# *The Practice of Native American Christianity*

MICHAEL D. MCNALLY

The fields of Native American religious traditions and American religious history have reached something of a shared critical juncture.[1] Although there has been a long standing scholarly interest on writing about missions to Native Americans from a variety of viewpoints, recent years have seen the publication of a number of fresh considerations of the diversity and texture of Native American Christianity—or better, native Christianities. Native communities have long woven the stories, signs, and practices of the Christian tradition into the fabric of their lifeways, in rich and resourceful ways, even under the direst of colonizing circumstances. But only recently has scholarship begun to take this fuller texture into account: most recently, *Native and Christian* (1996), edited by James Treat; *Native American Religious Identity* (1998), edited by Jace Weaver; Sergei Kan's *Memory Eternal: Tlingit Culture and Russian Orthodox Christianity through Two Centuries*; Clara Sue Kidwell's *Choctaws and Missionaries*; and Christopher Vecsey's multivolume study of the varieties of native Catholicism, of which volume two, *The Paths of Kateri's Kin* (1998), is of most interest here.[2] This recent scholarship reflects new perspectives of native

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1. I am indebted to Devon Anderson, Ann Braude, Joel Martin, Michelene Pesantubbee, James Treat, Christopher Vecsey, and others whose comments helped vivify a previous draft of this article presented at a joint session of the North American Religions Section and the Native American Religious Traditions Group at the American Academy of Religions' annual meeting (November, 1998). For the work on Ojibwe hymn-singing, I am grateful for the guidance of the late Larry Cloud Morgan, Erma Vizenor, and other elders of the White Earth Ojibwe Singers.
2. James Treat, ed., *Native and Christian* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Jace Weaver, ed., *Native American Religious Identity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998); Christopher Vecsey, *The Paths of Kateri's Kin* (South Bend, Ind.: University Notre Dame Press, 1997) and *Where the Two Roads Meet* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999); George Tinker, *Missionary Conquest* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); Sergei Kan, *Memory Eternal: Tlingit Culture and Russian Orthodox Christianity through Two Centuries* (Seattle, Wa.: University

*Michael D. McNally is assistant professor of history and philosophy at Eastern Michigan University.*

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scholars entering the field and more publications that anthologize a range of native Christian viewpoints into single volumes. It has also to do with more sustained accountability among nonnative scholars to native communities and the way that consultants in those communities imagine their religious lives.

What unites the new scholarship and makes it so refreshing is how each study shifts the focus away from missionaries and their intentions to what native peoples *made of* the Christian tradition, in turn equipping us to appreciate the complexity and variety of ways of being both native and Christian. Perhaps the clearest message we get from this new literature is a chastening of any impulse to generalize or theorize about native Christianity, except to say that being both native and Christian, in whatever manner, poses a problem that lies consistently at the core of native Christian reflection and practice. In this respect, the form of the new work follows its content. Shying away from a master narrative about the unitary sweep of Catholicism in Indian country, Vecsey pieces together a patchwork of particular stories, vignettes about native Catholics. Weaver and Treat compile collections of essays by different native Christians, recording a full range of voices in a debate about the problematics of native Christian identity, with little interpretive overlay. Kidwell immerses readers in the complex and detailed realities that brought nineteenth century Choctaws to make of Christianity a resource in the effort of communal survival, linguistic preservation, and cultural continuity. Kan identifies the distinctive contours of Russian Orthodoxy that rendered this form of missionary Christianity and not that of the region's Presbyterians a strategic medium for the ongoing articulation of Tlingit religion and culture.

Refreshing as it is, the new literature begs something of a paradigm shift of interpretation—or at least a more fruitful interpretive posture—to suit it. For the new material prompts a language that can help scholars dramatically rethink the place of Christianity in Native Ameri-

of Washington Press, 1999); Ann Fienup-Riordan, *The Real People and the Children of Thunder: The Yup'ik Eskimo Encounter with Moravian Missionaries John and Edith Kilbuck* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991); Clara Sue Kidwell, *Choctaws and Missionaries in Mississippi, 1818–1918* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995); Homer Noley, *First White Frost: Native Americans and United Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992); Achiel Peelman, *Christ is a Native American* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995); Michelene Pesantubbee, "Beyond Domesticity: Choctaw Women Negotiating the Tension Between Choctaw Culture and Protestantism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67 (1999): 387–409. Several article-length studies of Abenaki and Montagnais Catholic practices by Kenneth Morrison are intriguing and bear further elaboration. See "Baptism and Alliance: The Symbolic Mediations of Religious Syncretism," *Ethnohistory* 37 (1990): 416–37 and "Discourse and the Accommodation of Values: Toward a Revision of Mission History," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59 (1985): 365–82.

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can religious histories—not simply as an indication of acculturation, but as a potential resource in native struggles to act as agents in a history otherwise conditioned by domination.

To that end, I will here briefly identify some limits of the rather wooden framework by which scholars have broadly understood native Christianity, predisposed as we are to interpret Native American religious change in terms of exchanges between "belief systems." The earlier work of nineteenth-century historians of missions and turn-of-the-century anthropologists alike practiced a kind of tunnel vision, focused entirely on either missionary Christianity or Native American cultures at the expense of the other. Such a view was complicated by social anthropologists in the 1940s and 1950s who sought to document, and often to deplore, the rapid culture change they witnessed over time in the communities to which they returned over their careers.[3] This more sustained attention to the cultural changes undergone by the native communities came in the 1970s to characterize the emergent field of ethnohistory, in which historians brought the tools and language of cultural analysis to bear for better historical writing on Native American histories.[4] But the attention directed to culture change was still by and large encumbered by static notions of religions as systems of belief and of cultures as systems of meaning.

Until only recently, the religious story of contact between Euro-Americans and native peoples had been seen in terms of the "collision" of two ostensibly well-bounded systems of belief: Protestant or Catholic "Christianity" on the one hand and tribe-specific traditions on the other.[5] The domination of the one and the resistance of the other were said to play each other out in a one-directional process of "acculturation." In this more formulaic understanding of culture

3. See, for example, Robert Redfield, Ralph Linton, and Melville Herskovits, "Memorandum for the Study of Acculturation," *American Anthropologist* 38 (1936): 149–51; *Acculturation in Seven American Indian Tribes*, ed. Ralph Linton (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1940, 1963); and Melville Herskovits, *Acculturation: The Study of Culture Contact* (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1938).
4. See, for example, Robert Berkhofer, *Salvation and the Savage* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965); James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Carol Devens, *Countering Colonization: Native American Women and Great Lakes Missions, 1630–1900* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1992); Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1975); William McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Christianity 1794–1870: Essays on Acculturation and Cultural Persistence*, ed. Walter Conser Jr. (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1994).
5. An exception to the rule may be the work of Ken Morrison, "Baptism and Alliance: The Symbolic Mediations of Religious Syncretism," *Ethnohistory* 37 (1990): 416–437 and "Discourse and the Accommodation of Values: Toward a Revision of History," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59 (1985): 365–82.

