BOOK REVIEW

Vilaça, A., and R. M. Wright (eds). 2009. *Native Christians: Modes and Effects of Christianity among Indigenous Peoples of the Americas*. Farnham: Ashgate. xii + 252 pp. ISBN 978-0-7546-6355-3. Hbk. £60.00.

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This volume is an important contribution to the growing corpus of ethnographic studies of Christianity as adopted and adapted by indigenous American peoples. Readers of this journal will appreciate the way that the editors have constructed a comparative analysis of ethnographic and historical case studies that quite intentionally addresses a number of major contemporary anthropological questions (such as the role of the body in conversion narratives, and the legitimacy of continuity and rupture as emic categories). But readers may also be disappointed that a wider geographical range of examples was not selected. Only two of the 11 chapters have field sites outside South America, and both of those on North America focus on indigenous peoples of Canada (and one of these is an exclusively historical perspective). This book – subtitled *Modes and Effects of Christianity among Indigenous Peoples of the Americas* – would have benefited from a chapter looking at contemporary North American Indians or Mesoamerica.

Native Christians is a comparative analytical collection of ethnographic and historical case studies that takes perspectivism as its dominant theoretical framework; the predator-prey dyad is apparent not only in the cases where it is directly identified and discussed (such as Bonilla's chapter on the way that the Paumari relate to God and missionaries as domesticated "prey" or "pet" [*igitha*]) but also in those chapters that draw upon, rather than centralize, the theories of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (Gow, Grotti, Kapfhammer, Laugrend and Oosten, Vilaça, and Wright). Many of the chapters take shamanism as their departure point for understanding Christian conversion and conceptions of the Other amongst the people groups they study.

The editors are up-front about their epistemological choices: their observations do not start with missionaries, and missionary perspectives are "subsumed" by "native" categories (p. 2). This dedication to indigenous perspectives as the optimal entry point for studying conversion to Christianity is also emphasized by Robbins in his afterword, and though this commitment could perhaps be sustained better in some chapters, the collection – in the same mode as Cannell (2006) – does show Christianity to be just one transformation of many.

The editors show an apparently unquestioned belief in the "comparative perspective" (p. 5) that, it seems to me, requires more justification, particularly when it exists without

the presence of a third referent. They maintain that this approach overcomes “excessive regionalism,” and my reservations are not to say that Pan-American motifs do not exist. Gow walks the tightrope well. He shows how the term “Christian” does not necessarily carry a particularly religious meaning, and instead should be seen more as a category that usefully connects disparate agents as “human” (i.e. “civilised”). In looking at the phenomenon of “cristiano,” he does provide a third referent, triangulating with those situated outside the system.

Gow also challenges what he sees as “the subordination of ethnography to history” in the ethnographies of the Bajo Huallaga peoples of the late twentieth century (p. 36). This lambasting of the idea that ethnography can only be made sense of in terms of the preceding history, and Gow’s critique of those in his own field that is inherent in this lambasting, represents the sort of reflexive enquiry and linking of one’s own material to that of other anthropologists that marks those chapters (like Gow’s) that choose to engage in this practice as the best in this collection. Indeed, Gow’s question “What did the people of the Bajo Huallaga do with the Jesuit mission?” is not unreminiscent of Webb Keane’s treatment of Dutch Calvinist mission efforts in Sumba, eastern Indonesia (2007), and represents a welcome departure from (or perhaps at least an apposite addition to) the editors’ emphasis on purely “native” perspectives – as Gow concludes, “Like the Jesuits, the Bajo Huallaga people had a mission too” (p. 50).

The dominant analytical theme that marks the most insightful chapters out as just that is the sustained interrogation of the notion of conversion (p. 4). The chapters by Bonilla, Gow, Grotti, Laugrand and Oosten, and Vilaça prefigure Robbins’ astute analysis in the afterword in the way that they attend to these questions. Whether directly (such as Vilaça’s application of Viveiros de Castro’s concept of Amerindian perspectivism (1996) to the case of conversion amongst the Wari’ people of southwestern Amazonia) or indirectly (such as Bonilla on Paumari cosmology) these authors question the nature of Christian conversion, and prompt the reader to do the same about the other ethnographies represented in the volume. In this light, contributions like that of Kapfhammer (whose treatment of Christianity seems very incidental) and Greer (who writes from an exclusively historical perspective and includes little systematic comparative research) appear slightly incongruent alongside the other chapters, particularly as they do not touch on the notions of conversion that weave the other chapters together so deftly.

Indeed, Vilaça’s own chapter stands out for its detail and for the way that data and theory are interwoven. It represents a fascinating ethnographic treasury about the people alongside whom Vilaça has spent the last 20 years living and researching, but its real success lies in the way that the author uses this fieldwork to plunder select anthropological baskets, attending to key conceptual questions about what is really going on here and quarrying the on-going debate about the roles of rupture and continuity in religious conversion. Vilaça seeks to reconcile these notions through her ethnographic analysis and whilst this remains to be fully realized, her chapter still amounts to the most thorough interrogation of conversion as a category in the entire collection, and for this reason, one of the most insightful. After giving a detailed explanation of Robbins’ theoretical model (“adoption model”) of Christian conversion (Robbins, 2004: 84–88), Vilaça tests the model’s applicability with the test case of the Wari’. In her conclusion, she rejects it in favour of the analytical starting points provided by Lévi-Strauss (1995) and Viveiros de Castro (1992, 2002), but it nevertheless serves as an excellent introduction to one of the current dominant understandings of the motivations governing conversion.

The text constitutes a significant contribution to the anthropology of Christianity and to Amerindian studies, eliciting many interesting insights about anthropological methodology, and doing so without turning the ethnographies themselves into vehicles for

ruminating about anthropology at large. The most insightful chapters do this by providing plenty of ethnographic detail, and it is here that the weakest chapters fall down. Nonetheless, the strength of the volume ultimately rests on the commitment of the editors – and Robbins – to understand Christianity from multiple indigenous perspectives.

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