

Article

The Bible in Native American Literature

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Abstract: For at least a century the Bible played a significant, positive role in Native American letters starting with the eighteenth-century writings of Samson Occom. A product of the Great Awakening, Occom's engagements with the Bible resembled those of other Protestant thinkers and writers of his time, although his sermons were sometimes specifically tailored for Indian audiences and topics. After Occom, Indian authors in the nineteenth century such as Elias Boudinot and William Apress drew upon the Bible to make arguments against removal and "scientific racism." In the twentieth century writers like Zitkala-Ša and Charles Alexander Eastman cast a critical eye on Christianity and reconsidered the virtues of traditionalism. John G. Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks* (1932) was the century's fullest literary depiction of a traditional religion, but it came at the cost of concealing Black Elk's actual religion, Catholicism. During the 1960s and 70s oral tradition was privileged over sacred scripture, as seen in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968). While the Bible makes fewer appearances than it used to in Native American literature, it would be premature to suggest that Christianity is finished in Indian country.

Keywords: Native American; Christianity; the Bible; Samson Occom; Elias Boudinot (Cherokee); William Apress; Zitkala-Ša; Charles Alexander Eastman; John G. Neihardt; N. Scott Momaday



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1. Samson Occom's Razor

If we define Native American literature conservatively as Indian-authored writing in English about Indian topics that enters a public print culture within the geographic area now called the United States (as opposed to more inclusive but vaguer definitions that would bring oral traditions into the fold, organize literatures tribally rather than nationally, etc.), then we can point to a "father" of Native American literature: Samson Occom (1723–1792). A Mohegan minister, public intellectual, and Indian advocate, Occom was a product of the Great Awakening, converting to Christianity at the age of 17 and eventually becoming a missionary under the tutelage of Eleazar Wheelock. Occom's archive includes letters and journals, six occasional essays, seven hymns, over a dozen petitions, and twenty sermons. *A Sermon Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul, an Indian* (1772) was the first book published by an American Indian author, and Occom's autobiographical narrative (1768) was the first in what became a long and venerable tradition of Indian life writing. Occom's topics ranged widely from ethnographic descriptions to theological questions to political matters, but throughout all of his writings only one extraneous text was consistently cited: the Bible.

While the Bible appears across all of Occom's genres, it features most prominently in his sermons, which followed the basic rhetorical patterns of Great Awakening and New Light Calvinist preaching. Like Wheelock, James Davenport, George Whitlock, Jonathan Edwards, and other ministers of the day, Occom, guided by the Spirit, would preach from a single passage of scripture in a plain-spoken, emotionally appealing manner that could reach rural, tribal, non-elite audiences. Explications were followed by doctrines, proofs, and applications, more or less in keeping with the traditional Puritan form.¹

The Bible passage that Occom selected for his famous execution sermon was Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ

our Lord,” an appropriate selection given the sermon’s occasion. After elucidating some theological implications of the verse, Occom spends the latter half of his sermon addressing its applicability specifically to the Indian Moses Paul—whom he calls “bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh” (Occom 2006a, p. 188)—and to Indians in general—whom he calls “my poor kindred” (Occom 2006a, p. 192), and much of what he says to them concerns the dangers of drunkenness. Intoxicated Indians can be “cheated over and over again” (Occom 2006a, p. 193), and intoxicated women can be taken advantage of, as we find in Habbakuk 2:15, which Occom quotes (“Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors . . . so he can gaze on their naked bodies”). Such were dangers to Indians in that part of the country at that time, and Occom was promoting Christianity as the best way to resist them.

The Bible was also useful to Occom for making points about race relations. In a sermon dated 13 May 1787(?), Occom’s guiding Bible passage was Luke 10: 27: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.” Known as the Great Commandment, this verse from Luke immediately precedes in that book the parable of the Good Samaritan, as Occom reminds us in his immediate comparison of the Good Samaritan to Indians: “they are very Compassionate to one another, very Liberal among themselves, and also to Strangers, When there is Scarcity of Food amongst them, they will yet Divide what little they have . . . This I take to be a Human Love or Being Neighbourly, according to our Text” (Occom 2006b, p. 204). Occom may well be trying to evoke the story of the first thanksgiving here, although he does not say so directly. More direct is his criticism of slaveholders who fail to treat their slaves as neighbors: “I think I have made out by the Bible, that the poor Negroes are your Neighbours, and if you can prove it from the Bible that Negroes are not the Race of Adam, then you may keep them as Slaves, Otherwise you have no more right to keep them as slaves as they have to keep you as Slaves” (Occom 2006b, p. 206). Finally, Occom uses the Great Commandment to criticize colonial greed: “These are a Covetous People, They Covet every thing that their Neighbours have, Yea This Sort of People I think are Monopolizers; don’t you think so?” To clear up any possible confusion about just who he had in mind, Occom mentions their love of “Shillings” (Occom 2006b, pp. 202–3).

Sometimes Occom drew prophetic inspiration from the Bible, as seen in his undated sermon on Isaiah 58:1, “Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and show my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins.” Occom certainly showed the sins. Beginning with “the great Sin of unbelief,” Occom lists a litany of sins before landing on the “most abominable Sin in the world”: adultery (Occom 2006c, pp. 215, 217). Occom’s main target was Christians who commit adultery or fornication despite knowing that such things are wrong, for even “Heathen Indians” without the benefit of church teachings could naturally intuit the evils of fornication: “that if Some Young Man and Woman have been too familiar, and like to be found out in this Sin, they would voluntarily Banish themselves from their own Country and never to [be] Seen there again” (Occom 2006c, p. 217). Murder, too, is “Such a Sin that is abhord by all Nations”—Indian nations included—“Yet this Sin is very Common in Christian Land” (Occom 2006c, p. 217). Finally, the sermon’s climax revisits a theme that we have already encountered: the “Murderous Trade” and “most Devilish Practice that ever was found among the Children of men,” slavery. “I Cant Conceive how they read the Word of God,” Occom declaims, while “Carying on the inhuman Trade” that has resulted in “a Lake of Negroe Blood” (Occom 2006c, p. 218).

