

The JRC would like to acknowledge the support of sponsors
from within the Concordia University community:

Concordia Council on Student Life Special Projects Committee (CCSL)
The Multi-faith and Spirituality Centre (MfSC)
The Department of Religions and Cultures

We would also like to offer our special thanks to:

Dr. Naftali Cohn, our very supportive department Chair; Munit Merid, administrator extraordinaire, without whom we could not have pulled this publication together; Lindsey Jackson, our amazing mentor; Sophie Charest, our incredible designer; and all our referees, readers, and everyone else who gave their time to the publication of this journal.

The Journal of Religion and Culture (JRC) acknowledges that our work takes place on unceded Indigenous lands. The Kanien'kehá:ka Nation is recognized as the custodians of the lands and waters on which we meet today. Tiohtià:ke, which has been settled as Montréal, has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst many First Nations, including Kanien'kehá:ka of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, Huron/Wendat, Abenaki, and Anishinaabeg. This place continues to be the home of many Indigenous peoples, as well as settlers and immigrants representing different cultures, languages, and worldviews. As uninvited guests who call this place home, we respect the continued connections with the past, present, and future in our ongoing relationships with Indigenous and other peoples within the community, and we are grateful for the opportunity to live here. We hope to honour the relational values that Indigenous peoples have centered in their connections with human and ecological worlds, and aim to centre consistent and persistent labour rooted in decolonial and antiracist practices while recognizing and working to change ongoing colonial practices of institutions of higher education.

In Conversation

Dr. Chantal Fiola, University of Winnipeg

Dr. Chantal Fiola is Red River Métis with family from St. Laurent and Ste. Geneviève, Manitoba; she is a citizen of the Manitoba Métis Federation. Fiola has previously written two books, *Rekindling the Sacred Fire: Métis Ancestry and Anishinaabe Spirituality* and *Returning to Ceremony: Spirituality in Manitoba Métis Communities*, that explore Métis practices of religion and spirituality. She, with Drs. Emily Grafton and Paul L. Gareau, is currently working on the Expressions of Métis Spirituality and Religion Across the Homeland research project. This project, in collaboration with the Rupertsland Centre for Métis Research (RCMR), and in partnership with three historic Métis communities (St. Laurent, Manitoba, Lebret, Saskatchewan, and St. Albert, Alberta), brings together Métis researchers and Knowledge Keepers from across the Métis homeland to share their knowledge, experience, and expertise with each other in order to more fully explore the full breadth of Métis religiosity and spirituality.

Participants:

Dr. Chantal Fiola (University of Winnipeg) [CF]

Ellen Dobrowski (Concordia University [ED])

[ED] *Please tell me about the ongoing project Expressions of Métis Spirituality and Religion Across the Métis Homeland. How was this project formed?*

[CF] Expressions of Métis spirituality and religion across the homeland is phase three of a larger research program I have been undertaking over the last 15 years. During the first two phases, I focused on Métis relationships with traditional Indigenous ceremonies, such as sweat lodge, Sundance, Midewiwin, smudging, mainly in the province of Manitoba. Our relationships with ceremony, up until recently, have been an understudied and misunderstood topic, even among many Métis themselves. It is an aspect of our

collective history, culture, and identity that has suffered greatly due to colonialism – I have sought to shine a light on the topic and encourage, especially Métis folks to take a closer look.

In this third phase, I wanted to broaden my focus from Métis relationships with ceremonies to include our relationships with institutionalized religion, and our efforts to make this our own. I also sought to broaden the geographic focus from Manitoba to the larger Métis homeland, concentrating on the three prairies provinces.

To form the project, I first reached out to Dr. Paul L. Gareau to ask whether he'd be interested in collaborating on a study. At that point, we hadn't met but I was familiar with some of his work and knew he explored Métis relationships with religion, especially Catholicism. I was right in thinking we'd be a good match and could bring a balanced view to this complex topic. Also, he's at the University of Alberta, and I'm at the University of Winnipeg, so we could lead teams in these two provinces. That left Saskatchewan. After a couple false starts, we were finally joined by Dr. Emily Grafton who is at the University of Regina and has married into the Métis community of Lebret, SK. She has been a wonderful lead for that province.

