
Indigenous Engagement with Christianity: A Review Essay

Covered in this review:

Tolly Bradford and Chelsea Horton, eds. *Mixed Blessings: Indigenous Encounters with Christianity in Canada*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017. 236 pp. ISBN: 9780774829403.
<https://www.ubcpress.ca/mixed-blessings>

Timothy P. Foran. *Defining Métis: Catholic Missionaries and the Idea of Civilization in Northwestern Saskatchewan 1845-1898*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2017. 240 pp. ISBN: 978-0-88755-774-3. <https://uofmpress.ca/books/detail/defining-metis>

Julius Rubin. *Perishing Heathens: Stories of Protestant Missionaries and Christian Indians in Antebellum America*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. 276 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4962-0187-4. <http://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/university-of-nebraska-press/9781496201874/>

In an essay titled “Rethinking Edward Ahenakew’s Intellectual Legacy,” Tasha Beeds, an Indigenous Studies scholar of Cree-Métis origin, resists scholarship’s dismissal of Christian practice among First Nations individuals merely as evidence of assimilation, arguing instead that a person could both adopt Christianity and maintain strong allegiance to an Indigenous culture. She writes specifically about Edward Ahenakew, “one of the first nēhiyaw [i.e. Cree] people in the post-reserve era to bridge the Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds in terms of language, spirituality, and politics” (120). His contributions to Cree society are, according to Beeds, often discounted because of his commitment to Christianity (121). Without dismissing Christianity’s involvement in colonization, Beeds asserts Ahenakew’s powerful ability to use his experiences as a Christian for the benefit of the Cree people while still retaining his nēhiyaw identity.

Featured in the edited collection *Mixed Blessings: Indigenous Encounters with Christianity in Canada* edited by Tolly Bradford and Chelsea Horton, Beeds is one of a number of contemporary scholars reinvestigating the complexities of Indigenous interactions with Christianity as part of the necessary and challenging task of decolonizing academia. In recent decades in both Canada and the United States historians, literary critics, and theologians have indicted Christians as perpetrators of colonial violence, identifying Indigenous people as their victims. This assessment, vital for decolonization, is in many ways long overdue, preceded by years of denial of wrongdoing by both church and state and celebration of narratives that diminish Indigenous perspectives. However, some contemporary scholarship, like that produced by Beeds, complicates the conversation, considering the harm perpetrated by Christians alongside possibilities of Indigenous acceptance and/or subversive use of Christianity. *Mixed Blessings* co-editors Bradford and Horton and *Defining Métis* author Timothy Foran have created book-length studies that creatively interrogate settler and missionary source material and consider “Indigenous agency” (Bradford & Horton 5) as the First Nations of Canada interacted with Christianity. In *Perishing Heathens*, Julius Rubin likewise contributes to the scholarly project of re-examining Indigenous engagements with Christianity, but he pairs indictment of the colonial impulse of antebellum American missionaries with sympathy for early evangelical Christians, a combination that may trouble some readers. Read together, these three books

function like a primer on the project of decolonizing scholarly perspectives, evidencing the possibilities and pitfalls involved in studying often tense and ambiguous moments of interreligious and cross-cultural encounter. This review offers an overview of each text and then highlights ways in which all three situate themselves in relation to Indigenous perspectives, address the difficulty of accessing Indigenous history through archival sources, and contribute something significant to the field of Indigenous Studies.

Mixed Blessings is the strongest of the three in terms of careful framing, breadth of coverage, and the dynamism of a collection grown directly out of dialogue. Bradford and Horton present an interdisciplinary study that spans multiple centuries, allowing space for both historical and theological considerations of First Nations interactions with Christianity. Contributors to the volume first participated in a workshop entitled “Religious Encounter and Exchange in Aboriginal Canada,” and the resulting responsiveness of many of the contributors to one another creates a sense of community and relationship when their essays are read as a collection. Divided into three sections that focus on “community, individual, and contemporary sites of encounter” respectively (6), *Mixed Blessings* progresses from detached to increasingly personal analyses and also moves forward in chronology from investigations of the 18th century all the way through the present day. To some extent, all nine essays consider the political implications of Christianity’s arrival among the First Nations of Canada, acknowledge the transnational context of encounters with Christianity, and take “seriously the role of spiritual experiences and knowledge” (7).