It would go too far to characterize Samson Occom’s sermons as primarily political or focused on race relations, for in fact most of them are conventionally geared toward helping Christians lead holier lives. Occom preached on how to increase faith and better appreciate the love of Christ, on the gifts of regeneration and thanksgiving, and sometimes he simply told Bible stories like the creation narrative found in the book of Genesis (“To All the Indians in this Boundless Continent,” 1784). Sometimes Occom developed sermons from mysterious books and passages in the Bible almost as if they posed an irresistible intellectual challenge. Occom seems undaunted by the famously strange passage from

the book of Daniel presenting the original “writing on the wall”: Daniel 5:25, “And this is the writing that was written, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.” The words mean *numbered, numbered, weighed, divided* and come from an ominous story in which the prophet Daniel informs Belshazzar that God has doomed his kingdom because the king was too prideful. Calling this story “the most remarkable Text in all the Bible,” Occom resists the low-hanging fruit of comparing Anglos or slaveholders to King Belshazzar in lieu of advancing a universal interpretation: “all from the Highest of mankind to the lowest have Something to do for god in the World, & every one of us know[s] something of the Work or Duty he requires of us” (Occom 2006d, pp. 198–99). As if to assuage any doubt about if or when Occom thought Judgement Day would occur, in a sermon dated 19 August 1787(?) his expounded Bible verse was Revelation 22:12, “And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give everyone according to his work.” This verse is from the final chapter of the Book of Revelation, the Apocalypse of John, as well as the final chapter of the New Testament and the Christian Bible, and it was exemplary of Occom’s ultimate concern: salvation. Jesus is coming, he exhorted, so you must be ready: “you know What you have been doing, you know your own Works, and So you must expect your rewards accordingly, Let us then see what it is” (Occom 2006e, p. 208).

Areligious readers might find Occom’s sermons a bit “negative” for all their prophetic warnings, moral condemnations, critiques of hypocrisy and the like, but that would miss what Christians experience as the genuine joy of living in God’s love and truth. Occom’s hymns express that sense of joy, and two of them directly associate it with the word of God. The hymn, “Conversion Song; Or, Wak’d by the Gospel’s Joyful Sound,” narrates a story of regeneration that begins with the speaker’s reading of the Bible: “I read my bible; it was plain/The sinner must be born again” (Occom 2006f, p. 237). In “A Son’s Farewell; Or, I Hear the Gospel’s Joyful Sound,” Occom’s speaker says goodbye to his parents as he embarks on his new vocation as an itinerant preacher: “thro’ the wilderness I’ll run,/Preaching the gospel free;/O be not anxious for your son,/The Lord will comfort me” (Occom 2006g, p. 236). These hymns appeared in Occom’s hymnal, *A Choice Collection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1774), another “first” that should be listed alongside Occom’s first published book and first autobiography. Hymn-singing became a popular communal practice in American and tribal communities and on some reservations still is.² Occom is an important part of that history.

What lessons might be drawn from this consideration of Occom’s sermons and hymns? Firstly, the Bible was not only there at the birth of Native American literature but was in many ways its midwife. Leaving aside the historical facts of Christian schools and Indian missions bringing the written word to indigenous people, it was the Bible that provided the first Native American writers with “content” including its vast treasury of stories, parables, images, aphorisms, allusions, and forms. Native American literature did not emerge organically from oral tradition (although oral traditions would eventually provide some content of their own); it emerged religiously from the Bible, the usual tale of Western literary history. Secondly, the Bible enabled Occom to speak to the issues that mattered to him, granting him moral authority and other affordances as he pursued his literary and social objectives. How else could he condemn slavery or warn Indians about the dangers of drunkenness? In what other ways might he point out the injustices of colonialism or describe the joys of Christian courage? The Bible was a useful tool. Finally, note how Occom’s use of the Bible did not signify *to him* a step taken away from indigenous community, as is sometimes assumed in our age of identity politics. To the contrary, it seems that in Occom’s hands the Bible helped to beat a direct path into the very heart of the community. It was not a loss. It was a gain.

Call it the rule of Samson Occom’s razor: the simplest explanation is probably the best, and the reason Indian writers were drawn to Christianity and the Bible is not because they had been forcibly converted or corrupted, driven insane or self-deluded, but because they believed Christianity to be true and the Bible to be useful.³ It was a choice made of free will.

2. Radical Changeability

Samson Occom's later years correspond to a decline of tribal nationhood in the sense of political independence from the European nations and colonies that had been entering into treaties with tribes for over three centuries. Treaties get a bad name these days—the noun is often modified by “broken”—but it is important to remember that, whatever their weaknesses, treaties were mutual recognitions of legitimate nationhood between parties that entered into them. That changed after the American Revolution when the United States assumed sole treaty-making powers. During the 1820s and 30s a series of Supreme Court decisions authored by Chief Justice John Marshall articulated a new kind of political status for tribal nations: “domestic dependent” nationhood.⁴ No longer would tribes and the United States engage each other as separate sovereigns; instead, the United States would henceforth act as a “guardian” to its indigenous “wards.” This new legal doctrine included a promise of protection and assistance toward the “civilization” of Indians. Civilization is another concept that gets a bad name—we post-millennials preferring to speak in terms of “civilizations” which I think usually means different cultures—but in the nineteenth century the term evoked what we now call *modernity*: institutions like schools and judicial systems, forms of government like constitutional republicanism, participation in a common market, mass culture, literacy, and so on.⁵

Once tribal sovereignty had been reduced to a domestic dependent condition, other policies became possible, notably the controversial policy of removal authorized by federal law in 1830. Removal history is complicated and uneven, but the theory of removal was rather simple: it assumed that Indians, as “savages,” could not coexist alongside their “civilized” neighbors. Making matters worse was the rise of the American school of ethnology, a loosely affiliated collection of scientists who promoted what historian Reginald Horsman calls “scientific racism,” the idea that “races” were biological realities ascribing certain gifts and limitations to some races that differed in kind from others.⁶ While scientific racism would not survive the nineteenth century, in its heyday it provided intellectual support for race-based policies from removal to slavery. For over three centuries the Christian missionary project had assumed that the indigenous people of the new world were fully human and possessed a free will necessary for genuine conversion. Scientific racism came along and said that this might not be so.

The upshot of these various developments is that the nineteenth century saw Indians become more dependent, vulnerable, racialized, and stereotyped. No one understood this better than Native American writers who emerged to tell different stories and, like Occom, drew upon the Bible to do it. The Cherokee Elias Boudinot (1804?–1839) provides an example of a writer who challenged the notion of racial unchangeability. In 1826 Boudinot embarked on a speaking tour of the American northeast to raise funds for the purchase of typesets that would be used to publish the *Cherokee Phoenix*, the first tribally owned newspaper. His tour was a success, and the *Phoenix* started publication in 1828 with Boudinot serving as its editor until 1832. His stump speech, “An Address to the Whites” (1826), opens with a critique of harmful stereotypes: “the term *Indian* is pregnant with ideas the most repelling and degrading. But such impressions, originating as they frequently do, from infant prejudices . . . do great injustice” (Boudinot 1996, p. 68). Such images focused on savagism, on war whoops and scalping, and after conceding that perhaps *some* Indian tribes possessed savage characteristics—although not his own Cherokees, he stressed—Boudinot asserted that no one's savagism was inherent to a racial identity, nor could it be permanent. As he put it, “the stale remark—‘Do what you will, an Indian will still be an Indian,’ must be placed no more in speech.” Boudinot's reasoning was drawn from Acts 17:26, which he quotes: “of one blood God created all the nations that dwell on the face of the earth.” The verse's simple clarity allowed him to come right to the point: “What is an Indian? Is he not formed of the same materials with yourself?” (Boudinot 1996, p. 69).