With our provincial leads in place, each of us relied on existing relationships to connect with a historic Métis community and ask whether they would be interested in collaborating on this study. We have been blessed to partner with St. Laurent, MB; Lebret, SK, and St. Albert, AB. The communities are represented by a Knowledge Carriers Council comprised of two Métis Elders or Knowledge Carriers connected to each community. We have also been working with a Métis Community Liaison connected to the community. We have three partner universities in the institutions where the provincial leads are employed (noted above). We have also been joined by Métis graduate students as a Research Associate and Research Assistants. Finally, we have also been collaborating with the Rupertsland Centre for Métis Research in AB. I should also note, our wonderful colleagues from the religious studies units at each university.

[ED] *The project included partnering universities hosting symposia in locations across the Métis homeland. Can you tell me more about the significance and importance of these symposia?*

[CF] That's right; we hosted one-day symposia at the Universities of Winnipeg, Regina, and Alberta. For the symposia, our Métis team collaborated with colleagues in religious studies units in each partner university, namely University of Winnipeg's Department of Religion and Culture, University of Regina's Luther College, and University of Alberta's Chester Ronning Centre for the Study of Religion and Public Life.

The symposia were opportunities to invite Métis from the focal communities to join with Métis scholars conducting research on this topic or with an interest in learning more about it. Before the symposia, we held community gatherings and encouraged those who participated to also join us for the "academic" gathering. I put quotation marks around "academic" because we purposely push the boundaries of that concept in this project in an effort to build bridges with Métis communities. For instance, we have privileged Métis community involvement throughout the study in an effort to acknowledge and uplift local expertise and knowledge and decision-making.

The robust Métis teams, outlined previously, collectively selected who would be invited to deliver presentations from the responses we received to the Call for Presenters we issued broadly. Together, we determined how to format the symposia, including ceremonial elements such as smudging, feasting and spirit dishes, the presence of wellness workers trained in counselling as well as traditional medicines and ceremony, and, at UW, a designated wellness room should participants want a quiet space to take a break, reflect, smudge, or drink their tea.

While the symposia were open to the general public, only Métis could be presenters. Métis community members, scholars, faculty, graduate and undergraduate students, artists, educators, elders, and knowledge carriers generously shared their knowledge and experience. The range of topics was also diverse from scholarly research studies involving considerations of historic and contemporary Métis

spirituality and religion, to harvesting as spiritual practice, to the creation of community-facing programming involving a resurgence of Métis spiritual ways, to narratives on personal spiritual journeys, to a conversational panel of Métis elders and knowledge carriers from different faiths.

Afterwards, a call for chapters was circulated to everyone who presented at the symposia and the community gatherings for an edited collection we will publish. We also hired a local Métis film crew in each location to film the symposia and community gatherings and plan to create a short film on this beautiful project.

[ED] *Can you tell me more about the corresponding gatherings held in Métis communities (St. Laurent, Lebreton, St. Albert)?*

[CF] As I mentioned, the symposia were preceded by a two-day gathering in a historic Métis community: St. Laurent in MB, Lebreton in Saskatchewan, and St. Albert in Alberta. As with the symposia, the provincial Métis teams were responsible for organizing the gathering in their province. A Call for Participants was physically and electronically circulated in each community in advance of the event. The Knowledge Carriers Council, together with the Métis Community Liaison (who is connected to the community either by residence or kinship), the research assistant students, and the provincial lead decided how to structure the two days, who the presenters would be, and engaged local Métis caterers and entertainers.

