The creative resistance of Native American Christian art

The Christian Thunderbird is once more taking flight.

by Matthew J. Milliner in the December 15, 2021 issue

Kahkewaquonaby (aka Peter Jones) holding a sacred bag (right) featuring an icon of the Thunderbird. (National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa / Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY)

When the Ojibwe minister Kahkewaquonaby, aka Peter Jones (1802–1856), converted to Christianity, he aligned himself with the Thunderbird, seen on the bag he is holding in the oldest surviving photograph of any Indigenous North American. The Thunderbird is among the most powerful spiritual beings in Anishinaabe cosmology, a force against evil with a special, protective relationship to the Anishinaabe people.

In a time when Native Christians sometimes felt compelled to abandon their culture as a survival strategy, the Thunderbird was an indigenous symbol that Jones refused to discard. On his sacred bag, made by an anonymous Anishinaabe woman out of tanned leather, porcupine quills, dye, glass beads, metal cones, and deer hair, the

iconic bird stands erect with wings outstretched to the east and west in cruciform. The photograph is now in the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Relegated to a backroom gallery of the Science Museum of Minnesota are an Ojibwe altar cloth that displays the word *wakan* (holy) and a head vestment of Dakota convert Andrew Good Thunder. As if to emphasize the continuity of Ojibwe life before and after Christianity, the beadwork is displayed adjacent to a 13th-century ceramic vessel that features the Thunderbird.

Christian Indigenous artifacts have faced scholarly prejudice, sometimes being deemed insufficiently “exotic” to the White imagination. This has led to major losses, and it’s important to highlight items that survive: the funeral remains of an 11-year-old Pequot girl, buried around 1700 with a medicine bundle containing the skeletal remains of a bear paw and a fragment of Psalm 98, for example, or a Kiowa man’s illustrated vision, received during the revived Ghost Dance, of Christ himself blessing the ceremony.

Over the last 150 years, White views of Native spirituality have shifted “from a shocked contempt for primitive superstition verging on devil worship, to an envious awe for a holistic spirituality,” writes Philip Jenkins in *Dream Catchers: How Mainstream America Discovered Native Spirituality.* Modern-day admiration of American Indians can be as patronizingly violent in “editing” Indigenous Christianity as Christian missionaries were in attacking Indigenous ceremonies. And yet the fusion of Indigenous and New Age thought is a recent innovation. As these artifacts of material culture demonstrate, the fusion of Christianity and Indigenous North American culture is nearly five centuries old.

What are we to make of the strange contrast between two receptions of the same Christian gospel in this country? If Christianity alone were at work in our landscape, then Indigenous converts and my White European ancestors would have received similar treatment, and our reception of the gospel in this land would have mirrored the vision of the New Testament, in which all tongues, tribes, and nations are welcomed into the kingdom. As it happens, the conversion of these original people registered no change in their treatment at all. They preached powerful sermons both before and after their expulsion from their land. There were other, malevolent forces at work, and Indigenous peoples intuited those dangerous powers. The evidence survives in art drawn on caves, on rock faces, and in birchbark scrolls.

The full force of Indigenous Christianity is best perceived when understood as a form of creative resistance. This applies even to the most seemingly “compliant” of Christian Indians. Native Christianity is not a mark of inauthenticity, as it is often perceived, but a sign of revitalization in the face of overwhelming pressure. Only Indigenous North American Christianity can address the pervasive imbalance of Christian culture on the American continent, which so often has failed to honor or even acknowledge the land’s original inhabitants. As an Ojibwe elder says in Ignatia Broker’s novel *Night Flying Woman*, “Only time will tell if [Christianity] is the right thing for our people. If it is, then the people who wish us to be baptized will some day come to know the goodness that has been our life.”

Material culture makes the point with particular force. The ancient, sacred birchbark scrolls of the Canadian Ojibwe, once thought lost and then “discovered” in the collections of the Smithsonian Institution in 2000, reveal that Indigenous and Christian imagery were entwined from the start. The Christian Thunderbird, long muffled and suppressed by European entitlement, is once more taking flight.

The 2015 report of the truth and reconciliation commission in Canada cataloged horrific things done to First Nations people under Christian auspices. It also included this quote from Margaret Mullin, a Presbyterian minister: “Can the Rev. Margaret Mullin/Thundering Eagle [W]oman from the Bear Clan be a strong Anishinaabe woman and a Christian simultaneously? Yes I can.” As evidenced by the beaded stole she wears in her online profiles, Mullin has taken up the Thunderbird in the name of Christian ministry.

At the Indigenous Christian Fellowship in Regina, Saskatchewan, the self-taught Cree artist Ovide Bighetty’s *The Creator’s Sacrifice* (2002) shows Christ fused with the Thunderbird on the cross, with power lines extended even to his enemies. The Thunderbird is interwoven, in a variety of manifestations, throughout the series, an Indigenous Stations of the Cross. The Church of the Immaculate Conception on Manitoulin Island in Lake Huron is crested by a Thunderbird in the dome, and there is a carved Thunderbird on the altar at Wiikwemkoong’s Holy Cross Mission on the island.

And at the Saint Kateri Center of Chicago, which serves Indigenous Catholics, the cross-crested Thunderbird adorns the altar as well. The endurance of the Indigenous Thunderbird in Christian contexts is evidence not just of the Christianizing of the Indigenous but of the indigenizing of Christianity. While I acknowledge the thorny

question of appropriation as a White Christian, I refuse to pass by depictions of Thunderbirds without letting them inform my faith.