What that claim amounted to was the deployment of Christian monogenesis against scientific racism's polygenesis. But it would not suffice to stop with a biblical assertion of common human origins; Boudinot also had to demonstrate through real examples

that Indians were not only theoretically changeable but actually changing. Fortunately, Cherokee Nation's recent history offered plenty of evidence: "First. The invention of letters," a reference to Sequoyah's invention of the Cherokee syllabary. "Second. The translation of the New Testament into Cherokee. And third. The organization of a Government" (Boudinot 1996, p. 74). Boudinot cites comparative statistical information showing dramatic increases at Cherokee Nation in the numbers of farms, livestock, roads, churches, schools—"civilization," *modernity*—and boasts of new laws passed by the National Council outlawing savage practices like polygamy, witchcraft, and blood feuds. Finally, there was the dramatic autobiographical evidence of the transformations that had taken place in Boudinot's own life and family history: "You here behold an *Indian*, my kindred are *Indians*, and my fathers sleeping in the wilderness grave—they too were *Indians*. But I am not as my fathers were—broader means and nobler influences have fallen upon me" (Boudinot 1996, p. 69). Christianity was responsible for those "nobler influences," and the transformations they produced put the lie to the notion that savagism was a permanent condition passed down in the blood. For Boudinot, what this likely foretold of a civilized Cherokee future was such happy news that it inspired his quotation of the song, "Joy of the Redeemed" from Isaiah (35:1): "The solitary places will be glad for them, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as a rose" (Boudinot 1996, p. 74).

Boudinot's optimism was unwarranted; after all, the Trail of Tears loomed in the not-too-distant future, and Boudinot himself would be assassinated by his fellow Cherokees during a power struggle caused by removal. But let us note the importance of the Bible to his work. While "An Address to the Whites" is Boudinot's most famous text, most of his writing took the form of editorials in the *Cherokee Phoenix* and his most frequent topic was the scourge of removal. For years he criticized the policy, published stories demonstrating steady progress in Cherokee civilization, demanded that the United States protect the Cherokees as stipulated in treaties, and all of that work rested upon the single radical idea that Indians and whites were of "one blood." Boudinot's entire project was founded on biblical monogenesis. Sacred scripture made his antiracism thinkable.

Pequot writer and preacher William Apess (1798–1838), who published five books in seven years and became a popular orator in New England, similarly grounded political critiques on biblical ideas. In his autobiography, *A Son of the Forest* (1831), Apess follows Boudinot's example in "An Address to the Whites" of lingering over the stereotype and meaning of the word *Indian*, writing that as a child he "thought it disgraceful to be called an Indian" and "wondered where the whites received this word which they so often threw as an opprobrious epithet at the sons of the forest. I could not find it in the Bible" (Apess 1992a, p. 10). What Apess does find in the Bible is the story of Adam and Eve, and it is there that he locates the indigenous people of North America as one of the ten Lost Tribes of Israel: "It is my opinion that our [Indian] nation retains the original complexion of our common father, Adam. This is strongly impressed on my mind. I think it is very reasonable, and in this opinion I am not singular, as some of the best writers of the age . . . have expressed their sentiments in its favor" (Apess 1992a, p. 34). One of the "best writers" that Apess identified by name was Elias Boudinot—not our Cherokee editor but the Cherokee editor's white benefactor, namesake and mentor—the first president of the American Bible Society and author of *A Star in the West; or, A Humble Attempt to Discover the Long Lost Ten Tribes of Israel* (1816) from which Apess drew extensively in his Appendix to *A Son of the Forest*. In a nutshell, the Lost Tribes theory posited that the natives of north America were descendants of Jacob, "Semites" whose complexion would be a little darker than that of "Gentile" Anglo-Americans. Dubious though the Lost Tribes theory was, it was another biblically-based argument for monogenesis deployed against polygenesis, and another benefit was the blow it struck against society's default preference for a lighter skin color.

Apess is often remembered, not without reason, as a fiery polemicist and a master of irony, but he was also a dedicated minister whose archive features evidence of his sincere belief that Christianity could heal a wounded soul—and no one's souls, he thought, were

more wounded than those of Indians. In his *Experiences of Five Christian Indians* (1833), a volume of spiritual autobiographies, two women tell similar stories about considering suicide before submitting to Christ's salvific grace. At nineteen years of age Hannah Caleb was happily married with five children, but after losing them all she found herself looking into a "large pond" with the temptation to jump in. A loving "voice" intervenes for a brief moment, but despair quickly returns—just as it did for Job, whose prayer Hannah quotes: "Thou hast shaken me to pieces; all my bones are out of joint" (Apess 1992b, p. 146; Job 16:12). Hannah recovers, regenerates, and quotes the apostle Paul from 2 Corinthians 5:17, "Old things are passed away, and behold, all things are become new" (Apess 1992b, p. 147). She even forgives those she had previously blamed for her problems: whites. Sally George was another despondent young Indian who was tempted to throw herself into "a large, deep brook" but later converts and is baptized in that river instead. Caught between a white world that did not care about Indians and an Indian world that did not care about God, Sally's conversion is truly healing, giving her a place to live and leading her toward love. She quotes Acts 13:41: "Behold ye despisers, wonder and perish; I work a work in your day ye shall in no wise believe, though a man declare it unto you" (Apess 1992b, p. 149). These are examples of how the Bible looked to some removal-era Indians, especially Apess himself: not as a dreary collection of Thou Shalt Nots, still less a literature belonging to the whites, but as a library of poetic wisdom and spiritual guidance that could help even the most wounded of souls find their way in a cruelly administered world.

