

# Last Words

## ON LAUGHING AND PRAYING

James Treat

“Christian Indians make me laugh.” This is the sentiment of one contemporary Native artist, the third entry in his list of “Things that make me laugh,” written to accompany a recent exhibition on Indian humor at American Indian Contemporary Arts in San Francisco. It’s a logical corollary to the last item on the list, “Mixing Indian culture with the dominant society makes me laugh,” and it’s an attitude shared by a number of Native people, particularly those who want to identify themselves in opposition to the colonial ideologies that currently dominate the Americas. But it’s also reminiscent of other labels and insults that both Natives and non-Natives use to create hierarchies of identity, to distinguish between “authentic” Indians and degraded Indians, between “real” Indians and Indians perceived to be not-so-real: urban Indians, educated Indians, non-enrolled Indians, half-breeds, drunken Indians.

Can Christian Indians aspire to be anything more than the butt of a tribal joke?

Granted, the idea of a Native Christian identity is both historically and culturally problematic. The blatant opportunism and oppressive dogmatism of the missionization process, the open complicity of white religious leaders in widespread land dispossession, and the growing strength of the

Native traditionalist revival work together to challenge the legitimacy of the personal religious choices many Native Christians have made. But “Christianity” as a religious tradition is neither monolithic nor static—like any identity claimed by nearly a third of the earth’s human population, it varies remarkably over space and time.

*It is time to call a truce  
in the religious war for  
Native America and to  
begin building inclusive  
communities marked by  
respect and trust.*

It is hard to deny, for example, the lunatic hypocrisies of white religion in the United States, where greedy televangelists, semi-literate bible worshipers, pedophile priests and cross-burning Knights of the Ku Klux Klan vie for power. But it would be equally foolish to ignore the significant and lasting accomplishments of Christians who have worked for the common good, people like the Protestant ministers who marched with Martin Luther King, Jr., in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the liberationist Catholic priests of Latin America. So it makes little sense to disregard the complex religious experiences of Native Chris-

tians, notwithstanding the fact that some of them are so filled with spiritual self-loathing and assimilationist envy that they may very well be their own worst enemies.

Christianity can take on many forms and functions. Like Native traditions, Christian institutions can mediate social power and material resources and provide avenues for the development and recognition of religious leadership. Like Native traditions, Christian liturgical forms can facilitate community reconciliation and allow for the fulfillment of ceremonial obligations. Like Native traditions, Christian teachings can articulate beliefs and values that provide direction in daily life and in overcoming personal struggles, and that form the basis for prophetic critique and political action. Like Native traditions, Christian spiritual practices can cultivate meaning and purpose through religious devotion—offering a viable alternative to secular materialism—and can challenge devotees to a life of responsibility and service.

Native people who choose to identify themselves with Christian institutions, liturgical forms, teachings or spiritual practices, do so while bearing in mind the community circumstances, family precedents and personal experiences that define their lives. And many Native Christians accomplish this identification without abandoning or rejecting Native religious traditions. While it may be true that some Native Christians have adopted the theological blindnesses of their missionary trainers, in what appear to be textbook examples of internalized oppression, many others have not. To dismiss all Native Christians as acculturated, anachronistic traces of religious colonialism is to miss innumerable demon-

strations of their insightful historical and social analysis, their complex and sophisticated religious creativity, and their powerful devotion to personal and communal survival. To disregard Christian Indians, either as Christians or as Indians, is to deny their human agency, their religious independence and, ultimately, their very lives.

Native communities have long been the battlegrounds for intense religious contestation and conflict; life in these communities is characterized by unusual forms of religious diversity, often involving a variety of tribal traditions, intertribal groups and denominational churches that compete for human resources. But an increasing number of Native people—both Christian and traditional—are reaching across the religious boundaries that have divided their communities, and it is time for all of us to take these initiatives seriously. It is time to call a truce in the religious war for Native America and to begin building inclusive communities marked by respect and trust.

Indian humor is a precious gift. Human survival depends on our never losing the ability to laugh at ourselves, and the Christian Indians I have known can joke and tease with the best of tribal tricksters. Our world will move a little closer to the justice and peace that so many religious people are praying for when we learn to reach across our differences—cultural, political, even religious—and begin laughing with; not at, each other.

*James Treat is assistant professor of American Studies and assistant director of the Native American Studies Center at the University of New Mexico.*