Past Encounter, Present Resonance

Jennifer Graber

Consider two episodes on America's southern plains. First, in 1887 Christian Krehbiel, president of the Foreign Mission Board of the General Conference Mennonite Church, brought fifteen Arapaho children from the Indian Industrial School at Halstead, Kansas, to live on his family's farm. In addition to academic lessons, Native boys received training in farm work and girls were taught domestic skills. Krehbiel emphasized the importance of "family life," but not just any kind of family; he meant the singular combination of Christian living and industriousness that characterized Mennonite families. He also contrasted his farm and the Halstead School with life on the Arapaho reservation, where the army threatened, treaties provided rations promoting "slavish dependence," and Native people lived nomadically, consulted healers, and practiced traditional rituals.[1]

One of the first Arapaho children to attend Krehbiel's school was Henry Lincoln. According to Mennonites, the Halstead experience bore fruit in Henry. He was baptized in 1890 and became part of the "Christian Six," a group of Arapaho young men who encouraged relatives to renounce their traditional ways. Here, we move to our second episode for consideration: in 1900, while still a member in good standing of Zion Arapaho Mennonite Church, Henry Lincoln led a meeting for ritual peyote ingestion.[2]

These episodes—Krehbiel's placement of Arapaho children with his Mennonite family and Henry Lincoln's participation in peyote rites while a baptized member of a Mennonite church—highlight two important patterns I observed

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[1] Henry Peter Krehbiel, *History of the General Conference of the Mennonites of North America* (Canton, OH: self-published, 1898), 307–9.

[2] Christian Krehbiel Papers, folder 13, MS 10, Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, Newton, KS, (hereafter MLSBC); Zion Arapaho Mennonite Church, Canton, Oklahoma, record book, CONG 104, MLSBC; Loretta Fowler, *Wives and Husbands: Gender and Age in Southern Arapaho History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 238; Omer C. Stewart, *Peyote Religion: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 196.

during research for my book on Kiowa Indian-American Christian encounters: First, each Christian denomination identified a *particular gift* it offered to Native peoples. These gifts not only differentiated them from other white Americans but also made them stand out among other Christians. For Mennonites, that special gift was family. Second, Native peoples, especially those affiliated with Christian schools and churches, responded in unexpected ways to these offers of Christianity through the medium of special gifts. Native worldviews—with their focus on kinship, land, and peoplehood—created forms and expressions of Christian life that missionaries had never seen before.

I'd like to reflect on these patterns using examples from my book *The Gods of Indian Country*.[3] Then I'll come back to the above examples that are part of a new project in which I'm researching the encounter between General Conference Mennonites and Arapahos.

Pattern #1: Particular Gifts of Christian Missionary Groups

1. Quakers

The Society of Friends, or Quakers, emphasized two things in their work among Kiowas and other tribes in the American West: their peace testimony and their record of relating peacefully to Native peoples. They referred often to colonial Pennsylvania, where they had played leading roles in the colony's government and initiated a variety of interactions with Native nations. Over time, Quakers developed an almost mythic memory of these colonial encounters. There's no better symbol of this viewpoint than Edward Hicks's painting of "The Peaceable Kingdom." Hicks, a Quaker preacher, depicted a scene from the prophet Isaiah in the foreground: the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, the calf and the lion. Nestled behind them, another example of the peaceable kingdom, is William Penn making a treaty with the Lenape, or Delaware, Indians.

Quakers contrasted their interactions with Native people with those of other Americans, including self-proclaimed Christians. They saw settlers as selfish swindlers and quick to violence, and they considered colonial and later American officials to be corrupt leaders who rarely worked with Native people's best interests in mind. As a result, Quakers offered their services to the government soon after the American founding.

Quakers were some of the first Christian activists to arrive at the young nation's newly created reservations. In the 1790s, they initiated "civilization" programs among the Iroquois, or Haudenosaunee, of upstate New York. Of course, these weren't the first Christian *missions* to Native people; the colonial period had many before this. But Quaker reservation work involved a new level of partnership with governmental officials. Society members sought to influence federal Indian policy, implement it on reservations, and thereby transform Native cultures in a totalizing fashion.