One final example of Apess's biblical citations deserves some comment. Delivered twelve years after Boudinot's "Address to the Whites," Apess's famous oration, *Eulogy on King Philip* (1838), features an unusual, almost jarring element that appears to distinguish his understanding of Indian changeability from Boudinot's. If the Cherokee editor had bent over backwards to underscore the progress his people had made in their civilizational process—not the worst argument to make during the heyday of racialism—what exactly is Apess up to when, toward the end of his speech, right at its climax, he interjects the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13) in King Philip's Wampanoag language? "Noo-chun kes-uk-qut-tiam-at-am unch koo-we-su-onk, kuk-ket-as-soo-tam-oonk, pey-au-moo-utch, keet-te-nan-tam-oo-onk ne nai" (Apess 1992c, p. 308). *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.* Let me stress that this interjection comes out of nowhere, practically appearing *ex nihilo*. Why? King Philip was not a Christian, Apess never claims that he was, nor that the Lord's Prayer was ever uttered by King Philip, and furthermore the prayer is barely introduced: "We will now give you his language in the Lord's Prayer"—note: not "the Lord's Prayer in his language" but the other way around (Apess 1992c, p. 308). What is Apess's point? Perhaps he was presenting a more radical changeability. If Boudinot argued that the Cherokees are now Christian, perhaps Apess was showing that Christianity is now Wampanoag. If so, what kind of challenge might that notion pose to the powers and principalities of America? In any case, whatever Apess may have intended with his interjection, it was the Bible that provided the content for his performance.

Apess and Boudinot are only two of a good number of Native American writers who emerged in the nineteenth century, wrote in a variety of genres, occupied a range of social positions and careers, and dealt with different kinds of Indian issues and developments. But while it is difficult to generalize about nineteenth-century Native American (or any period of) literature, I think it is fair to say that these two are representative figures. To wit: both used their writing to correct the public record where Indians were concerned, to challenge stereotypes and criticize false histories, to demonstrate Indian changeability and push back against racialism. Both were very much in favor of Indian assimilation—"civilization," *modernity*—and they called upon the United States to live up to its promises to provide it. Both saw Christianity as indispensable to their work and proclaimed the Bible as evidence *par excellence* in a dangerously scientific age that seemed to have Indians in its sights. Most if not all nineteenth-century Indian writers were themselves Christians, at least nominally, so some of the same thematic concerns and textual patterns and motifs that we find in Boudinot's and Apess's works can be encountered elsewhere (as well as in

the writings of non-Indian abolitionists, temperance and women's rights advocates, and other social reformers during the Second Great Awakening). But as the nineteenth century came to its close—as the removal period gave way to the assimilation era and Christianity lost cultural power in a secularizing time—the Bible made fewer appearances in Native American literature. Soon it would even become a target of attack.

3. Unwritten Scriptures

The General Allotment Act ("Dawes Act") was passed in 1887, its purpose being the assimilation of Indians through the creation of quasi-private property on tribal lands. The philosophical underpinnings of the policy were Lockean, assuming that private property would create individualists out of their collectivist tribes.⁷ Another assimilation program was General Richard Henry Pratt's off-reservation boarding school system which began with the founding of Carlisle Indian Industrial School in 1879. The theory behind the off-reservation boarding schools was that families could send their children to be instructed in the ways of civilization in what might be charitably considered a language and culture "immersion" experience away from the influences of home. Tribal consent was obtained for allotment, and parental consent was secured for boarding school attendance (neither policy was unilaterally imposed by the federal government as is often assumed). These progressive-era policies symbolize the assimilation period in American Indian history, and it marks a shift in thinking from the assumptions of the removal era. If removal was about moving racially distinct savages behind the frontier line, assimilation was about integrating Indians—now thought to be quite changeable, indeed—into American society.

At this time a new generation of Indian writers called "red progressives" emerged, and while some were Christians, at least nominally, others cast a more critical eye on the religion of Ocom, Boudinot, and Apess. As an example, in 1921 the Yankton Sioux writer Zitkala-Ša (1876–1938) published *American Indian Stories*, a somewhat autobiographical novella about a Sioux girl's childhood life on a reservation, education in a boarding school, and brief career as a teacher, and in it the Bible symbolizes not divine justice and love but white hypocrisy and lies. In the first of the novella's three parts, "Impressions of an Indian Childhood," readers are immersed in a tribal environment where the world is not disenchanted and a precocious little girl is told legends about Iktomi the spider, a dead man's plum bush, and the mysterious tattooed stars of a traditional religious society. But in her eighth year, "white men who wore big hats and carried large hearts" arrive bringing "big red apples"—an allusion to the forbidden fruit of the Garden of Eden—to recruit students for their boarding school (Zitkala-Ša 2003a, p. 83). Although her mother initially balks, the child is permitted to go to the school in the "land of red apples" (Zitkala-Ša 2003a, p. 87). Because it is large-hearted Christians who stand in for the serpent, allusions to the Genesis story appear to be ironic, flipping the Bible on its head. But a Fall is coming.

The novella's second section, "The School Days of an Indian Girl," portrays the cold disrespect with which the students are treated in the "civilizing machine" of the school, and some of its drama centers on the precocious protagonist's crafty resistance (Zitkala-Ša 2003a, p. 96). In a chapter entitled "The Devil," readers are told that while "evil spirits" constituted a part of the Sioux cosmology she knew as a child, she was never taught to fear them. The "white man's devil," by contrast, inspired "horror," and she was even told that "little girls who disobeyed school regulations were to be tortured by him" (Zitkala-Ša 2003a, p. 94). The narrator tells of an anxious dream she had in which she was home again with her mother, and the devil appears and chases the girl around the house while her mother vacantly watches. At last the mother is roused from her "quiet indifference," places her daughter on her lap, and the vanquished devil disappears. Observing that the devil takes no interest in the mother—presumably "because he did not know the Indian language"—the writer associates the devil, thus Christianity, exclusively with the whites. The morning after she has her dream, the young protagonist takes her "revenge upon the devil" by defacing his image in a book called "The Stories of the Bible" (Zitkala-Ša 2003a, p. 95). It turns out that the devil was only a text, just another of the

“white man’s papers” (a recurring expression in this book), one that might be as easily erased as feared.