The Thunderbird is ubiquitous in the material intersections between Christianity and Indigenous faith traditions. But one of the most moving pieces of Indigenous Christian art I've seen is a simple Christ figure, which I encountered at the home of Peter Powell, an Episcopal priest in Chicago.

Powell, who established Indigenous collections at the Art Institute of Chicago and elsewhere, was five years old when the 1933 World's Fair took place in Chicago. Soon after, he began studying the history and the ceremonies of the Plains Indians. In fact, studying Indian culture, he told me, is what caused him to want to become a priest. But just as Powell set out to serve among the Navajo beyond Chicago, he realized that Indigenous America was coming to him.

The fusion of Christianity and Native American culture is nearly five centuries old.

The 1950s saw the mass urbanization of the American Indian, with Chicago serving as the movement's defining city. So instead of leaving, Powell helped to found St. Augustine's Center for American Indians, which scholars have cited as being instrumental in advancing the Indigenous self-determination movement. He organized emergency relief for American Indians uprooted by dislocation. The city's incoming American Indians increasingly acknowledged Powell as a friend.

Powell chose the name Augustine for the center. This saint, who himself faced a flood of refugees in his own city of Hippo, knew what so many Christians have forgotten: "What is now called the Christian religion existed of old and was never absent from the beginning of the human race until Christ came in the flesh. Then true religion which already existed began to be called Christian." Or as Powell himself put it at the beginning of his first massive study of the Cheyenne people:

> Christ came as the Perfector, the Fulfiller, of all the world's cultures and traditions. The Church holds that the finest in the pre-Christian religions reflected the eternal truth and beauty of God. Thus, these religions were, in their way, preparations for God's revelation of Himself in human flesh as Jesus Christ.

If this sounds suspect to some, it did not to the presiding elder of Indigenous studies, Vine Deloria Jr., who early on gave Powell and his book *Sweet Medicine* a glowing imprimatur in *God Is Re*d, a book that is otherwise excoriating of Christianity.

Deloria's criticism is deserved. There are plenty of studies that have uncovered and foregrounded the horrors that have happened, and continue to happen, to Indigenous persons in the wake of settlement. More recently, these have been supplemented by studies that finally do more to take into account the strategic embrace of Christianity by many Indigenous people.

"Critics who argue that Christian missions were mechanisms of oppression and social control underestimate the intelligence and awareness of the tribes," write Carola Wessel and Hermann Wellenreuther, scholars of the Moravian missions. "Christianity did not eradicate old [Indigenous] beliefs," claims historian Colin Calloway. "Rather, it supplemented and even strengthened them, providing a new, broader spiritual basis." The Indigenous choice to accept Christianity could be "a decision to restore ancient [Native] values that had been abandoned by other Indian peoples," writes Rachel Wheeler, or even "a cry of desperation and faith proportionate to the misery produced by colonialism."

As an emerging activist, Powell criticized the Bureau of Indian Affairs and attacked the Chicago school system for teaching a false history that ignored the dignity and courage of American Indians. From the storefront post of St. Augustine's Center, Powell said daily mass, organized relief efforts, and ably fundraised, even partnering with Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley for urban Indian relief. Soon the center grew into a north side brownstone home, all while effectively partnering with the complementary work of the American Indian Center of Chicago. Powell was careful to keep spiritual interests separated from publicly funded relief.

Above all, Powell did not maintain control. Instead, "letting go was a form of activism." His entire board of directors consisted of American Indians, and in 1971 he resigned to make way for an Indigenous director, Matthew Pilcher (Ho-Chunk), to take his place. But Powell continued his role as spiritual director of the program while maintaining his scholarly work.

Native Christianity is a mark of revitalization, not inauthenticity.

What remains of St. Augustine's Center for American Indians can be seen in Powell's modest north side home, itself a gallery of Indigenous art from the entire continent.

It is gathered in his living room not for display but for prayer. There are carvings by the Northwest coastal artist Lelooska, 139 paintings of Indigenous Marys and Magi, even icons painted in the Byzantine style. But the centerpiece is a large brown wooden crucifix of the Cheyenne Christ, in use by the center since its storefront beginning. American soldiers, under the command of Colonel Ranald Mackenzie, had destroyed a great deal of Cheyenne wealth and material beauty. So Powell commissioned a Cheyenne sculptor, Richard West, to depict a Christ that conveys both the suffering and the beauty of his people.

Now in his 90s, Powell remains an Episcopal priest and an honorary Cheyenne chief. He sees no conflict in these vocations. On my visit to meet him, he accommodated my request to see the Cheyenne Christ. He held it as if it were a child and laid it upon his living room altar, where he still performs daily mass. Powell almost seemed to refer to the sculpture as Christ, testifying to the effect of the countless prayers offered by all those from across the continent who gathered to worship before it for more than 50 years.

Christ's elongated body conforms to the gentle bend of the cottonwood. His eyes are softly closed as he absorbs his afflictions with hard-won grace: the wounds inflicted on him by the feather-clad priests of Cahokia, who sacrificed human life on the nearby prairie; by General Winfield Scott, who supervised the Trail of Tears; by Chicago's gun culture and the amnesiac arrogance of its towers; and by the forgetfulness of all who—still benefiting from the remarkably efficient American policy of conquest and removal—live obliviously on this land today.

Standing before the sculpture with Powell, I felt as if I stood in the center of the universe. He was less sanguine, having absorbed some of the sculpture's radiant sadness. After all, in dynamics that parallel the western frontier, so much of Chicago's Indigenous population has been gentrified away from Chicago's north side neighborhoods. "The world as a whole," Powell gently informed me as I departed, gesturing to the Cheyenne Christ, "is not ready to receive this power."

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