“We Take Hold of the White Man’s Worship with One Hand, but with the Other Hand We Hold Fast Our Fathers’ Worship”: The Beginning of Indigenous Methodist Christianity and Its Expression in the Christian Guardian, Upper Canada circa 1829

David Andrew Kim-Cragg

Emmanuel College, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON M5S 1K7, Canada; david.kimcragg@utoronto.ca

Abstract: With more and more evidence coming to light of the cultural genocide inflicted by settler Christians upon Indigenous peoples through the residential school system, it is hard to see how Christian and Indigenous identities can hold together in the current Canadian context. Nevertheless, many in the Indigenous community within Canada continue to call themselves Christian, and Indigenous Christians continue to provide important leadership for the Canadian church. This phenomenon cannot be properly understood or appreciated without knowledge of the longstanding tradition of Indigenous Christianity and its origins. Beginning in 1829, Indigenous leadership within the Methodist Episcopal church in Upper Canada used the Christian Guardian to tell the story of their work among Indigenous communities. These Indigenous accounts of mission work provide a window into how early Indigenous converts to Methodism understood their faith and its meaning within the context of Canadian colonial Christianity, an understanding that differed in significant ways from that of their settler co-religionists. The early Indigenous narrative found in the settler Methodist publication emphasized Indigenous leadership, Indigenous language and the compatibility of Indigenous and Christian spiritual teachings. This study provides an important perspective which confirms and challenges contemporary views on Indigenous Christianity in Canada and helps to reimagine the past, present and future of Christianity in postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: Indigenous Christianity; Upper Canada; missionary; Methodist; Anishinaabe; Haudenosaunee; Anishinaabemowin; Mississauga; Egerton Ryerson; Kahkewaquonaby; Peter Jones; Christian Guardian; missions

1. Introduction

“As an Indigenous Christian, I am often asked, ‘Why do you participate in a church or follow the Christian religion?’” wrote Rev. Murray Pruden in his piece introducing the September 2022 edition of Broadview magazine (Pruden 2022b). It is an obvious question in the present Canadian context, wherein the painful discovery of hundreds of unmarked graves at former church-run residential school sites is still fresh in peoples’ minds, and many more similar discoveries are likely to come to light in the coming years. Indigenous people have suffered criminal neglect and cultural genocide at the hands of the Christian church in colonial Canada, a fact that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission underscored in its 2015 report (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015, pp. 1–5, 90ff). So, how can any indigenous person associate themselves with the Christian religion? “[T]hat”, Pruden admits, “is a hard question to answer”. Nevertheless, Pruden and two-thirds of Indigenous people across Canada continue to identify as Christian.1 Among them, is the newly elected moderator of the United Church of Canada, the Rt. Rev. Carmen Lansdowne, who, for the next three years, will serve as the spiritual leader of the denomination. “[D]espite the horrors that we know took place in Indian residential schools and in adoptive homes and in church buildings across this country”, she told the
congregation at her inaugural worship service, many Indigenous people through the years have “found comfort in the stories of Jesus despite the church”. The same mystical power that touched the saints down through the ages, she said, was also there with some of those Indigenous children who, even while suffering the worst of residential schools, experienced “the visceral presence of Jesus and the power of his story”.2

Written from a settler perspective, this article seeks to bring attention to the long tradition Pruden and Lansdowne represent, a tradition of Indigenous Christianity that has survived for centuries despite the injuries suffered at the hands of colonial Christendom. Recent historical scholarship in Canada has focused on some of the first Indigenous Christians in Upper Canada (Grant 1984; Smith 2013a, 2013b). But more could be done to describe how their witness managed to navigate the fraught politics of settler religion and missions of the time. There is also a need to describe what that witness was, as other scholars have achieved for Indigenous Christians in other parts of Canada at different moments in history (Bradford 2012; Neylan 2005). This paper describes some of the prevailing ideological and political currents against which an Indigenous Christianity that sought to preserve and promote Indigeneity had to swim. It explores the ways in which the first Indigenous Christian leadership within the early Canadian Methodist church came to make use of the Christian Guardian publication, the official mouthpiece of the Canadian Methodist Episcopal church. It argues that their contributions to the publication represent an important articulation of Indigenous Christianity. Finally, it describes the content of that Christianity on the key issues of language, culture and Indigenous identity in opposition to the colonial agenda that would have had them assimilate and disappear as a distinct people. These nineteenth-century Indigenous converts initiated a pattern of Indigenous Christianity still in evidence today in such Canadian Indigenous church leaders as Pruden and Lansdowne. This work seeks to build on a growing body of scholarship that is contributing to an explanation of how Indigenous people have sometimes resisted, sometimes adopted and sometimes led the Christian church despite the participation of many of their settler co-religionists in a system that sought to rob them of their land and their identity.