An important point of tension in *American Indian Stories* is the sad conflict between the mother and daughter which seems to be a product of the assimilation era’s creation of different cultures within the same family. Christianity can get caught in the middle, but not necessarily in the ways that you might expect. When the mother asks her now-literate daughter to read to her from an “Indian Bible, given her some years ago by a missionary,” which the mother calls “the white man’s papers,” the daughter snatches it from her mother’s hand, throws it on the floor, and puts her feet on it. As she explains, “my enraged spirit felt more like burning the book, which afforded me no help, and was the perfect delusion to my mother.” After this dramatic “rejection of the Bible,” the girl’s mother sees her daughter cry, steps outside, and wails into the night: “she was grieving for me” (Zitkala-Ša 2003a, p. 99). Clearly assimilation was not playing out as planned. If it had, presumably the daughter would have read out of her own Bible and converted her mother. Instead, *American Indian Stories* concludes with both women issuing “curses” against the white man (Zitkala-Ša 2003a, pp. 110–11). The third and final section of the novella, “An Indian Teacher among the Indians,” presents the protagonist as an alienated “cold bare pole” shorn of all her foliage, “uprooted from my mother, nature, and God” (Zitkala-Ša 2003a, p. 112).

Zitkala-Ša was clear about her disdain for Christianity but did not see traditionalism as a viable alternative. After the “Indian Bible” episode, the protagonist returns to school bringing along a “a tiny bunch of magic roots” prepared by a medicine man that was supposed to help the girl make friends. “So absolutely did I believe in its charms that I wore it . . . for more than a year. Then, before I lost my faith in the dead roots, I lost the little buckskin bag containing all my good luck” (Zitkala-Ša 2003a, p. 100). One would be hard-pressed to come up with a heavier metaphor for deracination than “dead roots.” But if traditionalism was impossible and Christianity was undesired, what else was there? In 1902, Zitkala-Ša published an essay in the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled, “Why I Am a Pagan,” later retitled “The Great Spirit,” the first half of which consists of romanticized descriptions of nature, the second half being an unflattering account of a “native preacher” who made the mistake of inviting Zitkala-Ša to church. In the essay, the author reveals that her mother was “now a follower of the new superstition”—Christianity—making her another “hoodooed aborigine.” As for the writer, she would remain content to hear the Great Spirit “in the twittering of birds, the rippling of night waters, and the sweet breathing of flowers” (Zitkala-Ša 2003b, pp. 116–17). Not unlike Emerson or Thoreau, one supposes. Her Great Spirit resembled another new superstition called American Transcendentalism.

The Dakota Charles Alexander Eastman (1858–1939) was another “red progressive” who ran in Zitkala-Ša’s social circles (indeed, for a time the two were even engaged to be married). One of the most famous Indians of his day, Eastman was a doctor educated at Dartmouth and Boston University and the author of at least a dozen books including two popular autobiographies, *Indian Boyhood* (1902) and *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* (1916). His 1911 book, *The Soul of the Indian: An Interpretation*, is described in Eastman’s foreword as a portrait of “the religious life of the typical American Indian as it was before he knew the white man” (Eastman 1980, pp. ix–x). While *The Soul of the Indian* features its own criticisms of American Christianity, Eastman is less inclined than his former fiancée to dismiss the religion as a “perfect delusion” for “hoodooed aborigines.” To the contrary, Eastman writes that “the spirit of Christianity and of our ancient religion is essentially the same,” and the enemy of both religions was actually “civilization,” *modernity*. Eastman goes so far as to suggest that “there is no such thing as ‘Christian civilization.’ I believe that Christianity and modern civilization are opposed and irreconcilable” (Eastman 1980, p. 24). Industrial age decadence and corruption, a disenchantment of the world, injustice, inequality, the white man’s lies: such things could not be squared with Christ’s teachings on mercy, justice, and love.

The Soul of the Indian attempts to explain traditional Indian (actually Sioux, with a nod to the Ojibwe) religion through an examination of its parts, as chapter titles indicate: “The Great Mystery,” “The Family Altar,” “Ceremonial and Symbolic Worship,” etc. It reads like a combination of apologetics—a defense of traditionalism—and a comparison to Christianity. For example, in a chapter entitled “The Unwritten Scriptures,” Eastman argues that “[e]very religion has its Holy Book, and ours was a mingling of history, poetry, and prophecy, of precept and folk-lore, even such as the modern reader finds within the covers of his Bible” (Eastman 1980, p. 120). This “living book,” which is characterized by Eastman as “our whole literature,” is what we now call oral tradition, and Eastman noted many similarities between it and the Bible. While the Bible has its Adam, the living book of the Sioux has its Ish-ná-e-cha-ge, or “First Born” (Eastman 1980, p. 123). While the book of Genesis has the tempter take the form of a serpent, oral tradition has its own crawling tempter, “Unk-to-mee, the Spider” (spelled *Iktomi* in Zitkala-Ša’s work). After relaying a myth about a great cosmic battle between humanity and the rest of creation—a story in which Unk-to-mee plays the role of a sower of dissension—Eastman sums it up comparatively: “Here we have, it appears, the elements of the story in Genesis; the primal Eden, the tempter in animal form, and the bringing of sorrow and death upon earth through the elemental sins of envy and jealousy” (Eastman 1980, p. 133). There was even a Sioux story about a great flood “which in some measure parallels the Old Testament story” (Eastman 1980, p. 134). Reading *The Soul of the Indian*, one gets the impression of encountering not the Bible in Native American literature so much as Native American literature in the Bible.

Eastman’s comparative approach was not really a novel way of thinking about such things in 1911, for in fact comparative studies of religion had been generating interest for some time, as best exemplified by the works of his contemporary James George Frazier, author of *The Golden Bough*. One innovation that Eastman did bring to his study was his remarkable contention that some of the biggest, most resistant religions in Indian country had overwhelmingly white and Christian influences to them. The Sioux Sun Dance, for example, once a solemn expression of thanksgiving, had in recent years become “exaggerated and distorted into a mere ghastly display of physical strength and endurance under torture” which Eastman attributes to an “increase of cruelty and barbarity” since contact with the whites (Eastman 1980, pp. 55, 62). The Grand Medicine Lodge of the Ojibwe was for Eastman an essentially reactionary religion designed to “resist the encroachments of the ‘Black Robes’” which paradoxically required incorporating some Black Robe elements, ideas, and iconography (Eastman 1980, p. 63). Eastman observes that the “only religious leaders of note who have arisen among the native tribes since the advent of the white man”—these would be Tenskwatawa (1775–1836), the Shawnee prophet known through his association with his brother Tecumseh, and Wovoka, also known as Jack Wilson (1856–1932), the Paiute prophet of the Ghost Dance movement that swept the plains in the late 1800s—“both founded their claims or prophecies on the Gospel story” (Eastman 1980, p. 64). So while Zitkala-Ša associated Christianity with whites, Eastman linked even the most iconic tribal religions to white Christianity. You simply could not escape them.

