Colin Woodard's American Nations (2011): Insights into North American Christianity

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Preacher: Joseph Jones

[0:00] I'm really looking forward to telling you, this is a book talk. This is the first time I've done a book talk.

It's almost like a book review. This is one of the things that librarians do. I was, in my working life, a librarian. I have a lot to do with books, and I'm very oriented toward books.

And this is a book that I treasure, and I hope that will come out. I hope some of you will even be inspired to track it down and read it afterward.

This is the heart of the book, which is why it's up on the screen. We won't really make use of that until a little later.

Here, let's get rid of that impairment. In a sense, this got sparked off by Sheila Westberg a few weeks ago, talking.

[1:09] Somebody at the end saying, why don't you talk about all of those things in North America? Now, this is not what that would have been, but it is tangential to it.

It also, and I want to say this right up front, is somewhere towards a bit of practical theology, in that I know that St. John's Vancouver has a great current concern with relating to 21st century Vancouver.

This book has done a lot to help me understand why I have stayed in 21st century Vancouver, and why I felt a congruence between where I started out from and where I am now.

And that should come out a little more, and if it doesn't, then you can ask about it. So the approach here is to present the book and perhaps entice you to read it.

What I'm going to do is far more expository than critical. I know I'm being listened to by geographers and historians who know much more about these two sides of what this book is about than I do.

[2:41] So I'm very, very sensitive to that. Yesterday, I had a look for something related to this on Google, and something popped up at the very top.

And it turned out to be a younger fellow. I would guess he's in his 30s. A blogger who writes about history, and he had done a 10-part review of this book.

It had started with his having made a comment on his blog, which was discovered by the author who got in touch with him and suggested that he not just read the article that's in Tufts magazine attached to this map, but actually read the book.

So that's when he went on to write his 10-part review. This book, for me, has had an unusual degree of impact on self-understanding, specifically why this native, that's me, of greater Appalachia, born there, raised there, has found congruence in a life relocated to the left coast.

He has some somewhat cutesy names, but they're pretty descriptive, pretty accurate. I've read it. Yankeedom.

[4:12] Actually, I came across Yankeedom in a book that I was reading a week or two ago that was written by an Englishman in 1862, 72, somewhere in there.

So it's a well-established term. I'd like to sing a few praises about what has become a kind of a rare book.

This is my copy, Hardback. I wanted a hardback. When I first encountered this book, it was because I used to get, no longer do, not sure why, a weekly email from New York Times Book Review.

These are the books that are out, and you can read some of our reviews. Once a year, they would have a list of 100 titles, maybe 200, fiction and nonfiction, and I would routinely skim through those.

That's how I discovered this book. When I skimmed through the list, I said, now there's something I might want to take a look at. I put in a request at Vancouver Public Library, and sooner or later it floats my way, and maybe I read it and maybe I don't.

[5:27] This was quite a find. By the way, Vancouver Public Library right now has two copies that you can borrow, and it is also an e-book, so you don't have to buy it if you read fast enough.

Now, I checked this this morning just out of curiosity. Last August, I got this quite decent copy.

As I said, I wanted a hardback for slightly over $40 US used. Today, you want a hardback.

The cheapest you will find it is a little over $80, and if you want a new one, there seem to be three available, and they would cost you $150, and the highest price currently being asked is almost $300 US for this book.

Now, if you want a paperback, it's in print, it's a reprint, and you can get it for $27 Canadian. That says something to me from what I know about the book market.

[6:43] Typically, a used hardback will be a fraction of the original retail price. In this case, when it came out in 2011, it was US $30 and Canadian $34.50.

What's the author's name? Colin Woodard, not Woodward. I like Woodward better. It's easier to say, but it's W-O-O-D-A-R-D. Woodard.

I'm going to talk a little bit about Colin Woodard. He was born in 1968, so he could have been my child, but I would have had to be quite young.