2. A Preliminary Word Regarding Methodological and Ethical Concerns

For decades now, non-Indigenous and Indigenous scholars in the field of mission history have been exploring the ways in which Indigenous people around the world responded to the missionary movement. There has been important work carried out to look and the phenomenon globally (Brock et al. 2015a; Jones 2021a). There have also been efforts focused specifically on the Canadian context (Bradford and Horton 2016a; Austin and Scott 2005; Grant 1984). These have discovered that, no matter where missions happened, it was often the case that, while Western missionaries intended something different, Indigenous people who did convert were often not only able to align their new religion with their ethnic allegiances, but they were also able to use Christianity to push back against Western missionary agendas they perceived as damaging to their people. Adoption of Christianity happened for a host of reasons that included but were not limited to economic and political considerations. Scholars have recognized the importance of taking spiritual impulses into account as well (Bradford and Horton 2016b, p. 7). Regardless of its underlying motivations, Indigenous Christianity often developed in ways that non-Indigenous missionaries could not predict or understand (Brock et al. 2015b, p. 2). But mission scholars recognize that, although Indigenous Christians embraced “the new source of spiritual power, material wealth, and modes of authority” that Christianity offered, this does not mean that they entirely controlled the process of missionization or conversion either (Neylan 2005, p. 88). There were aspects of Christianity and its association with the colonizer that caused harm. Discerning the positive from negative aspects of conversion for Indigenous peoples is a fraught undertaking, particularly for a non-Indigenous scholar. Nevertheless, scholars in the field have concluded that the written accounts of Indigenous Christians can be helpful sources as long as historical methods are used to understand the colonial contexts in which
they were produced. In a sense, with this historical principle in mind, it is simply important to “listen” to what is being said (Vescey 2021, p. 181).

This paper treads on well-trod ground in its historical exploration of Indigenous Christianity. It seeks to contextualize Indigenous missions and Christianity within the competing settler interests of the time, particularly the interests of the churches that made Indigenous missions a focus for reasons that had more to do with their own self-interests than the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples. It was in the midst of such pressures that Indigenous Christianity had to carve out a meaning and mission for itself. As the scholarship and contemporary political experience shows, correctly hearing what Indigenous people are saying has been very hard for non-Indigenous people throughout history, especially for those who benefitted from colonization. But this does not mean the effort should not be made. As Arun W. Jones’ introduction to Christian Interculture pointed out, Indigenous Christians have left an historical record, and “[t]he important question for many contemporary historians, then, is not how to discover and uncover native Christian voices but whether one is willing to look at materials produced by indigenous Christians and other persons, and work with these materials”. Too often, Jones concluded, Western scholars have failed to do so (Jones 2021b, pp. 5–7). There is something important at stake. As one historian put it, to fail to engage Indigenous voices in history out of theoretical or ethical concerns will cause us to end up with “histories in which only Europeans speak” (Bradford 2012, pp. 11–12). I, therefore, humbly offer this account as a non-Indigenous person seeking to highlight, understand and preserve a shared history with the help of Indigenous voices past and present.

3. Beginnings of Indigenous Methodism in Upper Canada

A noteworthy chapter in the history of Canadian Indigenous Christianity began at the turn of the nineteenth century. As Methodism made inroads into British North America in the early 1800s, Indigenous people in Upper Canada were given new opportunities to hear the gospel message. Most of the first Indigenous converts to Methodism were from the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe nations, which inhabited the areas adjacent to and north of the Great Lakes. Once the faith began to take hold in these populations, it quickly spread, making hundreds of new members and adherents to the Methodist church. In the mid-1820s, the number of Indigenous Christians who were committed members in the Methodist church reached 552 (Semple 1996, p. 163). One mission station on the Credit River, near present-day Toronto, had 110 members (Semple 1996, p. 162). All but two of that community had been converted by 1827 (Smith 2013a, p. 55). New mission stations were opening in a variety of places. By 1830 there were at least five missions and seven other locations that were being visited regularly by missionaries. Indigenous audiences at Christian gatherings were large and attentive. On one occasion, several hundred Anishinaabeg attended a camp meeting, and nearly a third were converted (Semple 1996, p. 163). Indigenous people were part of the first gathering of the Canadian Methodist Episcopal church and, as such, were founding members of the denomination. One missionary commented in 1830 that “The prospects in Canada both among the white population and also among the Indians, are very encouraging. By the returns made there is an increase of 1000 members among the white people, and rising 100 among the Indians”. The sudden and enthusiastic embracing of Christianity by Indigenous people in Upper Canada came as a surprise to settler missionaries working in the area (Grant 1984, p. 76). By 1832, the number of Indigenous people who were full members of that church had increased to 1090, 7.2% of the new denomination’s total membership (Semple 1996, p. 76). This reflected a higher proportion of the membership than the 4.7% (9457 (Sub-Committee of the Aborigines Protection Society 1839) of 197,815) which Indigenous people constituted of the entire population of Upper Canada.

