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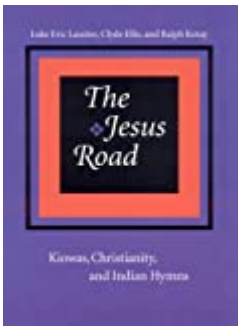

Luke Eric Lassiter, Clyde Ellis, Ralph Kotay. *The Jesus Road: Kiowas, Christianity, and Indian Hymns.* Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. xii + 152 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8032-8005-2; $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-2944-0.

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Where Does the Jesus Road Lead?

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Readers of *The Jesus Road* will be moved by the experience of listening to the CD of twenty-six Kiowa hymns which accompanies it. The songs and commentary tell a powerful story capable of deepening academic understanding of First Nations Christianity generally. Three authors wrote *The Jesus Road* for two purposes. One of the authors, Ralph Kotay, uses the book to preserve and spread the life and power of hymns written by the Kiowa community in Southern Oklahoma. Anthropologist Luke Lassiter and historian Clyde Ellis join Kotay to offer a history of Kiowa Christianity, through which they attempt to free the history of Kiowa Christians from the myopic lens of assimilation narratives. Motivated by a coincidence of interests between the authors, this slim volume treads a winding path through three disciplines and multiple agendas while maintaining a provocative interpretive position: that Kiowa Christians are not cultural sellouts, and should be considered representatives of Kiowa culture, just like followers of the Ghost Dance and Peyotism.

The book opens with a section covering Kiowa political history before their removal to the reserve and a summary of the U.S. government's and missionary's policies toward the Kiowa. Clyde Ellis picks up the story of Kiowa Christianity in the 1860s with President Grant's policy of using missionaries to culturally assimilate Natives on reserves. Ellis explains that the Kiowas preferred missionaries who offered them something useful or who adopted Kiowa practices. The Catholics, for example, provided a popular residential school, while the Methodists gave advanced education and social prominence to selected Kiowa leaders, and argued for Kiowa rights with the U.S. government (p. 30). Both the Methodists and the Baptists reshaped their own religious rituals to resemble more closely pre-existing Kiowa practices. That much is clear, but Ellis deals with these events in a contradictory way. On the one hand, he claims that missionaries wanted the Kiowas to trade their culture for "something entirely foreign" (p. 50). On the other hand, he argues that the Kiowas who followed them were not dupes of colonialism (p. 50). His assertion that the missionaries wanted to completely change the Kiowas flounders in the face of his own evidence of culturally concerned missionaries. A more significant omission in this account is the absence

of an explanation as to why the Kiowas would be interested in any Christian missionary. Ellis explains Kiowa interest as a combination of three phenomena: the influence of key Kiowa leaders, "effective" missionaries, and the churches' support of community life and identity (p. 53). Although Ellis demonstrates each of these points, they each beg larger questions. If community members followed leaders into Christianity, why did the leaders join? Why were the missionaries effective at all? Why could already existing community structures not support community identity in the early reservation era?

The second section of the book, in which Luke Lassiter and Ralph Kotay consider the meaning and significance of Kiowa hymns, raises another question. Here the authors argue that the hymns sung in the Kiowa language provide a reservoir for tribal history on the Kiowa Comanche Apache (KCA) Reserve (p. 81). Not only do the hymns keep the old stories alive, they also transmit power to singers and listeners by connecting them with Kiowa Christians who have died and whom the Kiowa believe to be more holy or "Godly" than people in the present (p. 81). The authors do not explore the question of whether the Kiowas' veneration of people from the past originates in a practice of ancestor veneration, which predates Christian missions. Rather the authors argue that the Kiowas' theology is largely indistinguishable from the beliefs of other Christian communities (p. 77). But the Methodist missionaries who started the congregations that now sing the Kiowa hymns did not teach or practice reverence for deceased ancestors. They almost certainly told stories about the Wesley brothers and other famous Methodist preachers, but these larger-than-life figures of the faith do not correspond to the kin relations who were and are the subjects of the Kiowas' reverence. Ralph Kotay's subsequent explanation of the hymns, combined with the suggestions of syncretism in the earlier sections, suggests that both the hymns and the Kiowa Christian movement arise from a combination of the missionaries' gospel with the Kiowas' own beliefs.

The final section of the book contains English lyrics for the twenty-six Kiowa hymns on the CD. Listening to the hymns, I found Lassiter and Kotay's suggestion that Kiowa Christian beliefs are like those of other American Christian communities increasingly improbable. Of all of the stories and personalities in the Christian Bible, the only characters who appear are Jesus and Jehovah, but Jehovah is thickly robed as Daw Kee, a Kiowa name for God, which predated contact with Christian missionaries. Jesus appears as Daw Kee's son. Kotay's commentaries, while filled with detailed stories about Kiowa people who lived in the past, contain no trace of the specifics of Christian ethics as they appear in European traditions, or discourses on the nature of the universe, as the sermons of the European missionaries likely did. On the other hand, Kotay devotes many commentaries to the importance of following the right path and to the virtue of the ancestors, whose songs have the power to make people feel better. While the Kiowa in *The Jesus Road* clearly identify themselves as Christians and their practices are consonant with other Christian traditions, it is also clear that their metaphysical concerns differ from, say, your average Southern Baptist.

Despite the author's intentions, those who condemn the inherently aggressive and individualistic nature of Western Christianity will not be satisfied that Kiowa Christians have achieved a healthy accommodation with their colonizers' culture comparable to Ghost Dancers or Peyotists.[1] However, the book contains the basis of a more convincing argument. Readers who wish to pursue this argument must begin by trying to reconstruct what the Kiowas saw when missionaries distributed wafers and wine, held people under water and shouted in the woods. As philosopher Michael McNally has shown, Anishinaabeg people, with no interest in listening to sermons or learning biblical teachings, eagerly incorporated Methodist hymns into their long-established mourning rituals.[2] The hymns turned out to be more malleable than their authors intended. Or, as ethnohistorian Kenneth Morrison shows, the Christian ritual of baptism might just as likely be understood as a cure for disease or a vehicle to confer spiritual power as an inoculation against divine judgment.[3] The scholar on the path to such an understanding of Kiowa Christianity will find the annotated CD an unmatched opportunity to step into the world of Kiowa song. It resonates with stoicism, courage, and pain, the unforgotten tribal heritage of the KCA Reserve.

Notes

[1]. Vine Deloria Jr. "Christianity and Indigenous Religion: Friends or Enemies?" in *For this Land: Writings on Religion in America*, Vine Deloria and James Treat (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 145; Wub-e-ke-niew, *We Have the Right to Exist* (New York: Black Thistle Press, 1995), p. xxv.

[2]. Michael McNally, *Ojibwe Singers: Hymns, Grief and a Native Culture in Motion* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 80.

[3]. Kenneth Morrison, "Baptism and Alliance: The Symbolic Mediations of Religious Syncretism" *Ethnohistory* 1990 37(4), p. 420.

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