Such were the ironies of the assimilation era. So many unintended consequences. The planned orderly transformation of savage Indians into civilized citizens ended up driving wedges within families and made even the assimilation project’s greatest successes feel deracinated and alienated. For their part, Indians who wanted to resist the Black Robes ended up imitating them in a spirit of rivalry and degraded their own religions. Meanwhile, it might have been the case all along that Christianity and traditional tribal religions shared more than anyone had imagined. Perhaps everyone was missing the big picture. Perhaps the actual threat to Indians and Christians alike was “civilization” itself; *modernity* was the thing attacking both Bible and “living book” and in the process strangely bringing everyone in line with an unwritten policy that no one consciously designed: a secular age.

4. Indians Made of Words

Historians generally mark the close of the assimilation era in the 1930s with the rise of a federal Indian policy program of tribal self-determination. Out was the progressive-era condescension and micromanagement of figures like Richard Henry Pratt. In was a general desire to encourage tribal nations to govern their own affairs with the feds serving more as technical assistance and funding source than civilizing “guardian” to its “wards.” Under the supervision of Indian Bureau chief John Collier, new tribal constitutions were written and adopted, allotment was ended, Indian education was increasingly handed over to Indians, and traditional tribal cultures were not suppressed but actively promoted.⁸ Collier rarely passed on an opportunity to be photographed with tribal elders wearing traditional garb, and that attitude was not unusual. There was no longer any need to engage in comparative religious speculation or apologetics for traditionalism. What the self-determination era wanted from Indians was for them to be as Indian as possible.

Few books answered that call as fully—or as beautifully—as *Black Elk Speaks* (1932). An innovative collaboration between Oglala Lakota elder Nicholas Black Elk (1863–1950) and celebrated Nebraska poet John G. Neihardt (1881–1973), *Black Elk Speaks* tells the story of Black Elk and his people during their dramatic, difficult years of the late nineteenth century, and it features an astonishing real-life cast of characters including Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, George Armstrong Custer, Buffalo Bill, even Queen Victoria (part of Black Elk’s story takes place in England and Europe). Based on interviews conducted across three weeks near Black Elk’s home in Manderson, South Dakota, the book was produced not only by the two men but also by Black Elk’s son Benjamin who translated (having learned English at Carlisle), Neihardt’s daughter Enid who took notes and produced the transcript (since published as its own book, *The Sixth Grandfather*, edited by Raymond J. DeMallie), and Black Elk’s two friends Fire Thunder and Standing Bear who filled in the occasionally misplaced memories and provided their own stories and drawings. Despite its many authorial fingerprints, the final text was Neihardt’s. This is ultimately his book.

Neihardt gave his readers an authentic Indian which paradoxically required taking a few liberties with the details of Black Elk’s life and words. I am not saying that he made up his own facts or added events to his protagonist’s life. What Neihardt does is use his prodigious talents as a writer to shape a “Black Elk” that satisfied the twentieth century’s desire for Indian authenticity. The primary way he does this is by adding language to Black Elk’s first-person narration, for instance the first six paragraphs of Chapter 1 where the narrator introduces himself thusly: “My friend, I am going to tell you the story of my life, as you wish; and if it were only the story of my life I think I would not tell it; for what is one man that he should make much of his winters, even when they bend him like a heavy snow?” (Neihardt 2014a, p. 1). Only an Indian would speak like that! But it was all Neihardt; Black Elk never said anything of the sort. There are many such additions, often at the beginnings and endings of chapters where it seems necessary to produce a coherent narrative or establish historical context. On one level, I want to defend some additions because it would be impossible to produce a readable—much less a literary—text faithful to the interview transcript alone. On another level, one is troubled by a nagging sense that maybe they show that Black Elk was not as interesting to Neihardt as his own “Black Elk.”

This seems especially true when it comes to his religion. *Black Elk Speaks* is a lot of things—history of a people, story of an individual, an account of wars, etc.—but the book is especially interested in Lakota religion. The entire life story of Black Elk is framed by the powerful vision he experienced as a child; literally everything in the narrative returns to it. Neihardt’s obvious respect for traditional Lakota religion is beyond reproach, but perhaps the same cannot be said of his opinion of Black Elk’s actual religion at the time of the interviews: Catholicism. And let us be clear, Black Elk wasn’t some Sunday Catholic but an effective catechist who was reportedly responsible for hundreds of Lakota conversions. Having converted in 1904—twenty-six years before meeting Neihardt—Black Elk, as DeMallie explains in *The Sixth Grandfather*, “put himself beyond the onerous obligations of his vision, and he never practiced the Lakota religious ceremonies again”

(DeMallie 1984, p. 14). Not only that, but “Black Elk became a staunch member of the St. Joseph Society”—a Catholic men’s sodality—and for years “wrote letters in Lakota to the *Šinasapa Wocekiya Taeyanpaha*,” a Sioux-language Catholic newspaper, exhorting Indians “to be faithful to the church” (DeMallie 1984, pp. 16–17). As I write, Black Elk is being considered by the Catholic Church for canonization as a saint. Neihardt provides no indication of this religious life in *Black Elk Speaks*. If anything, he suppresses it.

We know from Enid’s interview transcript that Black Elk said a few Christian things that did not make it into the final book. The most dramatic example is Black Elk’s apparent vision of Jesus and his disciples during a Ghost Dance ceremony, chronicled in a chapter entitled “Visions of the Other World,” the details of which Neihardt obscured via editing. In this chapter—and we are starting here with what did make it into the published version—Black Elk describes seeing in his vision an idyllic scene of six villages in a “beautiful land that was all clear and green in living light,” and a “holy tree” (a motif in his Great Vision and in the book symbolizing Lakota flourishing) “full of leaves and blooming.” *Twelve men* approach to announce the coming of “*Our Father*, the two-legged chief” (“two-legged” signifying human as opposed to the “four-leggeds,” etc.—so this would appear to be the “chief” of humanity). A man appears in front of the holy tree with his arms “held wide in front of him,” but Black Elk cannot determine which people he belongs to. “He was not a Wasichu and he was not an Indian. His hair was long and hanging loose, and on the left side of his head he wore an eagle feather.” The man’s body emits “all colors of light” and he “spoke like singing” saying, “all earthly beings and growing things belong to me. *Your father, the Great Spirit*, has said this. You too must say this” (Neihardt 2014a, pp. 153–154). Again, that is all in the final version of *Black Elk Speaks*; my added italics indicate what we might acknowledge as Christian traces that made it in. What Neihardt omitted—as we know from the transcript—are these statements by Black Elk: “He did not resemble Christ. He looked like an Indian but I was not sure of it.” “It seemed as though there were wounds in the palms of his hands.” “It seems to me on thinking it over that I have seen the son of the Great Spirit himself” (DeMallie 1984, pp. 263, 266; emphasis mine). *Dechristianization* seems too strong a word to describe Neihardt’s edits, but it would be in the same ballpark.