Bradford and Horton acknowledge that Canada is only just grappling with Christianity’s involvement in colonization, most especially “the traumatic histories of violence associated with Christian missionaries, churches, and the residential schools” (5). Both the workshop and collection of essays move the dialogue beyond uncomplicated indictment of Christianity toward privileging “Indigenous agency” while questioning “singular stories of powerful churches and powerless Indigenous subjects” (5). In the conclusion, the editors call for an investigation of “Indigenous-Christian interactions” that “balance[s] the harsh realities of colonialism with the possibility that Christianity had, and continues to hold, deep spiritual and political meaning for some Indigenous people” (207). Without Bradford’s and Horton’s thoughtful framing remarks acknowledging the potential dangers of exploring First Nations acceptance of Christianity, the collection might be perceived as moving too quickly past the egregious intertwining of Christianity with colonization in favor of taking a more positive look at historical experiences between First Nations individuals and the Christian religion. But the editors are careful to acknowledge their precarious position between long-overdue acknowledgment of Canada’s dark past and more complex investigation of the nuances of Indigenous religious identity and experience throughout the missionary era. Without trying to oversimplify the diverse perspectives represented by their contributors, Bradford and Horton make it clear that they compiled this book with a “decolonizing spirit” in the hope of catalyzing “ongoing innovative investigation” of First Nations experiences with Christianity (3).

All contributors to the volume grapple with the problem of access to early First Nations voices and cultures, given that most source material was produced by settlers. Section One, “Communities in Encounter,” highlights this dilemma through three complementary essays that reinterpret archival sources in order to understand Indigenous religious practices as a form of political and social power. Both Timothy Pearson and Elizabeth Elbourne use knowledge of specific First Nations cultures to infer how Indigenous communities might interpret the

observations recorded by Euro-Canadian missionaries. For example, Pearson examines First Nations religious rituals of the 18th century, reading between the lines of missionary documents to construct interpretations that privilege Indigenous social and spiritual values. Elbourne's study dovetails nicely with Pearson's, focusing specifically on Anglicanism and how its practice, texts, and symbols were used by both Euro-Canadians and First Nations people to form and break political alliances, to affirm communal identity, and to express obligation or resistance to other communities. While both of these writers depend entirely on archival sources, Amanda Fehr uses a combination of Euro-Canadian historical documents and Indigenous ethnographic sources. This difference is possible largely because Fehr focuses on a more recent subject, a 1930s public memorial featuring a cross erected by members of the Stó:lō community. Fehr provocatively interprets the cross as an authentic expression of Stó:lō beliefs and resistance to government encroachment, not as evidence of missionary influence (73). Throughout her article, Fehr acknowledges that, even with ethnographic sources, the religious and political histories she attempts to piece together are ambiguous and partial at best. All three scholars in this section read their sources creatively in order to maximize their limited access to earlier First Nations perspectives.

The remaining two sections continue this theme of seeking access to and understanding of Indigenous perspectives. "Individuals in Encounter" features studies of the lives of missionary wife Eliza Field Jones, architect of the 1885 Métis rebellion Louis Riel, and Cree leader Edward Ahenakew. "Contemporary Encounters" concludes the volume with three dynamically written essays on present day interreligious negotiations. Sipiwe Dube's theoretical analysis questions whether Christianity's prominent involvement in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada is productive. Denise Nadeau offers an insightful and practical guide for decolonizing any classroom in which faculty teach Indigenous traditions or knowledge. Carmen Lansdowne's essay is definitively more personal than those in the rest of the collection: the second of only two Indigenous contributors in the volume, Lansdowne writes an autoethnography, an analysis focusing on herself, the researcher, as the essay's subject. Significantly, Lansdowne reflects on her experiences researching First Nations Christians who evangelized her own ancestral village (193). She makes a strong case for integrating the personal with the academic, especially when investigating Indigenous tradition, experience, and knowledge.