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[3] Jennifer Graber, *The Gods of Indian Country: Religion and the Struggle for the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

With this view of their mythic past, along with their success in forging government partnerships, Quakers constructed a sense of themselves as the "Indian's friend," as especially able to direct the nation's Indian policy toward a benevolent and enlightened end. They found new opportunities after the Civil War, when federal officials dispatched former generals to subdue tribal nations across the West. Quakers not only voiced opposition to this militarized approach, they also offered themselves as an alternative. They created a committee to lobby federal officials, arguing that reservations were places Native people could be persuaded to live. They also claimed their policy recommendations would result in a new era of peaceful relations.

In response to Society lobbying, President Ulysses S. Grant initiated what came to be known as the Peace Policy, and sometimes even the Quaker Policy. It assigned more than seventy reservations to Christian denominations, which then designated members to administer these sites on behalf of the federal government and their own respective religious bodies. President Grant also established a committee of Protestant leaders, including several Friends, to advise the federal Indian office. Quakers celebrated; a new era, driven by their peaceful witness, had arrived.

Before turning to Kiowa responses to the Quakers' arrival on their reservation, let me add two more examples of Christian groups vying for influence by way of their particular gifts: Roman Catholics and Baptists.

2. Roman Catholics

Roman Catholics, of course, had carried out missions to Native peoples dating back to the late fifteenth century. When the United States acquired lands west of the Mississippi River, they inherited a territory that, to some degree, had already been evangelized by Spanish and French Catholic missionaries. Given this extensive experience, Roman Catholics assumed they would have a special place in the government partnership to administer reservations. In fact, the Peace Policy stated that a record of mission work among a tribal nation would lead to an assignment, and in light of their record, Catholics anticipated renewed work on at least thirty reservations. To their surprise, federal officials granted them only seven. Further, the government assigned many reservations to Protestant groups who had no history of Native missions, and they refused to name a Catholic representative to the committee of churchmen advising President Grant.

In response, Catholics founded the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions to publicize their history of Native missions to Catholic laypeople as well as federal officials. Bureau leaders claimed that Catholics had, over several centuries, baptized more than one hundred thousand Native people. Worried about reservations assigned to Protestant groups, they claimed more than eighty thousand Indians were being coerced away from their Catholic faith.

In this context of government agencies privileging Protestants, Catholics developed a somewhat surprising take on the particular gift they had to offer American Indians. To be sure, they affirmed that theirs was the one true church and the only true sacraments, but they also began to talk about religious liberty and the First Amendment to the Constitution, presenting themselves as the special protectors of Catholic Indians' religious freedom. Bureau leaders called on their coreligionists to rise up and defend "their Catholic brethren on the plains," as the "religious liberty of the Indian" was at stake. Roman Catholics viewed themselves as particularly able to defend Native people from government-sponsored prejudice.

3. Baptists

Baptists love the Bible. When it comes to missions, they especially love Acts 16:9–10, the Macedonian call. In the King James Version, it reads:

> And a vision appeared to Paul in the night; There stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us.
>
> And after he had seen the vision, immediately we endeavoured to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them.

Of course, these verses were cited by other Christians as well, but they appeared inordinately in Baptist mission materials. Indeed, Baptists believed themselves especially likely to receive Macedonian calls from non-Christians, and they viewed themselves as particularly adept at answering these calls.

For instance, the first Baptist missionary to live among Kiowas claimed that Cûifā́ gàui/Lone Wolf the Younger, an important leader, had asked him to start a school. The missionary sent letters about the request to Baptist mission circles. In short order, Baptist missionaries arrived and soon outnumbered other American Protestants on the reservation. Over time, the story about Lone Wolf's school request underwent some embellishment. According to another Baptist missionary, Lone Wolf and some of his followers appeared at church one Sunday. The Kiowa leader addressed the missionaries. "Oh, friends," he said, "will you share with us your life and light and joy and gladness? Your knowledge, your Bible—your Jesus?" This account circulated broadly in a mission pamphlet called "Lone Wolf's Appeal." It captured Baptists' sense of their special work among Native people: they heard the Macedonian call, answered it, and then told others about it.