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change, Christianity's gains were unequivocally the losses of traditional religions. Similarly, the persistence of traditional religions signaled a lack of inroads on the part of Christianity. The relative rate of acculturation was seen to indicate the level of resistance on the part of traditional religion to the steady workings of the acids of acculturation. Acculturation was so real that a number of studies by students of anthropologist A. I. Hallowell in the 1950s were even trying to quantify the level of acculturation across native communities in varying proximity to Euro-American settlements by using Rorschach inkblot tests.[6]

Now, to be sure, sustained attention to acculturation marked an appreciation for native people whose lives did not resemble the old ethnographic quest for the holy grail of "purer" precontact cultures. What is more, acculturative studies by anthropologists, historians, and ethnohistorians drew needed attention to the very real violence of missionization, colonization, and culture change, for nowhere could it be said that native people were completely in the driver's seat when it came to assimilation and culture change. But neither were they passive recipients of someone else's historical actions, and herein lies the problem: the structural forces of "culture change" eclipse the historical agency of native people in their negotiation and renegotiation of culture over time.

In our effort to recover a fuller sense of native peoples' agency in their encounter with missions, colonialism, and Christianity, what if we were to recalibrate our analysis in terms of practice rather than belief? What if we were to train our eyes and ears on the religious practices of native Christians to see how Christianity came to change native traditions and how native traditions came to change the Christianity proffered to, or forced upon, them? I want to suggest that a framework oriented to religious practice can more ably encompass the varieties of native Christianity and more nimbly discern the capacity of native Christianities to negotiate tradition and change within the difficult circumstances of colonization. Indeed, this approach could aid in a richer understanding of the religion of the missionaries as well, though I want to focus these remarks on the native side of the

6. See A. Irving Hallowell, *Culture and Experience* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1955); Victor Barnouw, "Acculturation and Personality among the Wisconsin Chippewa," *Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association* 72 (1950); Stephen T. Boggs, "Culture Change and the Personality of Ojibwa Children," *American Anthropologist* 60 (1958): 47–58; Bernard J. James, "Social-Psychological Dimensions of Ojibwa Acculturation," *American Anthropologist* 63 (1961): 721–46. For a collection of viewpoints of acculturative studies, see Deward E. Walker Jr, ed., *The Emergent Native Americans: A Reader in Cultural Contact*, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1972).

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encounter, since it seems the evidence of our having missed the point of native Christianity is the more dramatic.[7]

## I. Vignettes of Ojibwe Christianity

First, I want to sketch the contours of native Christianity as freshly appreciated by recent scholarship and to do so with dispatch by turning to several examples of Christianity as it could be found among Ojibwe communities in Minnesota, communities with whom I have had some first-hand experience in the past nine years.[8] I borrow the vignette structure from the chapter entitled "The Varieties of Ojibway Religion" in Vecsey's *Paths of Kateri's Kin*.

Each of these stories is worthy of recounting in far more detail. My purposes here are simply to sketch, through the brief recounting of four, how many varieties there were of Ojibwe Christianity. The first two stories sketch an older, conventional understanding that Native Christianity be seen as a straightforward outcome of the contest between missionary culture and traditional native cultures.

* * *

Perhaps the most predictable trajectory of Ojibwe Christianity is represented in the life of George Copway, an Ojibwe man who converted to Methodism in 1830 and became a circuit preacher. Copway, or Kahgegagahbowh as he was known in Ojibwe, was a prolific interpreter of his people's culture to a non-Indian readership and a vocal advocate of their interests, at least as Copway saw those interests, for he believed Ojibwe people would best be served in the context of religious conversion to Christianity and cultural assimilation. "Education and Christianity are to the Indian," Copway proclaimed, "what wings are to the eagle; they elevate him; and these are given to him by men of right views of existence enable him to rise above the soil of degradation, and hover about the high mounts of wisdom and truth."[9] And yet, Copway used the very language of Christianity to criticize

7. This fuller evaluation of the missions encounter is most ably modeled by John and Jean Comaroff in their multivolume study of the "dialectics" of missionary encounters in southern Africa. See Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, 1997).
8. The Ojibwe (variously, Ojibway, Ojibwa, Chippewa, or Anishinaabe) people of the Western Great Lakes region are today among the most populous nations in native North America. According to the 1990 census, 106,000 Ojibwes live in the U.S., with as many or more in Canada.
9. George Copway, *The Traditional History and Characteristic Sketches of the Ojibway Nation* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1850), as cited in Gerald Vizenor, *The People Named the Chippewa* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 62.

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the injustices waged on his people in its name. Copway insisted that "communities can be governed by the pure rules of Christianity," but, he added, with "less coercion than the laws of civilized nations, at present, imposed upon their subjects. . . . A vast amount of evidence can be adduced to prove that force has tended to brutalize rather than ennoble the Indian race."[10]

"With all the wholesome and enlightened laws; with all the advantages and privileges of the glorious Gospel, that shines so richly and brightly all around the white man; the poor ignorant Indians are compelled, at the point of the bayonet, to forsake the sepulchres of those most dear to them, and to retire to a strange land, where there is no inhabitant to welcome them!!! May the day soon dawn, when Justice will take her seat upon the throne."[11] One might infer that the 65 percent of Minnesota Ojibwes estimated to have been baptized by 1900 simply followed Copway's trajectory of rather straightforward cultural conversion.[12] But even the predictability of Copway's trajectory ends here. The apparent confidence and stability of Copway's commitments to Protestant Christianity in his writings were later belied by a considerable restlessness toward the end of his life. After a falling out with the Methodists, Copway left the ministry to undertake short careers as a Union Army recruiter and as a healer in Detroit. Shortly before his death in 1863, he became (re)baptized and died a Roman Catholic.[13]

* * *

A second vignette is important as an indication of those Ojibwes who made conscious choices not to participate in the beliefs and practices associated with Christians. This one is actually an apocryphal story that circulated widely and rapidly in the oral traditions of many native peoples and concerns an Indian convert whose visionary experience of the afterlife persuaded him to abandon Christianity. Sherman Hall, a missionary affiliated with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, told of the following threat to his

10. Copway, as cited in Vizenor, 20–21.
11. George Copway, *Life, Letters, and Speeches*, ed. by A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff and Donald Smith (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1997 [1850]), 151.
12. J. A. Gilfillan, "Miscellaneous Lots of Notes" (1911), as cited in Vecsey, *The Paths of Kateri's Kin*, 222. The 65 percent Christian population, Gilfillan estimated, was comprised of 10 percent Protestant and 55 percent Catholic.
13. Donald Smith, "Kahgegagahbowh: Canada's First Literary celebrity in the United States," a biographical introductory essay to George Copway, *Life, Letters, and Speeches*, ed. A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff and Donald Smith (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1997 [1850]), 48–49.

