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VIRTUAL ISSUE INTRODUCTION

Christianity, Native Americans, and Global Indigeneity

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Indigenous stories occupy increasingly prominent cultural spaces. From the bestselling book turned feature film *Killers of the Flower Moon* to the critically acclaimed coming-of-age television drama *Reservation Dogs*, Native stories of resilience, creativity, trauma, and joy fill our pages and screens in exceptional ways. Together, they mark an unprecedented moment in the depiction of Native history and spirituality, one that promises renewed truth-telling and testifies to the ongoing power of material, visual, and oral literacies to re-narrate both settler violence and Indigenous survivance. In the study of Christianity, scholars have likewise devoted renewed attention to Native histories. As with the case of popular media, it is not so much that scholars have not told stories that include Natives. However, those narratives have been locked in stereotype and caricature, tales of cowboys and Indians that were translated to tropes of missionaries and revolts.

In the past half century, historians of Christianity have challenged those older binaries, but the field still has a long road to travel. While clean accounts of conquest vs. rebellion no longer satisfy, we have yet to see our places and publications fully center Native voices or begin to ask what it might mean to decolonize church history. The articles included in this virtual issue point to both progress over the last half-century and the ongoing need to interrogate and reimagine the historical study of Christianity and Indigenous peoples. From zero-sum accounts of conversion and resistance to transnational examples of creative adaptation, our understanding of Global Indigenous engagements with Christianity has grown substantially over the last half century but awaits further transformation.

Christian Missions and American Indian Resistance

Fifty years ago, *Church History* began to feature stories of Christian missions, conversion, and American Indian resistance. Convergent with the increasing power of the American Indian Movement (AIM), renewed interest in moments of resistance and Indigenous revolt characterized this scholarship. Articles from this period centered the recovery of supposed traditional religion and the assertion of authenticity in the face of coercive evangelism. Henry Warner Bowden's 1975 analysis of the 1680 Pueblo Revolt, for instance, argued that by incorporating anthropological insights from the 20th century, we could have more "scientific information" that was "less distorted by culturally conditioned bias. . .and by European source materials." This approach represented a healthy distrust of missionary histories and military missives.

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At the same time, it evinced an unreasonably strong confidence in western scholars' ability to "understand the content of any people's world view." This approach tended to freeze Indigenous cultural practices in the past as "folkways" and assumed that traditionalism naturally led to violent resistance rather than creative adaptation.

Likewise, William McLoughlin focused on Christian missionary efforts in his 1981 treatment of Methodist work among the Cherokee Nation during the removal crisis of the 1820s and 1830s. McLoughlin showed dexterity with the complicated story of Cherokee responses to the Indian Removal Act, President Andrew Jackson's authorization of Georgia militia violence, and the ensuing suffering of the Trail of Tears in ways that went beyond Bowden's focus on Indigenous "tradition." McLoughlin's emphasis on tribal politics and shifting strategies in response to mounting coercion reminded readers that Native engagement with Christianity continued well past initial moments of contact and "conversion," and that tough choices were made on all sides along the way. However, his attention remained solidly on white denominational politics with a goal of explaining why Baptists remained firm in resistance to removal and subsequently grew while Methodists ultimately bowed to rising white supremacy and lost Cherokee conversions. Bowden ultimately concluded that despite initial success, "Methodism failed (the Cherokee) on the critical issues of dignity and patriotism" and that "after 1830, to be a Methodist was to be a traitor to the Cherokee Nation." McLoughlin's work moved beyond questions of early contact and instead emphasized diverse tactics employed by multiple parties to navigate insatiable land pressure and growing US imperial ambitions. Nevertheless, it continued to center settlers and non-Indigenous Christians in this account, relativizing Cherokee religion within the rise and fall of white denominational competition.

Native American Christianity

Beginning in the 1990s, historians of early America and the US West began to take up innovative methodologies, cultivated first in Native American and Indigenous Studies (NAIS). Like Bowden, they sought to incorporate anthropological sensibilities in an attempt to "read between the lines" of colonial sources and recover Indigenous perspectives. In this, they turned to archeology and ethnography, but they also began to make themselves accountable to descendent communities. These ethnohistorical and relational approaches prompted a new generation to center Indigenous people in their questions and apply those insights to old archives in ways that challenged received dichotomies. Beyond conversion and resistance, this scholarship focused on emerging, creative forms of Native American Christianity and the middle grounds, crossroads, creative agents, and hybrid that made them possible.