So he's kind of half a generation away from me. So he was 43 in 2011 when this book came out, and I've found a reasonable amount of biographical material on him.

As far as I know, he is not a practicing Christian, and this is not by any means a Christian book, but it does have insights for us. He's a journalist.

[7:58] He got a B.A. from Tufts in 1991 and an M.A. from the University of Chicago in 1996. For his work at Chicago, you can find him listed on the University of Chicago website as having received the best M.A. paper prize for his year, which, let's see, what was it?

I don't have the year. It would have been around 1996. For his, I guess, in effect, his master's thesis, which was, Balkan Ghosts and Their Masters, The Politics of Ethno-Nationalism in Romania.

And this was awarded to him by the Committee on International Relations. He has had a tremendous amount of overseas experience.

As an undergraduate, he spent, and this is, for an American, I think this is pretty unusual, he spent a year behind the Iron Curtain as a junior year student in Budapest.

He witnessed various things to do with the fall of the wall, and that had a great impact on him. So after graduation, he became a journalist and covered lots of things.

[9:34] I'm not going to go into detail on that. But this book has been in long gestation, and if you look at the other things that he has written, you get a sense of how he came to write it.

He has a wonderful autobiographical essay in a resource called Contemporary Authors, which you need access to, and you may not have it.

But from that, we learn a fair bit about his own personal genealogy and his family life and upbringing, which are unusual.

He was raised in rural Maine by a somewhat dysfunctional, broken family and homeschooled.

So I think from a fairly early stage, in some very important sense, he was unsettled. And that is one of the reasons, let's bring this back, that I think he has been able to take the perspective on America that he has taken, which is not a usual perspective.

[11:05] So the book, In Long Gestation, a synthesis of much reading. Out of his journalism, his first book was called Ocean's End, something ecological, concerned with the state of the world's ocean.

Then in 2004, a book basically on Maine history, a bit of a precursor to this, called The Lobster Coast.

By then, he probably was well connected with publishing and knew how books worked and all that sort of thing. So in... Public what, you said?

Hmm? Public what, you said? He said public... Publishing. Oh, publishing, sorry. Sorry. So in 2007, he did, out of a lot of research, wrote a book, which may be his most popular, I don't know, called The Republic of Pirates.

By the way, American Nations is the only one that I've read. And then four years later, American Nations, and five years after that, a book called American Character.

[12:18] I've looked at the table of contents. I would like to read it, but I didn't get that done ahead of this. So, let's pause for a transition and a word of prayer.

Dear Lord, as we look into the past of the land on which we live, help us to gain a better understanding of the world that you have made, of our place within that world, and of how we should live our lives in the furtherance of your kingdom.

Amen. Now we're going to put something else up on the screen briefly. That's a nice map. Yes, it is.

Did you make it, or did you just get it? Oh, I stole it off the internet. There's a version in the book, but it's not nearly that pretty. It's not in color. We'll be going back to the map.

So, this is one of the cited bases for the book. He offers this up early on, from cultural geographer Wilbur Zelensky, about the doctrine of first effective settlement.

[13:41] Whenever an empty territory undergoes settlement, or an earlier population is dislodged by invaders, the specific characteristics of the first group able to effect a viable, self-perpetuating society are of crucial significance for the later social and cultural geography of the area.

No matter how tiny the initial band of settlers may have been. The blogger that I mentioned a little earlier takes some issue with this and says, you know, he's doing 400 years of history and 300 pages.

I don't like this. I live in the age of the internet, and things are way more mingled than, in effect, denying his thesis.

This may be general. Maybe if I were that much younger with his experience, I would be taking that approach. But it certainly resonates with me, so maybe it went at least for 350 years and is in the process.

That's something we can talk about. This, I think, is also a very biblical concern.

[15:08] As I started thinking about this, in my head resonated a phrase from the Bible, so I went back and dug it out and looked at the various cases of it.