Pattern #2: Native Responses

I've shown how three Christian groups cultivated a sense of their particular gifts for Native missions. Now I'd like to turn to Kiowa responses to these outsiders and their offerings. Lone Wolf, again, provides a helpful example. According to Baptists, Lone Wolf wanted exactly what their nineteenth-century revivalist piety offered: joy, knowledge of salvation, and a holy book. He asked for things only Baptists made available, they said, since Quaker meetings were not known for their joy and Roman Catholics did not prioritize Bible distribution.

While Lone Wolf did look to Baptists for some things, it seems they might have mischaracterized the situation. True, Lone Wolf invited missionaries to live in his camp and start a school and he attended some of their Sunday services, but he also looked outside Baptist circles: Some children in his family went to the Methodist school. His nephew (who was like a son to him) became a Methodist minister. Other children in his family went to the Roman Catholic school, and Lone Wolf himself attended mass on occasion. According to Benedictine missionaries—the Roman Catholic order working on the reservation—Lone Wolf once stood before a statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and thanked the "Great Spirit" for sending priests "to teach them about Jesus." The missionaries were, reportedly, so excited that they circulated the story to supporters through their abbey's newspaper, which featured an image of the Virgin Mary standing over Indian Territory.

Lone Wolf moved not only between Christian denominations but also from the Kiowa reservation to Washington, DC. He did not go for the same reason Quakers had gone. They had wanted "civilizing programs" for Native people. Neither did he go for the purpose Roman Catholics had—to lobby for reservation assignments. He went, instead, to demand that the federal government honor its treaty with his people. He went to fight allotment, the process by which Congress mandated the breaking apart of communally held reservation lands into plots assigned to individual Native men. The "surplus" lands left over after this dispersal would then be opened to white Americans for settlement. According to Lone Wolf, this process violated an 1867 treaty and threatened to dismantle the connections binding Kiowa people to each other. Roman Catholics, remember, had argued that they were singularly committed to protecting Native people from the federal government's adverse actions. But when Lone Wolf objected to government treaty breaking, he found no Catholic allies.

To be fair, Roman Catholics did not get deeply involved in the allotment question. But Protestants did, especially the Quakers. Recall their earlier memorial to Congress, calling on Americans to take a peaceful approach to Indian nations? They had argued that federal policy be based on persuasion, that Native people be presented with appealing options meant to draw them toward "civilized" living. In the 1860s, that meant reservations that promoted farming, refigured domestic life, and transformed ritual practice. By 1890, it meant private property through the legal mechanism of allotment. Quakers ardently promoted allotment, with one Society member founding a pan-Protestant association to promote it.

As with earlier experiments to persuade Native people to accept reservation life, this one also failed. Lone Wolf never chose to farm. He never agreed to allotment. Instead, he gathered Kiowas together to support his trips to Washington. Once there, he and his nephew initiated a legal case to protect their treaty-guaranteed lands—a case they took all the way to the Supreme Court.

Lone Wolf is one of many examples of the ways Kiowas responded to Christian missions. In his experience, we see that missionaries offered things that did not necessarily resonate with his understanding of what it meant to be a people, to live in a place, and to relate to the powers present there. So how did Lone Wolf understand these things? How did his worldview affect his engagement with missionaries?

Born in the 1840s, Lone Wolf grew up celebrating Kiowas' most important annual ritual, the Sun Dance. He participated at least forty times during his lifetime. In this summer gathering, he learned how to approach powerful forces and beings: One humbled oneself before them. One asked things of them. One made vows to show the seriousness of one's request. And one fulfilled those vows when blessed with positive outcomes. These exchanges with powerful forces were made in front of one's kin. They were made on *behalf* of one's kin. They occurred in beloved places, often at the bends of rivers or at stands of trees where ancestors had gathered before.

It's quite easy to see that Baptist joy, knowledge, and books would not necessarily have been what Lone Wolf was looking for. He wanted powerful forces to hear his requests and answer them. His people would not flourish or even survive otherwise. That doesn't mean that the missionaries' God had nothing to offer him. To the contrary, a mission school provided his young relatives with English language lessons, which proved helpful in their legal case. They also received medical care from missionaries and sometimes even miraculous cures from the new and powerful figure, Jesus. Such care and cures were eagerly sought when child mortality was high.

