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Book Review: Creating Christian Indians: Native Clergy in the Presbyterian Church

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By now it's safe to say that we have turned a corner in studies of Indian missions because recent publications have sustained a new perspective on Native Christianity. Previous interpretive ideas—ones shared by this reviewer—assumed a dearth of Indian documentary sources, regarded white values as incompatible with Native ones, judged evangelical efforts to be failures when Indians remained Indians, and dismissed converts as having abandoned the cultural patterns essential to their ethnic identity. But the author of this volume joins a handful of others who point out that Native clergy did not obliterate tribal self-consciousness but rather worked creatively to instill and maintain a new blend of beliefs and institutions in dynamic cultural forms.

Creating Christian Indians focuses on almost sixty ordained Nez Perce and Dakota Presbyterian ministers who labored mostly during the decades between 1865 and 1935. Within this framework the author produces copious evidence to support the view that pastors drawn from these two tribes "translated into their own cultures and languages what was meaningful from what some claimed was a 'white man's gospel' and provided spiritual and material leadership for their people. In doing so they created a more authentic gospel, one not tied to the cultural trappings of nineteenth-century evangelical Protestantism." And they succeeded in rooting vibrant new patterns in Native lives, addressing Native needs, upholding Native values, and expressing all of it with Native voices. Studies like this one show that "Christian Indian" was not an oxymoron but rather that those who "embraced the new ways . . . in becoming Christian . . . did not have to sacrifice being Indian." This multidimensional perspective helps us recognize that conversion to Christianity, for many Natives at least,
"was an open-ended social process actively involving choices and change."

In addition to its helpful thesis, this book's strength lies in diligent spadework in primary sources. Space limitations preclude listing all archives mined, but principal archives include the McBeth-Crawford Collection at the Idaho State Historical Society, the Clifford M. Drury Papers at the Eastern Washington State Historical Society, and the Minnesota Historical Society holdings related to Thomas S. Williamson, Stephen R. Riggs, and Grace Lee Nute. These sources retain much correspondence by pastors in their Native languages, and they provide valuable insight into the struggles and tensions these ministers experienced. Other basic data point to further research: an index of the sixteen Nez Perce ministers—plus one Makah and one Spokan—listed by name, church assignments, and the years served at each place, plus another index of the forty Dakotas with the same information. The university press at Norman is to be thanked for keeping down the price for 190 pages of text, forty-six of notes, nineteen of bibliography, and twenty-three photographs. This book is a valuable contribution to the field and a bargain to boot.

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