Coeditors Bradford and Horton acknowledge that the majority of voices in the collection, with the exception only of Tasha Beeds and Carmen Lansdowne, are those of "settler heritage" (206). While this is a weakness, the volume's primary strength lies in the ability of the workshop and the written work to sustain in-depth provocative dialogue between scholars with often competing methodologies. This type of collaborative dialogue produces a study that is both intellectually rigorous and heartfelt, a combined effort from multiple disciplinary perspectives to decolonize and complicate existing approaches to First Nations encounters with Christianity. Marked by tension and depth, *Mixed Blessings* is timely, bold, and sensitive.

Timothy Foran's *Defining Métis: Catholic Missionaries and the Idea of Civilization in Northwestern Saskatchewan 1845-1898* is much narrower in scope but no less considered in its approach and organization. In contrast to *Mixed Blessings'* coverage of First Nations encounters with Christianity from the 18th century to the present, *Defining Métis* offers a "micro-history," an intensely focused investigation of the 19th century Catholic mission called Saint John Baptiste, at

Île-à-la-Crosse. Through creative historical analysis and careful structuring, Foran offers a fascinating, instructive, and decolonizing exploration of this precise but significant slice of Canadian and First Nations history.

Instead of focusing his analysis on the Métis themselves, Foran studies the lives and correspondence of the Catholic missionaries who evangelized them, thereby centralizing the problem of access to First Nations perspectives. More specifically, he studies the development and use of the term “métis,” suggesting that historians have given too much credence to Catholic missionary perceptions of the Métis that originally portrayed them as faithful Catholics and later as a once faithful population now vulnerable to corruption and in need of reform (2, 114). While his focus is on the missionaries, Foran’s study shares the decolonizing spirit of *Mixed Blessings*. He differentiates himself from historians who have traditionally placed great trust in records kept by religious officials without considering that the missionaries’ “origins, education, affiliations, and clerical status” would influence those very records (3). Foran notes a change in scholarship, a growing skepticism of most missionary writings but a persistent trust in a specific set of records including censuses and logs of baptisms, marriages, and burials (3). Using newly available archival sources, Foran sets out to interrogate the record keepers themselves, specifically the Oblates, laypeople or clergy devoted to serving the Catholic Church but not as monks, friars, or nuns. He ultimately concludes that “the Oblates’ revision of the term *métis* was as much a product of disruption in their apostolate as it was a reflection of objective change in an historical Métis population” (118). His study complicates existing histories and challenges scholars to move beyond overly simplistic understandings of the Métis and the missionaries, to explore the complexities of both Métis culture and Catholic identity and experience.

The complexity of this volume is impressive and effective. Foran divides his study into an introduction, four chapters, a brief conclusion, and an appendix of maps that are especially helpful if consulted while reading the chapters. The chapters are dense and extremely detailed. Of the 229 page book, 76 pages are devoted to notes. Still, Foran structures the text to make this micro-history as accessible as possible. Each chapter focuses on a specific aspect of Saint Jean Baptiste: the Catholic network supporting it, its relationship to the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC), the operation of a residential school on the premises, and the use of the term “métis” by the Oblates who ran the mission. Read consecutively, each chapter builds on the previous one. By the end of the volume, a reader can understand relationships between the availability of Oblates, the influx of Euro-Canadian settlers south of Île-à-la-Crosse, HBC’s altering trade routes, and Oblate perception of Métis religious beliefs.

In many ways, chapter three, “Oblates and the Beginnings of Residential Education,” is most pertinent for scholars interested in Métis experiences at the mission. It closely examines the residential school established by the Oblates and the Grey Nuns. Not only does Foran trace the ebb and flow of the school as it coincides with the rise and fall of the mission and changes in the HBC, he also offers original source material that describes, in startling language, Oblate attitudes toward the plan of civilizing Indigenous people. Here is where readers see, intimately and troublingly, a religious community’s commitment to forceful assimilation. Foran notes that historians have traditionally focused on residential schools that opened after the treaties of 1877. These same historians have often asserted that Catholic missionaries who cooperated with the government did not fully believe in the program of assimilation. Foran’s detailed attention to the Saint John Baptiste mission and school demonstrates that these particular Oblates vigorously

pursued assimilation even without government oversight or support (65-66). This is all the more reason to question their seemingly empirical observations and categorizations of the Métis.