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efforts there on the Southwestern shore of Lake Superior.

> One day an Indian, of whom we entertain some hope that he has not listened in vain to the Gospel invitation, came to our house, and said that the chiefs had reported the case of a pious, or in their dialect, a praying Indian, who dies far away to the North. He had prayed a long time. On his death, he went to heaven, but was refused admittance on the ground that no praying Indians were admitted there. He then went to the place where the white people go, but was not received. He next went to the place where the Indians go, but was there told he had been a praying Indian, and had forsaken the customs of his fathers, and they would not receive him, and ordered him away. After these repulses he came back again to this world, and assumed the body which he had before inhabited.[14]

Missionaries like Hall were frequently confronted with this story, as it spread like fireweed in the documentary record. The vision conveyed a bitter truth that native converts, no matter how well they conformed to what missionaries considered "civilized," were destined never to be viewed as quite white. Color mattered in this story. So, too, did religious affiliation, and the story traces the outlines of an emerging critique of native Christianity within many sectors of the Ojibwe population. That resistance is part of the story of native Christianity, too.

But complete cultural conversion of the Copway sort or wholehearted rejection of Christianity were but two of many possible trajectories. And while seeming to be opposites, the two indicate a religious *all-or-nothingism* that may have been more the exception than the rule in the religious idiom of Ojibwe tradition. As the following vignettes suggest, the rule was more along the lines of a posture toward religious hybridity that was in keeping with traditional ways of life.

* * *

My own research focuses on the historical workings of a tradition of hymn-singing that illustrate the significant, if subtle, presence of religious hybridity within the boundaries of mission churches.[15] Among the Ojibwe, or Anishinaabe, people of Minnesota, translations of

14. Sherman Hall to David Greene, 17 October 1834, Papers of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, reproduced in Grace Lee Nute Collection, box 3, folder 7, Minnesota Historical Society.

15. A longer treatment can be found in *Ojibwe Singers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) and in Michael McNally, "The Uses of Hymn-Singing at White Earth, 1868–1988: Towards a History of Practice" in *Lived Religion in America*, ed. David Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

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Protestant hymns into the Ojibwe language were promoted by nineteenth-century evangelical missionaries as sharp tools in their campaign to root out the Indianness of Ojibwe people and to dissemble the communal structures, indigenous ideas, and seasonal rhythms that governed indigenous lifeways. But with time, the translated hymns took on a life of their own in the oral tradition. For many Ojibwe people today, the ritualized singing of these hymns, usually at all-night funeral wakes, has become emblematic of who they are as a distinctive people with distinctive values. This appears to be the case regardless of whether those gathered at a wake identify as Christian. The elders who travel the north woods to sing these hymns are neither emissaries for evangelical Christianity nor singers of hymns *per se*. Instead, they are known as "Ojibwe Singers," respected as elders who sing "Ojibwe songs."

The story did not begin this way. In the mid-1800s, missionaries promoted translated hymns as part of a concerted effort to instill, through the medium of sung texts, Anglo-American Protestant ways of valuing self, land, and community. Educational theorists of the day taught that hymns were effective didactic tools for inculcating values in children. Missionaries carried that logic into their work among peoples whom they considered to be like children. Of course, missionaries were ever frustrated that the cultural revolution never came as fully as they hoped. But whenever they heard native hymn-singing, they considered it nothing less than the "sound of civilization." "I am deeply touched by their singing," wrote Minnesota's Episcopal bishop while on a visit to the White Earth reservation in 1881: "The *wild* Indian voice is harsh. Nothing could be more discordant than their wild yell and hideous war song. The religion of Christ softened this; their voices became plaintive, and as they sing from the heart their hymns are full of emotion. All sing, and you are taken afar to think of the multitude no man could number."[16] The bishop was right in many respects. Singing gained momentum when Minnesota Ojibwes were concentrated in the 1870s and 1880s within the confines of reservations and where disease and dispossession increased dependence on the mission and Indian Agent for survival. Under such circumstances, hymn-singing mattered in the same way that cultivating land mattered, that keeping Sabbath mattered, that cutting one's hair mattered. The hymns proceeded according to Western tunes and involved the conspicuous absence of the drum, the *sine qua non* of traditional Ojibwe sacred music.

Yet, as some Ojibwes came to embrace it, hymn-singing was no mere

16. H. B. Whipple, in *Minnesota Missionary* 4/10 (1881): 5.

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performance of civilization. Under the religious leadership of elders, in candle-lit shacks and wigwams far from the mission house, performances were ritualized to make room for the practice of alternative values. The songs came within the province of certain singing groups, which resembled societies affiliated with particular drums. The hymn repertory became associated with certain occasions, especially funeral wakes and evening prayer meetings, held nearly every night in reservation villages. Hymns were sung slowly, like laments, more the chanting of syllables really than the conveying of the discursive meanings of the texts themselves.

In these contexts, hymn-singing seemed less about the performance of other people's songs than about the way of life required of those who were entrusted by the community with the task of singing them. Hymn societies became primary social networks through which age-old values of reciprocity, subsistence, and the seasonal round were negotiated within the demands of the new life on the reservation. In the twentieth century, with the coming of English-only boarding school education and the continued consequences of the dispossession of land, language, and culture, Ojibwe hymn-singing took on new significance, while becoming increasingly "traditional" as a mourning practice, even for those who did not identify as Christian.

Although this is but one story told all too briefly, one trajectory among many that the Christian tradition has taken among various native peoples, it is no isolated instance. As Jace Weaver reminds us, hymns were sung on the Trail of Tears, on the gallows at the execution of Little Crow and his cohort in the wake of the 1862 Dakota uprising in Minnesota, and by a group of Christian Delawares who played by the missionaries' rules and voluntarily removed themselves to Sandusky, only to be massacred upon their return to the East to harvest their crops in 1782. Such stories show how the contradictions of colonization mingle strangely to produce what a Lakota nun has called the "terrible irony" of being native and Christian.[17]

* * *

A fourth trajectory reflects this terrible irony in the story of another Minnesota Ojibwe whose visionary experiences took Catholic forms and stories and folded them into an Ojibwe religious idiom. According to an Episcopalian missionary, Abitagezhig was a Pembina Band Ojibwe prophet who embroiled Catholic, Protestant, and non-Christian Ojibwes in a movement centered around his declaration that he

17. Jace Weaver, "From I-Hermeneutics to We-Hermeneutics," in *Native American Religious Identity*, ed. Jace Weaver (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998), 1–3.