The St. Laurent gathering happened first and began with an optional traditional pipe ceremony and eagle fan brushing ceremony led by Kookum Barbara Bruce, a Métis Elder from St. Laurent. It was held on the shore of Lake Manitoba and was attended by a good 40 Métis participants, some for whom it was their first time participating in such a ceremony, and others who are themselves pipe carriers. This ceremony helped us invite our ancestors and Spirit to join us for the gathering but also to seek blessings for the project in its entirety so that the outcomes may benefit the Métis. In an effort to promote balance, Day 2 began with an optional mass at the St. Laurent Catholic church where a homily was delivered by one

of the project Knowledge Carriers, Michael Thibert, a Catholic Métis reverend, who wore a Métis sash visible under his cassock and held an eagle feather in his hand, and introduced himself with his spirit name and clan. Again, we incorporated smudging, feasting, spirit dishes, tobacco ceremonies, and sharing circles.

Topics of presentations varied from community to community, including history of the community, genealogical and familial community research, Elder and Knowledge Carrier panels, storytelling, open mics, and even two community book launches by local Métis authors. There were also cultural workshops on fish filleting, bannock making, Red River cart construction, beading, jigging, medicine walks, and tours of the community, including the cemetery where, inevitably, we found family names across each of the communities, reminding us of the history of mobility of our people along cart and trade trails. Our team noted that our project, which took us from St. Laurent and Winnipeg, to Lebret and Regina, then to St. Albert and Edmonton, was a contemporary reenactment of trails our Métis ancestors would have traveled. Indeed, one hope of our project was to re-ignite those historic relationships between Métis communities.

The community gatherings also had opportunities to participate in research activities such as film-recorded interviews, talking circles, and questionnaires. These sought to gain a better understanding of local Métis experiences, knowledges, and relationships with religion and spirituality. When the events concluded, the provincial Métis teams continued to engage with the stories and knowledge shared across these platforms, looking for patterns and points of significance. Like my previous studies, a prominent theme across the communities is the extensive historic relationship between Métis and Catholicism, including the presence of Catholic infrastructure – like churches, grottos, and the stations of the cross. This strong relationship continues today for some Métis participants; however, another pattern that emerged is an intergenerational decrease in attendance at church and in religious practices with many participants indicating they do not identify as Catholic. Syncretism is another theme, whereby participants discuss their faith as a blend Catholic and traditional ceremonial beliefs and practices. Another

important theme is the increasing number of Métis who describe their faith as primarily involving the ceremonial practices, like sweat lodges or Sundance.

[ED] *Your previous books, Rekindling the Sacred Fire and Returning to Ceremony, use a unique Métis-specific and community-centered methodology in examining actual lived practices and expressions of Métis religiosity. Can you tell me about how you developed this methodology and why it was so integral to the work you wanted to conduct?*

[CF] My first book, *Rekindling the Sacred Fire*, resulted from my doctoral research 15 years ago. At that time, I struggled to find any Métis-specific methodologies; what I did find were First Nation specific examples, or pan-Indigenous examples. I tried to craft my own approach that I called a “Métis Anishinaabe methodology.” It was a weaving of Métis and Anishinaabe world view, teachings, values, and ethics - including the Seven Fires Prophecy, relational accountability, and ceremonial components, such as beginning with a fast, and use of tobacco protocols - with some elements of Western research practices I found useful - such as thematic coding using NVivo qualitative research software.

In my second book, *Returning to Ceremony*, I sought to strengthen a collaborative and community-centred Métis research study and methodology. I focused on six historic Métis communities in Manitoba and hired six Métis community researchers directly connected to those communities by residence, kinship, and/or marriage; some were graduate students and others were community members unaffiliated with academia. I provided some training to ensure we were all on the same page and everyone felt comfortable, for example, interviewing. I passed each of them tobacco and gifted each of them a smudge bundle with shell, sage I harvested, matches and a cloth drawstring bag. They helped design the study, the research instruments; they helped with the fieldwork and analysis, as well as with the presentation of findings in the communities. Through that process, I realized the valuable insight that Métis methodologies can utilize traditional medicines and ceremonies in their own right.

In that study, I adhered to the national criteria for citizenship in the Métis Nation and sought to include participants that met that criteria, are connected to at least one of the six focal Métis communities, and who participate in ceremonies. I also obtained ethics approval from the University of Winnipeg as well as the Manitoba Métis Federation through their Manitoba Métis Community Research Ethics Protocol (MMCREP) which involved, for example, meeting with the Vice Presidents of the regions impacted by my study, their suggestion of an individual for one of the Community Researchers, and their help circulating invitations to attend the presentations of findings, thereby increasing attendance.