Though Foran's study focuses on the missionaries rather than on the Métis, he makes a significant contribution to Indigenous Studies. His methodical and detailed attention to the historical record and those who wrote it creates space to question the way scholars interpret histories constructed from these records. Foran provides a rigorously detailed, well-organized, and insightful study of changing Oblate attitudes toward this particular group of First Nations people.

In *Perishing Heathens: Stories of Protestant Missionaries and Christian Indians in Antebellum America* Julius Rubin holds a magnifying glass up to the lives of early settler evangelicals and Native American converts. As a historical sociologist, Rubin explores individuals, both Native and non-native, many of whom are underrepresented in the historical record. The book emphasizes the melancholic nature of early American evangelicalism and its failure to bring about widespread Native conversion. Rubin appears to have three primary goals: to understand and honor the early American evangelical missionary spirit and the individuals who committed their lives to it, to identify the tension between early evangelical Christianity and Native American cultures, and to wonder about the effectiveness of such a missionary spirit by looking at its shortcomings.

Like Foran and the contributors to *Mixed Blessings*, Rubin acknowledges the insufficiency of access to Indigenous experiences in the historical record. For example, in the preface he attempts to piece together the life story of Ann Cornelius, of whom no record exists except a tombstone labeling her "an Indian girl" (xi). Because of his focus exclusively on Christian perspectives, Rubin turns to written "religious intelligence" (xx) rather than oral tradition. He consults mission records, diaries, memoirs, letters, and reports produced by missionaries and Native converts. Though he acknowledges colonial and Christian biases among his sources and makes an effort to understand the incongruities between Native and Christian worldviews, he also expresses sympathy for the missionaries whose devotionism took the form of intense and often isolating self-examination, heightened awareness of and anxiety about death, and a fervent desire to build the kingdom of God by converting the "heathen" into followers of Christ (12-13). Rubin emphasizes the difficulties faced by missionaries and their converts, demonstrating throughout the entirety of the text that the lives of antebellum American evangelicals were often marked not by successful conversions and faithful long-term service but by suffering, illness, debt, and loss. Because of this emphasis, Rubin foregrounds Christian perspectives in archival sources.

Rubin's analysis of the antebellum evangelical missionary spirit is problematic from an Indigenous Studies perspective because it functions in many ways as a eulogy for that spirit. In the preface he announces his intention to "awaken in contemporary readers a sociological and historical imagination — the capacity to engage with empathy the lived experiences of missionaries and Christian Indians from past times" (xxii). This is an admirable goal, challenging readers to more deeply understand the experiences of others, and Rubin's enthusiasm as a sociologist who wants to reclaim narratives of individuals from the past is evident. However, this enthusiasm is at times unbridled and, at least for this reader, resembles admiration. At the end of his introduction, Rubin describes both the missionaries and Native converts as living with "heroic, tragic, and melodramatic fervor" and asserts that "their stories merit retelling to remind us of how evangelical Protestant culture helped shape American identity" (22). He frequently

identifies a “need” to remember. For example, in the preface he writes, “We *need* to reflect on what we share in common with those who forged a distinctive evangelical American identity and what we have lost” (emphasis added, xxii). Calling the missionaries “true believers,” Rubin emphatically addresses readers in the introduction: “we *need* to view the men and women called to domestic Indian missions as representative lives who forged [. . . an] identity founded upon religious values” (emphasis added, 4). While Rubin does highlight the failures of the missionary endeavor, in the introduction he chooses to punctuate the “meaning and purpose [early Christians found] in the fulfillment of religious values” (22). He appears to honor the missionary spirit adopted by both settlers and Native converts even as he purposefully identifies fatal flaws within that spirit, such as complicity in colonization. This contrast produces tension throughout *Perishing Heathens* and will render the book insufficient for some readers and challenging to others.