I will read you the version that we find in Deuteronomy 7, verse 1. When the Lord thy God shall bring thee into the land, whither thou goest to possess it, and hath cast out many nations before thee, the Hittites, and the Girgashites, and the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than thou.

So, 12 catalogs like this are scattered from Exodus through Chronicles. And, by the way, if, for example, the Girgashites don't immediately ring a bell with you, you can find them as early as the list of nations that we have in Genesis chapter 10.

Now, before we start ripping through the nations, so we actually, I mean, we have 11 nations, and that would be about two minutes each, and that would be 22 minutes right there.

Ask one question sort of right up front. What about those massive immigrations of the later 19th and early 20th centuries?

[16:44] Woodard addresses this in a late chapter. So let's skip forward and take that one up, since it may be something that immediately comes to mind, and in a sense is one of the big criticisms of that blogger.

Woodard addresses this and says, newcomers have always been a small minority, peak at 14% of population in 1914.

All immigrants, 1790 to 2000, would be 66 million. So they and their descendants would be one half of early 21st century population.

If there had been no immigration since 1790, the population would be half of what it was when he put these numbers together.

It would be 125 million instead of 250 million. No immigration since 1790. Still have half the population.

[18:06] So he also elsewhere addresses the, I would dare to use the word myth, of America as melting pot, and he calls it a Yankee construct.

That there was a group of covenanted people who saw their suppler activities as a kind of utopia.

That the builders of this were of English origin. They made the pilgrim voyage. They had the Boston Tea Party, and Paul Revere rode with the warning against the British some of the salient aspects of this dominant narrative.

Just a very quick librarian side detour before we do the nations.

I did this yesterday. It just struck me as something that would be interesting to do. Let's see. So, this is a classified grouping of the religious terms from the 17-page index of the book.

[19:27] I've read through the index twice. I've probably missed a few things. But these are the regions that get any kind of religious treatment in the index.

And I have to say, he probably didn't write the index. But there is some indicativeness in the index of the actual content of the book.

So, it's fair to use it in that sense. As a librarian who has indexed books and knows how indexes are supposed to work, I would probably give this index a C plus or a B minus.

It's not wonderful. But the regions, it's interesting, are the South and Yankee New England and Native Americans.

And apart from that, those are three of the 11 nations. The others don't get any subheadings. The groups that pop up. Do you see any commonalities there?

[20:33] Or does anything leap out at you from the groups that are provided? Three groups. I connect the Pennsylvania Dutch with the Amish and Mennonites. That's one of the same.

Okay. But I'm looking for probably something a little bigger picture, which is that lots of emphasis on sects. S-E-C-T-S. And Protestants get one lumping and you get a little bit there with Puritanism as well.

So religion is not a primary interest, but he recognizes the importance of it. What are borderlanders? Borderlanders are the group that settled greater Appalachia.

They would be... Borders then of the UK. Of the UK. Are they like hillbillies or not? Well, we can take that one up later.

Okay. So I picked out the individuals. There's something else. Not a lot of individuals. We've got a few sectarians. We've got a Quaker martyr, Mary Dyer.

[21:43] We've got one great theologian, John Calvin. And we've got three modern day big names in televangelism.

Falwell, Graham, and Robertson. Topics. An odd little bunch of topics. I won't make anything out of that.

And then the states and provinces. Some states there and some states not. And a number of them...

The subheading is religious revival in. Others it's just and religion. Two of them and Puritans. So there's a peek at the book through the index.

I'm going to take a quick look at a different map.

[22:45] Let's see if I turn this a bit. You'll get a little better, bigger version of it. There.

So this has to do with sort of the early settlement of the eastern part of North America. So we have New France, taking it from the top, New France, Yankeedom, New Netherland, Greater Appalachia, the Midlands, Tidewater, and the Deep South.

We'll be talking about each of these. But these sort of show how things moved in. And you notice a kind of a borderline here which corresponds to basically the Appalachian mountain range.

Let's see if I can turn this again without knocking over the... Okay. Oops. Let's see if we can... back to our standard map.