Michael McNally's 2000 essay on "The Practice of Native American Christianity," beautifully models this turn. Through a perceptive survey of recent work, he reflected on the trends and challenges for the study of what he termed "native Christianities" at the turn of the century. Notably, McNally critiqued the field's preoccupation with Euro-American missionaries and institutions. Instead, he focused on Native histories and scholars, highlighting James Treat's important collection of Indigenous Christian voices in *Native and Christian,* Jace Weaver's exchange-based frameworks for analyzing both Christian and non-Christian Native religious practices, Clara Sue Kidwell's accounts of Choctaw negotiation of evangelistic efforts, and Christopher Vecsey's substantial histories of native Catholicism with its particular attention to the Mohawk Saint Kateri Tekakwitha. In this work, McNally called on non-Indigenous – what he called

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"normative" – scholars to make themselves accountable to Native tribes and nations by connecting historical research to the realities of contemporary communities and appreciation for their ongoing practices. McNally argued that evaluations of "acculturation" based in theological profession could never comprehend the ways Native Christians integrated Indigenous sensibilities, materials, foods, rituals, and embodied habits into their everyday religious lives.

A decade later, Jennifer Graber retained McNally's renewed focus on Native Christian practices but balanced that with an interrogation of the function of violence and suffering in their creation. Her account of the 1862 Dakota War traced the lines of this redemptive teleology, like the Presbyterian missionary Stephen Riggs' conviction that despite the death of hundreds of settlers and the rapid depopulation of southern Minnesota, that God would nevertheless "work though this 'mighty upheaval'" to effect the expansion of Christendom. Graber argued that tragedy and tumult were not necessarily failures but open to interpretation by both missionaries and Dakotas. Evangelistic success could raise similar questions. Graber notes how all sides struggled to account for the large-scale conversion of Dakotas to Christianity in the wake of the violence, especially several warriors who seemingly embraced the religion on the way to execution. White Protestants read the capture and execution of hundreds of Native prisoners as a brutal but providential event that deepened Christian influence and decreased traditional religious belief and practice. Conversely, Dakotas understood their suffering as necessitating a revitalized spiritual pantheon that included Christianity as a means of innovation and survivance. Graber attended to the function of memory for descendant communities, noting the settler propensity to see the violence as redemptive, while Dakota descendants present a more complex story. They mourned the execution and incarceration of their ancestors, but also mobilized the new religion for their own endurance and creative flourishing, a version of what the Minnesota Chippewa scholar Gerald Vizenor termed "survivance." Here, Vizenor urges us to move beyond questions of mere subsistence and toward a vision of Indigenous ingenuity and vitality.

Conversión in the Contact Zone

In the last decade, the journal and society have pressed beyond their North American strengths, emphasizing wider geographies and temporalities. This has meant not only a greater attention to late antique and medieval histories, but increasingly transnational and global Christianities. In the 2010s, the ASCH intentionally increased its cooperation with scholars focused on other "Americas." Logistically, shared sessions with the Conference on Latin American History (CLAH) at the annual meeting fostered renewed interest in Iberian-Indigenous colonial encounters. From these panels, several intriguing conversations emerged, eventually leading to publication in both print and online issues of the journal. This research into *conversión* in the contact zones of what came to be called "Latin America," challenged older historiographies that emphasized totalizing "spiritual conquest." As it centered Catholic evangelization, much of this scholarship attended to issues of space, materiality, bodies, ritual, and linguistic efforts in ways that challenged Protestant assumptions about what "conversion" looked like. Karin Vélez' fascinating account of Jaguars shaping religious life and practice in the Jesuit missions of Paraguay and Moxos exemplified this trend. Paying special attention to the presence of tigers in Jesuit missionary sources in South America, Vélez charted the priests' fears about the possible shamanic reverberations of these mysterious, fierce

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animals. Dating back to the 1580s messianic movement of Santidade de Jaguaripe that destabilized the Society's earliest work in Brazil, Jesuits associated the animal not only with savage power, but Indigenous resistance led by charismatic leaders who were intent on overturning the mission system. Like Graber, Vélez saw destabilizing violence, this time in the form of jaguar attacks, as a moment for competing explanations and theological innovation as they dealt with these "key third players in zones where European and indigenous populations met." Jesuits like Antonio Ruiz de Montoya saw them as "instruments of divine justice," who encouraged Guaranís to enter into the Society's *reducciones* for protection. But the priests believed jaguars also figured the beasts of ancient times, who had proved the authenticity of Christian faith in Roman coliseums and German forests as new converts found their *imitatio Christi* within their savage claws and jaws.

Daniel Wasserman-Soler's 2016 essay on Castilian linguistic programs similarly challenges us to reconsider older paradigms in our rendering of colonial encounters between Indigenous communities and European evangelists. Beginning with two different additions to the Laws of the Indies in 1619 and 1634, Wasserman-Soler queried the Castilian crown's diversity of linguistic approaches to evangelism. In the former, the Crown recommended that priests use local Indigenous languages. Then, less than two decades later, new proclamations recommended Castilian sermons, catechisms, and prayers. Far from a unidirectional change, however, Spanish magistrates and ministers moved back and forth on their linguistic policies, depending on the moment, the community, or the place. This diversity of policy and practice, Wasserman-Soler argues, was not the result of hypocrisy or prolonged debate, as previous scholarship supposed, but rather shaped by practical choices, varied strategies, and real ambivalence. Specific Indigenous communities influenced these changes more than coherent ideologies or unilateral hopes of "spiritual conquest." As such, Wasserman-Soler contended that Spanish leaders themselves became hybrid in their practice, comfortable with a unique set of religious practices that were neither fully European nor Amerindian, but *mestizo*.