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himself was "the Son of God, come anew, complete with stigmata, to save the world." The missionary reported that Abitagezhig "desired to be approached only with Divine honors, by people on their hands and knees" and "pretended to know the thoughts of those who came to him."[18] According to Catholic missionaries, however, Abitagezhig was a Catholic Indian who brought more Ojibwes into the Catholic church through his teachings and through a hybrid dance that came to him in a vision. In the Prayer Dance, "men danced with rosary beads around their necks; drummers used an instrument blessed by a Catholic priest; the women chanted Catholic hymns."[19]

But even the Catholic missionaries were made ill at ease by Abitagezhig's success at making converts through these indigenous means. Vecsey notes that while "Indians sought and received baptism and then proceeded to perform their Prayer Dance, another priest caught sight of them in their Catholic regalia. He slashed the drum with a knife and railed against their 'Catholic' movement."[20]

## II. New Material Begs a Paradigm Shift of Interpretation

Existing language in the scholarship on American religious history and Native American religious traditions as yet offers little guidance in making sense of the hybridity demonstrated in Abitagezhig's Prayer Dance, nor sufficient scope to encompass the range of native Christianities seen across these four vignettes, a hybridity that became as much the rule as the exception in nineteenth-century native religious histories. What we have, on the one hand, are shelves of yellowing histories depicting the epic struggles of missionaries and the eventual triumph of Christianity. On the other hand, we have valuable correctives, like George Tinker's *Missionary Conquest* (1993), an important book that appraises the missionary project in light of the cultural genocide that has come as a consequence of missionary-supported and -directed policies of assimilation, language dispossession, and land allotment.

Either way though, native Christianity winds up being understood largely as an *outcome* of history rather than as a part and parcel of it, a derivative of missionary intentions, rather than a complex process shaped by both missionary and native Christians. An interpretive paradigm of acculturation can be seen at work here, sometimes in

18. J. A. Gilfillan, "Indian Deacons at White Earth," Protestant Episcopal Church, Diocese of Minnesota Papers, box 3, Minnesota Historical Society. See also *Minnesota Missionary* 4/7 (1881) and Alban Fruth, *A Century of Missionary Work Among the Red Lake Chippewa Indians 1858–1958* (Red Lake, Minn.: St. Mary's, 1958), 15–16.
19. Vecsey, *The Paths of Kateri's Kin*, 223.
20. Vecsey, *The Paths of Kateri's Kin*, 223.

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subtle ways. Again, acculturation came to refer to the teleological process through which a dominant culture eventually displaces, dissolves, or outlasts the resistance of an indigenous culture. Changes in worldview, most notably changes in religious belief that came as a result of missionary activity, were among the central indices of acculturation. When viewed through the lens of acculturation, the ways that native people have actively inflected Christianity appear simply as patinas thinly covering the deeper processes eroding "traditional" cultures from the inside out.

At best, hybrid religion has been seen in terms of the language of "syncretism," where aggregations of unlikes are held together more by circumstance than by their own cultural logic and thus prove unstable and of only fleeting consequence. As with those aggregate stones one occasionally encounters on the lake shores in Ojibwe country composed of many different kinds of rocks, one sees the parts jammed together, but one sees neither the logic nor aesthetic of the betweenness. It would be like saying that Afro-pop or reggae music are signs of cultural confusion and instability rather than creativity and fluidity. Alternatively, some have come to understand such material in light of the concept of "inculturation," where the Christian faith is made fresh through its incorporation into the worldviews and liturgical practices of indigenous cultures.[21] Interestingly, the concept of inculturation has emerged in the thought of nonnative Roman Catholic thinkers who embrace interreligious dialogue with native communities as part of their own mission efforts and as such carries the promise of being connected with the life of native Christians. Yet "inculturation" has emerged more as a prescriptive term of postconciliar Catholic missiology than as an autonomous expression of indigenous Christian thought or as a descriptive term used in historical or ethnographic interpretations of native Christianity. In general, in the work of identifying modes of resistance to the colonization and dispossession of history, native Christianity in any form bespoke accommodation, not resistance.

By suggesting that we could benefit from a more fluid interpretive language, I do not mean to imply that colonization, dispossession, and racism are no longer relevant to the history of missions and native Christianity. Quite to the contrary, such processes have structured the field on which native people and missionaries interacted and still do shape the field on which native Christians interact with larger Chris-

21. See Achiel Peelman, OMI, *Christ is a Native American* (Ottawa: Novalis-Saint Paul University, 1995); Carl Starkloff, SJ, *A Theological Reflection: The Recent Revitalization of the Tekakwitha Conference* (Great Falls, Mont.: Tekakwitha Conference National Center, 1982).

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tian communions. Neither do I wish to overstate the reach of Native American agency within those structures, since that risks dismissing the plain facts of material, cultural, and spiritual dispossession as a matter of Indian consent. Such a view would do interpretive violence to the historical material and, more troubling still, rub salt in the wounds that the missionary legacy continues to inflict on so many native people today. I would suggest, though, that the structures of colonization and missionary intentions could not completely determine the story and that native people were far more than passive recipients of this history.

We therefore stand in need of an interpretive shift away from missionary intentions to some other paradigm that can better appreciate the finer workings of religion and culture. The signs and practices of the Christian tradition, variously presented by various Euro-American Christians to various native communities under various material and social circumstances, are better understood as part of the process of culture change rather than as a product of that change. This is because those signs and practices—especially the practices—became a medium through which many native people exercised their own agency within the tight confines of history and through which some articulated resistance as well as accommodation.

It is curious that until recently we have largely missed such an obvious point. Students of African American religious history have long recognized that although the mission to slaves was in part an extension of a power system that upheld slavery, the Christian tradition became a resource with which African Americans tapped into sacred power; fashioned a meaningful, shared culture; and criticized the moral contradictions of a slaveholding Christian society. Why has the possibility that Native Americans could find similar resources in the Christian tradition been so consistently overlooked in the field of native religions? In part, I think, it is because scholarship on native Christianity has absorbed unaware some key assumptions of the missionaries on whose documents it has relied for its data. When absent of meaningful interchange with native Christian communities, archive-bound scholarship has taken for granted a notion of religion that is out of step with what most native people practice as a more all-embracing lifeway. This view of religion has clouded our understanding of Native American religious change in at least two ways.

First, like missionaries, scholars have drawn conventional boundaries around and between religions as systems—boundaries that have not always been recognized by native people. Missionaries not only considered Christianity to be a well-bounded system; they also policed those boundaries against the encroachments of syncretism or the

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lapses of "backsliding." Of course, reflecting a wide range of theologies, missionaries differed widely in the extent to which they policed those boundaries. Some condemned native traditions; others provisionally accepted native traditions as pedagogically useful forerunners to Christian supercession; still others, like the Russian Orthodox missionaries described by Sergei Kan, actively sought common ground between indigenous practices and those of Christianity in order to advance their message. But in any event, most missionaries agreed that Christianity was an all-embracing system of belief, the integrity of which relied on its exclusive claims to truth.

While few historians or anthropologists have incorporated the missionaries' belief in the exclusive truth of Christianity into their scholarship, many have nevertheless made the assumption that religions in general are systems of belief—coherent, self-referential wholes that offer orientation in the world because they offer singular, mutually exclusive frameworks of meaning. This might be analogous to reasoning that, since language structures reality and since languages are self-referential wholes, then effective functioning in the world requires the operative use of only one language at a time.