Rubin’s indictment of Christian participation in forced assimilation, though accompanied by an insistence on remembering early evangelicalism’s contribution to American identity, is present throughout the text. For example, at the outset of chapter two, Rubin notes the seemingly inseparable link between missionary endeavors and manifest destiny. Likewise, in chapter five, perhaps his strongest and most tightly organized of six chapters, he explores how the Euro-American plan of civilization permanently altered Cherokee culture specifically by examining the lives of two Cherokee Christian women, Catherine Brown and Sister Margaret Ann. Taking up the question of cultural identity, he wonders to what extent each woman replaced or combined her Cherokee ways with her newfound faith. Elsewhere he acknowledges the starkness of evangelical life compared to the vibrant and communal experiences had within many Native cultures. He asserts that Native experiences with religious devotion were marked by intense suffering and often accompanied by the political motivation of securing survival for Native people as Christianity and Euro-Americans encroached upon them. Multiple times throughout the text, Rubin evidences his understanding of Christianity as antagonistic to Native Americans. This means that his call for readers to empathize with the missionaries remains in constant tension with the historical realities of Christianity’s role in colonization.

The extensive attention Rubin gives to women like Catherine Brown and Sister Margaret Ann who devoted themselves to evangelicalism but have not received much attention is one of the book’s primary strengths. Throughout the text, he argues that the lives of evangelical women were harder than those of their male missionary counterparts because of the physical toll of childrearing and the constraints of early gender roles. Sister Margaret Ann’s story, in particular, highlights the relationship between Christianity and gender roles in Indigenous communities. Rubin identifies a “benevolent religious paternalism” (150) that involved white male missionaries pressuring Sister Ann to marry in order to pursue her religious life. Sympathetic to Sister Ann’s reluctance to accede to the missionaries’ plan, Rubin notes that she was newly a widow of an abusive husband and was just beginning to experience “relative autonomy” (154). While stories of other women punctuate many of the chapters, chapter three focuses almost exclusively on the sacrifices made and disappointments experienced by early female missionaries. Rubin provides a compelling critical analysis of how enmeshed the concept of “true womanhood” was with the missionary spirit and articulates how, surprisingly, some early 19th century women sought out lives as missionaries so that they could have public influence disallowed to women who led private domestic lives. However, maintaining his focus on the melancholy nature of missionary lives, Rubin records in tragic detail countless stories of female

missionaries whose high expectations met with “disease, disability, discouragement, and death” (85-86).

Though complicated by sympathetic treatment of the early missionary spirit, Rubin’s book makes a valuable contribution to Indigenous Studies through his detailed investigations of individual life stories that illustrate how this antebellum evangelical worldview influenced the lives of Native converts to Christianity. Perhaps his most significant contribution, though, is to the study of American religious history as he illuminates the fervent but tragic lives of early missionaries who participated in westward expansion by passionately pressuring Native Americans to adopt civilization as a hallmark of Christian belief. While Rubin calls readers to a deeper understanding of “how evangelical Protestant culture helped shape American identity” (22), he simultaneously documents the failure of that early Protestantism to accomplish its goals. He attributes these failures to a mismatch between expectation and reality, the disparity between the intense individualism of early Christian piety and the call to evangelize others, the harsh conditions of life in early America, and an insistence upon a Europeanized Christianity that was oppositional to cultures and beliefs of Native peoples.

The three volumes featured in this review offer readers multiple models for what a journey toward decolonization looks like in academia. In *Perishing Heathens*, it looks like paying careful attention to little-known archival sources and examining the failures of the missionary spirit. Rubin’s text also evidences the tension inherent in sympathizing with both white missionaries who married evangelism with civilization and the Native Americans negatively affected by such colonization. In *Defining Métis*, decolonization looks like a re-examination of settler source material long considered empirical and authoritative. And in *Mixed Blessings*, decolonization takes the form of dynamic interdisciplinary dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars all of whom confess a desire to more deeply understand First Nations experiences with Christianity outside of a colonial framework. *Mixed Blessings*, *Defining Métis*, and *Perishing Heathens* all move scholarly dialogue past mere indictment of the colonizer’s religion toward the possibilities of Indigenous refusal, acceptance, adaptation, and politically motivated use of Christianity.

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