Violence and Revitalization

In recent years, the fields of memory and material studies have challenged historians of Native Christianities to question other divides between past and present, subject and object. Emma Anderson's 2020 essay on Rose Prince of the Carrier Nation shared in Graber and Vélez' emphasis on violence, memory, and theological meaning making. Anderson directs us, as well, to suffering bodies, specifically the corporeal experiences of Rose Prince, a boarding school student at Lejac Indian Residential School in Canada. Anderson outlines the competing memorializations of her life and death for both Carrier people and non-Indigenous Catholics in the past and present. Carefully engaging the darkest of subjects – the confinement, abuse, and exploitation of children – Anderson puts forth the twin concepts of "diurnal" and "nocturnal" temporalities to elicit the lived traumas and visceral affects of colonialism. Anderson ultimately agrees with Catholic Carrier perspectives that insist on Prince as both fully Christian and Carrier —as Sister Susan Songory, a Carrier nun, stated, "she was Indian completely." Like McNally, Anderson rejected academic obsessions with discerning a pure Native religion and focused instead on the memory and meaning that Native people made of the school, the subject, and eventually, their saint.

In another recent contribution, Sonia Hazard takes a different turn, focusing on object rather than subject. Or rather, Hazard asked readers to think of object as subject,

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to take seriously the agency of things and reject dichotomies between living and non-living actors in ways that are consonant with methodologies in the field of Native American and Indigenous Studies. Beginning with a recognition of the legacy of white perceptions of Indigeneity that stress stagnancy and ineptitude, Hazard analyzed print culture as a site of political protest. In particular, she charted the subtle but powerful differences between the devotional tract *Poor Sarah* pre- and post-Cherokee removal. Shifting from acculturation-centric politics that envisioned a futurity of sovereign relations with the U.S., Cherokee print culture turned from mixed audiences to solely Cherokee readers as a means of caretaking and strategy post-removal. Both Hazard and Anderson stressed the importance of Native media as a rich site for resistance and innovation in the face of colonization. The production, circulation, and operation of these texts have too often gone unnoticed by non-Indigenous readers and later scholars, and Hazard makes a compelling case that like Vélez' jaguars, these objects should be considered as players in the push and pull of colonization and Christianization.

Global Indigeneity

The field of Indigenous Studies has increasingly turned away from strictly American topics in recent years and begun to consider shared issues that connect Global Indigeneity. Here, "Indigenous" no longer exclusively signifies communities from the Americas, but rather any local population caught up in colonial settlement and dispossession that attempts to maintain sovereignty and cultural survivance. Sylvester Johnson's 2008 essay on colonialism and biblical world-making in Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* anticipated this turn toward decolonization and global Indigeneity. Through the writings of the formerly enslaved and later abolitionist Equiano, Johnson argued that biblical narratives served as a resource to both justify and upend colonial rhetorics. Like some other Indigenous communities in the Americas – from Andean intellectuals in the 17th century to Native converts to Mormonism in the 20th century – Equiano argued that West African Igbo were actually descended from ancient tribes of Israel. In so doing, Johnson concluded that although Equiano had been "conquered by the logic of colonial Christianity," he nevertheless did so "on his own terms" and proceeded to subvert colonizer assumptions about slavery, freedom, and the people whom God favored. He also laid the groundwork for the abolition of the slave trade in England and later theologies of liberation.

Lian Xi is similarly pushing our understanding of Indigenous Christianity beyond the Americas, as he centers China's ethnic frontiers. In his recent publication in the journal, Xi charted what he calls "an enchanted response to Christianity" among Lahu, Wa, and Lisu Christian communities who found "deliverance on the margins of the Chinese Empire." Like many Indigenous communities in the Americas, they resisted coercive modernism in part through their conversion to Christianity, which challenged some aspects of Indigenous shamanism and its rituals but at the same time served as a space for resistance, revitalization, and cultural survival. In so doing, Xi gives us a rich example of what an emerging field of global Indigeneity might look like. Such a conversation would put into comparison diverse communities across the world confronting colonization beyond specific temporalities and geographies.

Future scholarship on global Indigeneity and decolonization should follow the paths charted by this recent intervention. While insisting on the importance of local knowledge, this wider approach moves beyond the bounds of nation-states to identify the

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patterns of colonial systems and the strategies that have empowered Indigenous people to not only endure but thrive in other times and places. Christianity is a crucial part of this accounting, both as a handmaiden of empire and resource for challenging and transforming subjugation. This work should center Native perspectives. Indigenous ideas about community, reciprocity, place-based meaning, and spectrums between spiritual and natural worlds have the potential to transform both our methodological and narrative approaches of Christian history.

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