Lone Wolf and other Kiowas also looked to missionaries as potential allies. For centuries, Kiowas had made agreements with other Native nations and European colonizers, and they approached Americans with this history in mind. Kiowas were sometimes able to make similar alliances with them, such as with the Methodist missionary who transcribed their petitions and sent them to Congress. Or the Baptist missionary who let them bury their loved ones in the church cemetery so that their relatives' remains would be safe from white settlers who might otherwise desecrate them in the rush to scoop up Oklahoma land.

When missionaries acted as allies, Kiowas fulfilled their obligations to them. And when powerful beings, including God the Father; his son, Jesus; or Jesus's mother, Mary, made good things happen, they fulfilled vows made to them. We have evidence of these acts in missionary records. For instance, a Kiowa woman vowed to hold a feast if Jesus healed her relative. When her kinsman's health improved, she delivered; to the missionary's chagrin, she killed her only head of cattle and served it up for all. At the meal, she gave a speech about her plea, her vow, and the deliverance she had experienced from Jesus. She encouraged other Kiowas to bring their petitions to him.

So Kiowas came to Christianity with a particular approach to powerful forces and with a particular way of bringing their concerns forward. Theirs was not a position that privileged joy, knowledge, or books. They emphasized places, relationships, and obligations. Their main purpose was the perpetuation of the Kiowa people in a land they loved.

This worldview was also characterized by a second pattern I observed among Kiowa Christians: religious fluidity. Remember Lone Wolf's interaction with Baptist, Methodist, and Roman Catholic missions? This was highly typical of Kiowa engagements with Christianity. Church records tell of Kiowas receiving multiple baptisms, taking communion in multiple churches, seeking healing from multiple missionaries, and sending their children to a variety of mission schools. And this fluidity was not simply between churches; it also moved outside the bounds of Christianity. Kiowa Christians were known to participate in Sun Dances, at least until the dances ended in 1890. They also continued to consult traditional healers, seek visions, and consider themselves protected by powerful animal spirits. They attended meetings for ritual peyote ingestion, and they joined the pan-Indian Ghost Dance movement.

They did this because their approach to sacred power had always been additive. As scholars have noted, being Kiowa involves assembling many pieces.[4] Sometimes these additions are metaphorical, involving new stories. But they are also quite literal. Kiowas acquired powerful *things* throughout their history. This practice started with medicine bundles created centuries ago when they lived in the Far North. When they migrated to the Northern Plains, they obtained an important object, the *Tá̱imé*, from their Crow neighbors, who taught them about the Sun Dance. When they lost that *Tá̱imé* in 1868, they made another. For Kiowas who affiliated with churches, coming to Jesus, Mary, or God the Father was to access more pieces and fit them into the assemblage of Kiowa life.

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[4] Luke E. Lassiter et al., *The Jesus Road: Kiowas, Christianity, and Indian Hymns* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 12.

Arapahos and General Conference Mennonites

While my research about the encounter between Arapahos and General Conference Mennonites is only in its earliest stages, fluidity of religion similar to that of the Kiowas is evident among Arapahos. Henry Lincoln, for example, the Arapaho boy who attended a Mennonite school in Kansas and encouraged others to become Christian, was later reported to convene peyote meetings. Frank Harrington, an Arapaho teenager who worked with Mennonite missionaries to translate the Bible, also served as a leader for the Arapaho version of the Sun Dance.[5] Willie Meeks, who served as an assistant to a Mennonite pastor, joined the society of lizard doctors—men who had visions in which lizard spirits gave them powers to heal.[6] Bessie Plentybear, who attended the Krehbiel family's farm-school, married the custodian of the Arapaho's sacred wheel. In her home, she hosted supplicants who made vows before it. She and her husband were responsible for bringing the wheel to summer Sun Dances.[7] And at least some Arapaho Mennonites, including those mentioned here who attended Mennonite school and joined the Mennonite congregation, picked up and assembled many other such pieces, similar to their Kiowa neighbors.[8]

Mennonite missionaries, of course, objected to this fluidity, at least when it was visible to them. I haven't yet found evidence that they knew about Willie Meeks and his work as a lizard doctor, but they eagerly wished for an end to the Sun Dance and objected vigorously to peyote meetings. Rodolphe Petter, Mennonite missionary to the Cheyenne who shared a reservation with the Arapaho, complained that "return to heathen customs," meaning Sun Dance and peyote rituals, was common "even among the [Indian] Christians."[9]

For Petter and other Mennonite missionaries, the world of supernatural power did not consist of pieces. It had one central reality: Jesus, the world's savior. To be sure, Mennonites in the United States debated the characteristics of Christian life, including the necessity of sharing the gospel with strangers. While Old Mennonites came to missions later, the General Conference had been active in mission work since the early 1870s.[10] Like other American Christians, they quickly identified the special gift they had to offer Native people: Christian discipleship and industry learned through incorporation into Mennonite families.

