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## **Magisterarbeit**

"How can you go to a Church that killed so many Indians?":  
Representations of Christianity in 20<sup>th</sup> Century  
Native American Novels

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Do you take the bread and wine  
because you believe them to be the body and blood?  
I take them, as other Indians do, too  
because that colonial superstition is as beautiful  
as any of our indigenous superstitions

Sherman Alexie, *The Sasquatch Poems*

## 1 Introduction

At the heart, if not *the* heart, of contemporary fiction by Native Americans writers is the struggle of Indians living between two cultures; often personified in mixedblood protagonists (which corresponds frequently with their authors' biography). A 'heart of darkness,' indeed, given that the colonial experience for the indigenous people living in the United States, albeit their citizenship, has not really come to an end yet.

Therefore, it has also been avoided to characterize contemporary Native American texts as 'post-colonial'. Nevertheless, one can profitably apply concepts and results from the studies of post-colonial literatures, where appropriate. One of the main concerns of almost all authors who write about colonized people, is their experience with Christianity; the religion, justification, and tool of the Western colonizer. The Indian-Christian discourse is also the earliest matter recorded by Native Americans writing in English. In fact, nearly all original documents by native authors from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century deal with their conversion to Christianity or are clerical texts, e.g. sermons, itself.

Ironically, one of the oldest literary accounts of Indian-White contact in North America – and what Charles Larson calls "our oldest myth" –, the Pocahontas legend, is also one of the first that deals with the Indian-Christian theme. For being able to marry John Rolfe, Matoaka (her real name) had to be baptized first in 1614.

Pocahontas thus became our first Christian convert – a beacon that would bring light to an entire continent of savages. She was living hope for the religious leaders of the colony – proof that savages could be converted.  
[Larson 23]

This is one side of the story, the one that has been recently favored not only by movie makers – after years of displaying John-Wayne-like characters killing the 'red savages' on screen. The other side is history, the history of mostly forced Christianization of thousands of Native Americans, at the cost of the destruction of their families, cultures, and lives.

In his struggle for his very existence the Calvinist who had looked upon the native as a being to be redeemed from the power of Satan soon became satisfied that the enemy of God was to be exterminated at any cost, and that the only good Indian was a dead Indian. In his peculiar religious intolerance and fanaticism he reputedly fell first upon his knee and then upon the aborigines, prompted to do the first in the hope that the second might be more successful. [Larson 25f]

Nevertheless, even after 500 years of Indian-Christian contact and conflict, the descendants of America's indigenous peoples are still present. Moreover, despite persecution and punishment they have managed to preserve (elements of) their tribal traditions, beliefs, and even languages. Since the 1960s and 70s, Native American religions and philosophies have experienced a revival of interest and practice. However – but not really surprisingly –, centuries of Christian missionary efforts, joined with legal prohibition of tribal customs, violent removal and destruction of native communities, and forced assimilation left deep marks in the Indian's soul: it (often) turned Christian.

While no reliable figures of religious affiliations among Native Americans are available – since it cannot be recorded by the U.S. Census and many practice multiple beliefs –, it is generally assumed that a majority was at least baptized. Churches today estimate a native following of more than 400,000 [cf. Davis 349], probably indicating only active members. Keeping in mind that more than 80 percent of all U.S. citizens regard themselves as Christians and a growing number of Native Americans have not grown up in tribal communities but in disparate 'Westernized' environments, higher numbers are possible. However, and this is the problematic and interesting part, a Christian Indian does not necessarily exclude tribal philosophies, rituals or beliefs. The "now day Indi'n" (Kenneth Lincoln) is not only often of mixed blood, but also of and in mixed cultures.

Indians can be Roman Catholic or Episcopalian, Baptist or Mormon, yet still pray with a Lakota medicine pipe in a plains ceremony or take peyote to see Christ in the Native American Church. They can ride the Manhattan subway and go to an Iroquois sweat lodge for purification; run a small business in Phoenix and attend a Navajo Beautyway ceremony with medicine people. [Lincoln 186]

This peculiar duality of today's Native Americans, who not only live between two cultures, but often embrace both, a tribal and Western lifestyle, became a special point of interest for me when reading contemporary American Indian fiction. In many of these narrative accounts, Christianity among Indians plays an important role. These representations occur in many forms, can deal with the colonial past, the various conflicts between Indians and Christians, and the inner conflicts of Native American Christians, who have accepted a faith that helped to extinguish their ancestors and tribal culture. Moreover, increasingly Native American authors are employing biblical texts for "intertextual references, thus enabling transcultural communication" [Wilke 83] with non-native readers, as well as challenging the Western society and its major religion.

The central question of the modern Christian Indian, as well as one of many non-Indian Christians, – "How can you go to a Church that killed so many Indians?" [Alexie, *RB* 166] – is implicitly stated and attempted to answer by many contemporary indigenous artists, and therefore, my main interest in the following examination of Native American novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 2 Thesis

In this paper, I will review various representations of Christianity in 20<sup>th</sup> century Native American fiction<sup>1</sup>, spanning sixty years from the 1930s to the 1990s, and covering a wide selection of geographical and cultural areas in the United States.

Introduced by a short survey of the historical background and development of Indian-Christian relations during the last century, the analytical focus will be on the changing approaches that the authors take to represent this reality within a changing identity and self-image as Native Americans in a dominant Christian culture. Questions will involve the writers' attitudes toward the Christian church and its history, their intentions in representing Christianity in the context of a Native American narrative, the various roles it plays in the alienation process of American Indians between the cultures, and the authors' contributions to the problem of cultural and spiritual hybridity.

While earlier literary accounts of these themes by Native Americans have been extensively researched – i.e. clerical and autobiographical writings from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century –, contemporary fiction has not been broadly examined yet in regard to its widespread representation of Christianity. Only a few authors have examined this special aspect in single works, although a general survey of American Indian fiction from this perspective would give insight to an important aspect of contemporary Indian life and culture.<sup>2</sup> However, many of the fictional texts since the so-called literary Native American Renaissance of the 1960s and 70s reflect upon this inevitable conflict of American Indians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, even – or especially – one of the first Native American novelists, D'Arcy McNickle, precedes the boom of interest in contemporary indigenous fiction with his novel about the religious and ethnic quest for identity of a young Salish Indian at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The selection of fictional texts examined in this paper is not supposed to appear comprehensive but as representative as possible. Therefore, I have chosen

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<sup>1</sup> Within the restricted frame of this paper, I will not enter a discussion of what defines Native American literature today. My subject matter is examined on works of fiction that have already passed the 'test of Indianness' in the academe and Indian Country alike, although with variable outcomes.

Secondly, I will operate with the commonly used terms Native Americans, Indians, American Indians, and indigenous people interchangeably, being aware of historic misinterpretations and exploitations. By their use I do not mean to offend anybody, and leave the question of who is an Indian, as well, to other scholars and people of indigenous descent.

<sup>2</sup> It seems that, so far, only Kimberly Blaeser's essay "Pagans Rewriting the Bible: Heterodoxy and the Representation of Spirituality in Native American Literature," *ARIEL* 25 (1994) 1: 12-31, provides a general introduction to various literary works. Anthropologists, on the other hand, have already discovered the many facets of present Indian-Christian relations. See, e.g. the entries and bibliographical notes in Champagne, Davis, and Hirschfelder/Molin [cf. my 'Works Cited']. Notable recent publications on the topic include Christopher Vecsey's account of Sioux Catholicism, *Where the Two Roads Meet* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1999) and James Treat's bibliography and collection of essays by American Indian Christians, *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996). The latter, interestingly, begins with two quotes from Momaday's and Silko's novels, both examined in my paper as well.

works from different decades that reflect the change of actual historical conditions as well as literary styles and models of narrative fiction. Also deliberately is the choice in regard of the tribal background of their authors or represented cultures, which covers the Flathead and Spokane from Montana and Washington, the Chippewa from North Dakota, and the Pueblos of New Mexico. Obviously, male authors dominate this selection, which is more or less coincidental. For a consideration of my topic, I could have also included novels by Linda Hogan or Winona LaDuke, which are only discarded here in favor of the more innovative literary approach of Thomas King, who adds to the stylistic diversity of this collection. However, the writers' gender is probably not of such high relevance in the context of this paper, and therefore, not a special focus here.

The main line of this paper will follow the growing literary confidence of American Indian authors in their representation and confrontation of Christianity. This trend seems to be a result or a reflection of an as well increasing self-assurance of Native Americans, whose political, cultural and spiritual conditions have significantly changed throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Whereas the earliest novelists, like McNickle, had to write against general assumptions of alleged native inferiority and therefore prophesied doom; later authors were intend to prove the survival of Indian cultures and traditions, despite centuries of Christian colonization. However, even the protagonists of the so-called Native American renaissance of the 1960s and 70s, were not only reviving tribal values but also acknowledging the changing conditions of the modern Indian, who had to find a way between and in two long-time antagonistic cultures and religions.

The second wave of a Native American renaissance in regard to a growing interest in indigenous cultures during the 1980s (mirrored as well in the sudden explosion of 'Indians' recorded by the U.S. Census, indicating changing attitudes towards one's Indianness), also began to produce different approaches in literature and the representation of Christianity in native fiction. With the arrival of Louise Erdrich in the nationwide best-seller lists, one associates as well a less restricted form of Native American literature, without strained attempts to create original 'indigenous' art. Authors easily moved between different literary traditions, used tribal and Western cultural references alike. Only reflecting reality, suddenly more Christian Indians seemed to populate the 'prairies' than traditional 'long-hairs' on a tribal vision quest. Moreover, during the 1990s, native authors began to shift their settings and destinations from the reservation to cities and urban areas. While the characterization of Native American novels as 'homing in' narratives [Bevis] had proven its validity for many years, suddenly the protagonists were Indian lawyers whose lives among whites in the city had become "so successful [they] can't go home again." [Velie 1995, 47] Without destroying its 'Indianness,' Native American has changed by opening itself, also to a broader audience; thus revealing that the (self-imposed) narrowness of the canonized definition of 'American Indian Literature' could not hold the great diversity of contemporary native fiction

In the following, I will demonstrate that the representation and discussion of Christianity in a native context, parallels and reflects the general development of

American Indian literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I will argue that the growing self-confidence of authors in their discussion of Christianity, their shifting focus and siding, and their various literary representation of the topic, are the result of broader political and social changes in the U.S. society.

Within only sixty years, Native American fiction has emerged, grown-up, and established an independent strategy to deal with particular problems of American Indians in an already problematic Judeo-Christian, Western culture. It was a giant step on the same path from D'Arcy McNickle's conventional novel in form of an abbreviated *bildungsroman* (which, nevertheless, already incorporates oral tribal legends and stories) that for the first time openly discusses the (im)-possibility to reject Christianity in favor of a tribal religion, to Sherman Alexie's self-ironic portraits of 'untypical' Catholic Indians and Thomas King's postmodern re-writing of the Bible. A general characterization of the different stages of fictional portrayal and interpretation of Christianity from a native perspective shall be an outcome of the subsequent examination.

Charles Larson, in his epochal survey of *American Indian Fiction* (1978), has developed a scheme that classifies Native American novelists into three groups: assimilationists, reactionaries, and revisionists [cf. Larson 97]. Although 25 years after these distinctions were made, definitely additions and reconsiderations are necessary, it provides a basis for an analog classification of Indian authors writing about Christianity. Moreover, as Larson has pointed out,

In large parts these groupings [...] mirror the period during which the writers themselves lived. The characters in the earliest novels generally accepted the status quo, the world that surrounded them. The protagonists in somewhat later novels came to reject that same world – as did the writers themselves, who saw as their goal the correction of the past suppositions and stereotypes. The works themselves evolved from a mood of veiled complaint to one of more overt protest. [Larson 133f]

The strict thematic grouping already began to trouble Larson in 1978, facing a growing multitude of very diverse new Native American literature. On the other hand, what troubles the scholar, naturally, pleases the reader. However, his general idea of the development of American Indian fiction still seems appropriate. Larson's first group, the assimilationist, covers the earliest narratives from about 1880 to 1920. My examination starts with the second, the so-called reactionary period, and ends with a new kind of literature that I would characterize as postmodern-ironic revisions.

With the term "reactionary," Larson tries to describe a development that embraces McNickle's work from the 1930s as well as Momaday's from the 1960s:

Like Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, McNickle's *The Surrounded* is primarily a novel of renunciation – wholesale rejection of the white man's world. The two works illustrate a new ideological stance: repudiation of the white man's world coupled with a symbolic turn toward the life-sustaining roots of traditional Indian belief. [Larson 67]

This is only partly right. Although both authors present tribal customs and values, which have been denied for a long time, as an alternative to Western culture, their critique and representation of the colonizer differs significantly.

While McNickle's *The Surrounded* clearly rejects a Christian understanding of missionary work that has dominated America far into the 1960s, it cannot really be classified as "reactionary," since the author does not present a return to tribal religions and customs as an actual alternative for the young Indian [see Chapter 4.1]. On the other hand, Momaday presents tribal cultures as an alternative that offers healing for the torn and battered Abel, without overtly attacking the white man's world that remains secluded from the novels main stage.

Nevertheless, I would like to borrow the term "rejection" from Larson to characterize a first approach of native fiction in dealing with Christianity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Opposed to common assimilationist tendencies in politics and literature alike, McNickle is the first Indian novelist who openly questions, confronts, and rejects the destructive Christian influence on Native Americans.

A second period of Indian-Christian representation could more likely include Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) along with Silko's *Ceremony* (1977). Despite Larson's observation of a "separate reality" in the fictional world of Leslie Silko and James Welch, these works cannot be easily categorized as "separatist." Although white people only play a minor role in these novels – often set primarily on Indian reservations – and Christianity seems to do so as well, it finds its representation. Already *The Surrounded* contained only a handful of whites, but they were still active and responsible. Whereas the main intention of McNickle's writing, was their critique, "the element of protest tends to be of lesser importance" [Larson 134] in the later novels of the 1970s. However, I do not read this as an acceptance of the social conditions and turn towards family and tribal problems, as Larson's interpretation might imply, nor an attempt to revive an ancient tribal past.

Christianity still is a topic dealt with in Native American fiction, only the focus and conditions have changed. The opponent now is not the white priest and missionary (though we find a short but clear accusation in *Ceremony*), who is rather neglected or displayed as obsolete, indeed of a "separate reality," a cast-out 'other' on the reservation. However, Christian beliefs and rituals are present among the tribe, in fact, adapted and incorporated perfectly. These are the first signs of a changing native attitude towards Christianity, which is already not the main point of reference for present criticism. The Indians are devout Christians themselves, but loyal to both native and Western religions. The Pueblos of Momaday's and Silko's world practice the Christian religion next to or mingled with tribal beliefs. Of course, this causes conflicts, but critique now is not only aimed at Christianity but also against inadequate tribal practices:

It is the stasis and monologic quality of orthodox dogma that much contemporary Native American literature opposes, whether manifested in Christian or in tribal religions. [Blaeser 22]

Both authors question inadequate rituals by Indians, be it in the Native American Church or practiced by reactionary medicine men. In fact, the tribal members that criticize Silko's Betonie for his 'updated' ceremonies, detach themselves from the present tribal reality just as much as Momaday's Catholic priest, who only thinks he can relate more to the Indians than his 19<sup>th</sup> century predecessor. Therefore, instead of emphasizing the separation of Native Americans from Western mainstream in these novels, I would rather highlight the

authors' appeal for a necessary (syncretic) adaptation of any belief system to the needs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Since the 1960s and 70s, American Indian writers have emancipated themselves. Momaday and Silko are classic examples of the Native American renaissance, by attempting to create literary techniques that itself had to be different from traditional Western narratives (although they learned their fragmented structures also from Western [post-]modernists). Later generations of native writers have not always followed this doctrine, but certainly built upon their works. Regardless of its actual literary form, the tribal focus in native fiction has been expanded also by a new sovereign and creative application of the Indian-Christian experience.

This criterion can be observed in as different works as Louise Erdrich's novels-in-stories, Thomas King's postmodern narrative, and Sherman Alexie's diverse poems, stories, and novels. A brave use of elements and structures from Christian mythology and ritual is a significant feature of these books. The critique of Christianity has reached a new artistic level, by re-applying Western religious patterns in a native context, these authors subvert an 'enemy' that has often become indivisible from themselves as active Christians. Biblical narrative structures and characters smoothly mix in Erdrich's modern oral tribal literature, conquering new grounds for native expression and in doing so becoming more representative of the today's mixed communities. King's *Green Grass, Running Water* even attempts to re-write the Bible, to add and "fix things" from a native perspective, a classic postcolonial method. In Alexie's various artistic approaches, Christianity very fittingly is all over the place, ironically played with, mocked at, and nevertheless practiced in a typical Native American 20<sup>th</sup> century style.

James Cox observes the emergence of the "direct revision and subversion of colonial literatures as popular narrative strategy for Native American authors" [Cox 219] in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Bible, as *the* colonial meta-narrative, is certainly included here. Cox, as well as Laura Donaldson, in their critiques of Thomas King's novel, refer to Edward Said's notion of the power to narrate in colonial discourses. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), he perfectly explains also the reasons for recent tribal re-narrations of colonial texts, ranging from the Bible over *Moby-Dick* to Western movies:

[S]tories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history. The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land [...], who won it back, and who now plans its future – these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative. The power to narrate, or to block other narratives [...] is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them.  
[Said xii]

The narrative mood that is most characteristic of contemporary American Indian postcolonial revisions, certainly is irony and parody. As will be demonstrated below, tribal humor connects even as diverse approaches as Erdrich's realistic storytelling with King's and Alexie's postmodern novels. Therefore, I subsume all of them, as well, in their representation of Christianity in

one category, defined as postmodern-ironic revisions. While not all current works display the same characteristics of postmodern literatures, they certainly all include a critique based on ironic subversion of Western discourses. Consequently, one can reasonably extend Denise Low's postulate about Alexie's stories to many of the new Native American texts: they "could not have been written during any other period of history. [They] read like a casebook of postmodernist theory [...]. Irony, pastiche, and mingling of popular cultures occur throughout the book." [Low 123f] She rightly observes, that postmodernism is both "the technique of communication – as well as survival." [ibid.]

### 3 Historical Background

This chapter will provide a short outline of the historical development of Indian-Christian relations concerning the tribes that are of interest in the later discussion of the literary texts. Moreover, I will look into the biblical pretext of colonization and point out the main problems of Native American cultures in their confrontation with Christianity. The general practices of conversion in missions and mission schools will be highlighted, before historic examples of tribal Christianization are demonstrated. The changing situation for American Indians during the 20<sup>th</sup> century shall be marked with two historic dates, 1936 and 1978, which stand for a reversal of the relationship between Western and tribal religion and policies.

From the very beginning, immediately after the 'discovery' of the Americas, Europeans were trying to classify the indigenous people within their Christian view of the world. Theological and political concepts were debated ranging from whether to treat them as 'savages' or perhaps rather descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. The two main camps formally solved the issues in 1550 at the Council of the Catholic Church, by favoring Bartolomé de Las Casas' argumentation over Gines de Sepulveda's. While the latter was regarding the indigenous inhabitants of the America's uncivilized savages, incapable of learning and slaves by nature ("Are they really human?"), Las Casas held the opinion that they were gentle, eager to learn, and quick to accept Christianity.

Subsequently, the reality produced an unholy alliance of the two: for five hundred years, missionaries of all denominations were eager to convert the American Indians, regardless of their cooperation. In the north, a self-proclaimed 'manifest destiny' to colonize the continent later replaced the Spanish Catholics' verdict, but without any improvement for the indigenous population. Without denying good intentions and beliefs of many Christian missionaries, and always keeping in mind the historic contexts and view of the world in particular times, the plain results of five centuries of Christian-Indian contact are devastating. From the very beginning, the intrusion of Christians in native communities with their own functioning cultures and religions, established over thousands of years, proved to be disrupting and literally fatal. Appropriately, George Tinker subtitles his study of this *Missionary Conquest*, "The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide."

#### 3.1 *Christian Premises of Colonization in Contrast to Indigenous Religions*

The Christian religion played a major role in the colonizing of the Americas and their indigenous peoples. In fact, the Bible provided the very document that sanctioned and guided the first explorers, colonial armies, settlers, and missionaries alike in their conquest of the continent. From Columbus, Winthrop and Mather, to Monroe and O'Sullivan, God's word was read as a colonialist programme that provided the Puritans with a blueprint for their city upon a hill and the 19<sup>th</sup> century imperialists with a map showing them the land of their

manifest destiny. The Eisenhower administration's policy of termination represents only its modern, 'humanized' 20<sup>th</sup> century reading.

It was all written in the book: the promised land of Moses was transferred further west, the Jordan became the Atlantic, nations were driven out and dispossessed, and "Every place where you set your foot will be yours [...]. No man will stand against you. The Lord, your God, as he promised you, will put the terror and fear of you on the whole land, wherever you go." [Deut 11: 24-25] The necessary power will be provided if they obey the Lord's commands and believe only in his supremacy. The Indigenous population and their religion must be extinguished:

Destroy completely all the places on the hills and under every spreading tree where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods. Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and burn their Asherah poles in the fire; cut down the idols of their gods and wipe out their names from those places. [Deut 12: 2-3]

In almost five hundred years, Western colonizers and Christian missionaries did their best to follow these biblical instructions. And they almost succeeded. An estimated indigenous population of 5 to 10 million in North America was reduced to about 800,000 in 1800. Languages, cultures and religions outlawed, forgotten, or their keepers murdered.

Even in 1987, when Christian publishers were considering the *Challenge of Indigenous Spirituality*, Vine Deloria, Jr., in an essay chose the topic "Christianity and Indigenous Religion: Friends or Enemies?" because it

illustrates one of the chief failings of Christianity, namely that it traditionally sees other religions as foes rather than simply as different. It sees other traditions as inferior rather than as having their own integrity. [Deloria 1987, 145]

Deuteronomy here also provides the rules: Christians are not allowed to "imitate the detestable ways of nations" in their colonized countries. [Deut 18:9] In his essays, Deloria demonstrates the fundamental differences between tribal and Christian religions, indeed, between Native American and Western philosophy. Primarily, the Christian manner of distinction, separation, and isolation is alien to tribal thought. The natural and human world are not separated in Indian spirituality and life, whereas the

Christian universe is dead, except for man, and anyone who believes otherwise and tries to communicate with the other entities of nature is not simply heretical but an idolater. [Deloria 1987, 148]

The Christian divisions do not end here. Most devastating proves the individualism of Western culture, opposed to tribal societies, which even extend "far beyond the immediate nuclear family." [Deloria 1987, 150] Deloria criticizes the discrepancy between a proclaimed sense of community in Christian preaching and lack of it in reality: "Here the individual is the primary point of reference." [ibid.] As will be seen below, native authors exactly take up this criticism of Christian de-emphasizing of the (Indian) family, which also considerably affects the greater society:

The emphasis on the individual's relationship with God to the exclusion of his or her responsibilities to others creates an immoral society. As long as individuals are "right" with God, so the idea goes, they can do whatever they want with respect to other humans or creatures. [Deloria 1987, 151]

Another interesting point is Deloria's distinction between a necessary 'divine calling' of tribal spiritual leaders and a Christian leadership based on wealth and education. This results in different effects when approaching difficulties with a priest's teaching or powers: "If that person cannot produce, he or she is irrelevant; in the Christian context it does not matter that the person is irrelevant if the proper credentials can be presented." [ibid. 152] This native assumption also enables the Indian to renounce his Christian faith, as well as combine it with other powers, if they "produce" better results.

Last but not least, the basic assumption of Christianity to know the solitary, universal truth, which allows no compromise with any other experience, is challenged by a tribal "very tolerant attitude for other religious traditions, for other people, and for the rest of the creation." [Deloria 1987, 158] This is the very premise that allowed the earliest white settlers to enter native lands and survive the first winter only with the Indians' help. Furthermore, it allowed thousands of missionaries to set up camp among the tribes and preach their religion. It also enabled many Indians to adapt to Christians religions without abandoning their own, which in the end help both beliefs to endure over five hundred years of contact. Deloria tells of his encounters with both:

Even with the great pressures that Christians brought to bear on tribal religions in the past century, which acts should infuriate people, I have rarely heard any criticism of Christianity among traditional people who look good in everything. On the other hand at least a third of the Christian missionaries and representatives I have ever met have been convinced that Indians dwell in darkness and that their religion and culture should be suppressed as quickly as possible. [ibid. 160]

### **3.2 Christian Missions and Indian Schools<sup>3</sup>**

For more than 400 years, American Indians have generally acquired their knowledge about Christianity from countless missionaries who had been following the explorers and pioneers across the continent. 'Acquired' in this case includes voluntarily, but most often involuntarily, violently, under penalty of imprisonment or physical punishment. The basic scheme has been the same from the early 16<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century: conversion followed by physical and political separation from community and family [cf. Tinker 18ff]. Missions and mission schools (later boarding schools) have provided the means for the resulting "cultural genocide," a.k.a. 'assimilation' or 'Christianization.'

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed critical examination of the spiritual, political, and economic nature of the Christian mission system in North America from a native perspective, I would recommend George Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

The first Catholic missionaries north of Mexico arrived with the Spanish conquerors in today's southwestern United States and Florida during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and established the Californian mission system in 1769. French Jesuits began their work among the natives in South Carolina and on the Great Lakes in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Pilgrims' arrival in New England in 1620 triggered off the Christianization and eventual expulsion, nearly extinction of the east coast tribes.

Admitting that the Christian missionaries of the past did not intend any harm to Indian people, Tinker characterizes their efforts as good intentioned, and naïve (and often financially motivated), but nevertheless culturally genocidal. This is not a contradiction, since the definition of genocide according to *Webster's* is a "deliberate and systematic destruction of a racial, political, or cultural group." By forcefully converting the indigenous peoples to Christianity and forcefully imposing on them a white-European culture, missionaries did deliberately and systematically try to destroy the native cultures of America. Ultimately, this led only too often also to the destruction, i.e. death of the very people they were trying to 'save.'

Of course, one can argue that only by assimilation and conversion it was possible for American Indians to survive within a dominant culture – a question that has been in discussion until today – however, hundreds of indigenous cultures were destroyed, languages and religions wiped out, and thousands of people killed. In fact, as Tinker points out, many Native Americans still associate their disastrous social situation with the long missionary presence, an assumption frequently reflected in the fictional works below.