It is important to me that my research is grounded in Métis perspectives and community collaboration and that the goals include direct and indirect benefits for the Métis. I have sought to offer examples of Métis research design and methodology and encourage other Métis researchers to also ground their work in Métis-centred approaches. For too long, Métis weren't considered experts in our own knowledges and were excluded from scholarly knowledge creation. Métis centred approaches privilege our culture, values, and goals which can help to strengthen the Métis nation, especially during these volatile historic times.

[ED] *Your current project, Expressions of Métis Spirituality and Religion Across the Métis Homeland, seems to employ a similar methodology, though I imagine there are significant differences given the scale of the project. Could you tell me about how this current project differs from your last two books and how you and your team considered and developed this new methodology?*

[CF] The idea for this study took shape during my previous study which focused on Manitoba Métis communities. With the new study, I sought to expand the geographic boundaries from Manitoba to the larger Métis homeland (focusing on the three prairie provinces), and from a focus on Métis relationships with ceremonies (like smudging, sweat lodge, Sundance, and Midewiwin), to also consider Métis relationships with institutionalized religion.

I spoke earlier about how the team was formed and the historic Métis communities were selected, and that the 20-member team of Métis knowledge carriers, community liaisons, research associate/assistants, and provincial leads are the decision-makers for the study. We drafted a Memorandum of Collaboration that each partner university signed acknowledging the Métis leadership and decision-making of the study, and that the university partners agreed to support the study, including with resources.

Unlike my previous study, after careful deliberation, the Métis team decided not to involve any Métis provincial governments, including seeking ethics approval from them. Reasons for this included MMF President Chartrand's public denial that Métis spirituality includes ceremonies, and the fact that, at that time, the Métis governments were suing each other. Our team decided that the safety of our participants was paramount and that it would not have been safe to expect these bodies to collaborate.

Importantly, we nonetheless have taken utmost care to prioritize our ethical responsibilities. In addition to obtaining ethics approval from all three universities, we understand that the Métis Knowledge Carriers Council and the Métis Community Liaisons, who represent the partner Métis communities, help our project to proceed in ways that centre relational accountability. The provincial leads also take direction from the team; we mobilize and facilitate their guidance. We have kinship and relational responsibilities to these communities that persist beyond the conclusion of the study – for example, St. Laurent is my mother's community. I will always be a descendant of that community and want to do right by my relatives; indeed, I have dedicated my life to serving my nation.

[ED] *Could you comment, in general, about why the development and use of Indigenous-specific theory and methodology is important to the study of religion?*

[CF] Like most fields of study in academia, the study of religion has historically been developed by Europeans (then European-descendants) and has excluded Indigenous people,

perspectives, and knowledges. Just take a look at the established canon of literature and publications in this field. My own scholarly background is in Indigenous Studies; unlike my colleague Dr. Paul Gareau, I am not a “religious studies scholar.” From the little I have seen of that discipline, it retains a “Western” focus, for lack of a better term, and does not center Indigenous knowledges or scholars. Some disciplines have been better than others in making space for Indigenous ways of knowing and scholars. I’m not sure if Religious Studies can claim to be among the disciplines who are actively prioritizing this. I am grateful that my colleague and friend Paul has been so diligently offering his knowledge, expertise, and efforts to this and uplifting Métis perspectives on Métis religiosity. He has a Métis heart of gold and prioritizes kinship and relational accountability above all else. I hope his discipline is listening and learning from him.

[ED] *Similarly, could you comment on how religious studies, as a field of study, can be employed to support and strengthen expressions of Indigenous nationhood/peoplehood and sovereignty?*

[CF] The discipline of religious studies would do well to acknowledge it was built largely upon white settler colonial perspectives and these remain dominant within it. The discipline could also be honest about the ways in which these patterns continue to be replicated and privileged in the field of study in the present date. Take stock of how many religious studies scholars identify as Indigenous, how many courses in these departments are dedicated to Indigenous perspectives and are taught by Indigenous people. Religious studies departments and scholars can ask themselves what they are doing to make space for Indigenous perspectives? What resources are being dedicated to nurture and uplift emerging and established Indigenous religious studies scholars? What does the culture of religious studies units look like today – who are the decision makers and what values and goals are centered? What do relationships between religious studies and Indigenous communities look like? Are reciprocal relationships being built and maintained?