Small wonder, then, that missionaries and interpreters alike have had such difficulty comprehending the logic of such hybrid native religious practices as Abitagezhig's, for such practices violated the integrity of putative boundaries between religious systems. Whether provisionally tolerated or flatly condemned, hybrid practices unnerved missionaries. They still keep scholars guessing as to how to make sense of them. Significantly, such boundary crossings were not so unnerving to Indian people. Indeed, one wonders whether native people perceived them as boundary crossings in the first place. They recognized differences among religious traditions, of course, but the boundaries were often of a very different kind. For example, to affiliate with one Christian community or another was typically a consequential social fact, a clear marker of one's social identity. Among our four vignettes of Ojibwe Christianity, this is most clearly illustrated in the story of the native Christian who envisioned his very rejection at the gates of heaven. Not surprisingly, baptisms of Ojibwes appeared more often as the fruits of collective actions by kin networks than they did as the conversion and profession of individual souls. Of those who did seek baptism as individuals, most were Ojibwes whose strong kinship bonds had already been disrupted by the violence of history, especially widows and orphans. Indeed, factionalism frequently developed along such lines of religious affiliation. But as John and Jean Comaroff point out in a recent volume on missions and culture change in Southern Africa, the social boundaries that came to define these affiliations in

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indigenous communities seldom reflected the complex inner life of religious identity among peoples whose spiritual proclivities are characterized by what the Comaroffs call an "ethos of religious relativism."[22]

Although Native American religious traditions differ in so many ways from the indigenous traditions of southern Africa studied by the Comaroffs, they do share this ethos of religious relativism. They tend to be concerned less with the falsehood of other traditions than with the truth and power that the sacred will not be exhausted by any particular comprehension of it. Although it would be misleading to wholly ignore the transcendent referents of Ojibwe religion, it has been said that traditional Ojibwe religion is less concerned with the precise nature of the divine than with how to access the divine powers that animate life. As Christopher Vecsey wrote in an earlier work, "survival in this life, this existence, was the Ojibwas' ultimate concern."[23] Indeed, for this reason, many traditions have remained remarkably open to the possibility that new truths, new visions, new ceremonies, could come to them in time. In some early encounters with Christian missionaries that were less encumbered by the dispossession of land and culture, there is considerable evidence that native people gave audience to the Christian tradition in this spirit, listening respectfully to the new stories and participating in the new ceremonies according to the familiar religious ethos of intertribal exchange. Joseph Epes Brown referred to this dynamic memorably, if awkwardly, as "nonexclusive cumulative adhesion," whereby tribal religions quite naturally came to incorporate the narratives, beliefs, and practices of neighboring communities.[24] But such unwieldy neologisms are not necessary for us to understand native religions on their own terms. Shifting the interpretive focus from beliefs to practice will equip us to recognize the remarkably pragmatic posture these religions appear to take toward tradition, innovation, and religious exchange, without trying to force the logic of that practicality into some other kind of model of religion.

A second, and related, way that scholarship has been impoverished by missionary assumptions concerns the relationship between the inner life and the outer life of the religious. For their part, missionaries construed the outer forms of religion as more or less reliable indicators

22. John and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997).

23. Christopher Vecsey, *Traditional Ojibwa Religion and Its Historical Changes* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1983), 4.

24. Joseph Epes Brown, *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 27.

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of inner leanings. Of course, at this point it is necessary to draw some important distinctions, for missionaries were anything but a unified lot. Indeed a thorough and grounded understanding of any particular instance of native Christianity requires a thorough and grounded understanding of the particular missionaries in each encounter. In the service of laying claim to a broader change of interpretive posture, though, a number of generalizations will suffice. Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox missionaries carried to the mission field their emphasis on the sacramental dimension of the faith and were thus more inclined to extend the faith in the presence of sacramental objects and through corporate liturgical practices like baptism, holy communion, and prayers for the dead. By contrast, Protestant missionaries, with the exception of high-church Episcopalians and perhaps others, brought to the mission field an understanding of the Christian faith as a matter primarily of inward convictions, of the inner life, and hence emphasized the scriptural, creedal, and catechetical dimensions of the faith.

To be sure, even these Protestant missionaries came to appreciate how outward practices could offer effective means for cultivating that inner life, but they were joined by Catholic and Orthodox missionaries in their scrutiny of those practices for evidence of inner transformation.[25] When the inner and outer did not fully correspond, as they often did not, the more generous missionaries construed the result as an uneasy, unstable position to be disciplined and trained; but more typically missionaries interpreted such disjunctions as insincerity or backsliding. The latter was the view taken by Sherman Hall, an American Board missionary among Ojibwes on the southern shore of Lake Superior in 1834. "An Indian is as unstable as water," Hall declared. "He will profess to wish for instruction today, but tomorrow he may be engaged in a heathen dance."[26]

Thankfully, scholars have not shared Hall's investment in the inner transformation of the people he viewed as his charges, nor have we shared his judgment that native people were "unstable," but scholars generally have been, like the missionary, perplexed by the fluidity—or seeming incoherence—of the behavior of native Christians we encounter in historical texts. As recent critics of the field have argued,

25. Sergei Kan's detailed comparison of Russian Orthodox and Presbyterian missionaries in this regard pushes the limits of this generalization most forcefully, for Kan observes that Orthodox clergy recognized and exploited the advantage that their sacramental and liturgical emphasis had over the Protestants from the Tlingit perspective.

26. Sherman Hall to Laura Hall, 4 February 1835, American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions Correspondence, reproduced in Grace Lee Nute Collection, box 3, folder 9, Minnesota Historical Society. The American Board was at the time a joint venture of the churches of the Reformed tradition, Baptists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians.

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religious studies scholarship has incorporated an emphasis derived from Protestant Christian thought on religion as systems of belief and meaning.[27] As a consequence, outward aspects of religion like ritual action have been construed principally as symbolic expressions of inner conceptualizations and therefore derivative of them. We often find ourselves reading ritual action as though it were a sort of text containing a narrative meaning that can be confidently interpreted.[28]

As the new literature shifts the focus away from missionaries to native Christians, then, how can we proceed to extricate our interpretive framework from these two missionary assumptions? First, I think we can take more seriously the simple, though hardly simplistic, claim that native traditions are better described as *lifeways* rather than *religions*. That, in turn, will bring us to appreciate the generativity of outward practices in native Christianity.