Most effective, and maybe most merciless, has been the work of Christian missionaries and teachers among the children of American Indians. The best chances to assimilate Indians by simultaneous cultural and religious conversion were seen in missionary and boarding schools.<sup>4</sup> Children were removed from the 'harmful' influence of their parents and communities. Regardless of their spiritual beliefs, they were uniformly dressed, their hair was cut, and the use of their language forbidden. (The use of tribal languages for instruction by some missionaries is actually one of the rare instances, where institutional Christians were ahead of federal policies, which strictly outlawed native idioms in schools until 1934.) The deep impact and disastrous effects on the children's development and their cultural identity have not only been the topic of scholarly research, but also been a main concern of American Indian writers. Autobiographical narratives almost inevitably reflect the education in mission and (for a long time

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<sup>4</sup> I refer here to both, denominational and governmental schools, since its practices and teachers alike were heavily influenced and guided by Christian convictions. However, towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, boarding schools under federal supervision increasingly replaced denominational mission schools. However, the constitutional division of church and state was neglected in regard of Indian affairs for many more years.

For detailed information cf. for instance Francis Paul Prucha, *The Churches and the Indian Schools 1888-1912*, (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1985) and David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 1995).

indistinguishable) government schools. The representation of this theme in Zitkala-Ša's *American Indian Stories* (1921) actually designates one of the earliest examples of Native American fiction. She was followed later by McNickle, Silko, Erdrich, and Alexie, just to name a few writers discussed below.

Zitkala-Ša had personally experienced the educational system at Carlisle Indian School as a student and teacher. This boarding school, established in 1879 in Pennsylvania, has become synonymous with the assimilationist concept of its founder, the now infamous 'father of Indian education,' Richard Henry Pratt. The former army officer, who had promised to "kill the Indian and save the man," met wide support in the period of forced acculturation efforts at the end of the century. Motivated by his "devout and simple Christianity" (Hertzberg 16), he is a prime example of the benevolent but destructive self-proclaimed educator of the American Indian.

The U.S. government has been deeply involved in and supportive of the missionaries' Christianization process. By discouraging and even outlawing the exercise of traditional Indian religions – from the 1890s through the 1930s –, and directly as well as indirectly supporting the 'conversion and civilization' of American Indians, the federal government took part in the cultural genocide by Christian churches.

Actually, administration and church groups have been linked more than closely concerning the control of Indian reservations and financing of mission schools. The Board of Indian Commissioners, established in 1869 by President Grant, was nicknamed 'church board' since its members were nominated and supervised by Christian mission boards. This policy, aimed at ending political appointments to BIA posts by granting the churches control over Indian reservations, was upheld until 1933 [cf. Hirschfelder and Molin 106]. Despite conflicting laws, federal funding of mission schools was maintained until 1917, and continued thereafter indirectly by transfers from tribal funds primarily to the Catholic Church. After public concerns and an investigation, government ceased the payment of tribal allocations by the end of the 1940s [cf. Davis 114]. After the government had abandoned the termination policies of the 1950s in favor of indigenous self-determination, the churches as well began to redefine their role within native communities. Since then, efforts were made to recruit Indian ministers and priests, and many mission schools were closed or transformed for lack of money and native students, who were preferring a modern education in public schools [cf. in Davis 115].

### **3.3 Christianization: Tribal Histories Of Conversion**

The Pueblos, the prominent culture in both Momaday's (Jemez) and Silko's (Laguna) novels have one of the longest histories of Christian-Indian contact in the United States. The tribe actually consists of 18 different groups, most of them still inhabit their traditional areas of settlement in New Mexico, which is a unique advantage of many southwestern tribes. Moreover, e.g. Acoma pueblo is probably the oldest continuously inhabited settlement in the United States. It was founded around 1100 C.E., and has steadily increased its population throughout

the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today, about one third of each, Laguna and Jemez, live on the reservation in the pueblos.

They were met by Spanish explorers as early as 1540. At the turn of the century, Franciscan friars began their work and had already established eleven missions by 1616. Years of Spanish rule and religious oppression ultimately led to the successful Pueblo revolt of 1680, in which the colonizers were driven out temporarily. Twelve years later the Spaniards began their reconquest, this time with a permanent result. The old Catholic churches in Acoma (1629-1641) and Laguna (around 1700) still testify the missionaries' endurance.

But, what is more, they also give evidence of a grown hybrid culture among the Pueblo, for the indigenous people perfectly assimilated the new religion into their old practices. N. Scott Momaday comments:

The Roman Catholic churches of the pueblos are so old, many of them, that they seem scarcely to impose an alien aspect upon the native culture; rather, they seem themselves almost to have been appropriated by that culture and to express it in its own terms. [*The Names* 123]

Although today a majority of the Pueblo is formally Catholic, they have developed a practice in which neither the ancient religion of the tribe nor the Christian belief exclude each other. Henry Warner Bowden<sup>5</sup> describes the Pueblo as loyal to either tradition:

Church attendance and Hispanic holidays had some place in the village routine, but Catholic elements that contrasted with baseline religious values were politely ignored. [Bowden 57]

Thus, a unique blend of the two religions emerged among the Pueblo<sup>6</sup>, both preserving tribal customs and beliefs, as well as, securing acceptance in the white Christian society. For instance, without contradiction, each village is dedicated to a different saint, who's feast day is celebrated with native ceremonial dances as well as a Catholic Mass [cf. Malinowski II, 171].

The Chippewa (a.k.a. Anishinabeg or Ojibwa – I only use Erdrich's preferred term), at present, are the third largest Native American group in North America. They cover an area from Canada and the Great Lakes to North Dakota, Montana, and also Oklahoma. Less than half of the tribe's members (about 104,000) today speak the native tongue. Prominent Chippewa and politician Winona LaDuke herself only learned the language as an adult and attributes the loss also to the education of most adult members in boarding and church schools.

Today, many Chippewa live in urban areas and not in tribal communities on reservations. Turtle Mountain itself – where Louise Erdrich is enrolled and places

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<sup>5</sup> Bowden's *American Indians and Christian Missions: Studies in Cultural Conflict* (1981) provides an informative and systematic overview of Indian Christianization in North America.

<sup>6</sup> However, one should not generalize from these examples. Steve Talbot, for instance, refers to Spicer's three types of Catholic syncretism in the southwest: compartmentalization (retaining the tribal religion almost unchanged), fusion (tribal and Christian beliefs are merged to a new religion), addition (acceptance of some Catholic elements without integration). [cf. in Champagne, 680]

her novels – is a notorious example of criminal federal policies in the past. About 15,000 members live on and around an area of only six by twelve miles, which makes Turtle Mountain one of the smallest and most densely populated reservations in the United States. Since its establishment, it has been under constant erosion through federal reduction, allotment, and land purchase by white farmers.

As the families in Erdrich's novels reflect, most Chippewa were already of mixed heritage by 1900. These Métis were speaking their own mixed language and introduced many elements of the French culture, notably Roman Catholicism, to the tribe. The French had encountered the tribe first in 1622, when explorers followed by fur traders and missionaries entered the tribe's territory. They apparently established relatively good relations that caused the tribe to ally with them in the French and Indian Wars of 1754-60. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 naturally met opposition among the Chippewa and drove many across the border into Canada, where three-quarters of the tribe still live. The United States Plains Chippewa were assigned to Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota in 1882.<sup>7</sup>

During the 1880s, also St. Ann's Catholic Church was erected in Belcourt on the reservation, where the majority of people worship still. However, though for such a long time exposed to and mixed with Western culture, the Turtle Mountain people have also retained tribal elements and beliefs throughout all the hardships. As will be shown later on, Erdrich describes the advance of Christianity at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in *Tracks*, but also the peculiar hesitance in adapting to Catholicism. In *Love Medicine*, it becomes clear that Catholicism is practiced with a similar attitude as among the Pueblos; tribal beliefs are not forgotten but rather incorporated. Erdrich reports the same from her family:

Catholicism is very important up there at Turtle Mountain. When you go up there, you go to Church! My grandfather has had a real mixture of old time and church religion [...]. He would do pipe ceremonies for ordinations and things like that. He just had a grasp on both realities, in both religions. [in Bruchac 1987, 81]

During the 1960s, which are oddly spared in her novels, the new Indian movement also promoted a return to tribal religions and customs with significant success. Today "Ojibwa traditional religion is flourishing" [in Bruchac 1987, 81] again informs Erdrich. It should be noted here also that the American Indian Movement (AIM) was founded by three urban Chippewa – Dennis Banks, George Mitchell, and Clyde Bellecourt – in Minneapolis in 1968.

The Salish language family of the northwestern United States includes the tribes depicted in both, D'Arcy McNickle's and Sherman Alexie's novel. While latter is Coeur d'Alene/ Spokane Indian, McNickle grew up as a child of mixed-blood Métis who had fled in 1885 from persecution after the Riel Rebellion from Canada to the States and settled at the mission town of St. Ignatius in the Flathead territory. There he was enrolled and allotted land on the Flathead reservation,

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<sup>7</sup> Historical data from Malinowski and Jacobs

which provides the model setting for *The Surrounded*. As well as his young characters, he attended an off-reservation Indian boarding school as a boy.

The Flathead tribe of western Montana (4,455 members in 1990) has a very particular, but maybe not so uncommon, history of Christianization. Compared to the southwestern and eastern tribes, who had been in contact with white settlers and missionaries since the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, Lewis' and Clarke's expedition of 1805 recorded the first 'official' encounter with members of the Flathead. The first Catholic mission in the territory was not established until 1841.

The unique story of the Flatheads' call for 'Black Robes' had soon entered tribal lore and was as such incorporated by D'Arcy McNickle in *The Surrounded* (1936). These tribal narratives tell of a shaman by the name of Shining Shirt, who announced the arrival of black robes and told the Flathead no to fear them.

Shortly thereafter, between 1812 and 1820, Ignace La Mousse, known as Old Ignace, an Iroquois, arrived in Flathead lands and taught the tribe 'the forms of Catholic Service' [...]. The Flathead sent emissaries to St. Louis in 1837 to bring priests to their tribe, but the first group were killed by the Sioux. Eventually, the Flathead achieved their goal and saw the fulfillment of the prophecies of Shining Shirt when Father Pierre-Jean De Smet founded St. Mary's Mission in the lower Bitterroot Valley in 1841. [Malinowski III, 409]

This first mission remained active only until 1855, when another one was opened in St. Ignatius, which was located on the proposed reservation that was to be established this year. After initial rejection, the Flathead in part agreed to the Hell's Gate Treaty (what an ironic name!) because of the mission's inclusion on that future reservation. Twenty years later, the mission had become "the focal point of the Indians" [Parker 8] in the valley; two boarding schools had been set up, a flour and sawmill built, and Jesuits were translating texts into native languages.

Dorothy Parker considers the 'golden age' of the mission between 1875 and 1900, while George Tinker is very critical of its early years and views the first mission project rather as a failure. The Flatheads had been waiting for the 'black robes' for years, but when their high expectations of the new power were not met by the Christian missionaries, they soon lost their interest. The tribe began to withdraw from the mission as early as 1846, and soon the St. Mary's had to be closed [cf. Tinker 77]. In addition, the Jesuits were caught up in the wars between the Flathead and Blackfeet, each tribe hoping the Christian God would help them to overcome their enemy.

Tinker attributes the Jesuits' initial failure to their incomprehension of the Flathead culture and their colonial imposition of the Christian culture, e.g. the substitution of polygamy by European marriage behaviors. Not surprisingly, not all Flatheads agreed with the treaty of 1855. Chief Carlo's band still remained outside the reservation until 1891. However, even after conversion to Catholicism, the Flathead managed to observe a rich, religious ceremonial life according to their own tradition [cf. Malinowski III, 412; Parker 8].

Christian Feest takes up a similar case of a band of Ottawa in Michigan [cf. Feest 104f], who sent a petition to the President of the United States in 1823, requesting a Jesuit father for their community as well. The good example given by Jesuit

missionaries in the area and the Ottawa's interest in better access to the dominant society in a contracting world in which their own culture seemed to lose efficiency, might have been reasons behind the tribe's decision. The model villages of the converted Ottawa a few years later seemed to prove them right: training and education had enabled them to assimilate into the white world, which on its part was still reluctant to accept them as equal.

However, the positive outcome of this particular case of Christianization and economic success was paralleled, if not only enabled by the missionaries' willingness to accept aspects of the Ottawa's traditional culture and their permission to let them speak their native tongue. The news of successful Christianization and Indian-Catholic contact was spread among the tribes and certainly helped again to convince neighbors to accept missionaries, or invite them as the Flathead did after good report from the Iroquois.

The Flathead's and their neighbors, the Coeur d'Alene and Spokane share not only a close cultural heritage, but also a common history of Christianization. Father Pierre De Smet also established the mission on St. Joe River in 1842. Interestingly, Sherman Alexie's father was born in the town named after the Jesuit: DeSmet, Idaho. Parts of Alexie's first movie, *Smoke Signals*, were shot there on the Coeur d'Alene Indian Reservation, which was established in 1873. The U.S. Census reports 1,048 enrolled members in 1990, which still reflects the drastic results of smallpox epidemics between 1830 and 1850, which had halved the size of the tribe.

The Spokane were also encountered by De Smet, as well as by protestant missionaries, sent out by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions between 1828 and 1848. The tribe had been introduced to Christianity by Spokane Chief Garry, who had attended school in Manitoba in 1825, and preached the teachings of the Anglican church after his return.

In later years, Spokane Garry became chief of all the Spokan people. He urged for the building of churches and schools staffed with American teachers in order to help the Spokan assimilate themselves into the white man's world. Gary himself conducted some of the services in the new churches. [Malinowski III, 474]

By the end of the century, Protestant-Catholic conflicts were settled, another Assembly of God church built, and Spokan stories already "heavily influenced by Christianity." [Malinowski III, 475] Though adapting to Euroamerican society, the Spokan also retained their traditional customs and culture. The reservation, depicted in Alexie's novel *Reservation Blues*, was established in Washington state in 1881. Today, the tribe consists of 2,118 enrolled members, of whom only a few observe traditional ways, practice the tribal religion or are able to speak the native language (neither is Alexie).

After the Civil War, the U.S. government began to take greater interest in solving the 'Indian problem.' Forced to action by increasing numbers of clashes between natives and advancing settlers, the 'solution' was found in the so-called Indian Wars and the ultimate legal effort to extinguish anything Indian in the United States. The Indian Wars were the last desperate attempt of indigenous peoples to

fight for their (legally assigned) land and to defend their culture. Despite the temporary success of some tribes, their military inferiority turned the war into a bloody round-up of the last free tribes living west of the Mississippi. They were assigned to reservations that were repeatedly reduced in size and lacked the essential needs of survival.

At the end of the century, conditions were worse than ever: in the plains the buffalo was nearly extinguished, the removal of many tribes from their traditional areas disconnected them from vital sacred places and traditional life-styles. People began to search for refuge and hope in new and revived religious practices, such as the Ghost Dances of the 1870 and 90s. For fear of organization and uprisings caused by the spiritual movement that soon spread all over the west, the U.S. government finally outlawed any tribal religious practice among American Indians in 1884. Kenneth Lincoln quotes an order by the Indian commissioner to the Blackfeet of Montana from 1894, which that anticipates McNickle's description in the novel:

Sun dances, Indian mourning, Indian medicine, beating of the tomtom, gambling, wearing of Indian costumes ... selling, trading, exchanging or giving away anything issued to them have been prohibited, while other less pernicious practices, such as horse-racing, face-painting, etc., are discouraged. [cited in Lincoln 150]

The Dawes Severalty Act of 1887 was aimed at breaking last tribal structures by separating people and restricting the size of reservations. The land was allotted to individual members of the tribes and the rest (often the best) was sold to white settlers. Lincoln sarcastically remarks "the Indian Bureau thought to make reservation-settling, potato-farming, beef-eating, hymn-singing Christians out of once nomadic buffalo-hunters who worshiped the sun and now starved" [Lincoln 150]. The most impressive artistic reflection of the results of the policy of allotment, which was also used to outplay Indians against each other, in the works below is Erdrich's depiction in her novel *Tracks*.

### **3.4 Changing Conditions in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

The 20<sup>th</sup> century is marked by a roller coasting federal Indian policy, with several reversals of its central issue: assimilation into the white mainstream or support of independent minority cultures. The changing situation for American Indians is marked by two dates, which are closely connected to the development of Native American literatures. The first is the year of 1934 and the introduction of the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA), which, at least theoretically, enabled the native population of the United States to practice their tribal religions and customs after fifty years of legal persecution. Thus an equal basis – again, theoretically – for both, tribal and Christian religions was established for the first time in history. So far, a majority in the Western culture had held the opinion that these two were of completely antagonistic nature.

For example, "Christian" and "pagan" were the oppositional epithets used by the missionaries and the federal government to differentiate the "good" from the "bad" Indians up until the New Deal of the 1930s [...]. [in Champagne 671]

D'Arcy McNickle is the first native author to acknowledge the new possibilities, by rejecting prevailing assimilationist attitudes and openly contrasting Christianity with tribal values. While at the beginning of the century, agencies and the public "for the most part pursued assimilationist objectives [...] and the Christian missionaries usually followed suit," [Bowden 198] critics emerged during the 1920s, who supported "cultural pluralism as an alternative to destroying minority life-styles." [ibid.]

John Collier's (one of the pro-Indian reformers) appointment to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1933 brought about the so-called 'Indian New Deal,' its major achievement being the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) of 1934. This new policy was based on the principles of tribal self-government and religious freedom. Of course, assimilationists and churches opposed Collier's reform, who even abolished the Board of Indian Commissioners for its affiliation with missionaries. Instead, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) now began to attack the Christian monopoly on the reservations by "declaring that Indians had constitutional rights in spiritual matters." [Bowden 204] By lifting the fifty years ban on native ceremonies, Collier's new policies not only evened the ground for a tribal revival of customs and religions, but also for a change of general Christian-Indian relationships based on an equal standing.

Unfortunately, the years of hope for tribal cultural and political independence were abruptly ended after the war with a return to an assimilationist policy that called for a "termination" of special federal-Indian relationships. During the 1950s, restrictions on the sale of Indian lands were lifted, the judicial status of the reservations abandoned, in fact, whole reservations and once acknowledged tribes disappeared. A key program of the Termination policy was the relocation of Indians to the cities, by assisting them financially and in training and education.

However, this urbanization proved to be disastrous for many Indians' sense of community and identity, for they could not adapt to the foreign environment without a functioning support system. Although termination failed (and later was abandoned), it created also the new, 'urban Indian' – detached from his tribal heritage, people, and religion – and added a new quality to the problematic situation of Native Americans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Quite a few classic American Indian novels deal with exactly those relocated war veterans and their alienation and dislocation in the cities, e.g. Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, Silko's *Ceremony*, or Erdrich's *The Beet Queen*.

On the one hand, the setback of indigenous religious and political sovereignty in the 1950s, hindered also the development of an independent Native American literature, on the other hand, it produced the anger that started the new Indian movement of the next decade. Not until the general political overturn of the American society in the 1960s, native authors were able to connect to McNickle's achievements. The second important date in this context, therefore bears symbolic meaning: the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA) of 1978 was an attempt to react to growing protests on the sell-out of sacred Indian sites,

which had culminated in the "Longest Walk" to Washington. However, inapt in particular (a major amendment was just made in 1994), the symbolic gesture of the government was appreciated. Again, the changes were reflected by a growing interest in Native American literature. McNickle's *The Surrounded* was republished and soon followed by another novel, Silko's *Ceremony* was reprinted as well and at a popular high, new books by James Welch and Gerald Vizenor were available, too.

An expert on Indian-Christian relations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century emerged out of the 1960s Indian movement, as well: Vine Deloria, Jr., the son of a Sioux Episcopal minister, once Lutheran seminary student, and now self-declared "Seven Day Absentist." The controversial author, editor, lawyer and political leader also made predictions about the spiritual development of American Indians in his influential books, *Custer Died For Your Sins* (1969) and *God Is Red* (1973).

Whereas he might have failed in forecasting a severe crisis of Christianity in the U.S., and its replacement by the Native American Church (NAC) among Indian people [cf. Deloria 1973, 113], he correctly observes and comments on the revival of tribal religions (and criticizes their exploitation).

Deloria observed a doubling of NAC membership during the 1960s, estimates e.g. some 40 percent among the Sioux of South Dakota and proclaims Indian religions to be "the only ultimate salvation for the Indian people" [ibid. 119]. He accuses Christianity "to be a disintegrating force" [ibid.] and the "determination of white churches to keep Indian congregations in a mission status [to be] their greatest sin" [ibid. 112]. However, the NAC itself practices a religion that incorporates many Christian elements, thus pointing at the potential of syncretic beliefs among Native Americans.

The NAC, also known as Peyotism, evolved out of southwestern ceremonies that were revived in Oklahoma during the 1890s. It soon spread among many western tribes and became a significant pan-Indian religion much opposed by Christian churches and federal agencies. Its tolerant approach did not only allow several religious affiliations but adopted also Christian rituals and beliefs. In the founding declaration of 1918, the NAC asked for more acceptance and described its purpose in fostering "the religious belief of several tribes of Indians ... in the Christian religion with the practice of Peyote Sacrament" [cited in Davis 448]. Today it has been estimated that the NAC has a widespread membership of about 200,000.

The earlier mentioned adaptation to and of Christianity among the Pueblo not only helped the tribal religion to survive, but eventually assisted also the missionaries' work and firmly integrated the Christian belief into the native community. Similar developments are reported by Steve Pavlik for the Navajo, which have some 60 percent NAC members, among whom multiple religious affiliation is the norm. Most common is a 'Trinity' of Traditionalism, Peyotism and Catholicism. [cf. Pavlik 27] Syncretic pan-Indian religions are also known in other parts of the country, e.g. the Indian Shaker Church in the northwest and many other tribal religions that became heavily influenced by Christian practices.

Although it is difficult to gain reliable data about Indians' religious affiliation<sup>8</sup>, Christian Feest argues for a broader definition of tribal religions:

Despite the unquestioned fact that the vast majority of Native Americans are members of a Christian church, the notion that Christianity could be a traditional Native American religion is still not generally accepted. In the past, anthropologists and historians have significantly contributed to the construction of an opposition between Christianity and "traditional" religions. [Feest 92]

He attempts to open the notion of Christianity in regard to its native adaptations, and explains various models that formed native Christian communities. Feest differentiates here between rejection, fusion (syncretism), compartmentalization, substitution, and pluralism [cf. Feest 109-117].

However, one should also not underestimate the ability of the Christian churches themselves to change and adapt to contemporary Indian needs. While Deloria still met ignorant missionaries in the 1960s who declared to continue their work among a tribe that had lived as Christians for over 300 years "until the job is done," today the churches even employ also (a few) Native American priests, ministers, and bishops. Meanwhile, some churches incorporate also tribal sacred elements into their services. Steve Talbot lists a whole variety of examples on how churches use costumes, pipes, or other tribal elements in e.g. Catholic mass. [cf. in Champagne 670f]

Although he also supports Deloria's criticism of Christian churches which still hold up the missionary status of their native parishes, the official institution had already began to open its doctrines with the Second Vatican Council in the 1960. The newly declared tolerance toward all religious cultures, eventually led not only to a revision of missionary practices, but also to the various apologies of other Christian churches and bishops in the following decades [cf. Davis 115].

Talbot, however, emphasizes the prevailing difficulties of native Christians resulting from a devastating history of several centuries:

Christianity, because it was closely identified with the original land dispossession, genocide, and exploitation of the Native peoples, was considered to be the state religion of an oppressive Anglo-American nation. By identifying through Christianity with Anglo-America, Native Americans felt they were weakened ideologically and therefore more easily divided. [in Champagne 671]

Therefore, so assumes Talbot, many Indians are only nominally affiliated with Christian churches, and rather or also participate in syncretic or tribal religions. Most scholars agree that the importance of the Christian church has

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<sup>8</sup> Only estimated figures by a number of Christian denominations themselves exist: Roman Catholics (285,354); Mormons (75,000); Episcopalians (35,000); United Methodists (17,500); Presbyterians (9,864); American Baptists (2,000); United Church of Christ (1,684); Evangelical Lutherans (1,295) [cf. Davis 349]. Compared with the total American Indian population recorded in the 2000 Census – 2,475,956 – these add up to about 17 percent native Christians (with the lower figure of 1992, still only 24%). The remarkable difference to Feest's assumed "vast majority" both contradicts and supports his thesis, since we do not have specifications about active membership, baptism rolls, and multiple affiliations, e.g. with tribal and syncretic religions.

decreased significantly in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It has been attributed mostly to the revival of tribal religions and to the post-war urbanization, which was not appropriately answered by Christian churches who stayed with their communities on the reservations, while urban natives gave rise to pan-Indian organizations and movements.

However, as reflected in many works of contemporary native fiction, too, Christianity among Indians is alive and was not generally substituted but often rather complemented by tribal and syncretic religions. As demonstrated in the following, native authors like Erdrich and Alexie describe both, the rejection and affection of young Indians concerning the Christian church. While some stress its historical failures, others find support in the new Indian churches. Today's amount of web sites or the list of religious organizations in Champagne [684ff] suggest some potential if the churches manage to keep up their change from a once destructive to a community building institution. I can hardly support contemporary doubts about the continued vitality of Christianity among Native Americans. Questioning the church and its history does not necessarily mean rejection, as will be seen in the texts below and – so my guess – as well in many future literary works by Native Americans.

## 4 Literary Representations

### 4.1 'Pagan again': Rejection of Christianity in D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded* (1936)

The book cover of the 1978 reprint of *The Surrounded* (1936)<sup>9</sup> displays an old photograph of three American Indians standing in front of a church enclosed by a fenced-in graveyard. Although the editors do not provide any information about the time and location where this picture was taken, their choice was more than appropriate. The photographer's careful selection of the background contrasts with the outfit of the men in front: long-haired, wearing wide-brimmed hats, one of them wrapped in a blanket ('blanket Indian' once was a pejorative for 'backward' traditionalists), they stand with their backs turned to the cross. But, obviously, they are somehow related to this church and are also dressed in white men's working clothes, instead of stereotypical feather bonnet outfits.

