Christian community coming into the faith. I came to faith at Trent University. So I came in smoking and drinking and not knowing who I was, and I came out a Christian and giving those things up except for the occasional alcoholic beverage. As far as I know, I'm still allowed to partake. Ha ha. But yeah, it was a lonely walk. It would've been easier sometimes if I was not Indigenous. That's the way it felt, because most of the people around are white, or if they're not white, they're from outside of North America. And so, entering the faith had a very European flavour, but it was always theological. I came in through C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*: just an introduction and give it a chance. I think I was reading *Mere Christianity* at the same time as writing a paper on euthanasia in moral philosophy. I found him to be more pleasant reading. So I found myself reading him on Friday night as opposed to doing what I should have been doing, in focusing on the philosophy paper. I was arguing in favour of euthanasia at the time as I was reading C.S. Lewis.

So I came into the faith very intellectually, and it has remained so, and I don't really say that with any pride, because I wish it was less so at times. You see people praying, charismatic people, Pentecostals, and there's something to that kind of expression and you want that. But I'm not that person. That's not my character. Of course this doesn't imply that Pentecostals cannot be intellectuals concerning the faith.

In terms of my Baptist faith, that was the way I entered the faith. People around me had that background, or were non-denominational in background. Denominations were less important. It was who you were following. And [John] Calvin was a big person who I encountered, not just among older people but among the people I was going to school with as well. We were reading him or reading about people who were interpreting him. So, that colours the faith I walk in.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: You were baptized at twenty-two?

JEFF DECONTIE: Baptized at twenty-two in a water tub thing, whatever that is, whatever we Protestants do. It's embarrassing that I actually don't know what it's called. Yeah, it was just a tub in Peterborough. I was baptized Catholic when I was a baby, but sort of just stumbled away. It's not a dramatic story such as where people say, "Oh that happened, and I left." I think the average person, including myself, just stopped listening to the radio frequencies, and then all of a sudden two years later you're like, "Oh yeah, I used to be that, and now I'm not." So it was returning to the

faith, but from the Protestant mindset. Now, the way I think about my identities and my Christianity is complicated. I'm an urban Indigenous person who's not really attached to the community as much as I should be; it's sort of like you're too Indian to be white and you're too white to be an Indian.

And then there are my political beliefs too: you're too conservative to be a liberal, and you're a little too liberal to be a conservative. And in my religion, a little too Catholic to be strictly a Protestant, and a little too Protestant to be a good Catholic. So you're sort of stuck in between, and it's very lonely. And it reminded me of my teens, when I was very lonely. And so the religion didn't provide as much comfort as I thought it would. But that's not the point of a religion. It's not.

That's what has kept me going. If this is to make me feel happy, our culture can provide happiness in the very physical and material realm. This isn't about happiness. So I got that education early on in the faith, but it was still tough. It's been a very lonely battle. And it's wrestling with the faith constantly.

C.S. Lewis has that analogy about the hallway in the big Christian house. I got into the hallway at twenty-two, but I didn't pick a room for a while. I don't know the denominational room, but he said you're going to have to pick a room sooner or later. You can't stay in the hall forever. So I think that's sort of the mindset. It's been slow. I've been generally more interested in Christendom, the big hall, as opposed to the specific identity or denomination. It's the same thing for Indigenous Christians. We know who's really into their faith if they've lost so much. The stories I am more interested in from an Indigenous mindset are, once they're in, what's keeping them in the hall?

FR. DCN. ANDREW: In the church?

JEFF DECONTIE: In the church, yeah. And this affects whether we're missionaries or not, whether we call it that. I don't have to go around the world, I don't even have to go up to James Bay Cree territory or up north to Nunavut, to be a missionary to Indigenous people in our own backyard. Our cities are really in need. When people from those northern communities come here, they're generally not in the collective anymore. If they were Christian, they're at risk of no longer being Christian. They get stuck, they get alienated in the cities. They get lonely in the cities, and then they do certain things to fill that loneliness. And so I think our cities are in great missionary need, and if we wanted to target Indigenous people, fine, but I think Indigenous people have the same need as everybody else who's struggling with twenty-first-century urban life.