As another example of suppressed Christianity, in a chapter about Black Elk’s tour with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, the protagonist says this about the white people he observed in New York City: “I could see that the Wasichus did not care for each other the way our people did . . . [t]hey would take everything from each other if they could” (Neihardt 2014a, p. 135). That is another of Neihardt’s additions; Black Elk says nothing of the sort in the transcript. In fact, *and very much to the contrary*, as DeMallie notes, “in a letter written in Lakota in 1889, after he returned to Pine Ridge, Black Elk expressed admiration for the white people’s practice of the Christian value of charity” (Neihardt 2014a, p. 323, n. 10). In that letter Black Elk quotes 1 Corinthians 13: 1–3 on the importance of charity, “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing” (DeMallie 1984, p. 10). Neihardt’s “Black Elk,” who did not think much of those greedy whites, was a fictional noble savage. The real Black Elk, who was impressed by the Christian virtue that he witnessed, reflected on it with the aid of holy scripture just like Samson Occom would have done.

So much for the white man’s papers. But let us not be too uncharitable to Neihardt who was only giving his American readers what they wanted in the 1930s: an authentic Indian, something they would continue to desire as the twentieth century progressed into the 1960s and beyond. As for the factual distinctions between Black Elk and “Black Elk,” Neihardt admits in his preface to the 1972 edition of *Black Elk Speaks* that he thought “it was not the facts that mattered most” but rather “the mood and manner of the old man’s narrative” which he had a “sacred obligation” to depict. He added that the book’s 1961

edition was “enthusiastically received, particularly among young people,” and that was proof positive that Black Elk’s “message to the world” was spreading (Neihardt 2014b, p. xxvii). Whatever Neihardt thought Black Elk’s “message to the world” was supposed to be, it was obviously not his exhortation to Indians to be faithful to the Church. That latter, Catholic message was especially lost on young Indians in the sixties and seventies who, according to Sioux writer Vine Deloria, Jr., in his introduction to the 1979 edition of *Black Elk Speaks*, considered Neihardt’s book a “bible of all tribes”: “They look to it for spiritual guidance, for sociological identity, for political insight, and for affirmation of the continuing substance of Indian tribal life, now being badly eroded” (Deloria 2014, p. xiv).

Another major book from the sixties promoting something like a “bible of all tribes” for spiritually hungry young people was N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* (1968). Published in the same year that saw the formation of the militant “red power” group, the American Indian Movement (AIM), Momaday’s novel won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, inaugurating what critics now call the Native American Renaissance.⁹ As one element in its sprawling plot structure, *House Made of Dawn* features a sermon given by Rev. John Big Bluff Tosamah, Pastor and Priest of the Sun at the Holiness Pan-Indian Rescue Mission in Los Angeles, and its title is “The Gospel According to John.” Tosamah’s sermon takes up the Prologue to John, Chapter 1: 1–18, which is concerned with creation and “the Word,” *Logos, Verbum*. Reflecting on the opening line, “In the beginning was the Word,” Tosamah says that while that particular observation seems to be true enough, John said too much: “. . . and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’ It was the Truth, all right, but it was more than the Truth. The Truth was overgrown with fat, and the fat was God. The fat was John’s God” (Momaday 2010, p. 82). Characterizing John as a “preacher” who could not stop talking—and also (in a statement that would have surprised William Apess) as a “white man”—Tosamah says that John “imposed his idea of God upon the everlasting Truth.” But that act of metaphysical conquest could be resisted today by those who return to the first line of John 1:1 before it adds the fat. Even now one could go to the Word and find—or is it make?—her own gods, just like Tosamah’s grandmother, a “storyteller,” did (Momaday 2010, p. 83). The rest of the sermon is focused on his grandmother, her Kiowa people, and their evolving religion, much of it intersecting with Momaday’s other writings, especially *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1968) and “The Man Made of Words” (1970), which emphasize tribal—and personal—self-creation through language and imagination.

Momaday’s point is to recast the “Word” as synonymous with the creative potential of the oral tradition which in the end “represents the oldest and best idea that man has of himself. It represents a very rich literature, which, because it was never written down, was always but one generation away from extinction. But for the same reason it was cherished and revered” (Momaday 2010, p. 86). On that take, Momaday’s oral tradition resembles Eastman’s “living book” in the sense that it belongs to a culturally distinct—and culturally intact—people: the Sioux, the Kiowa, or for that matter John’s Jews. The problem is that in the twentieth century all of these cultures—not just the tribal ones—were experiencing dramatic degrees of change, even collapse. Indeed, *House Made of Dawn* demonstrates it, featuring not a culturally intact peoplehood but pan-Indian, intertribal messiness: a Kiowa preacher, a Pueblo protagonist, a Navajo friend (whose song is “House Made of Dawn”), two neurotic white women, a Mexican priest, a syncretic peyote ritual, a syncretic Catholic Pueblo festival, lots of non-Indian influences (rural and urban alike), generation gaps, and the novel’s fragmented form and modernist settings point to a postwar America in all of its dismal crumbling decay. Lonely individualism seems to be everyone’s ailment. While the novel’s protagonist appears to find healing in his return to the traditional culture of his grandfather, it is not clear if this salve is available to anyone else, nor even if it will stick in the long run with him (I have my doubts). Nor is it clear how Momaday’s take on oral tradition—the Word without fat, a religion without God, imagination and linguistic creativity above all else—would provide to young Indians what Vine Deloria, Jr. called an “affirmation of the continuing substance of Indian tribal life, now being badly eroded” (Deloria 2014, p. xiv). Nevertheless, *oral tradition* became a recurring theme for

Native American Renaissance writers like Leslie Marmon Silko and Gerald Vizenor, and for years Native Americanists would evoke “the Word” in their studies and book titles (e.g., Swann and Krupat’s (1987) *Recovering the Word*; Warrior’s (2005) *The People and the Word*). But to be clear, the fat-free Word in Tosamah’s sermon is not the same Word, *Verbum*, *Logos* found in the Bible (pointing to a divine “logic” at the root of creation and moral order).¹⁰ More like its opposite: postmodernism’s critique of “logocentrism.”¹¹ If Zitkala-Ša’s “Great Spirit” was American romanticism with Indianish attributes, perhaps Momaday’s oral tradition was Derridean deconstruction in the Age of Aquarius.