The photo perfectly captures the central conflict of McNickle's first novel, the struggle of the Salish Indians at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, forced to adapt to a white Western culture; their longing for an intact community, that provides support in religion and moral values. Through the example of young Archilde's coming-to-terms with Christianity and tribal traditions, the author focuses on the crucial role, Western missionary work has played in the destruction of native communities and cultures.

#### 4.1.1 "It's all lies": Critique of the Christian Church

In the novel, the mission town's existence of "brief sixty years [had] separated its primitive from its modern" [TS 35], so-called Indiantown from the newcomers' quarters. The missionaries had not managed to include or assimilate the Indians into their town, they were rather separated from "the modern," still. The Jesuits' plan had failed to succeed:

The newcomers thought Indiantown had been built without a plan, but they were wrong. There had been a plan, even if it didn't lend itself to street construction and regularity. Each cabin faced the church. Each door [...] gave a full view of God's tall house [...]. The newcomers saw only the confusion. [TS 35f]

And they were right in their observation. The Indians in *The Surrounded* are living in constant sight of the church, but lack its support, feel no real connection, and are left confused between the modern and old. A strange and destructive contrast is revealed here, the declaration of the mission church as the "center of life" [TS 35] is ridiculed by the geographical separation of Indiantown from the 'modern world' and flourishing quarters of the white population. Moreover, Indiantown is not only "left to itself" [TS 35] by the whites, but also buy the very church that is its center.

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<sup>9</sup> Plot summaries of the novels are provided in an appendix to this paper.

The Christian church is personified by Father Grepilloux, once creator of the mission, now "simply an old man" [TS 36] of more than eighty years. McNickle characterizes him as a very kind man, who represents the 'golden age' of the mission with its energy, reform, and good-will that was supposed to help the Indian's assimilation. He is respected among them for his truthfulness and felt "undivided devotion" [TS 40] on his part. Nevertheless, when he came back to write a personal history of the valley, he begins to realize that his mission has failed, that in almost sixty years of his service he never really understood the native people. Therefore he is inquiring information from Archilde's father, who's eyes were not veiled by a Christian calling when he first came to the valley: "What were the Indians like?" [TS 41].

Father Grepilloux starts to doubt his work, having noticed a change in the once friendly and open-minded Indians, who back then had called for 'Black Robes' and had awaited them expectantly.

Somehow or other the bad Indians [...] have come upon the scene. Who turned them loose I don't know. [...] I'm afraid they have also taken many children from the Church. [TS 45]

Archilde's father must admit to himself, as well, that the Indians' "old life was much cleaner than the present existence" [TS 42], alluding to their living conditions, alcoholism, and general moral decay. After reading from his old diary, Father Grepilloux contemplates the Indian's fate, yet not admitting his share in it: "these people have lost a way of life, and with it their pride, their dignity, their strength" [TS 59]. In the following, McNickle undermines Grepilloux's restrictive excuse with a characteristic cynical comment by his narrator and thereby indirectly answers the Father's question who turned them loose:

"Of course" – since Grepilloux was a priest, and a faithful one, he added what in his heart seemed to balance all that he had set against it – "they have God." [TS 59]

But this God is of no help to them; on the contrary, the Jesuits' teachings of how to please their God furthered if not initiated the Salish communities' downfall into "chaos and lawlessness" [TS 97]. Laird Christensen, in his excellent paper on theological imperialism in *The Surrounded*, has analyzed the disparities between a Catholic worldview and traditional Salish religion and ethics.<sup>10</sup> Primarily, the concept of a higher authority and eternal penalty was completely different from a community oriented and present based culture like the Salish's. Therefore, the insistence of the missionaries to spread their belief and exterminate the old way of life, has not only left the Indians in a spiritual void but also without an acceptable moral framework.

McNickle's main efforts are to present the reader with the results of this failed policy of conversion among the Salish. Foremost, the traditionally strong family bonds had been deliberately destroyed by bringing children to boarding schools and, as Christensen rightly points out, teaching a generation to be ashamed of their parents as Archilde admits [cf. TS 113]. The lack of a stable family (even

<sup>10</sup> Laird Christensen, "'Not Exactly Like Heaven': Theological Imperialism in *The Surrounded*," *SAIL* 11 (Spring 1999) 1: 2-16.

emphasized in the mixed marriage of his parents), where "a mother was respected" [TS 22] and his experiences in mission school lead Archilde's brother Louis astray and eventually set off the tragic developments described in the novel.

What is first just indicated by thoughts of their increasingly skeptical mother, that "He had spent a few years in school but little had come out of it. Whether that was the fault of the school or of Louis no one had ever inquired." [TS 17], is soon confirmed by Archilde's investigation of his young nephew Mike's trauma rooted in punishment by the Fathers in school. Fear has always been the most powerful tool in breaking a child's 'unruly' spirit, especially of a young Native American in Catholic schools. For a long time, these traumatizing methods have become a mainstay of modern literature, but particularly of childhood accounts in postcolonial literatures. Critical Native American writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century almost never had a chance to avoid this theme in their works, ranging from Zitkala-Ša over Louise Erdrich to Sherman Alexie today.

Actually, the described scene in *The Surrounded* very much reappears in Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, when young Marie is also punished in school by being locked into a dark closet and accused of having met the "Evil One." Not so uncommon a method in outdated (?) Christian education, this resemblance is remarkable for the development in its characters' constellation. While certainly deeply affected as well, Erdrich's Marie will come out of the closet with a new acquired power that eventually will help her to overcome the nun and her religion. But coming back to the traumatized children in McNickle's novel, one has to wonder if the punishment and imagined encounter with the devil is not rather a mild downplay of physical violence as described in *Love Medicine*, or the implied sexual abuse in Alexie's *Reservation Blues*.

The fear of a devil or punishing God is deliberately fed by Catholic missionaries to control the 'savages.' As the model convert, the "Faithful Catharine,"<sup>11</sup> that Archilde's mother once was, she "knew nothing but the fear of hell, for herself and for her sons" [TS 4] and "had been obedient to the fathers" [TS 21] all of her life. She will only lose this fear after having renounced Christianity and finding her true identity. A tribal ritual provided her with better 'absolution' than a Catholic confession:

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Larson suggests that her name is a "veiled reference to Kateri [Katherine] Tekakwitha [1656?-80], the first Native American presented to Rome for sainthood." [Larson 73] He does not give any further explanation and I do not have information about the significance of Kateri when McNickle wrote *The Surrounded*. She was not declared venerable until 1943, and only beatified in 1980. However, after Kateri's conversion she lived at the mission St. Francis Xavier du Sault, Quebec, which correlates to McNickle's fictional St. Xavier. Thus, McNickle might have had this early 'model convert' in mind when creating the character of "Faithful Catharine." Interestingly, Kateri Tekakwitha also appears in a short pointed remark in Erdrich's *Love Medicine*. Though an important figure of identification for Native American Catholics today, her canonization has been pending for decades. When Lipsha in the novel tries to explain the turkey hearts as "a present for Saint Kateri's statue," he is corrected immediately by the nun: "She's not a saint yet." [LM 247] Sherman Alexie, too, includes "a mirror for the Mohawk saint Tekakwitha" on his Indian wish list for "How to Remodel the Interior of a Catholic Church," *The Summer of Black Widows* (Brooklyn: Hanging Loose Press, 1996) 85.

Something had happened to her [...]. She had lost something. She was pagan again. She who had been called Faithful Catharine and who had feared hell for her sons and for herself – her belief and her fear alike had died in her." [TS 173]

A traditional ritual is also needed to heal Mike's "disease" as diagnosed by old Modeste, for whom fear equals sickness. This result of 'tribal psychoanalysis' from *The Surrounded* will be still valid more than forty years later, when Leslie Silko cures Tayo's trauma and alienation in a tribal *Ceremony* and Momaday's Abel expresses his healing in a ceremonial run.

McNickle's second focus next to his illustration of "how Christianity infects the Salish with a debilitating sense of fear" [Christensen 7] and damage of family structures, is the destruction of the tribal network of morals and punishments as established by old Salish communities. Again, the novel provides support for Christensen's argumentation that

the missionaries both removed the locus of moral responsibility from the community and shifted the motivation for appropriate behavior from the commonweal to the fear of infinite terror. [Christensen 7]

This could neither prevent Indians from crossing ethical boundaries (which they often did not understand) nor helped it trespassers to repent their deeds. So does Old Modeste complain that "the old law is not used and nobody cares about the new" [TS 207]. The imposed Christian moral standards violently edged out but did not substitute traditional principles and thus left the tribe to chaos, crime, and destitution.

A moral code already existed among the Salish that served them well: transgressions were confessed and punished in ceremonial fashion, which allowed guilty parties to put their faults behind them while reaffirming their accountability to the community – "the whip covered the fault" [Christensen 6]

Still, the Salish themselves had wanted "to try something else" [TS 73] and called for Christian missionaries. Facing their waning power in fighting other tribes, white invaders, and worsening conditions like the lack of game and buffaloes, the elders had believed the narrations of Iroquois about the "black-robe Fathers" and their new power, called crucifix. What they could not foresee was the white men's inability to understand and accept traditional cultures. George Tinker assumes that the missionaries "mistook the Flathead fervor for religious renewal and misinterpreted it too easily in terms of cultural transformation." (78)

McNickle's Father Grepilloux recalls that at his first encounter with the tribe, the Indians "would have willingly delivered themselves to us," having their Chief declaring "We have been worshipping False Gods, and we want you to teach us the True God." [TS 47] This seems very unlikely and is doubly unreliable: these are the events as stated in Grepilloux's diary by way of the historical sources of Jesuit missionaries De Smet and Palladino that are explicitly referred to by McNickle. Although the historical Flathead fervently welcomed the 'black robes' and indeed were willing to adapt their social structures to the Jesuits requirements [cf. Tinker 78], they also maintained most of their traditional ritual life parallel to being converted Christians.

What is more, some Salish refused to live under the auspices of the mission on the reservation, while others openly rebelled in 1847 [cf. Christensen 4]. While McNickle may have ignored these historic details for structural dramatic effect, he correctly depicts the Indians' disappointment with the power of the Christian religion and their preferred return to old beliefs and life styles. By example of the re-conversion of Archilde's mother and Mike's healing and (temporal) escape from mission school, at least the theoretical benefits of a tribal renewal are discussed for the first time in (Native) American fiction.

Archilde as an outsider to the reservation for a long time has given up Christianity after a process of realization. It was a development from his childhood's "The church! In the beginning, everything. [...] One lived in the perpetual tyranny of the life-everlasting." [TS 99f] to his understanding that

The religion of the priests was definitely gone from him. It had died out as he passed out of childhood, in spite of momentary lapses into the old fears and patterns of prayerful thought. It would never possess him again. [TS 179]

His mother, on the other hand, represents a slow development and recognition that seems to grow among the elders of the tribe. It took her almost sixty years to realize that all her praying and devotion had not kept her children out of trouble, instead her religion might be the cause for their problems:

[S]he tried to understand what made things go that way. Why was it that when he came home from school he went "bad"; and when would the old people have the happiness the Fathers had promised them? She had done everything they asked of her, and yet she had it no better than some of those who gave it up. [TS 208]

In a dream, she understands that she has never really arrived in the white men's world, and therefore would not appreciate their heaven with no animals to hunt, and rivers without fish. After having received her traditional punishment for killing a man, she finally "slept without dreaming" [TS 211], with a feeling a forgiveness that no priest was able to provide her with.

However, McNickle is aware of the fictionality of this solution. The final words of Chapter 23 state that "those old people turned back on the path they had come and *for a while* their hearts were lightened" [TS 211; emphasis mine]. Archilde's mother had "completed her retreat from the world which had come to Sniél-emen" [TS 209] and returned to one that has long disappeared. For the young people a return to old times is no real option, a mere rejection of Christian-Western society cannot help the surrounded to break their siege. Thus, the tragic outcome of the novel seems inevitable. In the end, Mike and his brother Narcisse will realize

how much greater – how everlasting – was the world of priests and schools, the world which engulfed them. [...] When they were wanted, by priests or agent or devil, they would be sent for, and that was all. [TS 286]

This bleak outlook is even more tragic since McNickle shows that many protagonists have realized the wrong course, but are not able to stop or change this development. Archilde, who was the only Indian with a chance to escape his fate by continuing his musical career off-reservation, could not avoid the question

of his identity, though. Therefore, he stayed longer with his mother than he had planned and was drawn into the course of events. However, he was neither able to save his brother from death, nor help his nephews to escape mission school. Archilde is trapped as anyone on the reservation and has learned "that you can't run away" [TS 297].

His hopeless effort to save a stray mare from starvation could be read as an indication for his personal failure in helping his relatives, but also, as generally done, as a symbol for the missionaries' good-intentioned but lethal care for the 'vanishing' Indians. Archilde, on a white (!) horse,<sup>12</sup> is trying to help the mare though he knows that the effort of catching her will kill her. Christensen's main thesis follows this reading to argue that by enforcing a Western cultural pattern on the Salish, "the Jesuit missions deftly undermined the[ir] possibility of cultural resistance to Euro-American expansionism" [Christensen 13]. Though coming for benevolent reasons, the missionaries destroyed social and economic patterns without replacing them with an appropriate substitute. McNickle certainly has sympathy for some of the Fathers – his Grepilloux is attributed with a great personality and a growing awareness – yet, he is clear about his opinion that Christianity is part of the Indians doom.

In the end, Archilde must witness the dead of the mare, which he was trying to feed though she "probably knew better than he how to reach water" [TS 240]. Her last groan seems like "a final note of reproach for the ears of the man who had taken it upon himself to improve her condition" [TS 242]. McNickle's novel fortunately was more than a last reproach, rather a first bitter yet brilliant criticism by a Native American via narrative fiction. The only hope offered and intentioned in the novel, thus, lies in the growing awareness among red and white Christians that the missionaries' approach to 'civilize' the Indian is wrong. A solution is only hinted at by re-establishing tribal religions as an alternative to colonial Western culture, however, a practical answer has yet to be found. McNickle is the first native author to reject Christianity in his work; he takes the first step, many others have followed since, others who already knew how to continue on that new Indian road liberating the surrounded.

#### 4.1.2 *Literary Methods and Structures*

McNickle precedes the literary Native American Renaissance by thirty years in his focus on and perspective of the indigenous population and his intention to make a case for a new Indian self-respect and claim for social and spiritual equality. Though *The Surrounded* shares elements of the traditional Western novel and particularly the critical social realism of the 1920s and 30s, it is way ahead of its time in content and form. With an Indian theme already in a niche, McNickle's novel completely opposes the argumentation of his contemporary native writers like John Mathews and Mourning Dove, who "were still advocating assimilation in their work" [Hans 236]. *The Surrounded* is the first novel that

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<sup>12</sup> The white horse here is not a mere metaphor for the white man and his religion, but certainly alludes to The Conqueror upon the White Horse from Rev 6:2. [Thanks a lot, Johnny Cash!]

criticizes the common equation of Christianize = Civilize that had dominated America since colonial times.

However amazing and revolutionary its publication was in 1936, it was not a coincidence. McNickle had written and revised his text for at least nine years and in this time completely changed its focus and intention.<sup>13</sup> The evolution from a typical assimilationist narrative, in which Archilde denies and despises his Indian heritage and marries a white woman to build an agrarian paradise, to the bleak criticism of a pro-Indian novel reflects McNickle's personal growth. While he had tried to become a "white man" as his mother had wished, sold his allotment to study in England, lived in Paris and New York as a writer, his studies of the history of the old west and growing despise of modern capitalist society finally led him to discover his roots and true identity.

His individual development paralleled also a change in society, a fact that scholars tend to overlook while focusing on his personality. Yet, it is striking that McNickle's major revisions of *The Surrounded* towards a plea for an equal treatment of Indian culture and religion took place in 1934, the same year that he also applied for a job with John Collier's Bureau of Indian Affairs. Its main achievement, the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) of 1934 allowed tribal self-government and ended the devastating land allotment practice. The same year, Collier also released a directive ordering an end to BIA prohibitions against Indian religion, resulting in "the resurfacing of religious phenomena that were thought by outsiders to have disappeared" [Vecsey in Davis 539]. The new opportunity for Indian religious freedom certainly influenced McNickle's final revision of *The Surrounded* in 1934 and is reflected in the courage to criticize and contrast Christianization with the first non-assimilationist Indian novel.

*The Surrounded* is the most autobiographical text of the selection considered in this paper. However, one has to emphasize that it is not an autobiography, but an artfully constructed novel. While employing Euroamerican narrative patterns (and the English language, of course), McNickle also began to make use of tribal oral narratives in a fictional context. This element has become a standard in what is considered 'typical' Native American literature today.

Historical correctness was certainly considered as important by the author that would later become a renowned historian and scholar. Therefore, McNickle's note on his sources precedes the novel, pointing at missionaries' diaries as well as collections of Salish stories.<sup>14</sup> By incorporating the writings of his character Father Grepilloux, McNickle manages to tell the history of Christian-Indian contact from the very beginning at is mostly accurate in his account.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> For a review of the development of *The Surrounded* see Birgit Hans, "Because I Understand The Storytelling Art': The Evolution of D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded*," in *Early Native American Writing: New Critical Essays*, ed. Helen Jaskowski (Cambridge: CUP, 1996) 223-238. Another, more biographically focused study provides Dorothy Parker, *Singing an Indian Song: A Biography of D'Arcy McNickle* (Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> A similar narrative tribal history in fiction is attempted later by Winona LaDuke with *Last Standing Woman* (Stillwater: Voyageur Press, 1997). Herein she tells an accurate history of the White Earth Chippewa covering more than a hundred years and using authentic events and people in the latter part.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Christensen pp. 4f on McNickle's deviations from historical accuracy for of dramatic effect.

Grepilloux's growing uncertainty is, as Christensen indicates, contrasted or supplemented by two other recollections, namely of the Indians Modeste and Catharine. Thereby, McNickle stresses the importance of different points-of-view, reflecting his own attempt to write a counter-account of Salish-Christian contact from a native perspective, which "as a whole attempts to see it [...] as the moment that announced the disintegration of the traditional Salish community." [Christensen 4]

In a more elaborate way, these different perspectives will become later a major structural element in Louise Erdrich's novels. There the contrast between native and Christian perceptions alone is strong enough to re-write (private) histories, even without any mediatory help of a narrator.

Besides the rather small part that the recounts of tribal history play in *The Surrounded*, its dual structures are much more significant. McNickle skillfully employs various dichotomies throughout the novel that contradict the prevailing official, narrow interpretation of the world by church and state. Exemplifying the modern Indian in the half-breed Archilde, who stands between two cultures and times, the author also provides a wider and not per se biased view on the problem, an outsider's perspective with the knowledge of an insider. This narrative constellation will also become typical for later Native American novels, e.g. in Silko's *Ceremony*, where Tayo "speak[s] for both sides".

McNickle contrasts the white world outside with the life on the Flathead reservation, "a different world" [TS 3]. While Archilde slowly enters this world that has become so alien to him, he discovers more and more contradictions that puzzle him first but in the process help him to understand not only the world of his mother, but also his father, and ultimately himself. By comparing one culture with the other, Archilde realizes why "the Indians turned bad," how he was raised by priests to condemn the Indian way of life, and what part the church and whites had played in the devastating fate of his tribe.

McNickle puts Archilde's white father against his Indian mother (though there are signs of reconciliation towards the end, Max's death suggests a rather pessimistic view); the white part of town against Indiantown; the hypocrite Christian laws against the old effective direct system of tribal justice; nature against artificial pretense and the Christian will to control it. Even within one group dichotomies show actual and possible differing developments. While Archilde is passive and hesitant (due to his white education and lack of clear identity), the girl Elise is the one who acts and determines their fate. She is neither obeying white laws nor Christian morals (nor does she comply with old laws either), and had long outstripped Archilde in his search for a true identity. Similarly, his mother is taking to action and decision during the process of distancing herself from Catholicism and after renouncing Christianity.<sup>16</sup>

Also the Catholic priests themselves are located on two opposite ends by McNickle. While Father Grepilloux has failed in his project of helping the

<sup>16</sup> On the determining role of native women in *The Surrounded*, see Roseanne Hoefel, "Gendered Cartography: Mapping the Mind of Female Characters in D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded*," *SAIL* 10 (1998) 1: 45-65. Again, with these two powerful women, McNickle anticipates a long line of active female characters in novels by Native American authors, that have become typical for writers like Silko, Erdrich, Hogan, Alexie, and many others.

Indians by 'civilizing' them, he is nevertheless depicted as an example of kindness and popularity. On the other hand, the new priest, Father Jerome, represents "a church that is no longer interested in the spiritual welfare of the Indian community" [Hans 231], something that was indicated by McNickle's first description of the town of St. Xavier.

Typical for the literary style of *The Surrounded* is the pointed irony, often sarcasm of its narrator. Again, therein it anticipates the works of native authors published at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, not the characters display a sense of irony – just at the level of the anonymous omniscient narrator this is possible for McNickle at the time. Only later writers are observing and are able to grant their Indians enough experience and self-confidence to mock their opponents and situation. Moreover, Erdrich's stories are told (almost) exclusively by her native characters themselves, in this sense symbolically win back their denied voices and get rid of the dominating narrator instance (often not even native 'autobiographies' have allowed the Indians their own voice).

A good example is McNickle's 'anthropological digression' explaining the importance of ritual dances for the Salish community and the U.S. laws prohibiting them now. The narrator's comment attacks the Western derogatory view of native religions and simultaneously its capitalist society, which stands in contrast to a tribal way of life:

Such a dance could not be tolerated in later years. Its barbarous demands on strength offended those who came to manage the affairs of the Indians in their own homes. There was nothing wrong with the dance in itself but it ought to be kept within reasonable limits. If the Indians wished to express their joy for, say, ten hours a day and then rest, like a factory or office worker, that would be all right. They could go on dancing for as many days as they liked on that arrangement, only they ought not to lose too much time at it. [TS 203f]

As in the already mentioned example of the undermining cynical comment of Grepilloux's excuse that "they have God" [TS 59], McNickle indicates by his ironic tone – this time even in a (white!) character's direct speech –, that also the good-intentioned missionaries completely misinterpreted the Indians:

Only one thing they didn't understand, and that was sin. We taught them, and that was the beginning of their earthly happiness. [TS 136]

By his own remark, the priest reveals his blindness to the Indians' reality. Nevertheless, he is not simply denounced: according to McNickle's rule of different perspectives, Grepilloux's motives are explained and respected as well. Momaday will pick up the priests' inability to understand and enter the tribal community in *House Made of Dawn* similarly, even accompanies this 'blindness' with Father Olguin's actual handicap.

Great metaphors and motifs testify to McNickle's literary skills. I already mentioned the stray mare episode, symbolizing the destructive result of missionary efforts among the Indians. A recurring motif throughout the novel are birds, representing nature in opposition to the artificial rituals and morals of the

Christian church. Moreover, combined with his sense of humor, McNickle is able to ridicule the Catholic pomposity and even backfires their denunciation of tribal religion as 'superstition.'

When Archilde remembers the prefect of his mission school getting ecstatic about a formation of clouds resembling "a flaming cross" [TS 102], forcing the kids down to kneel and pray, a careless bird "frees" Archilde: "It recognized no 'Sign.' [...] He felt himself fly with the bird. When he looked at the priest again he saw in him only darkness and heaviness of spirit. [TS 103] Christianity is associated with darkness and unnatural heaviness, restriction, punishment and false morals. Whereas a belief that was not antagonistic to nature would have immediately recognized the cloud as such, "bits of mist [...]. That was all." [TS 102] Later, Archilde teaches his nephews about his fall from God:

"Tell him it's all lies what the priests say. It's all lies about the devil. Tell him to look at the birds. They fly around and they don't know nothing about the devil. Look at them fly!" [TS 192]

Even more impressive for young Archilde was another experience, in which the boy discovered the true nature of the church behind its pomposity. As the highly symbolic incident with the stray mare, it represents a process of realization for Archilde, more than just the end of his "simple faith of childhood". Driven by his "desire to know" he climbed up to the altar where the priest stood during Mass, but "Nothing happened." [TS 105] A look behind the altar and a close inspection of the sacristy, the contrast between the "rich ceremony [...]" before the altar and the "shabbiness" behind it – raw timbers, dust and rags – shattered his belief. Moreover, later he becomes aware that the childish dread never fully left the grown man, as it was intended by the church that regarded Indians as immature children.<sup>17</sup> Archilde is the first Indian in the novel who understands that "one had only to go into the daylight" [again a natural contrast to the darkness of the church] "to realize how preposterous such things were." [TS 106] Later he teaches his nephews

One could even find a metaphoric scene that alludes to biblical images of the wrath and power of God. If McNickle really intended such an allusion (and I believe so), he would be the first native writer employing a mythical narrative of the colonizer's religion to subvert and challenge the 'manifest destiny' based on the very same book. As I will demonstrate further below, this technique becomes typical for contemporary Indian writers, who employ post-colonial strategy not until the 1980s.

Chapter 26 opens with a description of a hot and dry summer, resulting in failed crops of the white farmers, whose industrial tilling of the Indians' soil is the target of McNickle's criticism here. They are suddenly plagued by "swarms of grasshoppers" [TS 231] devouring everything green, pastures turn to brown in a drought, ultimately even the small crop burns in a fire. This biblical punishment is instinctively felt by the farmers: "My God! What's the country coming to?" [TS

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<sup>17</sup> Louis Owens not only supports this by a collection of Grepilloux's references to Indians as 'children,' but makes also an interesting note on Archilde's very name. The Anglo-French environment of St. Xavier/St. Ignatius suggests two readings: 'our shield' as well as 'our child.' [cf. Owens 71]

232] But, opposed to Archilde's father who recognizes the real disaster in the valley, they only complain about their "individual misfortunes" [TS 232] and do not see the misery and hopelessness among their neighbors:

If they would walk through Indian town – that part of St. Xavier given to crumbling log cabins and dogs and Indians, with the high brick church overtopping all – they would see that one summer was like another.  
[TS 232]

McNickle smartly juxtaposes the modern 'locust' plague with the traditional dance (ironically held on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July), which had to be defended against federal religious suppression. Thereby he relies on the reader's knowledge of Revelation 9:3 and even more of Moses' and God's demand and threat in Exodus:

Let my people go, so that they may worship me. If you refuse to let them go, I will bring locusts into your country tomorrow. They will cover the face of the ground so that it cannot be seen. They will devour what little you have left after the hail, including every tree that is growing in your fields.  
[Ex 10:3-5]

Thus, the author turns here from his usual bleak description and hopelessness for once to a prophetic threat for the white world, who similarly cannot go on in its treatment of its fellow Indian citizen.