Okay. So, now I am going to go very quickly through the eleven. But in this book talk, unlike with Woodard, the last shall be first.

[24:10] First Nations, or First Nations, basically, does not have a chapter.

And were I to criticize rather than expound this book, I think he has a difficult task given his thesis in what he's trying to do in that First Nation was actually everywhere to begin with.

And he does take some account of this. But he tends to... It's interesting. He tends to locate it with Canada.

And one of the very interesting things that he does is to say that it has really been formative for what Canada is.

Particularly because of what happened in New France, which we will come to very shortly. So, the order that he takes these up in in his first chapters is chronological.

[25:29] It's interesting that in his introduction he gives each of these a paragraph and does not follow the same order. He puts his own home territory first in the introduction, which is Yankeedom.

But Yankeedom actually only shows up fourth in the chronological order. Yes? Could we have a date for this, Matt? Because when he says American nations today.

That's what we're getting ready to do. It's not on the map. Right. So, first, El Norte, which, oh, I did want to say also, in terms of division and correlation with boundaries.

Nations are not states. And there is a very interesting lack of correlation between nation and state here.

Very few states actually fall entirely within one of his nations. And I'm just going to run through that really quickly. Canada has two undivided provinces only.

[26:42] Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. Yankeedom. The United States, in its, there are only three of the eleven nations that have undivided states.

Yankeedom has Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. That's it. Greater Appalachia has only two, despite its large extent, Kentucky and West Virginia.

The far west has only Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Nevada, and Utah. Now, now we're going to sort of characterize very quickly each of these eleven nations.

El Norte, the first in time. Catholic Spain, starting with St.

Augustine, Florida, in 1565. Between 1598 and 1794, there were 73 nations established.

[27:55] This was after the superpower at that time, Spain, was granted most of the western hemisphere by the pope in 1493.

If you ever think about Brazil being Portuguese, it is because there was a vertical line drawn, and Brazil sticks out.

And that was what the Portuguese got, not Spain, which is kind of interesting. So, in effect, El Norte was the neglected, far-flung borderland of a collapsing empire.

They had a considerable degree of respect for the indigenous people. They worked with them, they had an intent to educate them, and they interrelated with them in a way that many other settlers, except for the other great Catholic approach to North America, New France, which we will come to in a second, did not.

El Norte, he interestingly observes, is now split, like Cold War Germany, with walls being talked about.

[29:25] On to New France. New France is divided for historical reasons. Most of it is up here, but there is a little piece of it down here because of the Acadian expulsion.

French Catholics, starting in 1604, settled at St. Croix, and soon moved to Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia.

Values were a blend of Northern French peasantry with the indigenous. A rough equality and self-reliance prevailed over old world feudalism.

Today, he characterizes this region as far and away most liberal nation in North America. A defining factor for Canada.

Nation number three, Tidewater. Fairly small. Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, and part of North Carolina, part of Virginia.

[30:46] English Royalists. Maryland was Catholic. 1607, Jamestown. This is one of the dates and names that people learn as potted history.

The settlers were a few haves and many have knots. There was a project to recreate genteel manner life of rural England.

The defining factors were tobacco as a staple crop and the circumstances of the English Civil War.

indentured who came there were 80 to 90 percent of the 150,000 who came in the 17th century.

So this would have been not just the black labor that was later relied on. These would have been poor whites.

[31:56] there was very high mortality but there was a possibility of upward mobility if you didn't die before you got free.

Yes. Okay. Next is Yankeedom. England Puritans. 1620, Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay.

The Methodists came out of this as an 18th century Anglican splinter. The Baptists were in Rhode Island.

The Unitarians emerged strongly in New England. Yankee settlers came as families. Generally middle class, well educated, roughly equal in material wealth.

He describes it as an applied Calvinist utopia dissenters not wanted. They were opposed to landed aristocracy and suspicious of inherited privilege.