Religious studies scholars and departments could also actively acknowledge that non-Christian religious traditions and spiritualities are valid in their own right and that Christian religions *are not superior* to any other traditions. Endeavouring to understand and be honest about the ways in which the discipline has participated in epistemic violence against Indigenous knowledges and spiritual traditions is also important. How does this continue today? What efforts is this field of study undertaking to make amends, to reconcile, to step aside so that Indigenous scholars can lead the way in terms of Indigenous knowledge creation and promotion. This is not a free pass for settler religious studies scholars to not participate and expect Indigenous scholars to do all the heavy lifting and assume all the emotional labour of decolonizing the discipline of religious studies. We need settler scholars who put their hands to this work in supportive ways (that don't try to take over) and aim to be allies.

Collectively, these efforts could go a long way to support Indigenous knowledge creation and sovereignty, and strengthen Indigenous spiritual traditions and resurgence.

[ED] *Could you discuss the role and importance of studying religion in Indigenous studies?*

[CF] I'd first ask what is meant by "religion." Is it meant to encompass Indigenous spiritualities? Or does it focus specifically on institutionalized religions and Indigenous peoples' experiences with them? In our present study, we explore *spirituality and religion* and do our best to avoid a binary by recognizing that Métis experiences, resistance, adaptation, intergenerational transmission and evolution, and syncretism all complicate these core concepts and relationships.

In my view, Indigenous studies would do well to welcome and encourage these topics in all their complexity while prioritizing the views and experiences of Indigenous people and communities. Something similar could be said about Religious studies. Indigenous scholars and researchers should be prioritized in teaching, research, and publication in these areas. Comparatively, there are still so few Indigenous scholars in academia that non-Indigenous faculty

members and contract academic staff end up teaching Indigenous spirituality courses, sometimes for a decade or more. And while some might be wonderful allies with a decade of participation in ceremonies, student course evaluations still indicate (at least the ones I've received) a preference for Indigenous topics to be taught by Indigenous scholars. If a majority of Indigenous courses in an institution are taught by non-Indigenous instructors, much is lost in terms of authenticity, nuance, and lived experience. It also means non-Indigenous instructors are making money off, and sometimes building a career on, Indigenous knowledge and experience, when those privileges aren't being accessed by Indigenous people.

I'm not suggesting non-Indigenous folks shouldn't engage with Indigenous topics; I'm encouraging individuals, departments, and institutions to consider the dynamics noted above and take steps to ensure Indigenous voices are being privileged whenever possible.

Of course, the topics that any given department can teach and research will be limited by the number of instructors, contract academic staff, and regular academic staff they have, as well as the area of expertise these individuals possess. Being honest about present limitations is a good idea, as is developing a plan to address the limitations. I may have gone on a tangent with this question but it's what came to mind!

[ED] *Is there anything else you'd like to share about current projects, and/or the relationship between Indigenous studies and Religious Studies?*

[CF] A year and a half ago, I began serving in a senior administration role at the University and the demands on my time have been nearly all-encompassing. I've had to get creative to find time to continue working on my current (beloved) study and a few other existing commitments, like evenings and weekends. I don't want my life to consist only of work – I also have family, community, and ceremonial commitments. I continue to strive for balance. Sadly, it has meant I must decline most

public speaking invitations, and limit my efforts at publication. Perhaps when my current cross-provincial study gets closer to completion, I'll have time and energy to dream up my next project.

[ED] *Do you have any messages for Indigenous scholars who want to research their own religious traditions?*

[CF] Religion and spirituality, especially in one's own communities, can be pretty sensitive topics for a number of reasons: the legacy of colonization; historic outlawing of Indigenous ceremonies and consequences that continue in the present day; differing opinions by various Indigenous individuals, including Elders and Knowledge Carriers, about which topics are appropriate or not to study in academia, and who should be studying them. Depending on which topics are being pursued, the potential for spiritual consequences and repercussions should also be considered.