## III. The Practice of Native American Christianity

In travels over the past six years among Ojibwe communities in Minnesota, my inquiries as a self-described "religionist" have met with considerable consternation. I have been reminded—on too many occasions to overlook—some version of the following: "We don't have a religion, we have a way of life." This sounds so commonplace, perhaps even cliché, that some readers will doubtless roll their eyes upon seeing it here in print. Indeed, one could say that the more devout practitioners of any religious tradition could and do rightfully call their tradition a way of life. But the more time I spend with Ojibwe people and the more I try to interpret the dynamics of Ojibwe religiousness in scholarly language, the more convinced I am that coming to terms with such a remark is one of the key presenting problems of any inquiry into Native American religious traditions. For this, I submit, is as sophisticated a remark as any about the conventions peculiar to Western theorizing. What is more, I am convinced that putting religious practices, rather than religious beliefs, in the foreground can help make more sophisticated sense of the claim that native traditions are not religions, but ways of life.

27. See, for example, Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

28. This understanding of ritual, widely embraced by historians and students of religion, is best articulated by Clifford Geertz in "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," and elsewhere in Geertz's collection of essays, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). For a critical review of this and other understandings of ritual, see Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 13–66 and Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon, 1989).

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Readers who have been in similar proximity to native communities may not roll their eyes at this claim, but neither are they likely to raise their eyebrows. What might give us more pause is the suggestion that an adequate understanding of native Christianities must also take this presenting problem fully into account. Rather than looking for how something familiar—Christianity as "religion"—has been *translated* into the vernacular languages and cultures of native communities, we ought to consider how both the form and content of the Christian tradition have been *transposed and performed* in the context of an entirely different religious idiom, where religion is not recognized as a discrete segment of culture, but an integrative force in the entirety of a lifeway, an idiom where narratives, songs, and ceremonies with roots in a number of different religious traditions can be held within view as potential resources for living.

For example, were we to follow Joseph Epes Brown's lead, we might see how a given native tribal religion comes to accrue Christianity in its process of "non-exclusive cumulative adhesion." But the awkwardness of Brown's language bespeaks its underlying misapprehension of the process, for Brown's notion of a solid mass to which new traditions "adhere" as it rolls along appeals to a metaphor of solidity to convey the stability of such a tradition. Perhaps there was something to that remark by missionary Sherman Hall that a native Christian is "unstable as water" when he goes back and forth between indigenous traditions and the practices of the mission. But Hall was mistaken in judging this fluidity to be "unstable," for by another logic, the fluid is the more opportunistic and enduring of states. The key shift in religious idiom here from solid to fluid, I submit, is a shift from system to bricolage, from belief to practice.

In their treatments of what distinguishes native Christianity from other forms of North American Christianity, both Jace Weaver and James Treat quote Cherokee theologian William Baldridge: "Doing theology is a decidedly non-Indian enterprise. When I talk about Native American theology to many of my Indian friends, most of them just smile and act as if I hadn't said anything. And I'm pretty sure that as far as they are concerned I truly hadn't said anything."[29] In his book, Weaver goes on to document the emergence of a postcolonial Native American literature, through which native elites inflected Amer-European genres of literature with the conventions of the oral tradition, especially with what Weaver calls its "communitist" pragmatic activism. Weaver, like Treat before him, offers insightful guides for

29. Jace Weaver, *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1.

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reading how the George Copways of the world wrote about their own reconciliation of the native and the Christian in their identity.

My own remarks here can be construed as a parallel attempt to appreciate how nonelite native people—the vast majority of native Christians who were not resolving their religious identity primarily in the form of writing or narrative—nonetheless inflected the cultural practices of the colonizers in order to enact indigenous ways of valuing land, community, and the sacred. This task is all the more difficult as it requires a move from the familiar terrain of texts to the shifting ground of actions and behavior. It also risks becoming colonizing, since instead of simply presenting the thought of native Christians themselves *in so many words*, paying attention to practices requires translation and interpretation in order to come to meaningful terms with what has been articulated directly in practices. Nevertheless, it does, I think, help us to identify, within those often oppressive spaces of the missionary encounter, the sometimes subtle ways that the majority of native Christians came to assert themselves in the shaping of their world.

Fortunately, we do have some resources to interpret these practices, especially the ritual theory rooted in the work of social theorist Pierre Bourdieu.[30] To Bourdieu, scholarly understanding of practices does not come easily because practices proceed according to a logic all their own, a pragmatic logic that foregoes the quest for consistent, systematic meaning on which discursive endeavors like theology rely in favor of more tangible, practical results. But it is for this very reason that religious practices are equipped to do all kinds of important cultural work, especially in the tight spaces of colonization.

Because practices can "go without saying," it is difficult for the powers that be to discipline their meanings. Because the detailed elaboration of a practice's meaning in so many words is unnecessary (even impossible) in their performance, practices are nimble, capable of holding together a wide range of meanings and uses. To take an example from Sergei Kan's study, the elaborate Russian Orthodox practices that ritualize death, mourning, and the ongoing relations between the living and the dead became compelling practices indeed for Tlingit people whose own elaborate funerary practices and reciprocal exchanges with ancestral kin had been central to their traditional lives.[31] Within the confines of these shared performances of Tlingit

30. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987 [1972]); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Stephen Rendall (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. California Press, 1984); Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice;* John and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, vol. 2.
31. Kan, *Memory Eternal*, 404–54.

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Orthodoxy, though, there were at play a host of different, perhaps even contradictory, meanings. That the respective belief systems to which these practices referred in Russian Orthodoxy and Tlingit tradition could vary so did not go unnoticed by Orthodox clergy as they directed catechetical efforts to interpret the proper meanings of the performances. But by their very logic of practice, these religious actions could not be fixed airtight in meaning or performance, no matter how hard missionaries might have tried to rein in the range of those meanings and those performances. Religious practices, then, demonstrate a remarkable capacity for negotiating differences in the social field and can sometimes traverse putative boundaries between religious systems. Moreover, because practices have a certain taken-for-granted quality to them, they are equipped to smuggle in all sorts of new (or old) ways of configuring what is real and of value in the world and, in our case, of clearing room for the practice of indigenous ways of valuing land and community.

Just as they are flexible in terms of the range of meanings at play, the outward practices of religion are, in turn, quite suitable to improvisations that are themselves significant to the cultural and religious exchange between missionaries and native peoples. Here the value of practices lies less in the inner multivocality of symbolic acts than it does in the formal inflections of the outward practices themselves. People make practices their own not simply by assigning to them their own inner meanings but by performing them in ways that render the practices relevant and coherent (and perhaps beautiful) to them. But again, coherence here has less to do with the consistency of meaning interior to the practices as with a kind of formal coherence. Here the logic of practice allows for the suspension of contradictions or inconsistencies that might obtain if one were to spell out theologically what the meanings of their practices are for them. "Practice has a logic which is not that of logic," Bourdieu writes, "if one is to avoid asking of it more logic than it can give, thereby condemning oneself either to wring incoherences out of it or to thrust upon it a forced coherence."[32]

This logic of religious practices proves especially useful for colonized people trying to lead lives of integrity on their own terms within the spaces surveyed, structured, and policed by people with power over them. With the systematic logic of theology in the background and the logic of practice in the foreground, religion here is not considered solely in its aspect as a project of making meaning, but also in its aspect as a project of making do.