[33:04] Their area of settlement was less suited to farming. Next, New Netherland. Probably the, I think it's the smallest of the 11 nations.

Pretty well coincides with New York City. The Netherlands at that time was a power.

They were secular, tolerant, and diverse. 1624 was established New Amsterdam. In the early 1600s, Netherlands was the most modern and sophisticated country in the world.

Their dominant motivation was corporate and commercial via the Dutch West India Company. Everybody was welcome, notably Jews.

Peter Stuyvesant was intolerant, but he was overruled from back home. by 1664 the British took control, but continuation of Dutch policies, ethos, and culture was negotiated for in that transfer.

[34:25] And at that point it was named, renamed New York. and I dug into that, but it's escaped me and I didn't write it down.

It's interesting to see how the politics of Great Britain are very mirrored in what we find in North America.

The English Civil War and all the rest of it. Next, Deep South. This is the first of the seventh, the first in chronological order, the first of the American nations that does not come directly from Europe.

Anybody know where it comes from? it comes from Barbados. Royalists, 1670, Charleston, a carbon copy of the West Indian slave state, first based on sugar and then based on cotton.

they had nine times as many black slaves as Tidewater did. And they were as far as Tidewater.

[36:07] were as only alive. You tend to think of the Deep South as one, but it's not. Nine times as many slaves, and they treated them basically as disposable.

It was economic for them to do so. We work you until you die, and then we replace you. On the eve of the Revolution, 1776, the per capital wealth of Deep South was four times that of Tidewater, and six times that of New York and Philadelphia.

Very, very great disparity in profitability and wealth there. It had a strong Anglican orientation which entailed access to the British elite, which was denied to dissenters.

Number eight, Midlands. Quite a little dividing area here which has actually spread around and accounts for much of Ontario and even down into northern Texas.

Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma. Oklahoma.

[37:56] It starts with William Penn and the settlement of Pennsylvania, 1680, 1682 in Philadelphia, soon followed by many, many Germans.

Quaker and Protestant, little use for slavery, tending to be tolerant, multicultural, and multilingual. Number nine, and this is the first, I think, the first that does not involve approach directly through the coast, greater Appalachia.

1717 to 1776. I think in terms of numbers of states, it is, no, yeah, it is the largest.

It's rivaled by the Far West, but in actual number of states, it is, there are 17. Far West only has 16.

they came from the British borderlands, they were Calvinists, they came in via Philadelphia to the back country, this had already been settled up, so this is what was available, and their culture was a kind of a civilization without government, immigrants, refugees seeking sanctuary from a devastated homeland, establishing a new society beyond the reach of law, individual liberty and personal honor above all else, Presbyterianism, there were five waves of immigration, over 100,000 by 1775, destitute, land-hungry people going straight to the back country, living a woodland subsistence economy, mobile wealth in herds, distilled corn whiskey was a de facto currency, they were more oriented towards maximizing freedom than increasing their wealth, they tended to have large plans, the great wagon road to the south, ended in

[40:34] Augusta, Georgia, and went down just on the eastern side of the Appalachian Range, a significant proportion went native, they were the front lines in the Indian Wars and provided a kind of a buffer territory.

So that is the first nine chapters of Woodard's book. Where do we get the next two nations?

As I already said, First Nation really doesn't even get its own chapter. Well, we skip from chapter nine to chapter 20 before we get left coast, which is where we stand today, sometimes called Cascadia.

It's basically California, Oregon Territory, Washington, and British Columbia. There are two primary elements in left coast.

Yankeedom by sea coming to the coast and Appalachia coming over land and inland with the fur and gold being the prime economic original attractions.

[42:03] So our culture, in his thesis, is a blend of Yankee utopian idealism and Appalachian self-sufficient individualism.

I think he could be a little more refined with respect to British Columbia, and this may hold true for some of the rest of Canada, but British Columbia in particular, I think he underestimates the extent to which there was actual direct contact with Great Britain and gives more credit than he should to the Yankees, which is what accounts for whatever difference we have between British Columbia and the territories to the south, which basically at the outset were thought of as Oregon territories.

