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Mixed Blessings. Indigenous Encounters with Christianity in Canada

Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016.
236 pages, \$95.00, ISBN (hardcover): 9780774829397

TOLLY BRADFORD AND CHELSEA HORTON (EDS.)

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This volume comes at a troubling historical moment in the relationship between Christian churches and the First Nations of Canada. The 2015 report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRCC) has brought into public view a generations-long project of cultural genocide, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, and criminal neglect in government-mandated 'Indian residential schools,' the majority of which were operated by Anglican or Catholic churches. The findings of the TRCC report have served to polarize opinions about the role of Christianity in Indigenous culture and history, emboldening those who see Christianity as a destructive and homogenizing force, and putting on the defensive those who seek to maintain a sense of pride in Christian churches and their continuing role in First Nations communities.

This essay collection asserts that the relationship between Christianity and Indigenous Canadians defies easy categorization, demonstrating instead that the role of Christianity in Indigenous life has long been subject to complex and contingent historical circumstances. This book is comprised of nine essays, which the editors have arranged semi-chronologically into three sections: "Communities in Encounter," "Individuals in Encounter," and "Contemporary Encounters." Taken together, these essays provide a snapshot of the current state of this field in Canada. Each of these essays

demonstrate the importance of Christianity within diverse Indigenous cultures, as well as Christian churches' longstanding investment in destructive processes of colonialism and cultural imperialism. These contradictory roles make for difficult, fascinating history.

The first three essays approach this subject by focusing on the relationship between Christianity and Indigenous communities, particularly the ways in which Aboriginal groups have linked Christianity with politics and power. Timothy Pearson's opening essay examines early missionary encounters in the colonial northeast, and argues that both Indigenous and French people used religious rituals to negotiate social and cultural differences. Continuing with the focus on colonial power relations, Elizabeth Elbourne's "Managing Alliance, Negotiating Christianity," demonstrates how Mohawk people linked Anglicanism to British imperial politics during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and Amanda Fehr's "A Subversive Sincerity" tells the story of a coastal Salish community who erected a large Christian monument to assert territorial rights during the early 20th century. The latter two essays in particular demonstrate the deep linkages between religion and power. Indigenous people on opposite ends of the continent understood that their commitment to particular forms of Christianity could have a significant impact on their ability to proclaim and maintain their own sovereignty. Historians of colonialism and imperialism should take note of this crucial insight.

The book's middle section provides critical reassessments of three individuals whose lives epitomized the ambivalent relationship between Christianity and Indigenous identity. Cecilia Morgan's "'The Joy My Heart Has Experienced'" departs from other essays by focusing on a non-Indigenous figure named Eliza Field Jones, a British woman who married a Mississauga missionary and overcame the ostracism of her peers to become a valued community member and humanitarian advocate among the Mississauga.

In the next essay, Jean-François Bélisle and Nicole St-Onge provide a somewhat radical rethinking of Métis icon Louis Riel, arguing that his vision for his people's 1885 Resistance against Canadian expansion entailed a commitment to a strain of hyper-conservative Catholicism known as ultramontanist. To Louis Riel, Métis independence was inseparable from this project of "Catholic counterrevolution" (p. 108). Placing Riel's religious writings at the center of their analysis, these authors offer a potentially groundbreaking reassessment of a key figure in Canadian history, but one that would benefit from a lengthier treatment. Rounding out the middle section, Tasha Beeds's fantastic "Rethinking Edward Ahanakew's Intellectual Legacy," reexamines the life of an early 20th-century Anglican minister and Cree leader. Referencing Cree epistemologies and cultural practices, Beeds deconstructs previous historians' facile depictions of Ahanakew as "torn between two worlds," and demonstrates that his career as an Anglican in fact demonstrated his commitment to Cree tradition and community. These three studies marvelously demonstrate the key themes of this volume, and provide a lesson in the potential of biography and microhistory to illuminate complex ideas in accessible ways.

The final section—"Contemporary Encounters"—explores divergent aspects of Christianity in contemporary Indigenous life. First, a provocative essay by Sipiwe Dube outlines a crucial tension in the aftermath of the TRCC Report, in that churches have been cast in the dual roles of perpetrator and conciliator. How to resolve this tension is an open question for those seeking religious and national reconciliation. Next, in "Decolonizing Religious Encounter?," Denise Nadeau reflects on her experiences teaching a course on Indigenous Traditions, Women, and Colonialism in a religion department. Nadeau's commitment to decolonization through practice is impressive and instructive in its own right, but as an historian, I was left wanting clearer guidance on how one might incorporate such methodologies within

other disciplines. These are followed by an uneven final note: theologian Carmen Lansdowne's "Autoethnography That Breaks Your Heart," in which the author reflects on the lack of primary sources available for her original paper proposal and advocates for centering contemporary and 'subjective' Indigenous voices in historical scholarship. This is a thought-provoking intervention. However, several aspects of Lansdowne's essay require more fulsome analysis, for example her statements that existing historical scholarship relies on "an essentialized relationship of 'conquered peoples' versus 'imperial powers'" (p. 184), and that there has been a "general failure of the discipline of history to see power as problematic" (p. 193). The first statement is particularly jarring given that the current generation of scholarship in Indigenous history overwhelmingly emphasizes contingency and Indigenous agency.

In sum, by presenting a variety of voices and methodological approaches this essay collection more than accomplishes its stated goals of providing a 'reconnaissance' of the field and suggesting avenues for future scholarship. Upon finishing *Mixed Blessings*, one cannot help but feel that there is much left to explore in the troubling and fascinating relationship between Indigeneity and Christianity in Canada.

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