In light of this interpretive posture toward practice, the dilemma of

32. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 109.

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being both "native" and "Christian" can be seen to have been configured most often in terms of practice rather than in terms of belief. That is, the problem of a native and Christian identity has not generally been a *theological* one in the sense that Baldridge's remark makes clear. Rather, it seems for many if not most native Christians to have been a *practical* problem, a problem of practice. Without question the problem has been, for some, a wrenching theological dilemma, and doubtless increasingly so as more and more native people have attended to such problems in a manner that would be more recognizable to those of us who make a life's work of resolving contradictions and inconsistencies in our disciplined thinking and writing. But if Baldridge's widely quoted remark rings true, that is because for many native people the terms of the identity are configured in practice.

This shift to practice is not just theory-speak for its own sake. It will bring our interpretive language much closer to the ground on which native communities have engaged the Christian tradition in their lifeways. Because Ojibwe has no term that cleanly translates the modern western meaning of religion, it is revealing to inquire how Ojibwe people came to express the concept of Christianity when missionaries introduced it as a belief system.[33] The answer is key to our purposes here: the word in Ojibwe is *Anami'aawin*, prayer or praying, and those Ojibwes who identified as Christians called themselves by the related word *Anami'aajig*—those who pray. Actually the root word is a substantive form of the verb and could be rendered as "that which we pray" or "how we pray." What is significant here is the stress on the practice of prayer, not on its content, its object, or the system to which it refers.

Of course it is not simply just one of many ways of praying. It remains difficult to ascertain whether the term *Anami'aawin* had applied to other pre-Christian ritual forms of prayer prior to the coming of Christian missionaries, since the earliest Ojibwe language dictionaries were authored by missionaries themselves in the nineteenth century, but *Anami'aawin* was clearly no generic term for prayer, since it came to distinguish things Christian from things not-Christian. Presumably, it harked back to earliest seventeenth-century encounters with Jesuit missionaries. Hence *Anami'aajig*, those who pray, came to refer to those who affiliated with Christian groups, *Anami'aa-nagoma* to Christian songs or hymns, *Anami'aa-wiidigendiwin* to Christian marriage, and *Anami'aa-giizhigad* to the Sabbath day. But while one cannot say that this way of praying is just like any other way of praying, what

33. See Wilfred Cantwell Smith's famous treatment of the emergence of the modern Western notion of religion in *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985).

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counts here is that Christianity is not marked as a system or even a body of beliefs. In Ojibwe idiom, the term conscripted to refer to the Christian tradition refers itself to a practice, a way of praying.

The Ojibwe tradition is not unique in its practice orientation. Neither is it particularly revolutionary to claim here that practice is at the heart of Native American religiousness. As Sam Gill, William Powers, Gary Witherspoon, and many others have shown persuasively, indigenous traditions are fundamentally concerned with the transformative powers of performative language, art, and thought.[34] That is, when properly performed under the right conditions, ceremonies, songs, sounds, gestures, and dance steps do not merely give expression to the inner matters of feeling and meaning, but are believed capable of transforming the self, the community, and the cosmos. Here, the outer is not derivative of the inner, but potentially generative in its own right. Gill reflects on the broad implications for a decidedly text-oriented religious studies field:

> It seemed to me that the difficulty I had in approaching the study of Navajo prayer and religion was fundamentally a problem of the character of the data. I thought it was because Navajos do not write that I had to make allowances. . . . I now believe this is not the most fundamental issue. Rather it is our own interpretive emphases . . . on text at the expense of context; on code at the expense of behavior; on meaning and proposition at the expense of use, relevance, and effect. We have looked primarily to the authoritative basis for religious practice rather than to the immediate effects and powers of the performance of religious acts. In a sense we have denied that religious actions are of value when we have considered them principally as an encoding of some underlying system of meaning.[35]

To recognize the centrality of religious action, here by Gill and elsewhere by others, is valuable indeed. But it needs to be carried an important step further, for while Gill and others help us appreciate how performative utterances and gestures can work to transform the world through the suspension of historical time, we can also come to appreciate how religious practices often serve as resources for negotiating culture change in the realm of historical time, especially in colonizing circumstances. To Bourdieu, the power of language and

34. Sam Gill, *Sacred Words: A Study of Navajo Religion and Prayer* (Westport: Conn., Greenwood, 1981) and *Native American Religious Action: A Performance Approach to Religion* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1987); William K. Powers, *Sacred Language: The Nature of Supernatural Discourse in Lakota* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986); and Gary Witherspoon, *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1977).

35. Sam Gill, *Native American Religious Action*, 151.

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symbolic gestures may include an indigenous conviction about the raw power of their performance, but such performances do not take place in social and historical vacuums. One must also come to terms with the relative social power of the ones doing the performing. Because hegemony— and resistance to it—are more routinely exercised in and through the subtle cultural practices and beliefs that define what is real and of value in the world than through the conspicuous exercise of political or military force, practices come to be very powerful media for both domination and resistance. Here, "symbolic power" is the "power of constituting the given . . . of making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world, and thereby, action on the world and thus to the world itself."[36] An adequate understanding of Native American religious practices, the practice of Native American Christianity among them, must also take into account the relative power in the social realm of competing visions for defining the world.

How might the practices of *Anami'aawin*, or its equivalent in other native contexts, be seen as a medium for culture change rather than as a result of it? Putting practice first changes the question from "*What was missionary Christianity and how did it differ from the traditional religion it displaced?*" to "*What did native peoples make of Christianity?*" Here the ambiguity in the expression *make of* is intentional, for it conflates the verbs "to construe," "to evaluate," and "to do," mingling belief, value, and practice. Our interest will involve not only what Christian signs have meant to native people in translation, but what cultural work they have done in practice. To further demonstrate what I think is useful about this approach, allow me to return our attention to the example of Ojibwe hymn-singing.

To understand how Ojibwe hymns emerged from a missionary past that most Ojibwes associate with their dispossession to become emblematic, for some, of a distinctive Ojibwe identity, I looked first to the hymn texts. My late Ojibwe teacher, Larry Cloud Morgan, and I contrasted native language texts with English originals, in order to trace the workings of a theological sovereignty that we suspected had emerged from the sizeable translation gap between English and Ojibwe. We had assumed that the broad appeal of the hymns relied on the extent to which they offered distinctively Ojibwe meanings to the Christian tradition. We knew, for example, that it would be a far stretch in the Ojibwe language to convey fully the notion of *sin* as it exists in the texts of the English originals, since the Ojibwe worldview consid-

36. Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 170.

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ered the state of nature as one of ideal harmony and balance rather than as one of fundamental fallenness. To be sure, we found some intriguing nuances of meaning in the translations, but where we expected to find the hidden transcripts of subversive meanings, we found prayerful attempts to render the meanings of the original texts.

