H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bonnie Sue Lewis. *Creating Christian Indians: Native Clergy in the Presbyterian Church.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003. xix + 281 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-3516-8.

Reviewed by David Daily (Department of Religion and Philosophy, University of the Ozarks)
Published on H-AmRel (July, 2004)

Re-Evaluating Missions to the Indians

This book tells the story of over fifty Nez Perce and Dakota clergy in the Presbyterian Church between 1835 and 1935. Other historical accounts of Native Christianity have depended heavily upon missionary and ethnographic sources.[1] By contrast, Lewis's work is based, to a considerable extent, on English-language correspondence and church records written by Indians themselves. It draws, in her words, "from an Indian history penned in an Indian hand" (p. xiii).

Lewis uses this remarkable set of sources to argue that missions to the Nez Perce and Dakotas were effective and constructive, not because Indian converts turned out quite as missionaries had wished, but because they found ways to preserve their Native identities within the Christian faith. Missionaries might have interpreted Christianity and Native cultures in oppositional ways, but that does not mean scholars should, especially in the face of evidence of distinctly indigenous forms of Christianity. Lewis argues that if we shed our static and ahistorical preconceptions of "Christianity" and "Indian," we may yet see signs of missionary success in places "where Indians remained Indians and yet became Christians" (p. xii).

The book's two-fold focus on the Nez Perce and Dakotas helps to show how Native ordination provided the key to cross-cultural evangelism. After initial failures, Presbyterian missions gained ground in the 1860s and 1870s when the Nez Perce of Oregon territory turned to Christianity to deal with land loss, and when Dakota war prisoners in Minnesota used the new faith to address their own social crisis. In these two cases, Presbyterian missionaries did not co-opt the revivals to elevate themselves as spiritual overlords. Instead, they promoted the ordination of Native clergy as leaders of their own churches. For the Nez Perce mission, the driving factor was necessity: the two missionaries in the field, Sue and Kate McBeth, were female and therefore could not be ordained themselves. As a result, they directed their energies toward schooling Nez Perce men so that they could pass ordination exams and take charge of tribal churches. For the Dakotas, missionary support for Native ordination stemmed from the sympathy and understanding of John Williamson, who, as the son of missionaries, had grown up among the Dakotas and learned their language from birth. Relatively free from the anti-Indian biases of other missionaries, Williamson had no qualms about encouraging autonomous Dakota churches.

Native clergy in both tribes took advantage of this opening to adapt Christianity to the needs and purposes of their communities. Lewis describes some of the points of contact between Native and Christian cultures that made Christianity a viable source for spiritual renewal. She explains how church membership fell along the lines of existing band identifications, in effect resisting federal policies that were hostile to tribal social structures. At the same time, ordinations reproduced Native leadership patterns, which were based primarily on skills in public speech and conflict mediation. She also shows how the interests of race, gender, and class converged in the sometimes tense relationships between missionaries and the clergy they ordained.

One possible weakness in Lewis's account has to do with her argument that Nez Perce and Dakota Christians saw the new faith as an extension of tribal values and rituals. The problem is not that this claim seems improbable, but that the connections are sometimes vague. For example, Lewis says that the Nez Perce and Dakotas would have been interested in the missionaries' message because they were "predisposed … toward any who came to them speaking of or representing the holy" (pp. 4-5). But readers are not told enough to know what the "holy" meant in these two particular tribes. On such issues, Lewis's account should be supplemented with other materials, such as Larry Cebula's recent book on the spirit world of the Plateau Indians.[2]

Also, Lewis argues that Christian Indians saw their

own values of hospitality and charity in the Christian Bible, but we hear little on how they drew those values out of scripture. This is especially striking when missionaries frequently railed against Native forms of charity such as the "giveaway," because it contravened their efforts to instill Western values of private property and self-sufficiency. Lewis's book indicates that Christian Indians clearly saw things in the Bible that transcended the cultural trappings of the missionaries' gospel, but more detailed attention to Native uses of scripture would have helped to round out Lewis's narrative.

More broadly, this book may, for some readers, gloss over the harsher negations of tribal practice involved in conversion to Christianity. The division between Christian and non-Christian Indians cut close to the core of tribal notions of Indian identity. And yet, as Lewis recognizes, to focus inordinately on those negations would rob the central characters in this book of their remarkable achievement. Against the odds, they created vibrant and enduring institutions of Native Christianity. Their story deserves a hearing, and Lewis deserves credit for telling it well.

Notes

[1]. William G. McLoughlin, *Champions of the Cherokees: Evan and John B. Jones* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), and *The Cherokees and Christianity, 1794-1839* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); Clara Sue Kidwell, *Choctaws and Missionaries in Mississippi, 1818-1918* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1995); and Michael D. McNally, *Ojibwe Singers: Hymns, Grief, and a Native Culture in Motion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[2]. Larry Cebula, *Plains Indians and the Quest for Spiritual Power, 1700-1850* (Lincoln: Nebraska, 2003).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: David Daily. Review of Lewis, Bonnie Sue, *Creating Christian Indians: Native Clergy in the Presbyterian Church.* H-AmRel, H-Net Reviews. July, 2004.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9612

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.