Native Apostles: Black and Indian Missionaries in the British Atlantic World.


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For many British (and later, American) clergy and missionaries, the goal of Christianizing Africans and Indians was to bring their potential converts out of savagery and make them more civilized.\(^1\) Anglican missionary Morgan Godwyn elucidated this point in his 1680 treatise, *The Negros and Indians Advocate, Suing for their Admission into the Church*, in which he promoted the conversion of indigenous people and slaves. It was a position echoed by many future missionaries.\(^2\) Although the writings of Phillis Wheatley and others stood in repudiation of the belief that Africans and Indians lacked the capacity for European-style literacy and creativity, widespread skepticism persisted.

Even those who favored converting indigenous people and slaves often expressed doubt about the capacity of non-Europeans for genuine conversion.\(^3\) Part of their incredulity was related to the success of evangelicals among African American and Native American communities. Unlike more orthodox sects, which expected extensive study of their converts, evangelicals emphasized the need for a personal conversion experience. Literacy, in the European sense of the term, was not required for conversion.

Owing at least in part to the belief that Indians and Africans lacked the aptitude for deep and complex thought, many missionaries fully expected their students passively to accept their tutelage. But missionary work among Native Americans and Africans took some unexpected turns. Instead of being content with the veneer of Englishness that some missionaries intended, converts created knowledge systems that, while incorporating

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some of what they learned from missionaries, were of their own making. Much as Nancy Shoemaker demonstrated in *A Strange Likeness*, cultural conflict did not preclude finding common ground, allowing non-European pupils to adopt religious structures that made sense in the context of their own cultures.

*English Letters and Indian Literacies*, by Hilary Wyss, is among the latest contributions to scholarly discussions of the many syncretic cultural formations that resulted from European and Native American interactions. Focusing on Native American missionary schools in late eighteenth-century New England, Wyss describes one form of cross-cultural contact: the creation of new literacies. The word *literacy* is thorny in the context of discussing non-European cultures. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as in many traditional scholarly treatments of the literacies of subaltern people, literacy contrasted with orality much as civilized contrasted with savage. Wyss’s major contribution is her discussion of how historians might approach the idea of literacy without privileging the intellectual cultures of Europeans. Rather than thinking about literacy in the singular, Wyss encourages scholars to consider many different types of literacies, or knowledge systems.

In her reading of Indians’ engagement with Christianity, Wyss differentiates between “Readerly Indians” (35), who were more passive recipients of the evangelists’ messages, and “Writerly Indians” (35), who were more analytical and therefore more resistant to being mere receptacles for missionaries’ “largesse” (70). As an example of Readerly Indians, Wyss points to students at Moor’s Indian Charity School, founded by Eleazor Wheelock in Lebanon, Connecticut in 1754. Native students at Wheelock’s school were taught to copy Bible verses and psalms. Their elegantly copied passages were then sent to wealthy and influential New Englanders as evidence of the school’s success in civilizing its students. It was the presentation, rather than the students’ grasp of the content, that mattered. Requiring students to analyze biblical verses, or to become Writerly Indians, was discouraged. What is particularly fascinating is that Wheelock employed transcribers to copy over his own correspondence and record books, seemingly considering himself above “the need for . . . penmanship” (85). His demand that Indian pupils copy these verses in elegant script therefore seems all the more demeaning. Wheelock’s use of scribes is well known, but it would have

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been helpful to learn how many of them, if any, came from his school. But Wyss shows that Wheelock's practices reached well beyond his immediate contacts. The creation of a readerly, rather than a writerly, curriculum for Native American pupils spread outward from Wheelock's school, which, in many ways, served as a curricular model for literacy, education, and religion at other missionary schools.

Not content merely to consume missionaries’ words, Wyss’s Writerly Indians took on what British missionaries had to offer, but they also provided interpretations of their own, often viewing their own acts of “proselytizing [as saving] their own people” (118). Their outreach required a reconstruction of religion and language by Native American missionaries in ways that made sense to the Native Americans they evangelized. Some of these Writerly Indians, including Samson Occom, eventually became skeptical about the motives of Wheelock and the British missionaries.