Coming up to the last, far west, 16 states, we have the Mormon exception, and a lot of Mormons settling in Utah.

They actually originated in Vermont and came through Illinois. He mentions them. Look at this line here.

98th Meridian. Into the western mountains, high and dry, not really very livable.

[43:41] people. The settlement was either nomadic or attached to corporate interests, mining and railroads.

Politically, in the 19th century, there was often alignment between the far west and the deep south, a strain of libertarianism.

people. Now, this is his thesis, and one of the things that I would be interested in that he didn't go into was actually how he drew this map.

But, this is really interesting. We're going to go and look at another map. He actually talks about this.

I'll read the subtitle there. Clustering of 770,000 genomes reveals post-colonial population structure of North America.

[44:49] Nature Communications, 2017. So, they started taking all this DNA and computing on it. And, look at this.

There is your Yankeedom showing up as Mormons in Utah. The one thing, the one place where this, and there's your cluster of New France.

Although, he's not showing, I don't think he has that much material from up here to Curley, but it's definitely a distinct element there.

He posts and comments on this mapping, and the one interesting, really interesting divergence from his schema is the two strands of Appalachia.

This would be midlands, the blue. And you can see that this does stretch over quite far, and especially the purple and lines up with what he had come up with.

[46:16] So it's a little, his other three main divisions of the book, I'll just give you the captions for the divisions, are kind of taking history and carrying it forward, putting it into periods.

unlikely allies, 1770 to 1815, which would be right up to the war of 1812, and then wars for the west, 1816 to 1877, with that dividing line being the end of reconstruction, and then he titles his final section culture wars, 1878 to 2010.

the two things that I have sort of, I've got a couple of little, let's see, how are we doing for time?

I can squeeze these in. A couple of sort of perceptions coming out of all of what he has put together, the American Revolution.

He says, four nations rebelled against, let's go back to our other map, against Great Britain. Yankeedom, Tidewater, Greater Appalachia, and Deep South.

[47:54] He says, they had little in common, and strongly distrusted each other. New Netherland, he characterizes as the capital of loyalist North America, and nexus of British power, and pacifist Midland did its best to remain neutral.

Now, these are generalizations, but this is a big picture book flying high over the territory. The Civil War. The Deep South, with satellite tidewater, versus Yankeedom.

The Midlands, and New Amsterdam, and Greater Appalachia, tending toward neutrality, and primarily interested in avoiding domination by Yankees or slave lords.

The firing on Fort Sumter forced Appalachia to choose between two despised cultures. So, the Union got Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Kentucky, Missouri, and Indiana, and the Confederacy got North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Arkansas.

One more map and then we'll open it up for questions, comments, and whatnot. I think people will be interested in this one. This is Woodard's 2016 election map.

[49:41] Oh, Lord. And he says, this election was an exception, and I think it is because it did not feature a clear choice between individual liberty and the common good, which is kind of a great theme.

Now, a different map, not Woodard's, and you can see he's got the nations overlaid onto his 2016 county map.

I came across this map sometime back. I was hoping that I could get back to it, and I was able to, oh, no, don't, oh.

Huh. I grabbed it and then didn't put it in. But it's, it's quite interesting because it shows an even more startling picture because it's a three-dimensional map which shows counties.

Has anybody seen that map? The, the, uh, the counties that went blue in 2016, uh, with a third dimension to show how much of the population.

[51:06] It's, it's just this in three dimensions. It's quite striking. So I think I will, there's more that I could say, but I think I will, oh, he said, he also says of the, of his Trump map, there were three swing nations.

The Midlands, El Norte, and Far West, and that the Trump win was based on Midlands and rural Yankee the Midlands. So I hope you have, uh, found this as interesting and, uh, enlightening as I did, and your turn to say something about it.