And so it goes. As the twentieth century veered into the twenty-first, federal Indian policy and even international law increasingly recognized indigenous sovereignty, at least generally speaking, meaning Indians can be whatever they want to be. I suspect that most have stopped searching for a “bible of all tribes.” One rarely, if ever, encounters the Bible in new Native American literature these days.

5. Secular-Age Inclinations

Much has happened between Samson Occom’s sermons and Tosamah’s, perhaps the most obvious (for our purposes) being the Bible’s decline in Native American literature. What caused the decline? One way to think about this might be to focus on Indian literary “resistance.” Was it Native American literature’s polemical “rejection of the Bible” or its traditionalist apologetics that led to the Bible’s decline? Was it textual revisions made in service to an authenticity, or a postmodernist trimming of the fat from the truth? Or was it something bigger: decolonization, cultural renewal, a great restoration of tribal religions across North America and the indigenous world? As appealing as that story of resistance may be in our age of identity politics, there are reasons to resist it. For instance, one might note how our Native American writers’ attitudes toward Christianity tend to track the dominant opinions of elite Western literati more generally. For every Samson Occom there was an Eleazer Wheelock, for every Elias Boudinot there was—well, another Elias Boudinot, just as for every Eastman there was a Frazier, and so on. Yes, Native American writers brought their own concerns, styles, and even cultures to their scenes of writing, but we are speaking about their attitudes toward Christianity and the Bible, and on that issue I do not see much difference between them and their non-Indian counterparts. Indeed, I would suggest that there were far more differences between Native American writers and Native American non-writers in every single period of time that we have examined. I will leave it to the reader to decide if this situation warrants the dread word *assimilation*, but I will say that it is not *resistance*. In short, Native American writers claimed—then gave up—the Bible when elite American writers were doing the exact same thing.

The rule of Samson Occom’s razor leads me to conclude that in the twentieth century most American Indian writers simply lost their taste for Christianity. But something else was happening as well, during this long period of history, which affected all writers (and everyone else): the rise of “secularism.” In his massive and sweeping philosophical study, *A Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor analyzes “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others” (Taylor 2007, p. 3). Note: it becomes an *option*, not a disappearance. In a curious reversal of epistemic privilege, it could be that Indians understood that they were living in a secular age before whites did, having gotten used to so many competing religions in their midst and realizing that other options were possible. Might that explain why in so much Native American literature, religion never seems to go away completely? “The secular age is schizophrenic,” Taylor writes. “People seem at a safe distance from religion; and yet they are very moved to know that there are dedicated believers” (Taylor 2007, p. 727). Might that explain readers’ continued interest in Native American literature? In any case, I would not bet on religion’s disappearance from Indian country, nor would I lay odds that the Bible does not return to Native American literature. It really depends on what is happening in the real world which envelopes the scene of writing: on literary and intellectual fashions, on indigenous and American politics, on the states of cultures and

communities, and on the secular-age inclinations of Indian writers who might well hear the Spirit calling them to the Bible once again—possibly in King Philip’s languages.

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Notes

- ¹ For a good discussion about the traditional form of Puritan sermons, see (Miller 1982), especially chp. 12.
- ² An excellent study of Native American hymn-singing traditions is McNally’s (2000).
- ³ Forced conversions have happened in world history—in most cases taking the form of a king or emperor forcing his own citizens to convert to a new religion—but I am aware of nothing like that in the history I sketch out here. The idea of mental illness being a cause of conversion is sometimes suggested by scholars who apparently do not know what to do with the unexpected statements of an Indian, for example, the Ojibwe Christian George Copway (1818–69) whose reputation has endured such suggestions more than once. See (Lyons 2017, pp. 143–82, 145–46).
- ⁴ The “Marshall Trilogy” defined federal sovereignty in *Johnson v. M’Intosh*, 21 U.S. 543 (1823); tribal sovereignty in *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, 30 U.S. 1 (1831); and state/tribal jurisdictions in *Worcester v. Georgia*, 31 U.S. 515 (1832). The phrase “domestic dependent nation” comes from *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*. Before the Marshall Trilogy treaty-established tribes held a *national* status.
- ⁵ My favorite definition of modernity comes from Anthony Giddens: “At its simplest, modernity is a shorthand term for modern society or industrial civilization. Portrayed in more detail, it is associated with (1) a certain set of attitudes towards the world, the idea of the world as open to transformation by human intervention; (2) a complex of economic institutions, especially industrial production and a market economy; (3) a certain range of political institutions, including the nation-state and mass democracy. Largely as a result of these characteristics, modernity is vastly more dynamic than any previous type of social order. It is a society . . . which unlike any preceding culture lives in the future rather than than past.” See (Giddens and Pierson 1999, p. 94).
- ⁶ See (Horsman 1975). For Horsman, biological racial science engaged Native Americans most prominently in the 1820s–1840s.
- ⁷ As Vine Deloria, Jr. and Clifford M. Lytle write, “federal officials believed they could solve the problems of the Indians in one generation. Private property, they believed, had mystical magical qualities about it that led people directly to a ‘civilized’ state.” See (Deloria and Lytle 1983, p. 9).
- ⁸ The shift from assimilation to self-determination was largely the result of a congressional study published in 1928, *The Problem of Indian Administration* by Lewis Meriam. Cataloging a vast array of problems on reservations, the Meriam report shocked the government and called for significant changes in every dimension of Indian affairs. John Collier ran the Bureau of Indian Affairs from 1933 until 1945, radically revising federal Indian policy and promoting tribal self-government. With some exceptions—and a very bumpy historical road—I believe we are still basically in the self-determination era that was inaugurated in the 1930s.
- ⁹ Now widely used, the phrase is actually critic Kenneth Lincoln’s. See *Native American Renaissance* (Lincoln 1983).
- ¹⁰ The biblical tradition of the “Word” is much older than John’s Gospel, appearing frequently in the Old Testament: e.g., Isaiah 55:10–11, Jeremiah 1:4–5, Psalms 33:6, Wisdom 9:1–2, Proverbs 8:27–31, and of course John’s most important Old Testament reference, Genesis 1:1–5.
- ¹¹ Primarily associated with Jacques Derrida, logocentrism means being obsessed with the Word: privileging speech over writing, trusting presence over absence, and committing to a belief in axiomatic, transcendental Truth. Derrida’s attack on logocentrism launched what eventually became known as deconstruction, and it remains a central idea in postmodern philosophy and art. From that view, it seems Momaday is suggesting that oral-traditional Indians were postmodern before they were modern.

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