So, what are youth and twenty-year-olds and thirty-year-olds doing if they don't have the supernatural mindset, if they're not praying? It's pretty gloomy, pretty alienating. And, like I said earlier, if I'm going to have conversations with these people and the supernatural is killed, I can't just launch in and just say, "You need Jesus Christ," or whatever. Your mindset needs to open up to the supernatural first, before you're even able to accept Jesus rising from the dead. So most conversations that are missionary are going to be not even about Christ sometimes. Any kind of planting of the

supernatural is good, but it's scary for some evangelical Christians who say, "Oh, we don't want to believe in the sacred traditional stuff. That's pagan stuff." In this world right now in the cities, any supernatural thing is an opportunity to talk about Christ eventually. Because they're still hanging on to the supernatural. Just think of what you can talk about to somebody who thinks they can manipulate the weather, as opposed to somebody who thinks that's just childish nonsense. You're going to have a completely different conversation with those two people about Christ.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: I'd like to just build on some of this and ask one last question that touches on a couple of points you've made, and that is, whether you have a sense that the secular world or secularist world and that kind of secular elite understanding of Indigeneity and Indigenous Canadians comprehends Indigenous Christians? Or, put another way, do you believe that your Indigenous Christian faith is understood?

I think that's the danger of secular thought creeping into Canada: it goes unnoticed, it's perceived as neutral, but at the same time it's welcoming a whole wide range of beliefs. And it doesn't just influence Indigenous thought. It's influencing Christianity.

JEFF DECONTIE: Good question. I think that the beast of secular thought can consume this kind of mindset. At first you would think it would reject it or try to kill it. I think of Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, and I hope that more people apply his thought to Indigenous people in Canada and the United States. Secular worldviews can sort of eat up everything around them and accept a whole wide range of beliefs at the same time. For example, you have the prevailing scientific thinking alongside New Age believers, and people in society just accept this, saying, "Oh, whatever it is you believe in, all religions lead to the same thing." No one questions it. How can these contradictions coexist? It allows for so

many different beliefs, including those who say that the supernatural is just childish nonsense. Then we ask an elder to lead prayer? Any other religion would be a no-no, but you can ask for an elder who's going to pray a generic prayer to some generic Creator, and it's not going to ruffle any feathers. I think that's the danger of secular thought creeping into Canada: it goes unnoticed, it's perceived as neutral, but at the same time it's welcoming a whole wide range of beliefs. And it doesn't just influence Indigenous thought. It's influencing Christianity.

The default option is now unbelief. How does it go upside down in five hundred years? Well, it started with philosophical and political beliefs emerging in the Renaissance, and then it goes to the next level in the 1700s, and then fast-forward here, and it's affecting a whole wide range of areas in life, including Indigenous thought. I don't think it'll kill Indigenous beliefs or identities. I think it'll just radically change us.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Both Indigenous Christians and traditional Indigenous believers?

JEFF DECONTIE: Yeah. I'm talking Indigenous people in general. It doesn't matter what we believe; it's going to colour it. If we're Indigenous Christians, this kind of secular mindset, if we're not aware of it, is going to influence how we live our faith. For example, "I can shop for my beliefs, and I can pick and choose." You didn't do that two hundred years ago, but now we have a consumer mindset that influences how we think about religion. And if you're interested in traditional beliefs, people still want an individualist life, they want to drink, they want to party, but then the traditional lifestyle is way more strict in some ways, too strict for a lot of Indigenous youth. So how do you do that secretly? You have people picking and choosing how they become a traditionalist, and it looks good on the résumé if you're interested in that life and you're doing it, but you've still got these whispers in your mind, in your education, your philosophy, your life. You were raised in the Western world; it colours how you engage with your own traditional thought. You're just not the same as your great-grandfather one hundred years ago. You're influenced by new education, new language, new technology. This is radically going to change Indigenous life. It's a big unseen ideology. We should watch out for it. Some people were terrified of Christianity in terms of Indigenous lifestyles, and they still are, and any kind of post-colonial ideas and things popping up. But I think people should equally be afraid of the hyper-individualism that's influencing us, slowly. We should know what it is and know how to engage it, or take the best of it, but also stop some of the things that are destroying us.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Thanks, Jeff.

Photo of Jeff Decontie provided by interviewee.