The dual contrastive structure already mentioned before, is not only characteristic of McNickle's narrative, but also symbolic for 20<sup>th</sup> century Indians' lives between two cultures until today. Consequently, the protagonist embodies this duality in his mixed-blood heritage as well as in the opening constellation of the book, where it still seems that Archilde has a choice between these worlds. However, and that appears to be McNickle's point, the Indian does *not* have a real choice in this society, "can't run away" from his Indian legacy. Therefore, Louis Owens reads Grepilloux's remark about Archilde standing at the crossroads of a new time, as a "complete failure to understand the Indian world" [Owens 69], for his "purely Euroamerican [perspective that] valorizes the individual above all else, a perspective diametrically opposed to a Native American value system" [ibid.]. Archilde cannot and does not want to leave his family and native community, however destroyed it already has been by a – in this regard tragically 'successful' – Catholic missionary work. His father Max, at Grepilloux's deathbed pondering the demise of the mission and watching his family falling apart, at last finds the answer to all the questions who is to blame:

God pity us! All of us! [...] Did we think we were building a new world here? What's the worth now? [...] People are starving! They're freezing to death in those shacks by the church. They don't know why; they had nothing to do with it. You and me and Father Grepilloux were the ones who brought it on. [TS 146f]

McNickle's case is unmistakably here, stated clearer than ever in the history of Native American literature. By placing these accusatory insights in the mouth of a white man, the author not only tries to avoid any simple blame of "sacrilege" and "disloyalty" [TS 139], but expresses also the hope that white people one day

will understand the situation of the American Indian and the dreadful part the church has played in it:

Grepilloux had shown the way over the mountains and the world had followed at his heels. [...] As for the Indians who had been taught to understand sin [...] one had to ask of them – were they saved or were they destroyed? Bringing the outside world to them was not exactly like bringing heaven to them. [TS 139]

With *The Surrounded*, McNickle creates an extraordinary literary achievement for his time. He combines the criticism of a colonial power and its Christian spiritual and political worldview, with a new social and ecological critique of modern capitalist society from a Native American perspective. Moreover, he sets an artistic example that precedes and stimulates the political and cultural renaissance of indigenous peoples in the U.S. since the 1960s.

#### **4.2 Assuming the Names and Gestures of the Enemy: N. Scott Momaday's Syncretic Strategies in *House Made of Dawn* (1968)**

My original intention for this paper was a joined reading of two 'classic' novels of the so-called Native American renaissance, Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and Silko's *Ceremony* (1977). Although nine years have passed in between their publication, and their authors belong to different generations, the similarities in setting, time, theme, and style are naturally suggesting a parallel examination. Both novels describe the alienation and 'healing' of World War II veterans, who have returned to their Pueblo reservation but did not really come home. They struggle with their disturbing war experiences and the lost connection to their culture, communities, and families. As Archilde in *The Surrounded*, Abel and Tayo personify their spiritual fragmentation and outsider status between two cultures in a symbolic mixed-bloodness.

However, while re-reading both works, I discovered that Silko only marginally deals with Christianity as the colonizer's religion as well as its adoption by the Laguna Pueblo (which is an important statement itself). Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, on the other hand, provides more material for examination in this context. Moreover, concerning Christianity as a structural element in native fiction, his work suddenly revealed unexpected instances, too. Therefore, and since the limit of this paper puts up certain restrictions, I will concentrate on Momaday's novel in this chapter, without losing the connections to Silko's text where appropriate.

Obviously influenced by Momaday's book, but also sharing a similar background (both grew up in a Pueblo culture, though Momaday is Kiowa) and tribal worldview, Silko applies the same strategy to restore Tayo to wholeness: by re-introducing him to his Indian culture through a ritual ceremony, he regains his lost ability to communicate with himself and his native community. Therefore, both works have been commonly interpreted as a plea for a revival of tribal religions and philosophy, and thus, defined also a long-term feature of Native American literature.

Although Momaday and Silko have developed differing approaches to literature as far as politics and social issues are concerned, they, nevertheless, share an interesting common approach in these novels. Both do not simply blame white society for their protagonist's fate (though the white man's war plays an essential role in that), but ground their disrupted identity and alienation in uprooted tribal communities and families itself. Both observe a failure in communication that separates the heroes from their cultures and families. The changing world of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Indian adaptation to it are the main concern of the writers. Only thus, it is explicable that Momaday and, even more so, Silko almost completely can do without white characters in their novels. An intended attack or blaming on white society had probably forced the protagonists into direct contact and conflict with white antagonists, as in *The Surrounded*.

#### 4.2.1 Pueblo Syncretism in *House Made of Dawn*

However, there are a few white characters in Momaday's book (even though they are obviously outsiders) that need closer inspection, especially since two of them are Catholic missionaries. Christianity is also under consideration in native characters (Tosamah), and even more important, in the very structure of the book itself. Though not intentionally applied, as representative for later Native American fiction, Christian mythology and patterns have at least shaped the interpretation of *House Made of Dawn*, especially through its protagonist's name. Christianity has formed and influenced the history of the Pueblo for centuries, therefore it has to be included when discussing the possibilities of Indianness in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Momaday's native characters, as Silko's in *Ceremony*, reflect the typical constellation and incorporation of Catholicism among the Pueblo. The first person introduced is old man Francisco, Abel's grandfather who is on the way to pick up him up, coming home from the war. Francisco is contemplating a traditional race that he had won in his youth, singing words in his native tongue and in Spanish; the reader also learns about prayer feathers hidden in the rafters of his room. Obviously, he is a "longhair" as in Tosamah's later description – a traditional Indian who practices a native religion and lives according to tribal customs. That is emphasized by his symbolic taking of the old road that parallels the modern highway, signifying the two worlds that exist next to each other, and his preferred choice.

Surprisingly, after even more indications about Francisco's and Abel's traditional practices in the Eagle Watcher Society, we find him kneeling at a chapel altar and understand that he is also a sacristan in the Catholic church. However, this is not in the focus of the narrator, it appears as a simple fact, as natural as the landscape the events take place in. From the old priest Nicolas' letters, we learn how Francisco had already as a child "served well" in the mission church (that he is actually Nicolas' illegitimate son is not revealed until the very end of the book), although he 'betrayed' Nicolas efforts by taking part in kiva ceremonies as well. What is unbelievable for the priest, who actually expects the Holy Spirit to strike down every minute, is most natural for Francisco who "is unashamed to make one of my sacristans" [HMD 51].

Matthew 4:10, the Christian monotheistic concept, is as alien and incomprehensible to Francisco as sin is to the Salish Indians in *The Surrounded*. In accordance to Pueblo Catholicism, Jesus' command is "politely ignored" here and the Christian religion unanimously practiced alongside Pueblo rituals. Silko also describes Rocky's embarrassment about the persistence of old hunting rituals in his family, "He knew how there were. All the people, even the Catholics who went to mass every Sunday, followed the ritual of the deer." [C 52] Momaday later explains the peculiar religious syncretism that has developed among the Pueblo:

The people of the town have little need. They do not hanker after progress and have never changed their essential way of life. Their invaders were a long time in conquering them; and now, after four centuries of Christianity,

they still pray in Tanoan to the old deities of the earth and sky [...]. They have assumed the names and gestures of their enemies, but have held on to their own, secret souls; and in this is a resistance and an overcoming, a long outwaiting. [HMD 58]

An anti-colonial strategy of subversion is hinted at here, similar to the "out-yessing" of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, who is also trying to follow his grandfather's advice and assumes the "gestures and names" of the whites to backfire their exploitation of his talents and political oppression. Only, the Pueblo seem to have been more successful in their adaptation and use of Christianity, since they have retained their cultural 'visibility.'

In *House Made of Dawn*, the typical amalgamation of Catholicism and tribal religion is astonishing and yet victorious over the priests' idea of converted Indians. The annual feasts of the Jemez' Catholic patrons are described as celebrations that combine Christian and Indian elements. The very 'biography' of St. Santiago, which is given in Father Olguin's words [HMD 38f] already incorporates native myths into a Catholic saint's story. It explains the rooster picking as a fertility ritual of the Pueblo. The tribe not only observes the saints' days, but also "an old and solar calendar, upon which were fixed the advents and passion-tides of all deities" [HMD 71], knows Father Olguin. The Pecos' Bull Ceremony is actually a mockery of the white invaders, but practiced alongside the feast day of Porcingula, "Our Lady of The Angels," whose shrine, again, has been erected "adjacent to the kiva" [HMD 77] out of which the tribal dancers in ceremonial dresses would appear to kneel before her statue.<sup>18</sup>

Since this paper takes a look at the development of the representation of Christianity in Native American novels over a period of time, similar structures or characters in the texts are especially welcome. The most appropriate and logical personification of Christianity in relation to American Indians obviously have been missionaries, priests and nuns, working in more or less direct contact with the tribes. Except for Silko and King (who skips the priest and directly deals with GOD), all authors have used such characters to either confront the 'opponent' church directly, give it the strength and ambiguity of a human face, or employ these men of words in re-writing history.

As demonstrated with Father Grepilloux in *The Surrounded*, this character is depicted positively, almost pitiful, and provides the church with some human features, including erring and blindness to reality. He is also an important structural element, by way of his journal and written history of the valley. Thereby, McNickle covers some fifty years of Indian-Christian contact and evolution. Interestingly, Momaday attributes a similar role to his priests in *House*

<sup>18</sup> A similar example of Pueblo syncretism has been reported from Laguna Pueblo (which is Tayo's home in *Ceremony*). In the late 1870s, following religious quarrels between Protestant and Catholic groups, the latter left and "packed their ritual equipment and statue of patron saint, temporarily cached them out a shrine on Mount Taylor" [Malinowski II, 170] and moved to Mesita. Noteworthy here is the place of the temporary shelter for the Catholic relic: Mount Taylor – the sacred Tse-pi'na, or Woman Veiled In Clouds, in Pueblo mythology the home of the female rain deity.

*Made of Dawn*. Moreover, he even uses two Fathers as well, to evaluate the (non?)development of missionary approaches.

In contrast to McNickle's historical method that led him study the actual journals of Catholic missionaries from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Momaday relied on his imagination when writing the section on Fray Nicolás. But combined with personal experience, the outcome is of striking similarity to McNickle's disillusioned description. Both authors find their clergymen lost 'in the wilderness,' feeling out-of-place and misunderstood. In *House Made of Dawn*, both priests have not made any progress in approaching the natives in more than seventy years. At the end, in 1952, Father Olguin is not an inch closer to the Jemez than Fray Nicolás was in 1874. His letter could be a description of his successors situation: "I am excluded from Thee. Now the chanting & the drums & I have no part of it & I am by myself & tired." [*HMD* 49]

Whereas the Pueblo have adapted and adopted Catholicism for their needs, the clergymen have failed in doing so. Momaday admits and immediately restricts the importance and actual influence of missionaries from his point of view:

[T]he missionaries, especially the Catholic missionaries in pueblos, are very important. I think they have, in over four hundred years, made a great difference. Well, I'm not sure I want to say that. I don't know if they have made a difference or not, but they have become a kind of institution in the pueblos over a period of time [...] I got to thinking about their lives and what they must feel, being the representatives of the Catholic church to what in the past certainly had been a pagan society. They must have felt very isolated, and I wanted a character that would represent that sort of dichotomy in pueblo life. [Momaday in Schubnell 170]

There is a different development between the two men in Momaday's book compared to those in *The Surrounded*. Whereas Grepilloux started out wholeheartedly as a young priest among the "children" [*TS* 51], Fray Nicolás had felt uncomfortable among "enemies" [*HMD* 51] who betray him by practicing their native religion. Whereas Grepilloux had been amused by the Salish's understanding of a Catholic Mass, his successor Jerome is impatient and dogmatizing [cf. *TS* 263]. Momaday's Nicolás as well had lost "some quality of patience or intent" [*HMD* 50]. Father Olguin feels similarly displaced as Nicolás before him, although he does not admit it. This becomes clear in his grotesque perceptions of the Indian child at the Feast of Porcingula, where traditional Pueblos seem to dominate the Catholic rituals. Owens reads Olguin's confusion as a sign of his otherness,

alien in an unfathomably pagan colonial outpost and mocked by the Indian's cultural persistence, by the subversiveness of their very survival in remoteness. [Owens 107]

Father Olguin thinks he can understand the Indians and is able to reach them, but as Grepilloux must learn in the end that he could not, Olguin is symbolically blind in one eye. He cannot see that he does not understand, no matter how loud he calls after Abel, who is gone and leaves him alone in the darkness. The priest is informed of Francisco's dead only after the traditional rites have been passed, a

scene that mirrors a situation that confronted Fray Nicolás before [cf. *HMD* 48].<sup>19</sup>

All the missionaries in both novels, *The Surrounded* and *House Made of Dawn*, finally have to give up, admitting it or not. They withdraw themselves from the Indians (Grepilloux, Jerome) or are driven into isolation (Nicolás, Olguin). In fact, they are as isolated among the tribe as Abel is in the white world. Even in a syncretic spiritual society as the Pueblos, a narrow-minded or dogmatic Catholicism has no chance to enter the community or soul.

#### 4.2.2 *Biblical Allusions in the Novel: Tosamah, The Albino, Abel & Cain*

An alternative is shown by Momaday's reflection of Tosamah, the priest of an urban congregation of the Native American Church (NAC). A blend of Christian and native religions, the NAC had become an important center for relocated Indians in the cities after World War II. Its pan-Indian approach provided a substitute for the spiritual loss of the scattered and disrupted migrants. Moreover, it provided a cultural identity of being Indian (instead of Navajo, Sioux, Chippewa) in a hostile and alien white, urban environment.

Momaday's introduction to the L.A. chapter begins with an allegory that clearly draws from biblical sources. Without explicit reference, he compares the lost Indian newcomers with the grunion, a fish that spawns on the beach, "helpless creatures" like Abel and his fellow sufferers, lying scattered on an alien ground. By juxtaposing the fishermen who "catch them up in their bare hands," [*HMD* 89] with The Priest of the Sun, Tosamah, the author alludes to Christ's first disciples, Simon and Andrew, who were made "fishers of men." [Mk 1:16]

Tosamah is Momaday's favorite character, as he admitted repeatedly, for he is trickster and priest, intelligent and cynical, next to the albino (who is more a symbol than a man) definitely the most ambiguous character. Although, the author declares that Tosamah's sermons have to be taken seriously, he undermines the reliability of the priest by the very names of his church and himself. The "Holiness Pan-Indian Rescue Mission" mimics real names but is certainly ironic; and when its pastor Rev. J. B. B. Tosamah, is revealed as "The Right Reverend John Big Bluff Tosamah," the mockery of Christian as well as the Native American church becomes inevitable. The motto of Sunday's sermon, "Be kind to a white man today," actually could have been borrowed from Sherman Alexie's sardonic texts.

However, tricksters are not mere fun but transport a serious message. Tosamah's name as well as his second sermon, "The Way to Rainy Mountain," suggest indeed a reading of the character as "a parody of the artist as peyote priest" [Lincoln 286]. Momaday's second Indian name is Tsotohah, or Red Bluff, which also allows to read the priest's name as a land formation, instead of a faker.

<sup>19</sup> The same constellation is also picked up by Silko in the story "The Man To Send Rain Clouds," written alongside *Ceremony*. Here the Pueblos as well regard a Christian burial unnecessary, but then play on the safe side and request some holy water, so the dead "won't be thirsty." Although not understanding, the priest finally gives in and ultimately "is happy [...]; now the old man could send them big thunderclouds for sure." [Leslie Marmon Silko, *Storyteller* (New York: Arcade, 1981) 182-186.]

His first sermon, "The Gospel According to John," is a discussion of the power and significance of the spoken and written word in Christian and native cultures. Momaday states herein his regard of tribal oral literatures and despise of abuse of the word in Western civilization. John, the white man, started the inflation of words, that in Momaday's view is "alien to the Indian attitude toward language which is much more economical." [in Schubnell 137] John, for he was a preacher, concealed the truth by his words and imposed his idea of God upon it. "The Truth was overgrown with fat, and the fat was God. The fat was *John's* God, and God stood between John and the Truth." [HMD 92] However, as a trickster, Tosamah contradicts himself here constantly. He himself is a preacher, who cannot stop but rattle on in stereotypical phrases of Christian evangelists. He regards his notion as true to God, obviously the same as John's, but commits the very sin that he accuses John of.

Besides his function as the writer's mouthpiece who transports Momaday's positions on language, Tosamah's primary task is the representation of a new, syncretic spirituality of American Indians. Louis Owens employs Bakhtin's definition of hybridization to characterize Tosamah's performance in the novel:

a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the area of utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses [cited in Owens 110]

Thus, Momaday is able to challenge the Christian discourse while acknowledging its power and presence at the same time. In anticipating later techniques by Hogan, King, or Alexie, the author "subverts the authority of that text by placing it in dialogic tension with a Native American *context*." [Owens 110] Tosamah takes "the appropriation of biblical discourse" [Owens 108] quite far, he compares Abel, himself and the other Indians with Christ, who was a rebel surrounded by enemies as well. He believes in the Apocalypse, indicated by a red moon [Rev 6:12], that will bring justice:

"They put that cat away, man. They *had* to. It's part of the Jesus scheme. They, man. They put all us renegades, us diehards, away sooner or later. [...] Listen, Benally, one of these nights there's going to be a full red moon [...]. Now you don't believe this, but I drink to that now and then." [HMD 149f]

Owens explains Tosamah's rejection of Abel with his trickster function that allows him to mock and taunt Abel into self-knowledge [cf. Owens 111]. Interestingly, in Christian mythology, Jesus' rebuke of Peter has a similar stimulating function [Mk 8:33].<sup>20</sup> The resemblance of this scene is even more striking when reading about Christ's preceding teachings,

that the Son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. [Mk 8: 31]

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<sup>20</sup> I am indebted to "Ms. Cindy" for this reading of Tosamah's rejection of Abel and other inspiring thoughts. Cf. "The 'Jesus Scheme': Jesus figures in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*," *The Culture Rag*, 25 October 2002 <<http://www.culturerag.com/momaday.htm>>.

There Mark provides a perfect plot summary of Abel's exile, conviction, life-threatening beatings in L.A., and restoration to wholeness on the reservation!

However smoothly the tribal and Christian religions have been mingled in the village's feast mentioned before, it also signifies the vulnerability of tribal customs in modern times. Abel's alienation from his community and religion, his misunderstanding of the old ritual of the rooster pull, turns out deadly. In mistaking the sacrifice of the rooster and eventually killing the albino – who might have been trying to engage him into this ritual of recreation for his good –, Abel violates the rules and casts himself out of traditional society. By such a reading, I like to emphasize the (possible) good in the albino, commonly, and also by Momaday seen as 'the evil' in persona. Susan Scarberry-García has pointed out the regenerative ritual violence in René Girard's sense, but her concentration on Pueblo mythology does not allow her to explore the positive aspects of the albino in another direction. For her, the albino is the evil that is killed by Abel, though not in accordance with the ceremony but for the better of the village [cf. Scarberry-García 41ff]. Moreover, she dedicates a whole chapter on mythical twins, without referring once to the biblical brothers that Abel's name alludes to.

Lawrence Evers, in his exemplary analysis of *House Made of Dawn*, demonstrates the necessity to read a modern Indian text syncretically. He recognizes the snake symbol in both variants, on one hand, he makes the "association of the Devil and the snake in Christian tradition," [Evers 309], on the other, he knows about the ambiguous if not positive role of snakes in Pueblo cultures. He also observes the "Christian overtones" [Evers 308] in the killing of the albino. In fact, he reveals features of Christ in the albino, namely his ability to forgive, which explains the sudden positive response from Abel.

The white man raised his arms, as if to embrace him, and came forward. The white man's hands lay on Abel's shoulders [...]. There was no expression on his face, neither rage nor pain, only the same translucent pallor and the vague distortion of sorrow and wonder [...]. Then he closed his hands upon Abel and drew him close. [...] In the instant before he fell, his great white body grew erect and seemed to cast off its age and weight, it grew supple and sank slowly to the ground, as if the bones were dissolving within it. And Abel was no longer terrified, but strangely cautious and intent, full of wonder and regard. [...] He approached and knelt down in the rain to watch death come upon the white man's face. [HMD 82f]

This scene definitely alludes to Jesus' death on the cross (here "a telegraph pole" against the black sky).<sup>21</sup> The albino's "hands lay upon [Abel] as if in benediction," [ibid.] the death is already forgiven, even approved of. The forgive-them-father-look that he casts upon Abel, the symbolic Christ-like resurrection and disappearance, are met by Abel's reaction in kneeling down "full of wonder and regard." More indications point at Christ: the albino's nails represent "a string of black beads," thus a rosary; while his arm shines "like the underside of a fish," [HMD 84] the symbol of Jesus.

<sup>21</sup> A (mis)interpretation of this scene in solely sexual terms, like Velie's (1978), does not lead to anything, as Velie himself must admit [59].

But what does all that mean in the context of Abel's crisis? At first, it adds to the ambiguity of the albino as 'the evil,' signifying that such a definition is not as easy as it seems. A stereotypical reading of white man = evil, thus is rejected here by the author. Generations of scholars have struggled with a reading of the albino's various representations. An appropriate interpretation to me seems the understanding of the albino on a symbolic level. Of course, he has all the attributes of evil, his gloomy aura, his snake-like features; but then, he is also a Pueblo Indian and only acts out the traditional ritual when beating Abel, moreover, he might trying to help him. He represents a universal sense of evil, as much as his killing is an evil act in itself.

He is the White Man in the Indian; perhaps even the White Man in Abel himself. When Abel kills the albino, in a real sense he kills a part of himself and his culture that he can no longer recognize and control. [Evers 309]

Abel has been alienated from his tribal religion for a long time; even before the war, he could not stand the eagle being trapped and killed him. Thereby he had cast himself out of traditional society and symbolically killed (or at least severely hurt) the native religion, which he saw as barbaric and archaic. But his escape into white modernity failed terribly, confronted him with the real barbarism of world war and spiritual emptiness.

Of course, he kills symbolically also Christianity in the albino and himself, he was surely raised in despise of native religion by the priests as the characters in Silko's *Ceremony*, namely Rocky, Auntie, and Laura. Abel takes revenge after having understood that Catholicism drove a wedge between him and his community, as it caused Silko's Laura to run away.

Shamed by what they taught her in school about the deplorable ways of the Indian people; holy missionary white people who wanted only good for the Indians, white people who dedicated their lives to helping the Indians, these people urged her to break away from her home. [C 68]

Again, the justified accusation from McNickle's *The Surrounded* reverberates in this passage. Catholic missionaries deliberately poisoned and destroyed intact families and community structures, to break the natives' resistance. Abel's as well as Tayo's alienation from their tribes are also due to the long-term influence of the church:

Christianity separated the people from themselves; it tried to crush the single clan name, encouraging each person to stand alone, because Jesus Christ would save only the individual soul; Jesus Christ was not like the Mother who loved and cared for them as her children, as her family. [C 68]

Tayo's aunt, who is only concerned with proving that "she was a devout Christian and not immoral or pagan"<sup>22</sup> [C 77], is torn between her Catholic despise of Laura's immorality and her tribal responsibility to care for her sister. Because for the Pueblo it is not 'just' another individual soul that is lost, but "a part of themselves" [C 68].

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<sup>22</sup> Thus anticipating some of Erdrich's characters, like Pauline or Marie, who are consumed by the need to distinguish themselves from their tribal fellows by extreme piety and rejection of their Indianness. Cf. Chapter 4.3 below.

Still, despite its criticism, *Ceremony* cannot be read as a traditionalist novel in the sense of propagating a mere return to a tribal past. Adaptation instead of assimilation is the solution for breaking the vicious circle that "surrounded" tribalism earlier in the century. This message is a major concern of Silko's medicine man Betonie, who adapts old rituals to modern needs, since "things which don't shift and grow are dead things." [C 126] He uses phone books and calendars, next to gourd rattles, deer-hooves, and sand paintings. He has traveled to the cities and learned the language of the 'enemy,' because it "is carried on in all languages now" [C 122]. Betonie shows Tayo how to overcome evil, even if it cannot be destroyed, and find a way to return to his community and self.

Silko adds to her criticism of destructive Catholicism the demonstration that old tribal rituals carried out by dogmatic elders are neither able to heal the wounds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. New methods of healing have to be found. In one of the final scenes, Tayo returns to his pueblo to tell the elders about his healing process. He is supposed to tell them his story and experience with the spirits. They invite him into a kiva, the traditional cabin used for tribal ceremonies:

The old men nodded at a folding chair with ST. JOSEPH MISSION stenciled in white paint on the back. He sat down, wondering how far the chair had gone from the parish hall before it came to the kiva. [C 256]

In this little symbol the prophecy of Betonie's grandmother is reflected, she was among the first who recognized the need for change and openness. "It cannot be done alone. We must have power from everywhere. Even the power we can get from the whites." [C 150] Cooperation or joining of forces does not necessarily mean for one side to surrender and lose. Instead, like the symbolic spotted cattle – a mixed breed of Mexican and Anglo livestock –, the new union can be stronger and better adapt to life in a new or hostile environment.

A comparison between Momaday's and Silko's works also shows Tayo's strength and advantage over Abel (which also makes a positive outcome more believable in *Ceremony*): Tayo does *not* kill Emo, though he represents an evil witch as much as the albino does in *House Made of Dawn*. He struggles hard but recognizes that he would give in to evil, become part of it, when killing the witch. Momaday has contrasted Abel's wrongdoing with Francisco's living *with* the evil. Francisco senses the evil as well, has known it for all his life; and is able to ignore it, live with it as part of the world, of himself. It seems that the author has found a metaphor here that also reveals his attitude to the evil that is part of the Christian church, seen from a Native American perspective. You cannot fight it, nor kill it, but leave it "helplessly behind the colored glass" [HMD 67] by an acceptance and ignorance that gets its power from an ancient tribal identity.