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[5] Fowler, *Wives and Husbands*, 223–40.

[6] Fowler, 240.

[7] Fowler, 212–13.

[8] Zion Arapaho Mennonite Church, Canton, Oklahoma, record book, MLSBC; Christian Krehbiel Papers, folder 13, MS 10, MLSBC. Willie Meeks's school enrollment is attested to in some records but not others.

[9] Typed historical accounts of various Oklahoma Cheyenne and Arapaho mission stations, one on Cantonment by Roldolphe Petter, SA.II. 2056, MLSBC.

[10] Krehbiel, *History of the General Conference of the Mennonites of North America*, 272.

Of course, missionaries used other formats to convey their gospel message: they preached in Arapaho camps, built churches, and opened schools on the reservation. But whenever they discussed Arapahos' need for Jesus, they insisted on a concurrent renunciation of Arapaho traditional ways. Such changes seemed impossible, however, when students lived among their Arapaho kin. Separation was necessary. Though many denominations in this era accomplished such separation by opening off-reservation boarding schools, the Mennonite example is intriguing for its deliberate convergence of faith, work, and *family* that took the place of boarding school. As Krehbiel claimed, Arapaho children who lived on his family farm were educated "spiritually and industrially," and his wife was "as a mother" to Arapaho boys and girls.[11]

Learning to See All Families

As each denomination cultivated a sense of their particular gifts for Native people, they each also inflicted a particular trauma. Mennonites, for example, convinced that theirs was the only kind of Christian family, were blind to the Arapaho families in their midst. They failed to see the importance in Arapaho naming practices, which imbued children's names with particular meaning and history. They tried to stop children's initiation into communal rituals passed down by older family members. And they had little besides criticism for the way Arapaho parents and relatives fed, clothed, and raised their children.

In identifying this Mennonite blindness, I refer to not only the past but also the present and my own experience. In the last pages of *The Gods of Indian Country*, I give an account of Kiowa ceremonial dances I attended with a friend a few years ago. The experience was profoundly moving, especially as I witnessed the love and connection between Kiowa parents and children. I watched mothers fix their daughters' traditional dresses and shawls, and I saw fathers make space for their sons to sit around the communal drum. My friend brought a cradleboard made by his grandmother. In it, he placed his own grandchild. This beautiful cradle had been made with loving care at a time when Kiowa children were particularly vulnerable. On that lovely fall day, I watched a young mother strap the board to her back and carry her baby into the dance circle.

For the longest time I could not put my finger on why this event had such an effect on me, but now I understand. I grew up in an Anabaptist farm family[12] that hosted children from the South Side of Chicago through the Fresh Air Program.[13] The children stayed with us, ate with us, and ran around the farm with us. For a few weeks each summer, we called them our brothers.[14] But they weren't our brothers. They had their own families. And I've only just come to realize that we never, ever asked them about their own lives, their loved ones, their schools, or their neighborhoods. That lack of interest, that erasure, is the legacy of Anabaptist/Mennonite's particular approach to peoples they evangelized. For me, that realization prompts renewed effort to ask what families I still don't see and what work of repair I can initiate.

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[11] Krehbiel, 297, 309.

[12] My father grew up among the Old Order Amish. His family became Beachy Amish in his early teens. My immediate family attended a Church of the Brethren con-

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gregation, while extended family on my father's side occupied the Anabaptist spectrum, including various Amish subgroups, Conservative Mennonite Conference, and what became Mennonite Church USA.

[13] Tobin Miller Sherer, *Two Weeks Every Summer: Fresh Air Children and the Problem of Race in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).

[14] Although the Fresh Air program included both girls and boys, only boys stayed with our family.