I encourage Indigenous scholars to consider these angles; sometimes the historic moment or the individual's or community's circumstances might mean the time isn't right. If your desired research involves community, whether your own or another, seek to involve them (perhaps via community reps like a project council) as early as possible (like during the brainstorming stage) and during the various stages thereafter. Keep in mind that Indigenous communities are often over-researched, stretched thin (especially in the era of Indigenization and Reconciliation!), and too often exploited. Co-creating meaningful and reciprocal collaboration that works towards shared goals is paramount. So is proper compensation. If you're a grad student and don't have funding, be honest about this, and get creative with gift giving. If you're able to secure funding, offer compensation for as much as possible, not just honoraria to attend a workshop or gathering, but also for zoom participation, time spent brainstorming, and even time for email correspondence.

Other important considerations are Indigenous data sovereignty, acknowledging co-creation of knowledge and outputs, and, if possible, creating opportunities for co-publishing or co-presenting at conferences. Internal university funding and external grants need

to catch up on this, as it remains challenging to find funding sources who recognize what I've noted above instead of saying those types of expenses are ineligible. I think things are getting better in that realm, perhaps with the exception of securing funds for community collaborators to join on the conference circuit (assuming, of course, this is something they want to do). Institutions and funders still have work to do here.

[ED] *And for those who want to potentially publish that research?*

[CF] If you've done community-based research, be sure to obtain consent from them. Again, depending on the topic, there may be aspects of the topic that require more safeguards than others. Some information can be shared widely, while other information might best remain within the community – honouring their decisions is paramount. This might be made trickier if not everyone agrees – often they won't! Endeavouring to reach a consensus where everyone's integrity remains intact is also important. Be clear about intentions and expectations all the way through.

Maintaining good relationships, even after the conclusion of a study, is perhaps the most important consideration when doing Indigenous community-based research. This is true whether you are an insider or an outsider to the community you are working with. Indigenous community talks; if you behave unethically as a researcher, your reputation will precede you should you seek to continue doing community-based research. Practice humility, otherwise, community will humble you. This doesn't need to be scary or a deterrent; it's a way for community to protect itself (especially considering historic and ongoing exploitation at the hands of researchers). If you make a mistake, acknowledge it and apologize – depending on the severity of the mistake, you may need to put effort into re-balancing your relationships. Community will see and appreciate the effort you put in.

The JRC would like to acknowledge the support of sponsors
from within the Concordia University community:

Concordia Council on Student Life Special Projects Committee (CCSL)
The Multi-faith and Spirituality Centre (MfSC)
The Department of Religions and Cultures

We would also like to offer our special thanks to:

Dr. Naftali Cohn, our very supportive department Chair; Munit Merid, administrator extraordinaire, without whom we could not have pulled this publication together; Lindsey Jackson, our amazing mentor; Sophie Charest, our incredible designer; and all our referees, readers, and everyone else who gave their time to the publication of this journal.

The Journal of Religion and Culture (JRC) acknowledges that our work takes place on unceded Indigenous lands. The Kanien'kehá:ka Nation is recognized as the custodians of the lands and waters on which we meet today. Tiohtià:ke, which has been settled as Montréal, has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst many First Nations, including Kanien'kehá:ka of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, Huron/Wendat, Abenaki, and Anishinaabeg. This place continues to be the home of many Indigenous peoples, as well as settlers and immigrants representing different cultures, languages, and worldviews. As uninvited guests who call this place home, we respect the continued connections with the past, present, and future in our ongoing relationships with Indigenous and other peoples within the community, and we are grateful for the opportunity to live here. We hope to honour the relational values that Indigenous peoples have centered in their connections with human and ecological worlds, and aim to centre consistent and persistent labour rooted in decolonial and antiracist practices while recognizing and working to change ongoing colonial practices of institutions of higher education.