This parallels Silko's attitude presented in *Ceremony*. Evil has been part of the Pueblos world since "times immemorial," one only has to be constantly aware of it and "Don't let [it] finish off this world." [C 152] Not all white men are to be rejected, wickedness is part of Indians as well, in fact, so Silko's ingenious mythological explanation, whites have been created by an evil Indian witch:

They want us to believe all evil resides with white people. Then we will look no further to see what is really happening. They want us to separate ourselves from white people, to be ignorant and helpless as we watch our own destruction. But white people are only tools that he witchery

manipulates; and I can tell you, we can deal with white people, with their machines and their beliefs. We can because we invented white people; it was Indian witchery that made white people in the first place. [C 132]

Contrary to McNickle's pessimistic view of Christianity and Indians, Momaday's and Silko's message inform how to live with it (without leaving Christianity unchallenged). However, as an alternative or completion both authors promote native religions and ways of life. Thus, they reflect the changed situation for American Indians since the 1960s. Though actually still depicting the 1940s and 50s, both imply their newly won hopes and visions. After abandoning the policies of termination (and eventually restoring native religions on a legal basis in 1978), U.S. federals have provided a real chance for a revival of native religions and cultures, a true Native American renaissance. McNickle has hoped for it in 1936, but was accurate to the possibilities and actual situation of Indians at the beginning of this century.

Momaday himself has revealed that the albino character is influenced by Melville's conjunction of whiteness and evil in *Moby-Dick*. Thereby, the author exposes not only just another Western literary influence, but also one of *the* white American novels in general that discuss Christianity and its morals.<sup>23</sup> A comparison of Melville and Momaday leads Louis Owens to the same conclusion as I have drawn from a parallel reading with Silko's text. While Ahab, a white male Calvinist, perceives evil (even where it is not) and has to search and destroy it, gets killed – Ishmael, the open-minded is able to "perceive a horror and could still be social with it" [*Moby-Dick* 16] and thus survives.

Ishmael's philosophy sounds remarkably like Native American cultures' insistence upon balance and upon the necessity of both consciousness of and integration within all elements of this world. [Owens 102]

Thus, Momaday and Silko proclaim a universal moral standard, valid for both Christians and traditionalists. However, by his allusion to *Moby-Dick* and the murder that follows the albino striking Abel, Momaday also refers to a basic Christian principle: "Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn him the other also." [Mt 5:34] Abel, thus, has violated not only a tribal ritual, but his Catholic upbringing as well. He has cast himself out of any society and shamed his grandfather, the 'pagan sacristan.' For his brutality, which only seems to prove stereotypes of violent and superstitious Indians, he is later also rejected from Tosamah's Peyote church.

Among the first thoughts that readers of *House Made of Dawn* have, is the significance of the protagonist's name: whom does he represent and who kills him symbolically [cf. Velie 1978, 56]. Naturally, in the context of this paper, questions like these arise, as well. Abel was the Bible's first victim of the first murder in Christian mythology. Cain is condemned to be "a restless wanderer on the earth" [Ge 1:12] for killing his righteous brother. The trained reader comes up with instant answers: Abel is 'killed' by white society, Momaday reverses a basic myth of the colonizer's religion, Abel and Cain are one person, at least of the same

<sup>23</sup> On *Moby-Dick* see also Chapter 4.3.2 and 4.4.2 below.

race, and what about his dead brother Vidal, etc. Such expectations are rapidly disappointed when asking the author himself about the naming of his character:

I didn't want to make too much of the Abel-Cain story in the novel. Of course it was there in my mind, but I think at a fairly low level. I knew someone at Jemez whose name was Abel, and I had that character very much in mind through part of the writing anyway. So the name is more suggestive than I meant it to be. [in Schubnell 61]

However, although Momaday has been giving a great number of interviews, he has always been reluctant in revealing his motives for artistic turns and features. If we rely on his words, *House Made of Dawn* would have been a boring, unshaped realistic documentation of modern Pueblo life, but not the first modernist, highly artistic Native American novel that it is. Such a reading would fall into the trap of the trickster Momaday. Of course, he had all the facts:

[T]here was a man named Abel in Jemez, a postwar drifter; symbolic of dislocation in Indian men at the time when Momaday was a boy. There was common albinism in the Pueblo. There was a shooting. [Lincoln 269]

Then, again, Momaday says that he did not necessarily think of the historical Nash Garcia killing, although it resembles Abel's perception of the albino as a snake and witch.<sup>24</sup> Neither was he thinking in strictly biblical terms when naming Abel, though he was certainly "aware of symbolic associations." [in Lincoln 269] However, since he did not rename his protagonist, and accepted biblical allusions, one has to consider at least the implications of such readings; especially since most readers are not familiar with his interviews but the Bible.<sup>25</sup>

A common perception is shared by Kenneth Lincoln, who follows the reading of a reversion and, thus, subversion of the Christian myth: Abel "castrates and disembowels Cain." [Lincoln 119] A new setting for the ancient theme is defined:

School, war, prison, and the city are white institutions where the martyred son of the earth, the biblical Abel, lives through the Indian nightmare of a machine come into the garden. [Lincoln 117]

Various approaches are given here. By referring to Leo Marx, Lincoln establishes a connection to the new criticism that precedes Momaday's novel. Marx, Nash Smith, and Lewis as well employ and attack American Christian myths when criticizing the "American Adam." Lincoln's other allusion also is very appropriate. The Indian Abel is indeed a "son of the earth" – Momaday has frequently emphasized the significance of the landscape for the Pueblos. In fact, Abel's healing is only possible after returning to his land, which has spiritual and parental connotations in his culture. In addition, Lincoln's pun here might have

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Lawrence J. Evers on Silko's and Ortiz' literary representations of this case: "The Killing of a New Mexican State Trooper: Ways of Telling an Historical Event," *Critical Essays on Native American Literature*, ed. Andrew Wiget (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1985).

<sup>25</sup> One could similarly discuss the implications of Angela Grace Martin St. John's name, a "Christian labyrinth" [Owens 105] deliberately built by its author. Larson, e.g. refers to the provocative reading of the novel as "a Christian morality play" by Harold S. McAllister, "Incarnate Grace and the Paths of Salvation in *House Made of Dawn*," *South Dakota Review* 12 (1974-75): 115-125.

been in the mind of Momaday, too: Adam, the name of Abel's father in the Bible, is related to the Hebrew word for 'earth.'

One important theme of the biblical story is the question of the "brother's keeper." Alan Velie stresses the point of the implied Cain's Indianness: "The question is, who victimizes Abel? [...] Cain was Abel's brother, not some hostile outsider." [Velie 1978, 56] The worst damage, so Velie, is done to Abel by non-white people, namely the Jemez albino, the Kiowa Tosamah, and the Chicano or Indian policeman Martinez.<sup>26</sup> Thus, Cain cannot be directly associated with the white society, which correlates with the reading that the Indian victims in Momaday's and Silko's works not simply blame the whites, but call for a new tribal vision under the changed conditions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Momaday deliberately adds to the ambiguity of his characters and opens new levels of interpretation, which allow a deeper understanding of the messages and questions provided. By mixing ancient Pueblo and Navajo mythology with 'classic' Christian patterns, he also enables readers with different backgrounds to enter the labyrinth of his novel. Basic schemes like the stricken and blind who ultimately gain vision, knowledge, and identity can be found in all cultures and are applied here in a syncretic reading.<sup>27</sup> Momaday, thus, already displays features of later native authors, who intentionally re-apply Christian myths and structures in their challenges of Western colonialism and portrayal of contemporary syncretic Indian life.

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<sup>26</sup> Actually, not even *the* exponent of the Christian church, Father Olguin, is white in the sense of an Anglo-descent: he is a Mexican priest, thus liable to have some Indian blood as well.

<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, Momaday and Silko, in later works both develop also an interest in old Germanic and Scandinavian folklore.

### 4.3 "June walked over it like water": Louise Erdrich's *Indian New Testament of Love Medicine* (1984/93)

Louise Erdrich represents the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of writers of the so-called Native American Renaissance. While Momaday was born in the 1930s; Silko in the 1940s; Erdrich, born in 1954, belongs to a new age in several senses. Not only has she profited from her literary predecessors and their success since the 1960s, but she was already born into a very different environment that shaped her personality as both, a mixed-blood American and author. She has benefited from first effects of the Indian civil rights movement, which emerged in the 1960s, and slowly began to change society. The positive results in native literature were observed by Joseph Bruchac, one of the mentors of the Native American Renaissance, at the beginning of the 1980s:

In addition to the writers of my own generation, those born in the late 30s and early 40s, a whole new generation of Native American poets and fiction writers are beginning to produce substantial work [...]. [They have] grown up with more of a feeling for the acceptability of American Indian contemporary writing, perhaps, than have many of those Native writers in the late 30's and 40's who found themselves in public schools or BIA schools where THE Western Literary Heritage was all they were ever shown. For the younger American Indian writer today, perhaps, some things are easier and clearer and those dual myths of the "Melting Pot" and the "Vanishing Redman" may not have been so omnipresent. They may not have had to deal with the confusion and self-hatred of friends and families who wanted to lose or deny an American Indian heritage. At least I hope this is so. [Bruchac 1982, 1f]

These young writers were not only numerous, but became more and more successful, even outside the Indian and academic readership. Erdrich is *the* example for such a crossover success, having entered national bestseller lists with each of her novels.

The point of interest in the context of this paper yet is another: the new generations' writing differs significantly from what was defined as Native American literature in the 1970s. They have broadened their topics, settings, themes, and literary styles into the enormous diversity that one finds under this label in the bookstores today. This development signifies a new maturity of native fiction, but reflects also the changing social conditions and attitudes of its authors. Without abandoning the achievements of the first generation of post-war Indian writers, Erdrich and her contemporaries have taken the task of subverting stereotypes and displaying a new Indian self-confidence farther into the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. While Momaday and Silko had to re-build confidence and an Indian identity by reviving tribal spirituality, customs, and mythology, the new Native American writing depicts the modern Indian reality.

Although I do not completely agree with Marvin Magalaner, he is right in his general reflection of the changes in Erdrich's fiction: the 'cowboy and Indian' days are over, there is "not a horse in the novel, not a peace pipe [...] where there is religion, it is Catholic" [Magalaner 95], and the nowadays Indians ride in 'Mustang' and 'Firebird' cars. This can be continued: e.g. traditional respect for

the elders is now expressed in modern teenage lingo: "She's got a memory like them computer games that don't forget your score." (*LM* 240)

However, one must not overlook, as Magalaner tends to, the substantial tribal cultural and spiritual element, that juxtapose and contrast Western elements and Christian religion in *Love Medicine* and, even more so, in *Tracks*. Both novels can be read as a chronicle of the struggle between tribal and Western culture, between Chippewa spirituality and Catholicism on the Turtle Mountain reservation during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While already McNickle and Momaday tried to balance and contrast the two powers, Erdrich integrates this struggle even more into the structure of her texts. She systematically incorporates Christian mythology, symbols, and language into her narrative(s) to represent the amalgamation of Western religion and tribal life, and, secondly, subvert the dominant Christian discourse by a native application of its schemes.

Whereas, Momaday only hesitantly admitted the Christian influence on his work, Erdrich deliberately uses these elements to find an appropriate form that represents Chippewa life and struggle. She subverts Catholic colonization by reversing biblical patterns, applying them in a native context, even merging them with tribal mythology, or countering Christian dogma overtly. The author explains this also with her personal experience:

I don't deal much with religion except Catholicism. [...] I guess I have my beefs with Catholicism. Although you never change once you're raised a Catholic – you've got that. You've got that symbolism, that guilt, you've got the whole works and you can't really change that. That's easy to talk about because you have to exorcise it somehow. That's why there's a lot of Catholicism in both books. [in Bruchac 1987, 81]<sup>28</sup>

Christianity not only affected her fictional characters' representation, but is already underlying the narrative structure of *Love Medicine*, her first novel. While – in what has become a 'natural' approach in Native American Studies – many papers have been written on Erdrich's usage of the oral tradition in Chippewa culture, the storyteller attitude she develops in her novels, her Western influences have been neglected sometimes. She definitely takes on the role of a traditional storyteller "who tells the life of her people through example and metaphor while relating the touchstone stories that will be passed on to future generations." [Jacobs 92] Her novels, thereby, are an attempt to re-write the officially recorded history of her tribe with opposing personal recounts from the people. Erdrich provides a totally different picture of assimilation, allotment, and Christianization than federal or clerical sources.

However, beside a tribal narrative influence, the form of a story cycle borrows also from Western literary heritage (e.g. Faulkner), as well as communal gossip, familiar to both, Western and tribal cultures. Yet, more interesting here is the Christian influence that permeates the tribal stories via metaphor and symbol, as well as the Bible itself provides a structural basis to *Love Medicine*.

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<sup>28</sup> On a different, mostly non-explicitly native level, she explores her relationship with Christianity in her poetry published in *Baptism of Desire* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).

#### 4.3.1 *A Female Native American Christ: Adaptations of the Bible*

The novel's main theme, as its title suggests, is love; in this context also in the form of forgiveness. The leitmotif, or even moral in each of the stories is forgiveness – within families, towards enemies, and among the tribe in general. Lissa Schneider observes the same, the very stories become a spiritual act that provides forgiveness and transcendence: "forgiveness is the true 'love medicine,' bringing a sense of wholeness," [Schneider 1] she concludes. Thus, Erdrich's major concern, simultaneously, is the very central Christian message of "Love thy neighbor, love thy enemy" from the New Testament; in which Jesus Christ gave many examples of his ability to forgive – even his murderers.

*Love Medicine*, is not as loose a collection of stories as it seems, the tie that binds them together is the death of June, which opens the novel. Her character, although absent, is the point of reference, a catalyst for most of the narrators. Her life, respectively the relationships and memories of the storytellers, is told and remembered. This is another similarity to the very structure of the New Testament, which tells the life and death of Christ in accounts of his disciples. But Erdrich subverts "the master-narrative of Western society" [Wilke 83] by challenging its exclusivity. Set in a Native American context, moreover, populated with Indians – drunken Indians – in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Christian myth becomes a symbol of native survival despite the missionaries' attempts to "destroy the Indian."

Erdrich resists the monologic and monotheistic Christian discourse by absorption and adaptation. She applies a native tradition of active storytelling to static written text: the communal voices of men and women, who narrate in a very dialogic manner, counter the monologic gospels of the Christian patriarchs. Moreover, the story of Christ, in the new representation of June, is merged with ancient Chippewa myths and beliefs, thus representing a spiritual syncretism that point at similarities in both cultures, as well as it reverses Christian motifs in a tribal context.

In the first story, June (mind the initial!) is dying in an attempt to walk home during a snowstorm in the night to Easter Sunday. The whole account is overflowing with images and symbols that allude to Christ's death and resurrection. June is desperately looking for a new beginning, first by returning home, then with the man who has "got to be different" [LM 4]. Signs of death and rebirth precede her disappearance: eggs are peeled and eaten, shells in any form are mentioned, her drink is called "Angel Wings." Eggs and shells are symbols for rebirth in both Christian and Chippewa religion, a giant sea shell over the water is associated with sunset and sunrise in Chippewa mythology [cf. Sanders], an angel rolled away the stone that sealed Jesus' tomb. June is unconsciously focusing on these signs, for she feels "like going under water" [LM 2] – the worst death for a Chippewa, as we later learn – and the memory of the lethal accident of an engineer suddenly haunts her, too (his death also is associated with the Chippewa water monster, often associated with a snake). When June finally drops into the snow later that night, "it was a shock like being born" [LM 6], her naked and pure part does not feel the snow, but "walked over it like water and came home." [LM 7]

Her death is everything but the end, June does not disappear but is revived in the following stories. She actually returns as a spirit in *The Bingo Palace* to save her son Lipsha and in *Tales of Burning Love*, her once-lover Gerry. Thus, Erdrich creates a new Indian Christ, notably a female one, applies the biblical pattern to a modern native story and merges it with traditional Chippewa myths. Louis Owens and others have noticed June's resemblance of trickster, beside her Christ-like features [cf. Owens 195f]. She is also the one associated with Eli, the most traditional Indian in the family; it is even assumed that she was raised by spirits when once lost in the woods. Indeed, after having regained strength at Marie's, she decides herself for a life with Eli and his old time ways – as a symbol of her independence she leaves "The Beads" behind, rejects the rosary that symbolizes Christianity. Still, she is associated with Christ as well. Kim Blaeser tries to answer this dilemma by suggesting that June "most clearly embodies Erdrich's challenge of an orthodox vision" [Blaeser 28], by intermingling both, she contests the "exclusiveness of religious myths."

She places [her readers] on uneasy ground, requires they re-investigate their own understanding of religion and spirituality. [...] By overturning the perceived order, Erdrich requires her readers to embrace a heterodoxical and a more complete vision. [Blaeser 29f]

As both trickster and Christ, June becomes a syncretic culture hero, who breaks the boundaries of time, space, and religion; of life and death, to ultimately join her relatives in love and forgiveness. This is, indeed, a very positive reading of *Love Medicine*. However, her death as an impulse finally lets Lipsha forgive his mother, even meet with his father and brother in a satiric biblical 'family reunion.'

This was it, I thought, this was the wages of everything we done. This was the wages of the father meeting up with the son and the ghost of a woman caught in the dark space between them. This was the wages. [LM 359]

The broken family, the sin that they paid for, catches a glimpse of hope: Gerry escapes, King is on the wagon, and Lipsha crosses the water to bring his mother home. (Thereby resembling a final scene in *Ceremony*.) Even Gordie, his father is on the way to 'resurrection:' after having had a nightmarish experience, in which he believes to have killed June, and ending up in detox at his mother's house.

His story is titled "Crown of Thorns," a biblical symbol here converted into a metaphor for alcoholism. This chapter is heavily linked to the first of June's death and resurrection, and the newly added "Resurrection," which offers the possibility of his recovery. Again, eggs are a symbol of rebirth here and connect him to June. As she was trying to fill a spiritual emptiness on Easter, he has found a 'new God' in alcohol. A gold-colored beer can is turned into a sacred fetish:

[T]he soft pure blackness that stretched around the beer can. Gordie's hands felt unclean. The can felt cold and pure. It was as though his hands were soiling something never touched before. The way the light fell it was as though the can were lit on a special altar. [LM 213]

Actually, the description of "cold and pure" alludes to June, as well as the perception of the bent can as a statue of a woman, maybe even St. Mary. Unconsciously, he realizes already then that his new religion is as "empty" as June's life in the first story. After killing the deer, he "was cracking, giving way" [LM 222], his eggshell is breaking, too, and his real self drowned in alcohol is revealed.

A sudden impulse (caused by his Catholic upbringing) leads him instinctively to the convent to confess the imagined murder of June, respectively his real sins in their marriage. As June was unconsciously trying to fill or overcome her (spiritual) emptiness on Easter, the shattered drunk crawls to the nun for help. That he is not a devout Christian is clear through his prosaic remark and laughing that breaks into the automatic formula of his childhood: "It's been, shit, ten years since my last confession." [LM 225]

The story of June's death and resurrection is opening the narrative of her niece Albertine, who remembers her on the way home to a family reunion. This meeting of three generations is ironically titled "The World's Greatest Fishermen," borrowing the phrase from June's son King's hat, but obviously alluding to Jesus and his disciples [cf. Mk 1:16]. In the story, Albertine describes a symbolic contest between King and his uncle Eli for this symbolic crown and title.

The constellation of the old-time Indian Eli, "who knows the woods" [LM 19], vs. the young King, who represents the moral and social fragmentation that the Western society caused among many Indians, is a basic structure of the novel. Throughout, Erdrich contrasts traditional religion and beliefs with Catholicism; an Indian way of life close to nature and a natural incorporation of spirits into daily life, with a hostile to life attitude of Christianity that has restricted the spiritual into the supernatural realm [cf. Sanders]. The characters in *Tracks* and *Love Medicine* are often represented in antagonistic or contrasting pairs: Pauline vs. Fleur and Nanapush, Leopolda (Pauline) vs. Marie, Nector vs. Eli, King vs. Lipsha, etc. Often, these pairs reflect the clash of two cultures in one family, with Erdrich's sympathies clearly on the tribal side that defends their Indianness.

Eli, who is finally awarded the Fisherman's hat – which "fit him perfectly," though Lynette, the white woman who symbolically was the first to grant the title to King, yells "It's too big for him!" [LM 33] – is usually contrasted with his brother Nector. Their mother had managed to hide Eli from the mission school that Nector attended, and raised him traditionally. Thus, she "gained a son on either side of the line." [LM 19] While latter had "served Mass for Father Damien," [T 40] Eli never had cared for church. In old age, both show their different development: "my Granduncle Eli was still sharp, while Grandpa's mind had left us, gone wary and wild." [LM 19] Without discussing the different possibilities for Nector's senility here, the symbolic destructiveness of white society on the Indian mind is clearly visible. As in all three novels so far examined, Erdrich displays the disastrous results of forced assimilation by Western education, religion, and general culture. Literally torn between the two powers, Nector's mind splits, as Abel's and Tayo's had before. King displays the same symptoms of moral destruction that were mentioned by McNickle in his remarks on the Indian youth.

So, when King mocks Eli about who is the "Greatest Fisherman," it implies a contest between the modern and traditional, between Christianity and tribal religion. Notably, King still has some respect for the elder, as well as he retained some self-knowledge that causes despise for himself (revealed in his alcoholism and hatred of Lynette). Therefore, he willingly admits that Eli is more worthy to wear the hat, and when Eli finally returns the Christian symbol (because his old cap fits him better!), King steps on it carelessly while running away in shame and confusion. Albertine stuffs the hat ultimately under King Junior's mattress, a sign for the hope that he once might be worthy to wear it.

#### 4.3.2 *Catholicism in Love Medicine and Tracks*

A direct depiction of and confrontation with the Catholic church is astonishingly rare in Erdrich's novels, although Christianity shapes the lives of her characters as well as their literary representation. The central character that represents Western belief and its destructiveness in both novels is Pauline, later called Sister Leopolda. Erdrich herself describes her as "every aspect of Catholicism taken to extremes." [in Owens 205] While she seems to embody evil as the albino in *House Made of Dawn*, her personality still reveals an interesting ambiguity when looking at her development. Moreover, Erdrich again uses both Christian features and traditional Chippewa mythology to shape this character and emphasize its function.

In *Tracks*, Pauline is introduced as a light-skinned descendant from a mixed-blood family, which was already lacking its most important link to the tribe: the Puyats belong to a "clan for which the name was lost." [T 14] When she insists on learning a trade from the nuns in town, her father warns her of fading-out, "You won't be an Indian once you return." [T 14] But Pauline is eager to assimilate totally into the white world, wants to become like her grandfather, a "pure Canadian."

She represents a multitude of Indians who, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century tried to vanish indeed, merge completely with the dominant society and deny their native heritage that they were taught to despise as pagan and uncivilized. The assimilationist policies of government and churches affected the lives and cultures of Native Americans far into the 1950s, when termination and relocation were thought to be the final solution to the 'Indian problem.' Self-hatred and low self-esteem of Indians were deliberately fostered by agencies and schools. The result were children like Archilde, Abel, and Tayo's cousin Rocky, who all tried to escape from the reservation into the white world (where all of them fail to arrive). Erdrich's Pauline is trying the same in 1913, about the same time as Archilde, at the prime of assimilationist attitudes, deciding for the supposedly stronger side:

Our Lord, who had obviously made the whites more shrewd, as they grew in number, all around, some even owning automobiles, while the Indians receded and coughed to death and drank. It was clear that Indians were not protected by the thing in the lake or by other Manitous [...]. [T 139]

In *Love Medicine*, twenty years later, the same self-denial is repeating itself in Marie, who resembles her mother perfectly in emphasizing her whiteness and strive for leaving the reservation, where "God had only half a hand in the

creation" [LM 45]: "I had the mail-order Catholic soul you get in a girl raised out in the bush, whose only thought is getting into town." [LM 44] What is more, her desire to become white is the result of her education by the nuns, who taught the Indian girl to despise her kind, decide between doom or the Christian God. Her tribal identity was deliberately broken to be filled with new role models, as the Virgin Mary. However, Erdrich does not allow to lose another 'soul' to the convent (whose nuns are liked to *windigos*, the Chippewa cannibal spirits). She demonstrates the possibility of resistance to the Catholic lure, even gives Marie the strength to victoriously battle Sister Leopolda. Recalling these events, the older Marie recognizes her mistaken longing for Christianity:

I was that girl who thought the black hem of her garment would help me to rise. [...] I was like those bush Indians who stole the black hat of a Jesuit and swallowed little craps of it to cure their fevers. But the hat itself carried smallpox and was killing them with belief. [LM 45]

But young Marie had enough tribal knowledge left to fight the evil nun and survive. She is not only envisioning herself as a syncretic saint who combines Catholic images with Chippewa religion, but the devil also talks to her in the old language before sleep. Like her grandma (and Momaday's Francisco), "who called him by other names [she] was not afraid." [LM 45] Her escape from the convent is immediately celebrated by a symbolic acknowledgment of life. As Karla Sanders and others have pointed out, the marriage of the nuns to Christ negates life, is associated with dust and death, and despise for sexuality (Leopolda's big sin was to conceive Marie in *Tracks*, which she never forgave her). Therefore, Marie refuses the career as a saint and "reinforces this rejection through the loss of her virginity to Nector" [Sanders] – another instance where love heals the wounds inflicted by Christianity.

Once more, mental illness or at least an extremely distorted vision is symbolic of Pauline/Leopolda's unsuccessful attempt to assimilate into Western society (here primarily religion), to become white. Pauline does not reach her goal, she does not adopt mainstream Catholicism, because she cannot deny her heritage completely. She is another mixed-blood Indian stuck and crushed between the two cultures. While embracing Christ, she does not let go traditional beliefs about the water monster and magic potions. Whereas she believes to fight for Christ against Misshepesu, he uses her as a battleground instead, leaving her devastated and confused.

In Pauline, religious syncretism has taken a negative direction, failed to merge into a new positive spiritual power. Erdrich links her Catholic coming-of-age to a traditional vision quest, merging two beliefs in an unhealthy alliance. Her self-imposed mission of fighting the water monster is anticipated in the scene of the 'crying' statue of the Virgin. Interestingly, the ambiguity of good and evil is already visible here: the white and big-nosed Virgin (thus mirroring Pauline) and the snake under her feet (later linked to the water monster) have the same expression in their eyes.