Wyss’s main focus is on New England missionary schools, though she does briefly discuss schools in Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and elsewhere. This limited geographic focus is understandable, although it would be interesting to see further exploration of how her approach might apply to missionary schools elsewhere in British North America. Wyss’s analysis is also focused on missionary schools run by British Protestants. Although the circumstances would certainly be different, the ability to see how alternative ways of exploring literacies might play out among French or Iberian Atlantic missionaries and their catechumens would undoubtedly be beneficial to scholars working in other areas of the Atlantic world.

Edward E. Andrews explores cross-cultural religious contacts in a more transatlantic context, presenting in Native Apostles a “tangled history of cultural encounter between Europe, Africa, and the Americas” (188). To highlight the entangled nature of these encounters, Andrews opens with the experience of Olaudah Equiano. In 1779, Equiano appealed to the bishop of London for ordination as an Anglican clergyman, as he wished to evangelize in West Africa. Despite saying “all the right things” (1), according to Andrews, Equiano’s petition was denied. While the denial will not surprise those familiar with eighteenth-century church politics, Andrews demonstrates that there is much more to the story. Equiano’s exclusion resulted from what Andrews describes as a “sacred genealogy” (11) in which British missionaries and church hierarchy assumed that pupils were to be passive recipients of the gospel (like Wyss’s Readerly Indians). Equiano and others defied those expectations, tapping instead into the Christian gospel to create spaces where they could “gain access to Christian spiritual authority as preachers” (11).

As Andrews demonstrates, a lack of official sanction did not preclude native missionaries from evangelizing. Particularly in the colonies, where Protestant pluralism was the norm and competition for bringing new members into the fold was brisk, the expansion of Protestantism depended on
the work of African and Native American missionaries. Thus, Equiano’s rejection by the bishop could not subvert his message, which promoted Christianity but also fed moral arguments against slavery. He and other black missionaries were part of a new sacred genealogy that drew from past religious rhetoric but also added new layers. Indian missionary enterprises also expanded. Andrews explores similar stories of other native apostles (meaning native to the groups to whom they preached): Phillip Quaque, John Quamine, and Bristol Yamma. Like Equiano, Quaque, Quamine, and Yamma enjoyed the support of influential (white) supporters from Anthony Benezet to John Erskine. Yet among them, Quaque alone was successful, though just barely.

Andrews’s book makes two major contributions. The first is the extensive geography that he manages deftly to negotiate in discussing the politics of British missionary culture. There are numerous high-quality studies that explore the theo-politics of British Protestants in an Atlantic context, including Carla Gardina Pestana’s *Protestant Empire*. Along with Travis Glasson, Heather Miyano Kopelson, and others, Andrews contributes to a broader geographic treatment of these religious politics that also raises the visibility of non-Europeans as historical actors. Among other things, readers of *Native Apostles* will gain a better understanding of the unintended consequences of missionary work, and the ways conversion influenced how Native American and African missionaries understood their world. Secondly, Andrews’s index of three hundred Native American and African missionaries will undoubtedly help historians and others to identify people who, unlike high-profile missionaries such as Phillip Quaque, make scant appearances, scattered throughout the records.

Some might find Andrews’s occasionally broad application of terminology problematic. For example, he uses “native” to describe missionaries who came from the populations they evangelized. Also, aside from well-known figures like Phillis Wheatley, Andrews’s treatment of women is limited. There certainly have been studies of women missionaries, including Catherine Brekus’s discussion of both white women and women of color in *Strangers and Pilgrims*. Andrews’s lack of attention to women preachers is undoubtedly partly due to the challenge of locating non-European missionaries in the sources. Neither of these issues, however, detracts from the important contributions the book makes.

Because Anglicans were a religious minority in the colonies, studies of the religious history of the British Atlantic provide a particularly

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fruitful ground on which to explore informal, yet influential, cultural exchanges and networks that existed outside of conventional British hierarchical structures like the Church of England. Missionaries—Anglican, Congregationalist, Presbyterian, etc.—were forced to compete for souls in a contest over what comprised "religious truth" in the British Empire. In spite of the fact that non-European missionaries were not fully accepted into the official folds of the British Empire, Wyss and Andrews do much to demonstrate how those on the cultural margins of the empire helped to shape its religious culture.\(^\text{10}\)