How, then, did Ojibwe hymns become something more than a musical expression of accommodation to the missionary agenda? To trace that story, we were directed beyond the hymn texts to the practice of singing them, from *translation of texts* to *ritualization of performances*, from considering the discursive meanings of Christianity to considering what Ojibwe people made of the tradition in their idiom of religious practice.

Historically, the real action began in the 1880s, when Minnesota's Ojibwe bands were prodded or coerced to relocate to the White Earth Reservation in the northwestern part of the state. A land that encompassed both the thick woods and wild-rice-rich lakes to which the Ojibwe's seasonal round was acclimated, as well as fertile prairie, White Earth was to be an experiment in cultural reengineering at the behest of the Episcopal mission and the Indian Bureau. Remarking on the life of their Ojibwe charges once relocated to White Earth, Episcopal missionaries wrote increasingly of a tradition of native hymnody which they found profoundly moving and notably regularized in performance. Reading these missionary documents in light of Catherine Bell's notion of ritualization, whereby communities make room for the extraordinary within ordinary actions through the outward and regularizing techniques of ritual practice, one can identify a distinctive social context of singing: discrete societies of singers led by respected elders; marked associations of the hymn repertory with funeral wakes, sickbeds, and other settings involving illness and grief; a consistent structure—strophic alternations of singing and ceremonial speech; and a distinctive performance tradition—slow, *a cappella* laments based more on the chanting of syllables than on the conveyance of discursive meaning.

That said, the missionary songs of course involved European tunes, and the absence of the drum was most conspicuous to people for whom the drum was pivotal to any traditional interchange with the spirits. In the reservation era, when so much hinged on one's reputation with missionaries and Indian agents who controlled resources needed to survive, hymn-singing mattered. Hymn-singing took its place beside a host of practices in everyday life on which missionaries focused energies in their epic attempt to remake a people and a culture. Those Protestants engaged in the civilizing mission tried to implant their conceptions of what was real and of value through a

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reformation of manners. Hymn-singing mattered for the same reasons that cultivating land, keeping Sabbath, wearing dresses, and cutting one's hair mattered. Missionaries welcomed hymn-singing. They also did their utmost to discipline it along with other inflections that Ojibwe *Anami'aajig* were making in the Christian tradition. Some worried that evening prayer meetings were eclipsing public worship in importance. Some sought to regularize the singing with accompaniment and musical training.

But on the field of culture, there was only so much missionaries could do to discipline native practice. Although missionaries boasted of how Ojibwe singing graced Sunday morning worship, their letters indicate that the music was truly at home elsewhere than the mission chapel. Its soul developed at the margins of the reservation, where the *Anami'aajig* gathered almost nightly to eat, sing, and piece together a collective living based on traditional values of reciprocity. Hymns accompanied every community gathering and set the tempo for a new way of life on the reservation. Firmly rooted in traditions of kinship, communal property, and subsistence, the *Anami'aajig* nonetheless adapted to the demands of what amounted to refugee life on a shrinking land base that could no longer support a seasonal round.

In these tight confines, ritualized practices began to accomplish what translation never could. On the one hand, ritualized practices folded the missionary songs into an integrative way of life. On the other, these practices helped cast the dramatic changes to that way of life, necessary as they were to keep it viable on the reservation, in the familiar light of Ojibwe tradition, ensuring a sense of continuity and integrity. Ritualized hymn-singing here became a way to render Christianity as *Anami'aawin* and thus to integrate *Anami'aawin* into an Ojibwe way of life. Practices could begin to do this cultural work because, unlike discursive thought, they were remarkably capable of holding the contradictions of reservation life in tension, not necessarily resolving those contradictions, but making room for a variety of meanings to be at play at once.

This kind of cultural work had implications over time as well. A continuity of form of hymn-singing can be traced through the twentieth century to the present day, but amid changing circumstances, Ojibwe singers have put the tradition to new uses, new meanings. With the devastating loss of Ojibwe as a functional language in the wake of English-only boarding school education, the sung language of the hymns has been renewed with accrued meanings. They are no longer simply chanted syllables, but daring expressions of the Ojibwe language. Nonetheless, because so few who hear the songs at wakes are fluent in this language, the associations are unspecific. They are

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experienced not so much as detailed enumerations of the principles of Ojibwe religious thought as resonances of an indigenous language profoundly connected with the land and with Anishinaabe peoplehood and powerfully associated with evidence of cultural survival when survival was not supposed to happen.

The integrative posture toward *Anami'aawin* revealed through the story of Ojibwe hymn-singing was thoroughly consistent with an Ojibwe approach to the religious. Ignatia Broker tells of her own Ojibwe grandmother's return after a season of missionary education at the White Earth boarding school. The young girl was instructed by her own grandfather that the point was to integrate the Christian teachings and traditional Ojibwe teachings: "The [missionaries] do not know what we believe and they will not learn what we believe. If they did, it would indeed be much easier. But you must remember all the good our people have known and taught. Compare it to what you are now learning. Do not be ashamed of the good that we have taught and do not be ashamed of the good to be learned. Our way of life is changing, and there is much we must accept. But let it be only the good. And we must always remember the old ways. We must pass them on to our children and grandchildren so they too will recognize the good in the new ways."[37]

If one listens for the sometimes subtle ways that the practices of *Anami'aawin* integrated the Christian tradition into this religious idiom, one appreciates how missionaries and their intentions were not the only forces of agency in this cultural exchange. Missionaries erected boundaries around Christianity as a belief system and tried to maintain those boundaries by disciplining the meanings of Christianity among Ojibwe *Anami'aajig*, but the practice of *Anami'aawin* did not always recognize those boundaries and served, on occasion, to subvert them. For some Ojibwes, the integrative practice of *Anami'aawin* was enough to claim the Christian tradition as their own. The practice of *Anami'aawin* was an instance of neither pure resistance nor pure accommodation, but a real world mix of the two in the struggle of a people for whom *making meaning* and *making do* had become part and parcel of the same religious project.

I recognize that, to many, my remarks may sound far too hopeful about the historical agency of native Christians. Indeed the recent studies on which I have depended have also disclosed important ways that Christianity continues to be a colonizing force in the experience of native people, a source for continued dispossession rather than empowerment, a force for fragmentation rather than integration. Indeed, for

37. Ignatia Broker, *Night Flying Woman* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1983), 94.

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many, it has become the religion—the mutually exclusive system of belief—that missionaries sought to make it, one which tolerates no integration with indigenous traditions.

That, too, is part of the story. But it is, I submit, not some inevitable unfolding of native Christianity. Rather, it has to do with the contingencies of a history of colonization that shaped and still shape native Christianities. Ojibwe Christians struggled, and many still struggle, to integrate *Anami'aawin* into a traditional way of life. This has become an increasingly difficult thing to do, given the political, economic, and ecclesiastical structures that constrain native communities from determining for themselves how tradition will incorporate change. In an ironic sense, perhaps these difficulties make the practice of *Anami'aawin* today an even bolder exercise of religious sovereignty.

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