*Tracks* depicts Pauline's imaginary Armageddon, her temporary victories and final defeat. She finds first fulfillment in being a black angel of death, thus representing the hostile to life side of Catholicism. When Fleur is almost dying while giving birth, Pauline is not able to help her and the child, because she has

forgotten her tribal knowledge of medicinal herbs. Her only offer is to baptize the dead child. Her second attempt to intervene and demonstrate the superiority of her belief leaves her with a burned arm and doubting the power of Christ. Ultimately, Pauline regards him "overcome by the glitter of [Misshepesu's] copper scales" [T 195] and herself in the stronger position to battle the monster, respectively tribal religion. Like Jesus confronting the devil in the desert, she seeks him out on Lake Matchimanito, the home of the Chippewa spirit. In a symbolic misuse of her rosary, she strangles what she perceives to be the monster and thereby the man trying to save her (and to whom she had lost her virginity). Like the Catholic church killed innocent lives while battling the 'devil,' she also perverts the non-violent and reconciliatory concept of Christ.

Instead of becoming a saint, Pauline ultimately regards herself higher as God, wants to become Jesus' savior and does not address God with humility, but "as a dangerous lion" [T 196]. She sheds her skin like a snake, and grows the webbed claws of the water monster. Misshepesu is not only liked to snakes, but also to a lion, ironically therefore Pauline's new name in the convent: Leopolda.

Erdrich personifies all the evil that Western culture caused among the Chippewa in Pauline: the spreading of diseases, the disruption of families, and the degradation of their own religion and identities. In contrasting her with the healing powers and high regard for the family of Fleur and Nanapush, who even care for Pauline after she has entered the convent, the author stresses the importance of traditional knowledge and communal bonds. Pauline's renunciation of her Indianness and welcoming of Catholicism as the stronger power, thus clearly was a crucial mistake.

One could get the impression that Erdrich does never confront Christianity directly, but instead "saves her most severe criticism for Pauline who renounces her own people." [Hessler 44] Still, Pauline's distorted sadomasochistic version of Catholicism is a result of forced and failed Christianization and assimilation. The direct confrontation with missionaries for most Chippewa already belongs to the past (old man Nanapush is an exception), but the lasting destructive effects on the tribe are discussed and embedded in the structure of *Tracks*:

The two narrative voices in the novel, that of Pauline the fanatical religious mixed-blood pitted against the traditionalist and culture hero Nanapush, dramatically underscore the fight taking place at large [...]. Pauline denies her Indian heritage while Nanapush labors to continue Chippewa culture, and the juxtaposition of the traditional voice with a proselytizing Christian one serves to remind readers of the very different identities Indians have adopted since the initial contact with European trappers and missionaries. [Jacobs 86]

However, also direct representatives of the church are portrayed in Erdrich's novels. In *Tracks*, the author installs another 'good shepherd,' Father Damien. As Grepilloux in *The Surrounded*, he adds a human component to the general picture of the church. He is supportive and understanding, helps Nector and Margaret to keep their land, and does not insist on a dogmatic, exclusive Catholicism. In fact, he is very open to the Indians problems, even suggests Nanapush to run for tribal councilman to better help his people. He is hilarious in his attempts to convert Nanapush, who complains about the hardness of the pews [cf. T 110]. Yet, he is

not very successful in convincing the old tribal trickster. Although having lost his soul to Damien "gambling at cards," Nanapush bears similarity to McNickle's Catharine and Momaday's Francisco, when stating that he still likes "to walk away on the old road," [LM 71] in a traditional burial.<sup>29</sup>

Skipping two or three generations, the reader finds a renewed skepticism among young Indians in the 1980s that does not differ very much from Nanapush's, who confesses his uncertainty about Catholicism sixty years earlier:

I felt no great presence either, and decided that the old gods were better, the Anishinabe characters who were not exactly perfect but at least did not require sitting on hard planks. [T 110]

Erdrich places her (only direct) discussion of Christianity in the title story of *Love Medicine*. Here Lipsha reflects his spirituality after Nector's uncontrolled, ironic and blasphemous outburst "HAIL MARIE FULL OF GRACE." [LM 235] While his grandfather is begging his wife Marie, and not St. Mary, for grace during mass; Lipsha is attending because "there's something very calming about the cool greenish inside of our mission." [LM 235] Beside this ironic treatment, Catholicism is also questioned seriously:

God's been going deaf. Since the Old Testament, God's been deafening up on us. [...] I had this Bible once. I read it. I found there was discrepancies between then and now. It struck me. Here God used to raineth bread from clouds, smite the Philippines, sling fire down on red-light districts where people got stabbed. He even appeared in person once in a while. God used to pay attention, is what I am saying. [LM 236]

The indigenous people who have been converted to Christianity, have always struggled with this dilemma. They felt betrayed and lost, left behind by the new God. Lipsha mentions his battered family and killed ancestors. In *The Surrounded*, Catharine finally renounces her belief because it did not prevent her son from being killed, and her tribe from dissolving. Marie in Erdrich's novel ultimately does the same, "having seen the new, the Catholic, the Bureau, fail her children" [LM 263]. Also, both women symbolically start to speak their tribal languages in old age again. Lipsha seems ready to join them prematurely, replicating old Nanapush's thoughts:

Now there's your God in the Old Testament and there is Chippewa Gods as well. [...] Our Gods aren't perfect, is what I'm saying, but at least they come around. They'll do a favor if you ask them right. You don't have to yell. [LM 236]

However, Lipsha's comments reflect the syncretic nature of his belief system. Both religions are perceived as equal, practiced alongside each other and thereby

<sup>29</sup> In the comic story based on a traditional tale, "Potchikoo's Life After Death," (in *Baptism of Desire*, 1989) Erdrich takes up the theme of the elders' renunciation of Christianity, as well. Resembling Catharine's dream of going to an exclusively white heaven in *The Surrounded*, Potchikoo, too, is forbidden entrance by St. Peter. White man's hell, where the damned are "chained, head and foot and even by the neck, to old Sears Roebuck catalogues," neither seems appropriate for the old Indian. Therefore, Christianity leaves him with no option but to return to life on earth. Feest mentions the 'original' version, as told in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: in addition to denial of the Christian afterworld, here the Indian convert, consequently, is refused to enter the "Happy Hunting Grounds" as well. [cf. Feest 100]

changed and adapted. Nevertheless, he begins to favor the tribal Gods, although he cannot rely on his knowledge of traditional ritual anymore, since "to ask proper was an art that was lost to the Chippewa once the Catholics gained ground" [LM 236]. Therefore, he plays safe and tries to get a Catholic blessing for his fake traditional love medicine as well. Moreover, after being denied such a help, pragmatic Lipsha dips his fingers in the holy water and "blessed the hearts, quick, with [his] own hand." [LM 248] He is neither dogmatic in his use of tribal magic, nor in drawing on Catholic spiritual support; therein he is true to his principles:

Was there any sense in relying on a God whose ears was stopped? Just like the government? I says then, right off, maybe we got nothing but ourselves.  
[LM 237]

Although the book ends very balanced, many sins are forgiven and differences embraced, the scale obviously tends to a renewal of tribal powers. The old women Marie and Lulu become traditionalists, the political hero Gerry escapes, King promises the rise of the Indian, and Lipsha questions the Christian God. Again, by this Erdrich does not favor a return to a glorious Indian past, but rather the opening of new ways and possibilities based on a new Indian self-respect within a dominant white culture. Lulu's talk of the "four-legged people" is not only ridiculed by the ambitious Westernized Lyman, but in its out-of-place-and-timeness undermined by the author herself. However, in accordance with its central metaphor of forgiveness, "the novel refuses to wholly condemn the Christian, the traditional, or the odd blending of beliefs" [Blaeser 28] and instead upholds a general idea of faith and spirituality.

The new self-assured outlook for the Indian that Erdrich ends with, is continuing the renaissance Momaday and Silko have started. They, as well, suggest an adaptation of old ceremonies and beliefs to 20<sup>th</sup> century needs. Erdrich's approach relies on a broader sense than a mere revival and adaptation. She transcends tribal spirituality, by incorporating Christian patterns into her narratives of healing. Thus, she only follows Betonie's advice in *Ceremony*. Whereas Silko had to define a particular native identity and form for the novel first, Erdrich could already build on that foundation and open her text to other, Western and Christian models without denying her Indianness.

Erdrich is among the first to extend the horizon for Native American characters in fiction. Examining American Indian novels of the 1990s, Alan Velie noticed the emergence of "a very different class of protagonists: Indian professionals who have achieved a great deal of success and prestige in the white world." [Velie 1995, 46] What begins in *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace*, Indians going into business, is taken off reservation by Momaday, Welch, and Erdrich later on. This only reflects the new realities and seeks to confront contemporary problems. Of course, not every Native American today is a middle class lawyer living in the city, but as in Erdrich's case, it has become necessary to reflect the changing situations. At present, of 28,000 Turtle Mountain Chippewa enrolled in 2000, about 13,000 live off reservation. Already in 1979, the tribe was awarded a retributational payment of \$52,527,338 for unfair land-sales in 1892. A tribally run shopping mall and bingo hall exist in Belcourt, as well as a number of businesses owned by Chippewa [cf. Jacobs 81].

Erdrich and many others of the younger generations of native authors – such as King, Tapahonso, or Alexie –, not only reflect these present changes and its new problems, but have also found new ways of literary representation. Most visible and different from 'classic' American Indian fiction, is their use of humor and irony.<sup>30</sup> This applies as well to their depiction of Christianity, despite the tragic experiences of many Indians. Erdrich admits that she only echoes tribal reality:

But, if there's any ceremony which goes across the board and is practiced by lots and lots of tribal people, it is having a sense of humor about things and laughing. [in Bruchac 1987, 81]

Moreover, traditional trickster narratives in many Indian cultures work primarily with comical plots. As mentioned before, Nanapush is such a representation of the Chippewa trickster, and employs heavily comic strategies, such as mocking and irony, to subvert Catholicism in *Tracks*. Especially his dealings with Father Damien, Margaret, and Pauline reveal a great sense of humor and, yet, respect for the other. In *Love Medicine*, Nector Kashpaw partly takes on the role of trickster. His sexual appetite, lust for alcohol and sweets, constant wanderings are features linking him to traditional tricksters. And, of course, his humor. It is especially visible in his story "The Plunge of the Brave," which combines a tribal sense of irony with Western picaresque traditions.

Interestingly, his narration includes another reference by an Indian author to *Moby-Dick*, "for some reason" the only book taught by the priest at Flandreau Indian School.<sup>31</sup> Louis Owens noticed the true nature implied in Nector's strategy to outlive the "fish as big as a church." [LM 125] Nector declared he would fool the white world, escape their raging waters simply by non-resistance: "I wouldn't fight it, and in that way I'd get to shore." [LM 124]

"Call me Ishmael," I said sometimes, only to myself. For he survived the great white monster like I got out of the rich lady's picture. He let the water bounce his coffin to the top. In my life, so far I'd gone easy and come out on top, like him. [LM 125]

However, so Owens, Nector fails to understand the two reasons for which Melville's Ishmael survives. First of all, he is the 'balanced man' who alone is able to see both good and evil, and secondly,

the coffin that bounces Ishmael to the surface of the sea belongs to Queequeg, the Indian [...]. Ishmael floats atop of Queequeg's doom as Melville's novel ends. If Nector is Ishmael the survivor, it is at the expense of his Indian self. [Owens 202]

<sup>30</sup> I am referring to general tendencies, being aware of Gerald Vizenor's *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (Saint Paul: Truck Press, 1978), preceding later native humor and parodies.

<sup>31</sup> Indian schools are incorporated by Erdrich in her characters' biographies as another example of negative Western influence. In fact, they become symbolic, for only Nector, who was trained there for the white man's world, later loses his senses. The ones connected to a traditional life, Nanapush, Eli, June, Gerry, and Lipsha, all escape school or resist somehow or other. However, Erdrich shows an ambiguity about Western education as well: Nanapush and Nector profit from their knowledge or use it successfully in helping their tribe against the government, but Nector passively and Lyman selfishly turn business also against tradition and family.

Queequeg, the colonized 'savage', is noble but exploited by hard labor almost to his death on the Pequod – the ship "named for the Pequots, a tribe slaughtered by the colonists in the name of a monomaniacal Calvinist vision." [Owens 202]

With this last example of intertextual reference in Erdrich's novels, we find all features of contemporary Native American fiction for the first time included in one work. Postmodern intertextuality, sub(and re-)version of colonial and biblical texts, a hybrid application of Western Christian and traditional Indian mythology, tribal humor as a strategy of survival, and a general broadened definition of American Indian literature.

Although writing from a native perspective about native characters and concerns, Erdrich also includes a wide selection of general human concerns (which partly explains her economic success). The emphasis of family and communal bonds as opposed to Western Christian attempts to separate individuals and use them against each other, are a major concern in her novels. However, a craving for restored families and communities, as a means to heal individual identities, can also be observed in present-day white mainstream America. Thus, Erdrich's *Love Medicine* is rightly characterized by critics as fulfilling a holistic vision, or seeking a healthy balance "between seemingly diametrically opposed cultures" also in a broader sense that is no longer exclusively 'Indian':

[T]his inclusiveness, this multiplicity, depicts the complex nature of what it means to be both a rational and a feeling being, to be both American and a Native American, to be schooled in both Catholicism and tribal beliefs.  
[Sanders]

#### 4.4 "Forget the book. We've got a story to tell": Thomas King's *Rewriting of the Bible in Green Grass, Running Water (1993)*

With Thomas King's ambitious postmodern tribal novel, Native American literature has reached a new artistic level that challenges and requires the readers' knowledge of both, Christian and tribal cultures to enjoy and comprehend this postcolonial attack on dominant Western discourses. So far only comparable to Gerald Vizenor's trickster-novels, *Green Grass, Running Water* reveals the similarities that are characteristic of critical postmodern literature and tribal oral traditions. Skepticism toward authority and universal truths; playfulness and variation; disregard of linearity, common concepts of time and history, and dividing categories are not only features of a postmodern approach, but essential qualities of many tribal myths, especially traditional trickster tales.

Above all, King is the one author in my selection who challenges the very Euroamerican literary tradition itself, the most. Although already Momaday and Silko attempt to contrast Western linear narratives with their circular structure, incorporating and borrowing from oral traditions and native mythologies, King directly attacks literary conventions that only reflect general ideologies based on Christianity. He does not merely depict and criticize the conquest and conversion of American Indians, but attempts to counter the basic fundamentals of a Christian ideology that sanctified the cultural genocide and European conquest of America. Whereas Louise Erdrich applies Christian mythology in a native context for better representation of a syncretic spirituality and thereby challenges dogmatic Catholicism; King applies, reverses, and destroys Christian mythology with his trickster narratives. Laura Donaldson, in her examination of King's use of intertextuality, substantiates Homi Bhabha's emphasis of postcolonial opposition to Western religion, ideology, and literature:

It is to be found in the resistance of the colonized populations to the word of God and Man – Christianity and the English language. The transmutations and translations of indigenous traditions in their opposition to colonial authority demonstrate how the desire of the signifier, the indeterminacy of intertextuality, can be deeply engaged in the postcolonial struggle against dominate relations of power and knowledge. [Bhabha cited in Donaldson]<sup>32</sup>

Whereas the first Native American authors of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were eager to adapt to the dominant discourse and techniques in their theological and autobiographical writings, contemporary American Indian literature challenges the very basics of Christianity and colonial discourse itself. Kimberly Blaeser is among the first who brought this fact to a wider attention. Her list of "pagans rewriting the Bible," includes also Linda Hogan and her novel *Mean Spirit*,<sup>33</sup> in which the Indian Michael Horse makes a literal attempt to write an indigenous erratum to the

master-narrative of Western society, [that] provides the ideological framework of Christian discourse, presenting itself as a universal story of

<sup>32</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York, 1994).

<sup>33</sup> Linda Hogan, *Mean Spirit* (New York: Atheneum, 1990).

absolute truth, with God as infallible authority and a Christian patriarchal hierarchy as God-given and natural. [Wilke 83]

On a realistic plot level, his 'Gospel of Horse' anticipates King's structural approach to revise the Bible by fixing its "mistakes." As in *Mean Spirit*, where Horse e.g. replaces Christian divisions between humans and animals, challenges 'God given' hierarchies, one of King's major concerns is the revision of Christian rules. Moreover, Hogan as well, "challenges the privileging of text over oral tradition [...], the imitative style of Horse's 'gospel' becomes itself a critique of prescribed form." [Blaeser 21] In *Green Grass, Running Water*, King deliberately challenges the unquestionable 'truths' of the written word. Not by mimicking its form, but – closer to Erdrich's approach – by contrasting it with the power of native oral traditions.

#### 4.4.1 *Subverting Christian Rules with Intertextual (Re-)creation Stories*<sup>34</sup>

King creates multiple levels of action and narration within his novel. The two more conventional depictions of contemporary events are finally merging in a plot that derives from various literary traditions of magical realism and postmodern writing. The part of the four old Indians, who escaped a mental asylum (presumably close to the historic Fort Marion, Florida) "to fix the world," culminates in their appearance at Grand Baleen Dam in Alberta, Canada. Erected on and threatening to flood traditional Blackfoot land, the dam is a real danger to the tribe's culture as well as a symbol of Euroamerican conquest and colonization of the nature and its indigenous population. The Blackfoot Indian and former professor of literature, Eli Stands Alone, is engaged in a legal battle against the project, successfully delaying the ultimate closure of the dam. "As long as the grass is green and the waters run," [GGRW 224] is the phrase from a treaty that assures the Blackfoot settlement rights to the area; but Eli knows that treaties "were hardly sacred documents" [ibid.] in the white world, and the waters could stop running very soon.

The four old Indians arrive just in time with their friend Coyote, the mythical tribal trickster. These five characters are active at all narrative levels in the novel, and thus, merging realistic with mythological spheres – a common place in indigenous cultures that do not distinct between spiritual and everyday life. Coyote's dance and song, performed on both levels simultaneously, finally results in an earthquake that destroys the dam and liberates the waters and Indians alike.

King parallels this plot with four chapters that discuss the creation of the world from native perspectives in contrast to the Christian Genesis. Four mythological Indian female deities in disguise<sup>35</sup> – First Woman, Changing

<sup>34</sup> For the interpretation of King's novel, which overboards with intertextual and intercultural references, I rely heavily on James Cox's impressive and comprehensive analysis. Laura Donaldson's and Gundula Wilke's essays were also especially helpful and inspiring for this chapter.

<sup>35</sup> *For clarification:* The old Indians on the realistic level are recorded as Mr. Red, White, Black, and Blue, but are actually four old women who call themselves the Lone Ranger, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe, and Hawkeye. Throughout the creation stories it becomes clear that they are the four mythical women in postmodern and -colonial literary disguise.

Woman, Thought Woman, and Old Woman –, an anonymous narrator, and Coyote tell each other creation stories from various Indian cultures. According to native conventions that words and thoughts enact their creative power while they are expressed,<sup>36</sup> these narrators have the ability to imagine and re-imagine several versions of these tales. Mistakes are made and corrected, the stories told over and over again, until they "get it right." [GGRW 10] One of these 'mistakes' evolves out of a dream that Coyote has. It is agreed that the dream (which noisily claims to be in charge of the world) can be a dog, "But when that Coyote Dream thinks about being a dog, it gets everything mixed up. It gets everything backward." [GGRW 2] GOD has appeared on the scene!

In the following four parts, this GOD is constantly demanding a superior status and declaring to know the only valid version of earth's creation. The ambitious and authoritative GOD is easily recognized as the Christian, supposedly infallible, only existing deity. But GOD is forced to learn about other 'truths' beside the Christian, e.g. about the two worlds existing in native mythology, which he does not accept: "This is all wrong, says that GOD. Everybody knows there is only one world." [GGRW 31] By placing GOD within a group of other 'Gods,' and actually reversing the biblical order and making him a *creation* of, instead of the *creator* of somebody, King undermines the fundamental argument for Western superiority. Throughout the novel, the author employs and expands this strategy.

The appropriation and re-telling of an existing text becomes the parodic inversion of the original text, questioning its values and its influence and therefore establishing a counter-discourse with alternative spiritual visions. [Wilke 83]

King is doing so in various ways: he is not only giving a voice to (and privileging) "belief systems historically marginalized by the invading culture's exclusive and dominative discourses," [Cox 220] but raises also questions of gender, sexism, patriarchal authority, natural exploitation, and, primarily, colonization, based in (dogmatic) readings of the Bible. He revises and subverts not just the very fundamental Christian text itself, but also various literary interpretations and applications "that affirm colonial dominance and plot Native American absence." [Cox 220]

King begins to extricate his characters' lives from the domination of the invader's discourses by weaving their stories into both Native American oral traditions and into revisions of some of the most damaging narratives of domination and conquest: European American origin stories and national myths, canonical literary texts, and popular culture texts such as John Wayne films. [Cox 221]

I will concentrate on King's revisions of biblical passages here and refer to his re-readings of the colonial narratives in Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Defoe's *Robinson*

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. the beginning of Silko's *Ceremony*: "Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought-Woman, is sitting in her room and whatever she thinks about appears. [She] named things and as she named them they appeared." [C 1]

*Crusoe*, Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, and his allusions to Western movies and series like *The Lone Ranger and Tonto*, only briefly where necessary.

God's role as creator is not simply challenged by telling contrasting native myths, he is immediately being ridiculed as "that silly Dream," [GGRW 1] and "that backward GOD" [GGRW 32], reversing the colonizers attitude toward the 'childish' Indians. His authority, which only derives from the written word in the Bible, is not acknowledged by the native mythical characters who believe in the power and flexibility of the spoken word. The Bible is interpreted by King in a tradition that was taught to the Indians by missionaries of all denominations: as a fixed set of rules which were not to be questioned, even if they proved wrong in the face of a native reality. In *Green Grass, Running Water*, the revolt against Christian authority is even twofold: the doubly oppressed indigenous woman (if you will, triply oppressed, indigenous mythical woman) is confronting the "Christian rules." [GGRW 57] It is remarkably that the first appearance of the word 'Christian' is only in combination with 'rules, a context kept throughout the book.

King's employment of the trickster Coyote as antagonist (and creator) of GOD, gives him the chance to apply his great comic talent in form of a postmodern irony, which has become typical (also in its more realistic variants) for contemporary Native American literature. He continues what Erdrich's tricksters started, and even surpasses Sherman Alexie's tribal humor. King combines the disrespect for authority and 'truths' and the name-play of Western postmodern writers with the clownish qualities of tribal trickster figures. His serious critique and revision of essential Christian myth and ideology, is accomplished in outstanding hilarious new versions of the Fall of Man, Noah and the Flood, and Christ walking on the water.

In King's version (vs. the King James Version), First Woman and Ahdamn inhabit the garden that was a bad idea of Coyote, not of GOD. The very idea of a garden, tamed and dominated nature, is not only contrary to traditional Indian ways of life close to and within nature, but stands also for the Puritan idea of a new Eden in America. They classified the new world as wilderness, empty of civilization, and its 'savage' inhabitants therefore closer to animals than humans. In the novel, the idea of a garden is immediately rejected by another character from a native creation myth: "A garden is the last thing we need, says grandmother Turtle." [GGRW 32] On the parallel narrative level, Dr. Hovaugh's garden around the mental asylum, symbolically planted on native land, which was acquired by his evangelist great-grandfather from a local tribe, "extinct now" [GGRW 78], shows signs of decay and disease.

King's merges multiple creation stories in his 'Genesis' to subvert the dominance of the biblical version (itself already a patchwork from different sources). First Woman falls of the edge of the sky world and meets grandmother Turtle; together they start to create the first land. The author is not only deviating from Genesis, but mixes also various myths from different native cultures, e.g. it is Sky Woman who falls to earth in Iroquois legends). Attention should be drawn also to the fact, that the creation in King's revision is a collaborative act, opposed to the "single-voiced command by a male deity that creates the firmament in Genesis 1:6" [Cox 226]. The storytelling Indians remind each other that creation

myths are a conglomerate of different views: "you can't tell it all by yourself." [GGRW 10] This, and the fact that King's major subversive strategy is to provide a stage for these differing views, implicitly suggests "that the monotheist version [...] achieves its singular and univocal status only by suppressing all other voices." [Donaldson 32]

Gender conventions of the Christian patriarchal systems are, as well, contrary to many native cultures, and therefore challenged by First Woman, who resembles the biblical Eve but also a powerful native mythical figure. She is clearly the agent in the garden<sup>37</sup> (as Eve was before she was punished by God), is caring for food, while a blundering Ahdamn "is busy [...] naming everything." [GGRW 33] About his creation nothing is revealed: "I don't know where he comes from. Things like that happen, you know." [ibid.] His authority is multiply subverted, of course by his very name 'Ah! Damn!', the passing remark about his unknown origin, and his inability to name things correctly.<sup>38</sup>

You are a microwave oven, Ahdamn tells the Elk.  
 Nope says that Elk. Try again.  
 You are a garage sale, Ahdamn tells the Bear.  
 We got to get you some glasses, says that Bear.  
 You are a telephone book, Ahdamn tells the Cedar Tree.  
 You're getting closer, says the Cedar Tree. [GGRW 33]

In the passage above, King's native criticism of Western exploitation and destruction of nature is revealed, as well. While it is obvious on the realistic level of the book, where his characters battle the energy company, whose dam threatens to flood their land, respectively deprives trees needed for the Sun Dance of water; on the mythical level, King challenges the very foundations of Western (mis)behavior. Repeatedly, he argues against the biblical categories and rules that separate living from non-living nature and animals from humans. He subverts these rules by substituting them with native beliefs: First Woman is talking to the Tree (of Knowledge), Changing Woman to the animals on the ark and later to Ahab's whale.

Donaldson reveals the common origins of the Christian separation between God and humankind (which's transgression ultimately was punished with the flood) and the different categories of nature, in fact nature from 'civilization' itself: "that dichotomous consciousness so endemic to Western monotheism – a consciousness which enacts separation as the major premise of existence." [Donaldson 31] Native ecologists and writers have taken up that point frequently.

<sup>37</sup> It cannot be stated too often: King is another representative of American Indian authors who develop prominent powerful, independent, and active female characters to counter Western Christian patriarchal discourses with tribal alternatives.

<sup>38</sup> A(h)dam(n) in King's version is an American Indian, too [cf. GGRW 58], which allows here a note on the Hebrew meaning of his name. As mentioned before, it alludes as well to 'ground' (adamah) as to 'man' (adam). In addition, in its full translation it means 'one that is red,' for he was made of the red earth of Mesopotamia. Thus, he is a perfect reference for tribal intertextual name-play: Adam was the first 'Red Man.' [Cf. *The Cambridge Factfinder*, ed. David Crystal (Cambridge, 1993) and *The Thompson Chain-Reference Bible* (London, 1984).]

The division above is an imperative basis for a Christian ideology that applies the rule of *divide et impera* also to nature, which has to be deprived of its soul before it can be conquered and exploited. Donaldson quotes a review that explains the importance that King – as well as other native authors like McNickle, Momaday, Silko, and Erdrich – attaches to these Christian concepts contrary to native cultures:

By portraying biblical stories from a native point of view, King shows how illogical and foreign the natives found the Christian religion. And without resorting to polemics, he illustrates how white culture misinterpreted, ridiculed and even outlawed native beliefs. [Turbide cited in Donaldson 38]

The Christian rules which are referred to by King, and which were alien to Native Americans, are established in Genesis 1:28, where God grants man dominion over the animals. Although Eve also talks to the serpent in Genesis, it already implies sin and her subsequent fall. A talking animal clearly is a trick of the devil, thus against God's order. When First Woman is thanking the Tree for its fruits in King's revision – a customary habit in traditional native cultures –, the Christian boundaries are broken: "Talking trees! Talking trees! says that GOD. What kind of world is this?" [GGRW 33] GOD claims exclusive ownership of the garden (although First Woman made it) and establishes rules, "Christian rules." [GGRW 57] But First Woman and Ahdamn disobey, or rather neglect his authority, and leave the garden: "No point in having a grouchy GOD for a neighbor." [ibid.] GOD's ban cannot be heard anymore by First Woman, who is already out of his reach. Later on, Noah will similarly rage against Changing Woman who speaks with the animals on the ark:

Why are you talking to animals? says the little man. This is a Christian ship. Animals don't talk. We got rules. [GGRW 123]

But let us return to the question of gender discourses in the novel. The garden passage in Genesis also establishes the alleged reason for male dominance in the Christian world. There God curses Eve's disobedience: "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." [Ge 3:16] King's native women obviously disregard his words. Alberta is an independent single woman, a professor of history in Calgary, who rejects all male advances but rather looks for possibilities of artificial insemination: "I just want a child. I don't want a husband." [GGRW 148] An option so completely outside of all rules, that the doctor simply ignores her remark about not being married and continues his interview. The other woman on the realistic plot level is Latisha, who has divorced her husband after he had left her and turns down all his attempts to apologize, and rather raises her children alone.

On the mythical level, the biblical men are not better off, as King's re-written versions of Noah and the new annunciation scene reveal. However, as with the beating ex-husband of Latisha, the serious consequences of disobedience to men are implied here, too. Noah, the lecherous and devout Christian, simply threw his wife and kids overboard after they had opposed him openly. When he fails to chase Changing Woman down for "procreation," he deserts her on an island:

This is a Christian ship, he shouts. I am a Christian man. This is a Christian journey. And if you can't follow Christian rules, then you're not wanted on the voyage. [GGRW 125]

The male domination and sexist reduction of non-Christian, i.e. Indian, and/or disobedient women, is sarcastically emphasized by Noah's first rule: "Thou Shalt Have Big Breasts." [GGRW 125] King's last two examples of his revised native version of the Bible, as well, (partially) restore Indian women to power. A. A. Gabriel according to his biblical role, but in a typical colonial manner randomly re-names Thought Woman to Mary, and assigns her the task as Holy Virgin. In alluding to many missionaries' sexual abuse of their native wards, King lets him attempt to rape her. After ridiculing her disagreement, he approaches her again, but Thought Woman – opposed to Mary's instant submission in Luke 1:38 – escapes and leaves him to his male sulkiness, that nevertheless implies a threat: "There are lots of Marys in the world [...]. We can always find another one, you know." [GGRW 227]

The union between church and government in their exploitation of the indigenous people is also hinted at here. A. A. Gabriel is both heavenly host and Canadian intelligence agent at once; when he looks for his card to identify himself, he mistakenly produces a land sale treaty form: "Wrong paper, he says. That one is for later." [GGRW 226]

In the final biblical passage, King directly challenges Christ and his alleged omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. Furthermore, also Christian patriarchy is confronted again, by posing the question of what would have happened if a woman did all the wonders in the New Testament (as she can in Native American mythology). When "Young Man Walking On Water" does not even know whom he is supposed to rescue from the raging waters, and much less is able to save them, Old Woman again demonstrates the advantages of a different approach to nature (notably, the Waves and the Boat are capitalized and speak). While Young Man's yelling and stomping does not calm the waters, Old Woman pacifies them with a song. But Young Man claims to have saved the men, whose objection that it was not him but the other person is rejected: "Nonsense, says Young Man Walking On Water. That other person is a woman." [GGRW 293] Whereupon they follow him with no more doubts.<sup>39</sup> Old Woman in her attempt to help according to tribal customs, has violated "Christian rules" in several ways: she, as a woman supposedly powerless, is enacting a non-violent harmonious power and is neglecting the divine division of the natural and human spheres. What is worse, she challenges the patriarchal power balance established by God (respectively the authors of the Bible), in intervening in a fundamental Christian myth and witnessing Christ's fallibility, his impotence to follow his own rules.

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<sup>39</sup> Among others, King lets Old Woman also suggest "subalterns" as a designation for Young Man's disciples, when he cannot remember the correct term. The author, thus, once more reveals his knowledge of postcolonial discourse and might particularly refer here to Spivak's "Can The Subaltern Speak?" (1988), in which she states, that if "the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in the shadow." [excerpt in *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, eds. Ashcroft et al. (London: Routledge, 1995) 24-28.]

Christian rules, says Young Man Walking On Water. And the first rule is that no one can help me. The second rule is that no one can tell me anything. Third, no one is allowed to be in two places at once. Except me. [GGRW 291]

#### 4.4.2 (Post-)colonial Literatures, or: *Moby-Dick* meets Columbus

His latter remark obviously refers to King's transgression as an author, who opposes classic Western literary conventions with his multi-layered, intertextual narrative that smoothly merges mythical and realistic spheres. Thus, he reflects tribal realities and beliefs that contrast not only Christian based literary but also political discourses. As the various Christian patriarchs in the novel demonstrate, any transgression of the rules and spheres will be punished. At the very border of King's mythical and realistic levels (one should understand realistic here always rather in the tradition of magical realism), where the four women leave the creation myths via a detour through canonical Western colonial literature and enter the historical realm, their transgression is punished, as well. At the end of every chapter, each of the four is captured and brought to Fort Marion, Florida, the historic site for Indian prisoners-of-war – controlled by General Pratt, the later 'father of Indian education.' While they are mostly charged simply for being Indian, they are symbolically punished for trespassing the boundaries to the 'real world.' Moreover, their arrest by white soldiers represents the intrusion of the Western colonizer into tribal mythology and religion, and their replacement with Christianity. The only way to escape from the prison is found in taking up the disguise of authoritative (white) colonialist male heroes: First Woman runs off with Ahdamn as the Lone Ranger and Tonto.

A similar analysis as of King's biblical revisions could be done with his subversions of canonical colonial literature, which ultimately serves the same objective: the revision of dominant discourses that plot the destruction of Native Americans. Following the focus of this paper, only King's rewriting of Melville's *Moby-Dick* shall be considered here shortly. An extensive in-depth examination of this topic has been provided by James Cox [cf. 231-237].

King is the third Native American author in this selection, who explicitly refers to *the American* novel of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that discusses imperialism and domination at length. However, as earlier mentioned, also Melville follows the literary mainstream in that his 'noble savages' are doomed. All non-white members of the Pequod's crew perish with the ship that embodies the "primeval Native American identity that Melville sees as a human rather than as a specific cultural or historical inheritance," [Cox 232] representing itself in the savagery of the whale hunt. King not only reverses the assumption of the doomed native by Changing Woman's survival of her encounter with Ahab, but also corrects Melville's polite neglect of the reasons why the Pequots are "now extinct" [Melville 104; note the same implied inevitability in Dr. Hovaugh's remark].

"She means *Moby-Dick*," says Coyote. I read the book. It's *Moby-Dick*, the great white whale who destroys the *Pequod*."

"You haven't been reading your history," I tell Coyote. "It's English colonists who destroy the Pequots." [GGRW 164]

Ahab (whose relation to Cotton Mather is referred to by Cox) resembles God in King's novel: "Just around the eyes," says Coyote, "he looks like that GOD guy." [GGRW 163] His crew is performing the same colonial naming as A. A. Gabriel later, alluding not only to Adam's naming and imposing his order upon nature, but also to Robinson Crusoe's naming of Friday, subduing the 'noble savage' under his colonial order. When Changing Woman requests a reason for the killing of the whales, Ahab/God answers: "This is a Christian world, you know. We only kill things that are useful or things we don't like." [GGRW 163]

King is not only subverting Christian colonialism, but simultaneously several other Western Christian discourses of domination, frequently opposed in contemporary (postmodern) literature: ecological exploitation, racism, sexism, and homophobia. For his Ahab attacks not the "great male white whale" Moby-Dick, but "Moby-Jane, the Great Black [Lesbian] Whale" [GGRW 164]. Again, the outcome in *Green Grass, Running Water* is rather positive for the quadruply oppressed character: after sinking Ahab's ship she swims with Changing Woman to "someplace warm."

Summarizing King's intertextual work with the Bible, Western literature, and pop culture, and tribal mythology, Cox concludes that:

King's revisionary narratives disable European/European North American narratives of domination and conquest that help to enact, enhance, and enable colonialism. [Cox 221]

The novel provides a mound of references, symbolisms, and allusions also on its realistic plot level, in which the author transports his approach successfully into a contemporary story. Left to interpretation would be his postmodern name-play with many of his characters, e.g. Crystal Ball Cologne, the Italian actor in Indian roles; Dr. J(oseph) Hovaugh; Eli(jah), the prophet who foretold Ahab's death in both, *Moby-Dick* and the Bible, etc. Of course, the very subject of the present-day plot alludes to the biblical flood, as well as to native concepts of the destructive and recreative powers of water. Grand Baleen Dam, not only resembles a white whale but refers to the historic Great Whale energy project in Quebec, successfully fought off by local Crees.

The ultimate collapse of the dam takes place in 1992, the year of the Columbian quincentennial,<sup>40</sup> highly symbolic therefore the three cars sailing across the water and crashing into the dam: "A Nissan, a Pinto, and a Karmann-Ghia." [GGRW 339] Cox is certainly right in connecting King's description of "things giving way, things falling apart" [GGRW 346] to Yeats' poem "The Second Coming," and King's other implicit reference, Chinua Achebe's classic

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<sup>40</sup> Anniversaries like the 'discovery' of the Americas or the U.S. independence, still (often unreflected) celebrate the colonial conquest and, thereby, the nearly extinction of indigenous peoples. Naturally, native authors seek to challenge the public on such symbolic dates. Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* is also set in 1992 – the connection of Columbus and Christianity here indicated by the church choir members "Nina and Maria Christopher." [RB 160] Leslie Silko's as well intentioned originally to publish *Ceremony* in 1976, to counter "all of the rhapsodizing" and remind Americans that "this powerful nation they are celebrating was established on stolen land." [in Seyersted 24]

novel of postcolonial rewriting of history from a native perspective. But whereas Yeats and Achebe describe an apocalypse, King's cars tumbling "over the end of the world" [GGRW 246] are already the beginning to a new story of creation, not doom.

King, thus, merges a postmodern notion of repetition and history as fictional with tribal circular time, in which stories are not fixed dogmas, but re-told over and over again and thereby subject to change: "There are no truths, Coyote." I says. "Only stories." [GGRW 326] In a convergence of oral tribal literatures with postmodern theory, the author attacks colonial narratives, as well as the histories of the colonizer, and the Christian meta-narrative itself. When Coyote insists on his biblical knowledge, he is rebuked by the narrator: "Forget the book," I says. "We got a story to tell." [GGRW 291] How post-colonial rewriting of history and sacred myths are connected, reports Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism*. The controversial Smithsonian exhibition of 1991 that challenged heroic models of romanticizing U.S. history with its display of Native American degradation, was dismissed as un-American by conservative critics and politicians. Said explains their anger with the almost 'blasphemous' character of the exhibition's deconstruction of America's official image of itself and its national past:

Every society and official tradition defends itself against interferences with its sanctioned narratives; over time these acquire an almost theological status, with founding heroes, cherished ideas and values, national allegories having an inestimable effect in cultural and political life. [Said 314]

King challenges these very national myths along with their colonial biblical premises. Consequently, he over and over again parodies the Christian rules written down in Genesis and Deuteronomy, as Hogan's Michael Horse in *Mean Spirit*, who is also aware that "Christians [...] are accustomed to rules" [Blaeser 21] and therefore asks a priest about his new gospel: "Do you think I need more thou shalt?" [Hogan 358]

#### 4.5 "Father Arnold, we're not laughing with you, we're laughing at you": Sherman Alexie's *Catholic Indians in Reservation Blues* (1995) and *Indian Killer* (1996)

With Sherman Alexie's novels, this review of representations of Christianity in Native American fiction returns to its starting point: the culture of Salish speaking tribes in the northwestern United States. Exactly sixty years after the publication of McNickle's bleak depiction of the results of Catholic missionary work among the Flathead Indians, in which he discusses the possibility of rejecting Western religion and culture, Alexie takes another look at Salish Indians. The changes and prevailing attitudes in regard to Christianity and tribal life among them are, therefore, destined for comparison and critique. Alexie's different approach to the topic and his distinct literary representation of Catholicism on the Spokane Indian reservation (and in the city of Seattle) reveal an interesting development toward an acceptance, or rather appropriation, of Christianity among Native Americans. While some of his characters, as others in the fiction examined here, still search for an answer to *the* essential question of their bi-cultural life in contemporary America – "How can you go to a church that killed so many Indians?" –, others seem to have found an answer and solved this dilemma for themselves.

Alexie attempts to discuss this question in both novels in different ways. While the bleak murder mystery of *Indian Killer* fails to find an answer that allows the survival (in dignity) of Catholic Indians and rejects the modern white colonizer in a similar sense as McNickle's, *Reservation Blues* dares to have a laugh on white and brown Catholics, and offers some hope amongst all the "exaggeration of despair."<sup>41</sup> The author takes a look at the historic aspects of missionary work – and the collective memory still haunting the Indians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – as well as its contemporary (changing) representations.

##### 4.5.1 "Irony, a hallmark of the contemporary indigenous": Postmodern Irony and Satire in Alexie's Novels

The quote from this chapter's title is taken from Alexie's story "Dear John Wayne,"<sup>42</sup> and mocks there a certain anthropological and general scholarly approach in Native American Studies, which worships its subject (or rather: object) of study but forgets the living human being behind it. However, as in most satirical statements, there is a kernel of truth in it. As demonstrated extensively with King's novel, *Green Grass, Running Water*, the tendency of a more ironic approach in American Indian fiction, which had begun in the 1980s,

<sup>41</sup> Since his first publications, Alexie has been the target of (more or less) academic native criticism. While accusing him of 'redsploitation,' the true concern was his deviation from a traditionalist definition of American Indian literature. A typical example would be Gloria Bird, "The Exaggeration of Despair in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*," *Wicazo Sa Review* 11 (Fall 1995) 2: 47-52. For a review of the debate's most prominent arguments and an excellent refutation of them, see Stephen F. Evans, "'Open Containers': Sherman Alexie's Drunken Indians," *AIQ* 25 (Winter 2001) 1: 46-72.

<sup>42</sup> Sherman Alexie, *The Toughest Indian in the World* (New York: Grove Press, 2000).

is continued in many of Alexie's works. King's postmodern irony and intertextuality, although on a different level, are also major tools of Alexie's deconstruction of established notions of Christianity from a native perspective. Both authors, therein, distinct themselves from earlier works of the Native American Renaissance with their more dogmatic favoring of tribal traditions to contrast Western culture, and demonstrate a new artistic sovereignty even when confronting the most serious problems.

Although *Reservation Blues* is definitely making greater use of comic parody and irony, even the bleak *Indian Killer* – at the most sarcastic –, explains the function of Indian humor in modern Western society: "their laughter was a ceremony used to drive away personal and collective demons [...] always, they were laughing." [IK 21] That directly links his work to Erdrich observation of tribal humor, but also reminds of studies of Jewish humor in literature and daily life as a means of survival and strengthening of communities. In fact, Alexie's 20<sup>th</sup> century Catholic Indians in *Reservation Blues* have achieved more than that, they reversed the order of power and, thus, arranged themselves with a once antagonistic institution and are even able to teach it something about life:

Arnold's Indian education was quick and brutal. He heard much laughter. "Father Arnold, we're not laughing *with* you, we're laughing *at* you." He was impressed by the Spokane's ability to laugh. He'd never thought of Indians as being funny. What did they have to laugh about? Poverty, suicide, alcoholism? Father Arnold learned to laugh at most everything, which strangely made him feel closer to God. [RB 36]

Thus, Alexie's irony is not only his original invention, but rather overheard in reservation tavern gossip and downtown drunk's jokes. He also reconnects himself to traditional trickster figures and their ironic storytelling, in fact, he becomes a modern trickster himself. His ironic mocking and self-mocking is, therefore, not meant to put his fellow Indians down, but rather the

construction of a satiric mirror that reflects the painful reality of lives that have become distorted, disrupted, destroyed, and doomed by their counter-impulses to embrace or deny traditional Indian culture, to become assimilated to or resist absorption into white civilization – or both. [Evans 49]

The representation of Christianity in *Reservation Blues*, hence, is both funny and serious criticism. This novel about "an all Indian Catholic rock-and-roll band called Coyote Springs" [Alexie] introduces the reader to the problems of contemporary Indian youths on a reservation marked by poverty, unemployment, alcoholism, as well as tribal conservatism and obsolete Christian morals. Alexie challenges dogmatism and backwardness among his own people as well as the colonial history of the church and prevailing racist stereotypes.

Even Father Arnold realizes that the old Spokane Indians are more dogmatic than he is, as they confront the new rock band on the reservation:

The crowds kept growing and converted the rehearsal into a semi-religious ceremony that made the Assemblies of God, Catholics, and Presbyterians very nervous. United in their outrage, a few of those reservation Indian Christians showed up at the rehearsals just to protest the band. "You're damned!" shouted an old Catholic Indian woman. "You're sinners! Rock 'n' Roll is the devil's music!"

"Damn right it is!" Victor shouted back and hit an open chord that shook the protestors' fillings out of their teeth. The Indian Health Service dentist spent the next two weeks with his hands deep in Christian mouths.

"No," the dentist had to say more than once to Catholic patients, "I don't think there's a saint of orthodontics." [RB 33f]

Obviously, the reservation is still heavily influenced by Christian teachings. Although the young Spokanes are "not really" Christians anymore, most of them were still baptized Catholic [cf. RB 46]. While Thomas (as implied by his name) has his doubts about the church, Checkers Warm Water, the Flathead girl, receives comfort and help from the Christian religion (see next chapter below). On the very first page of the novel, the dominance of the church is already established: the first buildings one passes on entering the city limits of Wellpinit on the reservation are "the Assembly of God Church, the Catholic Church and Cemetery, the Presbyterian Church and Cemetery." [RB 3] This setting resembles McNickle's description of the dominating mission church in his novel; obviously, Christianity had endured and prospered in the area during the last eighty years.

Times have changed, though. The understanding of a Christian congregation on an Indian reservation does significantly differ from McNickle's picture. Reflecting the syncretic approach in Momaday's and Erdrich's work, Spokane Catholics have incorporated the church well into their personal and tribal communal life. In both of Alexie's novels, babies are sung to sleep with traditional Spokane songs as well as Catholic hymns [cf. IK 13], even mixed for a change by Thomas' mother with "Broadway show tunes [...], which were quite similar." [RB 22] The Indian priest, Father Duncan, in *Indian Killer*, "wanting to be heard by every version of God, prayed in English, Latin, and Spokane." [IK 125] And Carlotta Lott, who reverses every stereotype of an Indian, reveals not only her Christian name but also her "real name", her Indian name: Carlotta Lott [IK 252].

The very church service in *Reservation Blues* differs notably from McNickle's description, where the priests hated the "pagan beliefs" and in their sermons threatened those who still clung to them with burning in hell [cf. TS 174]. Father Arnold, on the other hand, announces a tribal potluck dinner during mass and reminds Bessie Moses to bring her fry bread, "the best Catholic fry bread on the reservation." [RB 162] The Spokane Indian Christian Basketball Tournament is his concern too, especially since "The Presbyterians and Assembly of God really kicked our butts last year." [ibid]

These examples are all part of Alexie's attempts to create a more realistic picture of contemporary Indians, even in his ironic exaggeration. Stereotypes are subverted, countered, and re-applied by the dozen in his works. Father Arnold had come to the reservation, "expecting tipis and buffalo, since he had never been told otherwise. He was genuinely shocked when the Indians in his congregation spoke English." [RB 36] The exposure of prevailing stereotypes as a form of colonial dominance is Alexie's serious intention behind the laughs. In *Indian Killer*, the tone even drastically shifts and reveals the implicit danger of this practice. Moreover, also the new age (and sometimes self-imposed) stereotypes of Indians are attacked by Marie Polatkin, the young Indian rebel and Samaritan:

"I'm not an Indian warrior chief. I'm not some demure little Indian woman healer talking spider this, spider that, am I? I'm not babbling about the four directions. Or the two-legged, four-legged, and winged. I'm talking like a twentieth-century Indian woman. Hell, a twenty-first century Indian [...]." [IK 247f]

Prejudices separate Indians from white Americans, who still think first of "All that alcoholism and poverty, the lack of God in their lives." [IK 19] when meeting an Indian. Although Marie "was definitely not Christian" [IK 32] – for good reason, as shown below –, her speech in this regard has a similar function as Lester FallsApart's conversation with the police officer Peone. Here, not only stereotypes on both sides are revealed, but also the power of humor to connect different cultures and people:

"Catholic cops are funny," said Lester.  
 "Yeah? Catholic Indians are funny."  
 "There's lots of Catholic Indians."  
 "There's lots of Catholic cops."

The old man started to laugh again. Peone had to laugh with him. [IK 365]

The best illustration of Alexie's ironic reflection of tribally integrated Christianity is his hilarious 'borrowing' from the New Testament. In a similar manner as Thomas King, he reapplies a biblical story to a (contemporary) native context and, thus, subverts its original meaning. While the miracles performed by Jesus in the Bible were to prove his authority and the power of the only valid God, Thomas re-tells the story and admits the same authority to Big Mom (a mythical Indian medicine woman<sup>43</sup>), who prevents a "fry bread riot" and disclosures the miracle as mere arithmetic:

"But there is a way," Big Mom said. "I can feed you all."  
 "How?" asked somebody. [...]  
 "By ancient Indian secrets," Big Mom said.  
 "Bullshit!"  
 "Watch this," Big Mom said as she grabbed a piece of fry bread and held it above her head. "Creator, help me. I have only a hundred pieces of fry bread to feed two hundred people."  
 Big Mom held that fry bread tightly in her huge hands and then tore it into halves.  
 "There," Big Mom said. "That's how I will feed you all." [RB 302]

Alexie employs intertextual references in his postmodern native novels very much like King in his. Beside the Bible as a common subtext, he also reapplies characters and themes from American history, literature, and pop culture to revise official narratives that degrade Native Americans. His application of Western pop culture gained him criticism for selling his Indianness to the Western mainstream. But he does not. Alexie not only reverses many Western assumptions and idols in his native contexts, but also reflects realities of young Indians who grew up in a

<sup>43</sup> The same scene is reused in *Smoke Signals*, giving credits to Victor's mother, whose bread is "used for Communion back home. Arlene Joseph makes some Jesus fry bread, enit? Fry bread that can walk across water. Fry bread rising from the dead." [Sherman Alexie, *Smoke Signals: A Screenplay* (New York: Hyperion, 1998) 74f.]

very American 20<sup>th</sup> century and not as warriors in the 19<sup>th</sup>. Especially with his more recent texts, Alexie has deliberately turned to a representation of urban Indians, in opposition to 'classic' American Indian literature:

Sixty percent of all Indians live in urban areas, but nobody's writing about them. They're really an underrepresented population, and the ironic thing is very, very few of those we call Native American writers actually grew up on reservations, and yet most of their work is about reservations. [in Chapel]

Though he is generally right, I have to mention again that also Momaday, Welch, and Erdrich started to depict urban Indians in the 1990s. However, it is Alexie's very sense of honor and reliability that enrages him when reading works of and about alleged Indians:

I've been living in the city – Seattle – for five years. I live a very cosmopolitan life now. [...] To pretend that I'm just a rez boy is impossible. [in Chapel]

As his character Marie protests against prevailing stereotypes of Indians, he himself writes against a demand (and self-restricted definition) of "the corn-pollen, four directions, eagle-feathers school of Native literature," [in Chapel] which sells out tribal spirituality as it mis-represents contemporary real Indian life. These are different, but at the same time, very similar distorted images as the ones in American histories and colonial myths, which are under attack in his books as well. In almost any of his poems and stories, he revises also white male heroes of Western pop culture, like John Wayne or the Lone Ranger. In *Indian Killer*, the protagonist, a Native American adopted by white parents, ironically bears the name of John Smith, which is not only a *very* white name but also the main hero in the history and myth of Pocahontas. More than appropriate an Indian's comment: "No wonder he talks to himself." [IK 219]

John (who also resembles Kesey's Chief Broom) is another Native American represented in fiction, whose mental health is affected by his life between the two worlds, the lost connection to his true identity, "an Indian without a tribe" [IK 35]. He is suffering from the same disease that plagued Archilde's nephews, Abel and Tayo, Pauline and Henry, and somehow King's four Indians who are locked up in a mental asylum. Obviously, a scholarly paper on Indian-White/Christian relationships could also focus on these metaphoric diseases and the various attempts to heal them. Modern native fiction can be as appropriately described as 'medical histories,' as they are characterized by Bevis as "homing" plots.

Other names are similarly ambitious: the two 'wannabes' in the novel, a fake-Indian writer and a professor of Native American literature, are given the names of Jack Wilson, the Christian name of Wovoka, the 19<sup>th</sup> century leader of the Ghost Dance, and Dr. Clarence Mather, obviously referring to the Puritan theologian Cotton Mather. Both make a living from an alleged Indianness and a public interest in native spirituality and culture without paying attention or credit to the real Indians whose culture they exploit. Alexie identifies the same new 'enemy' of today's Indian in *Reservation Blues*. It is not only/anymore the church or government, but the 20<sup>th</sup> century's colonizer: a white cop who claims Indian blood to get a job, the white girls who make 'tribal music' (promoted by their agents and producers of Cavalry Records, named after the true Indian killers, the Generals Custer, Sheridan, and Wright).

Interestingly, Alexie also mixes Indian and Christian motifs in *Indian Killer*. When John binds Wilson and slashes him with a knife, John counts coup like a warrior, but also alludes to the biblical Cain, who is marked by God for the murder of his brother. Though John commits suicide in the novel, he cuts Jack Wilson's face, so that

"No matter where you go [...] people will know you by the mark. They'll know what you did. [...] You're not innocent." [IK 411]

Nevertheless, Alexie is not only engaging in an intertextual postmodern name play and breaks the boundaries of historic linearity (with blues singer Robert Johnson or Big Mom in *Reservation Blues*), but is also interested in a serious discussion of tribal and, especially, Christian history. Even though his approach is far from McNickle's historic realism, Alexie as well gives credits to history books in *Reservation Blues*, to ground his challenges with facts. In various dreams, the pan-Indian collective memory is trying to deal with its past. A recurring motif in the novel, for example is the Coeur d'Alene War of 1858, in which a tribal alliance suffered a bloody defeat by Colonel George Wright.

#### 4.5.2 "Looking for a new name for God": (Indian) Christian Conflicts

Alexie's direct confrontation of the Christian church and its history is another important aspect in both novels. Notably, he is considering Thomas' question "How can you go to a Church that killed so many Indians?" [RB 166] not only from a Native American perspective, but also from the clergy's side. In *Indian Killer*, it is represented by Father Duncan, a Spokane Indian minister, and by Father Arnold in *Reservation Blues*. Another church representative is present here by way of telecommunication: the bishop who obviously does not ask himself such a question, but stands for a continuous, ignorant, missionary approach:

"Father Arnold," the Bishop said, "I know it's never easy ministering to such a people as the Indians. They are a lost people, God knows. But they need you out there. We need you out there." [RB 267]

However, Alexie clearly distinguishes between the priests who work with the (or are) Indians and the higher clergy. Of course, we all know of recent official bishops' apologies etc., but he is probably right and more experienced in depicting the bishop's attitude as a general contrast to the people who share their life with reservation Indians. Duncan in *Indian Killer*, was literally 'sent into the desert' by his bosses, since he questioned the church's historic role too much and his "eccentricities had become liabilities." [IK 16] Father Duncan could not come to terms with his inner conflict of being Indian and Christian, in fact, he might be another 'crazy Indian,' whose mind could not bear the shame of his religion and discrepancy with his native identity.

Father Duncan introduces young John to these quarrels and the Christian mythology and colonial history. Already the boy recognizes the inherent discord: "Such violence, such faith." [IK 15] In a discussion of historic conflicts between missionaries and Indians, Duncan's dilemma becomes explicit:

As a Jesuit, he knew those priests were martyred just like Jesus. As a Spokane Indian, he knew those Jesuits deserved to die for their crimes against Indians. [IK 15]

Being aware of the fact that "white people killed most Indians" [IK 14], young John asks with the logic and instinct of the innocent child, if the wounded Christ on the cross was an Indian. Duncan's answer seems acceptable: "He wasn't an Indian," said the Jesuit, "but he should have been." [IK 15]

Later, the Catholic Father Duncan becomes John's spiritual guide as in traditional tribal constellations. John struggles with his identity (of which his Christian belief is part) until the very end, but he fails to solve the conflict, "knowing that he could not walk away from it, but knowing that Father Duncan had walked away from it." [IK 78] He likes to think that Duncan could do so, that he "knew everything" [IK 199] or might have found an answer to all questions in the desert. Thus, resembling not only Jesus' and Moses', but also Native American vision quests):

Father Duncan must have been on a vision quest in the desert when he walked to the edge of the world and stepped off. [...] Perhaps Duncan, as Indian and Christian, had discovered a frightening secret and could not live with it. Perhaps Duncan knew what existed on the other side of the desert. Maybe he was looking for a new name for God. [IK 17]

Alexie creates with Father Duncan a symbol for a heterodox, critical approach to Christianity that is needed also within the contemporary church. He is portrayed as walking, talking postmodern and postcolonial theory: doubtful about canonized narratives of history, even reading "books backward" to work his way to the beginning, an "eccentric" (i.e., off-center of a dominant discourse) and intertextual and hybrid artist (incorporating traditional Spokane images in his contemporary paintings).

His and John's conflicts with the church are mirrored in Alexie's other Indians. In both novels, Spokanes have experienced a shocking incidence of Catholic ignorance: a book burning which included Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* as well as *101 Great Tricks of the Master Magician* [cf. IK 32 and RB 146]. For Thomas Builds-the-Fire and Marie Polatkin that was the final impetus to drive them away from the church. Though one might say that Salinger was on many other indexes during the 1950s as well, and Alexie depicts an event of the past, it must not be forgotten that he is writing of the late 1970s and similar campaigns were reported e.g. in 2001 when Christian fundamentalists protested the movie *Harry Potter* for its positive image of sorcerers and heathen magic.

In *Reservation Blues*, a great deal of the young Indians' quarrels with Christianity is placed into Chapter 5, introduced by the lyrics to an Alexie song titled "My God Has Dark Skin," which lists historic crimes of missionaries still present in the collective memory of many Native Americans today. However, its message remains ambitious. Does the singer imply a turn towards native religions or, like Father Duncan's attempt, a re-reading of the Christian God? A motif common in post-colonial and ethnic literatures is brought up in this context by Checkers Warm Water:

"I wanted to be as white as those little girls because Jesus was white and blond in all the pictures I ever saw of him."  
 "You do know that Jesus was Jewish?" Father Arnold asked. "He probably had dark skin and hair."  
 "That's what they say," Checkers said. "But I never saw him painted like that. I still never see him painted like that." [RB 141]

Alexie carefully structures his chapter on the individuals' experiences with the Catholic church. His writing method borrows from cinematic techniques by juxtaposing concise flashback scenes with present dialogues. So is the book burning paragraph an illustration to Chess Warm Water's *Gretchenfrage*, which Thomas honestly answers: "Yeah, I pray [...] I'm a recovering Catholic." [RB 146] He, as most Spokanes, was baptized Catholic but has his doubts now.

Also the following flashback precisely adds to and contrasts its preceding scene, which ends with Chess's remark on the beauty of the reservation and Thomas retort: "You haven't seen everything." [RB 147] The paragraph on Victor Joseph's childhood, demonstrates that the compulsory hair cut for Indian children from the song above, has been abandoned only for a few decades. Moreover, he is the one most seriously affected by the Christian church, since he was obviously sexually abused in Mission School when he was nine years old [cf. RB 147f].

Alexie here also includes the connection of fear and Christianity, common to the criticism of all American Indian novels examined in this paper. Young Joseph nods to the priest's questions if he was afraid of him and God, which brings a smile to the missionary's face. Fear as a powerful tool in the hand of the Christian colonizer is the subject also of Father Arnold's dream in the same chapter. Interestingly, it is again the white man who is plagued by the church's history in a nightmare. His dream refers to the historic Marcus and Narcissa Whitman, Presbyterian missionaries who were working with Cayuse and other local tribes in the area since 1836 [cf. Hirschfelder and Molin 321f]. Alexie's Father Arnold doubts his relevance and ability to reach his Indian congregation (a job he does perfectly well, as seen before). Like Momaday's or McNickle's priests, who felt lonely in a 'wilderness of heathens,' he cannot fulfill the bishop's doctrines: instead the Indians in his dream ignore him and practice their old religion.

In an impressive turn (resurfacing almost identical in *Indian Killer*), the Whitmans come to his help, bringing along black boxes that are silencing the congregation. "*Children*, the Whitmans said, *you shall listen to Father and believe.*" [RB 164] The colonial practice of domination is perfectly demonstrated in this one sentence: denigration, terror, and a demand for unquestioning belief and obedience. The Indians are told that the boxes would contain smallpox, a disease that killed half of the neighboring Coeur d'Alenes during the last century. The Whitmans explain it would be "the only way to get them to listen," [RB 165] which leads into a theological dispute with the disagreeing Father Arnold:

*But its wrong. We should teach them through love.  
 Don't be such a child. Religions is about fear. Fear is just another word for  
 faith, for God.* [RB 165, italics original]

And, in a way, he is right since the Old Testament calls for unrestricted obedience: "what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God [...] and to observe his commands and decrees. [Deut 10:12-13] These

commands are 'updated' by Thomas, who has re-written them from a native perspective as "The Reservation's Ten Commandments as Given by the United States of America to the Spokane Indians." [RB 154] With a terrific, pointed sarcasm, Alexie shows here the inseparability of church and state in blending the Ten Commandments with federal crimes and bureaucratic mistreatment of Indians in the past and present.

The radio talk show host Truck Schultz, in *Indian Killer*, serves as a kind of conservative *vox populi* who conveys stereotypes and political assumptions from times, obviously not long gone. He is the one relating the story of the Whitmans in this novel, but with a completely different notion. Although speaking in the past tense, he does talk about his (and others') attitudes of contemporary Indians:

The Indians were Godless people. They were savages, folks. Let's not deny it. Let's not pretend to be politically correct. Oh sure, a few enlightened Indians did convert to Christianity and lived full lives, but their fellow tribal members often butchered them. [IK 345]

He also talks about an "effort to save the Indians from themselves," [ibid.] when referring to children sent away from their parents to missionary boarding school. The irony that Alexie applies to his character's speech resembles McNickle's, but in their continued existence Truck's remarks prove to be dangerous. They are certainly welcomed by radical whites, as the family of the murdered David (also his brother, Aaron, was given a name from the Old Testament!). Truck combines prevailing arguments against judicial and financial privileges for native peoples, and also denigrates tribal religions as "primitive" and "superstitions." He connects the historic incidence of the Whitmans' murder<sup>44</sup> to the present and accuses Indians to have committed the murders:

And now it's happening again. Despite all we have done to help the Indians, they have refused to recognize it. They have refused to recognize how well we have educated them, how well we have fed them, how well we have treated them. To this day, they have responded to our positive efforts in the only way they know: violence. [IK 346]

Obviously, his racist remarks and accusations contrast with the opening discussion between Father Duncan and John about faith and violence in the church's history. Despite the positive examples of critical Christians that Alexie provides with Father Arnold in *Reservation Blues* and Father Duncan in *Indian Killer*, or even the benevolent modern intellectual colonizers Wilson and Mather, the populist chauvinist Truck Schultz gives a voice to the political assumptions of many Americans. His support of termination policies and ignorance of colonial history and the conquest of America, is met by well-known arguments comparing to Indians as "four-year-olds" and weighing "God-fearing-white men" against "Godless heathens." [IK 208f] Though condensed in one fictional character, these ideas still are, unfortunately, not an invention of the author.

In his works, Alexie takes a stand against such ultra-conservative positions, and by depicting contemporary social conditions and reviewing history from a

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<sup>44</sup> By a group of Cayuse in 1849, in retaliation for increasing numbers of whites in the area and for not preventing or even causing a measles epidemic. [cf. Hirschfelder and Molin 322]

native perspective, explains why "Indians were always protesting something." [IK 33] To counter "God-fearing-white men" like Truck, he incorporate characters like Marie Polatkin (who bears the name of a famous 19<sup>th</sup> century Spokane chief and warrior), a rebellious Indian, who shows no fear and disobeys the colonizer's commands of Deuteronomy.

However, though she is "definitely not Christian," other 20<sup>th</sup> century Indians are. Alexie closes his review of Indian-Christian relations in *Reservation Blues* (the chapter, "My God Has Dark Skin," is not accidentally placed in the very center of the novel) with a discussion of the essential question, brought up by Thomas: "How can you go to a church that killed so many Indians?" [RB 166] Though Chess agrees that the "church has a lot to atone for," Thomas doubts that is ever going to happen. He cannot believe in a God that did not prevent the genocide of American Indians, world wars (and U.S. Republicans):

"Sometimes the devil is easier to believe in, enit?"

"Really. How do you explain all that? How do you explain all of the murdered Indians?" [RB 166f]

Chess does not have an excuse, but she shares her conviction that allows her as an Indian to believe in the positive Christian ideas exemplified in Jesus Christ. She can list as many good Christian people as Thomas evil, and arrives at a similar solution as Lipsha in *Love Medicine*, it is up to the individual:

"There's good and bad in the world. We all get to make the choice. That's one of the mysteries of faith. [...] Don't you understand that God didn't kill any of us?" Chess asked. "Jesus didn't kill any of us."

"But they allowed it to happen, enit?"

"They didn't allow it to happen. It just happened. Those soldiers made the choice. The government made the choice." [167f]

Chess has found her very personal arrangement with the church and its history, and is able to profit from her faith. Thomas, as Lipsha, still has to fill a spiritual void. His (sometime comic) efforts to be a real Indian, expressed in his storytelling, only inadequately cover a general problem: raised as an Indian in modern 20<sup>th</sup> century America, he is neither "really" a Christian nor is he part of a traditional tribal culture. In his sweatlodge dream (during mass in church) he admits: "*I don't have any traditional songs. I don't even know if I belong here.*" [RB 178]

Again, others do know where they belong. Father Arnold is given a dreamcatcher by "the oldest Spokane Indian Catholic," [RB 250] decorated with rosary beads – a symbol of practiced religious syncretism. However, though he represents a progressive white Christian who admires the present while other "priests would have dismissed [it] as Indian mysticism or mythological arts and crafts," [ibid.] Arnold – as well as Father Duncan – fails in solving the conflicts between his faith and work with Indians. He has lost his direction, as McNickle's and Momaday's priests before, only at first sight giving up his position because of loving Checkers. Indeed, he loves too much, but the Indian people as a whole, which is opposed to his duty as missionary among a supposedly "lost people."

Alexie, thus, offers no general answer to the problem posed in his novel and this paper. He discusses the matter, but does not argue for one side. In his

perception, neither orthodox traditionalists nor Catholics are able to provide guidance for young Indians today. The band's members are driven away from the reservation and Junior even kills himself (as John in *Indian Killer*), as they face protest from all sides:

The very traditional Spokanes carried signs written in the Spokane language and chanted things in the Spokane language, too. But they all sounded pissed off. The Indian Christian signs read COYOTE SPRINGS NEEDS TO BE SAVED and REPENT, COYOTE SPRINGS, REPENT! while the nonsecular signs said COYOTE SPRINGS CAN KISS MY BIG RED ASS. [RB 263]

Alexie probably incorporates personal experiences as a controversial author here, as well as a Catholic Indian, matters which he tries to come to terms with in each of his works. As there is no instant answer for any Christian on how to live his or her life, there is certainly no general guide for Christian Native Americans, or, to quote one of Alexie's Indian characters:

"Hey, [...] what the hell do any of you know about being Catholic? You have no idea how hard it is." [RB 293]

## 5 Conclusion

The five writers primarily examined in this paper, display a great variety of literary styles and approaches, as well as in their consideration of Indian-Christian conflicts. Especially in recent years, the growing numbers of native authors have produced so many diverse works of fiction (and poetry, drama, film), that a general academic classification becomes an increasingly difficult task. On the one hand, this is evidence of the advanced literary capabilities of contemporary Indian writers, who are no longer restricted to narrow models of Native American fiction and outgrow the separating category of a 'minority literature.' On the other hand, despite their diversity, the examined novels display also common features and patterns, as well as a general trend of development in regard to their discussion of Christianity.

The evolution of American Indian novels from a native social criticism towards a tribal postmodern irony also affects the representation of Christianity. Whereas earlier authors only occasionally employed biblical motifs, later works show deliberate (re-)applications of Christian myths and Western canonized literary and historiographic narratives to challenge dominant discourses of oppression by re-reading and re-writing them from a native point of view. Moreover, despite their choice of the novel as a form of expression (many authors, however, started as poets), all writers also attempt to redefine the genre, whose origins (*Robinson Crusoe*) as well as later representations (*Heart of Darkness*) Edward Said indivisibly links to colonial conquest:

Without empire, [...] there is no European novel as we know it, and indeed if we study the impulses giving rise to it, we shall see that far from accidental convergence between the patterns of narrative authority constitutive of the novel on the one hand, and, on the other, a complex ideological configuration underlying the tendency to imperialism. [Said 69f]

This explains the unique structural incorporation of tribal oral literatures by Momaday, Silko, and Erdrich, as well as postmodern deconstructions of Western form and contents in King's and Alexie's works. Interestingly, though also influenced by other postmodern fiction, compared to these, native writers seem to have defined a more optimistic variant of such an approach. As demonstrated in this paper, a general characteristic of contemporary American Indian fiction is an increasing use of humor, irony, and playfulness. My findings are supported by Owens and Momaday, who also observe a growing confidence and new maturity of American Indians and their writing [cf. Schubnell 190].

At present, however, the situation of a majority of Native Americans is marked by tremendous social problems, which George Tinker describes as "part of the legacy of the missionary tradition and its participation in the conquest of Indian peoples."

That traditional values and spiritual strengths continue at all is a testament to the endurance and will to survive of our tribal nations. Yet native peoples have not survived intact. Each of our reservations or urban Indian communities is consistently plagued with individual and community dysfunctions that eat away the well-being of the people. [Tinker 177]

From McNickle's first novel to Alexie's recent works, native authors have been trying to critique the Christian church as a representative of Western colonization from the perspective of the – for a long time silenced – colonized indigenous people. In contrast to earlier Christian pamphlets by Indians or later assimilationist novels, all works considered here show a distinct critical approach to the religion that sanctioned and supported their attempted extinction. However, this does not necessarily mean that all writers reject Christianity and favor exclusively tribal religions and ways of life as an alternative. Their characters (and the authors themselves) are ambiguous about both, tribal and Christian beliefs in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although many try to reconnect to their lost heritage, native customs and religions in their view have to be adapted to the requirements of modern Western society, of which they are a part.

Syncretic religions and systems seem to be offered as a solution and practicable way by many authors. Nevertheless, the history of Indian-Christian conflict is a present element of their self-perception as Christians and/or American Indians. For example, the deliberate destruction of families and communities by missionaries and their churches, often in alliance with the government has been a major point of criticism in all considered works. The authors rightfully hold also the missionary efforts of the past responsible for the alienation and shattered identities of their protagonists. Whereas "the commitment beyond the self [...] lies both at the heart of the Christian myth and, very crucially, at the center of the American Indian tribal community" [Owens 197], practical history of colonization and present imperialist ideology has proven contrary. Hence, as Williams Bevis observes, in many Native American novels,

Indian "homing" is presented as the opposite of competitive individualism, which is white success [...] These books suggest that "identity," for a Native American, is not a matter of finding "one's self," but of finding a "self" that is transpersonal and includes a society, a past, and a place. [They suggest] a tribal rather than an individual definition of "being." [Bevis 585]

Bevis's definition also explains the revival of tribal philosophy and spirituality reflected in contemporary fiction. Steve Talbot comments on these recent developments: "Religion, whether pluralistic or syncretistic, has now been given a decidedly traditionalist emphasis and has become the foundation of the Native American cultural renaissance." [in Champagne 683] However, both do not contradict the continuing existence of Christian religions among American Indians. As all ceremonies and customs, Christianity has been and will be subject to change and, thus, can be incorporated in a native revival, as well. This is one of the main messages implied in the works of the 1960s and 70s by Momaday and Silko, as well as recent fiction by Erdrich and Alexie.

The inevitable inherent conflict of Christian Indians, as depicted by Sherman Alexie, has always been part of the native experience – in history as well as in the present. To make this conflict open to a non-native public and to engage them in its discussion is also an important task that contemporary Native American literature can pursue. Accordingly, already Charles Eastman, the early Sioux writer and spokesman for the Indian, reflects in his autobiography of 1916:

From the time I first accepted the Christ ideal it has grown upon me steadily, but I see more and more plainly our modern divergence from this ideal. I confess I have wondered much that Christianity is not practiced by the very people who vouch for that wonderful conception of exemplary living. It appears that they are anxious to pass on their religion to all races of men, but keep very little of it themselves. [Eastman in Treat 4]

Native Americans were never opposed to the basic teachings of Christianity as presented in the New Testament. Only thus, the Flathead could invite Christian missionaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the present-day Spokanes fill their many churches. As the possibility of merging tribal and Christian myths by many authors demonstrates, Jesus is not as far away from the Indian experience as one might assume. Christian Feest quotes a statement by Kiowa evangelist Spencer Cody from 1994, which resembles Alexie's fictional portrayals:

[He] asked God why he had let the Whites come to America and kill the Indians in His name. Instead of a specific answer, Cody received a vision of Jesus crucified. "Jesus was an innocent victim," Cody commented on his vision, "And I realized that Jesus knew what it's like to be an Indian." [Feest 117]

## 6 Appendix: Plot Summaries

### D'Arcy McNickle, *The Surrounded* (1936)

In the 1910s, Archilde, a half-breed returns from Portland for a visit to the Flathead reservation. While at first ashamed of his Indian mother, he becomes more and more interested in her Indian heritage. Having lost his Christian faith for a long time, he witnesses his mother's renunciation of Catholicism after she revenged the killing of her son Louis. Struggling for a reconciliation with his father, Archilde tries to escape from an arrest for murder after the death of his parents. He is joined by (or rather joined) Elise, a young Indian girl and his two nephews, who want to avoid a return to mission school. All are ultimately arrested before making it across the mountains that surround the valley of the Flathead Indians.

### N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn* (1968)

In 1945, Abel, a Pueblo Indian and World War II veteran returns to home his grandfather Francisco at Walatowa (Jemez Pueblo). Confused by his experiences in the war, he is unable to adjust to tribal life. During a traditional feast, he is humiliated by an albino Indian, whom he consequently kills. After having served eight years in prison, he is relocated by the government to Los Angeles. Lost in the city he seeks refuge at the Native American Church and its priest Tosamah, but is ultimately rejected there too. After losing his job and having suffered severe beatings by a policeman, he returns to Walatowa for a second time and, thus, begins the healing process that is supposed to reintroduce him to his tribe and culture.

### Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine* (1983/93)

In 1981, June Kashpaw, a Chippewa from North Dakota, attempts to return to her reservation after an unsuccessful experience in the city. After meeting a man in a bar, she ends up at night walking home alone in an advancing blizzard and never arrives there. Her death is only the catalyst for the following stories told by her family and friends. Some of their memories reach back until 1934, in combination with the novel *Tracks* (1988) the reader can trace back their personal and tribal histories to 1912. Considered in this paper are Pauline Puyat (later Sr. Leopolda); Marie, her illegitimate daughter; Nector Kashpaw, her husband; his brother Eli; June's ex-husband Gordie; and her sons King and Lipsha.

### Thomas King, *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993)

Please, cf. introduction to chapter 4.4.1 above.

### Sherman Alexie, *Reservation Blues* (1995) and *Indian Killer* (1996)

The first novel portrays "an all Indian Catholic rock-and-roll band called Coyote Springs" [Alexie] and their short-lived fame on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Washington. Supported by legendary blues musician Robert Johnson (who resurfaces in Wellpinit in 1992!) and the mythical Indian woman Big Mom, they are eventually invited by a producer team from New York for a recording session. Failing to meet their expectations, they return desperate Washington. Meeting only opposition from any direction there, Junior Polatkin commits suicide, whereas the other band members probably leave the reservation.

Set in the early 1990s, *Indian Killer* depicts a few months in the life of John Smith, an Indian adopted by white parents in Seattle. Struggling with his identity, he has found a spiritual example in the dead Indian Father Duncan. Meanwhile, a mysterious murderer is kidnapping and killing white people in the city, which reveals hidden racial tensions among Indians and whites alike. John is met by two people: Marie Polatkin, a young rebellious Spokane, and Jack Wilson, an alleged Indian and writer of murder mysteries starring a stereotypical Indian. Ultimately, the mentally disturbed John kidnaps Wilson, but kills himself before doing serious harm to the writer.

## 7 German Abstract / Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Arbeit untersucht Romane indianischer Autorinnen und Autoren des 20. Jahrhunderts hinsichtlich ihrer Repräsentation von Konflikten zwischen amerikanischen Ureinwohnern und der vorherrschenden christlichen Religion des allgemeinen gesellschaftlichen Umfelds.

Verschiedene Schwerpunkte sind zu erkennen, die im Laufe des Jahrhunderts immer wieder dargestellt und in veränderter Perspektive betrachtet werden. Sowohl historische Konflikte der Kolonialisierung und Christianisierung als auch die immerwährende Frage indianischer Christen – "Wie kannst Du in eine Kirche gehen, die so viele Indianer umgebracht hat?" [Alexie, *Reservation Blues*] – werden in den Roman diskutiert und in meiner Arbeit analysiert.

Es wird ferner versucht, eine literaturgeschichtliche Klassifizierung der einzelnen Werke entsprechend ihrer Repräsentation dieser Probleme vorzunehmen. In Anlehnung an Charles Larsons chronologisch-thematische Darstellung indianischer Prosa, werden die Kategorien *rejection*, *(syncretic) adaptation*, and *postmodern-ironic revision* eingeführt, um die unterschiedlichen Darstellungsweisen zu beschreiben.

Anhand der fünf Hauptbeispiele ist eine Entwicklung der zeitgenössischen indianischen Literatur zu beobachten, die sich von der engen Definition der 1960er und 70er Jahre zugunsten eines breiteren und vielfältigeren Ansatzes löst und dabei mittels interkultureller und intertextueller Referenzen, postmoderner Ironie, und einem neuen indianischen Selbstbewußtsein auch neue Positionen gegenüber dem Glauben der einstigen Kolonialmacht einnimmt.

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*Erklärung*

Hiermit versichere ich, diese Arbeit selbstständig und ohne die  
Zuhilfenahme anderer Quellen und Hilfsmittel als der angegebenen,  
verfaßt zu haben.

Potsdam, den 12. Dezember 2002

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Frank Schulz