The growth in Indigenous membership in the Canadian Methodist Episcopal church was accompanied by the rise of a talented and committed Indigenous leadership. Haudenosaunee chief Thomas Davis and his farm were the heart of one particularly important
mission center. Davis was an effective orator and a very influential member of tribal councils. His home became a place of regular Bible study and worship. Those who wanted to learn more about the new faith often came and made their home near his farm and were provided with instruction. It was on this site that the first Indigenous Methodist church was built in 1824 (Semple 1996, p. 154). A notable Anishinaabe youth named Kahkewaquonaby from the Mississaugas of the Credit and his half-sister Polly of the Haudenosaunee nation were among those who visited the farm to receive instruction and participate in Christian worship. The siblings both made the decision to become followers of Christ. Polly went on to become an important Christian leader in the Haudenosaunee community. Kahkewaquonaby was eventually ordained as a minister in the Methodist church and was also made a chief of his Anishinaabe community. He traveled extensively throughout the province of Upper Canada/Canada West, sometimes using his English name Peter Jones, preaching and making converts. He translated parts of the Bible and a number of hymns into Anishinaabemowin, which helped to influence more to become Christians (Semple 1996, p. 155). By 1830, there were 17 Indigenous men in special leadership roles within the church, a number that more than doubled over the next two decades (Semple 1996, p. 166). No scholarship that I am aware of has yet determined the number of recognized female leaders within the Indigenous church at this time, but it is likely that Kahkewaquonaby’s half-sister Polly was one of a significant number that increased rapidly along with the number of men. There was, for example, a Dorcas Society organized and led by Indigenous women in 1930 which worked to raise money for their church and community.

4. Settler Christianity and Its Relationship to Indigenous People

The growth of Indigenous membership in the Methodist church is more remarkable considering the complicated, fraught and often unfriendly religious context of Upper Canada at that time. To appreciate the leadership and message of Indigenous Christians within the Canadian Episcopal Methodist church, it is important to understand the settler attitudes and religious politics that they faced within that denomination. Settlers of every religious stripe held and expressed a range of attitudes regarding Indigenous peoples. These were not always negative (Francis 2012, p. 22). One of the strongest and most pervasive, however, was the belief that Indigenous culture and spiritual traditions were inferior to those of European origin. Most considered it Britain’s destiny, as the superior culture, to rule the land and, furthermore, that Britain’s rule was to the benefit of Indigenous peoples across North America. Indigenous religious practices were regarded as heathenism. Some regarded Indigenous peoples as having no rights to the land, a nuisance to be removed to ever more remote areas. Others took the view that they could be taught to abandon their semi-nomadic culture, begin farming and take up their place in settler society. In opposition to the most negative attitudes, some, including many in the settler Methodist leadership, believed that Indigenous people had a claim to the land promised to them by treaty and had rights against the incursion of settlers. But all struck a paternalistic posture and assumed Indigenous people would have to change to fit into the colonial system or disappear forever (Semple 1996, pp. 157–58; Francis 2012, p. 52).

Within Christian circles, there was a debate as to whether Indigenous people were capable of receiving the gospel without first adopting the European settler ways of life and education, that is, without first becoming “civilized”. Some argued that civilization must come first and Christianity second. Others argued that Indigenous people could understand the Christian message on their own terms and with reference to their own culture and traditions (Semple 1996, p. 153). But never was it in doubt among settler Christians that adoption of Christianity entailed a fundamental change to Indigenous life to the point that Indigenous culture and identity would become obsolete. Eventually, settler Christians believed, Indigenous people would have to adopt a completely new social system (Semple 1996, p. 155ff). This included, for example, a new practice of marriage. The negative view of Indigenous marriage had an enormous impact on Indigenous society and on Indigenous women in particular. Indigenous women were regarded as morally bankrupt for following
Indigenous norms, a judgement that some settlers used to justify their abuse. Women suffered some of the worst of settler behavior (Semple 1996, p. 156). Another example of the way settler Christian norms and assumptions undermined Indigenous identity and culture was in the giving of Christian names. When baptized, Indigenous Christians were expected to take a European first and surname, which had the effect of erasing Indigenous identity (Semple 1996, p. 157). The surname would then be passed down through the father, further alienating women from the respect they had once enjoyed in Indigenous societies that were often matrilineal.

In addition to the negative pressure of the general attitudes and stereotypes of settlers, including settler Christians, the politics of the colony of Upper Canada also left Indigenous people exposed to exploitation and manipulation. Following the War of 1812, most Indigenous communities were left weakened and more marginalized than they had been prior to the conflict. There was pressure on the colonial government by the general public to address issues related to the Indigenous people who had suffered disease and been displaced from their traditional lands. Most settlers felt that more should be done to encourage Indigenous people to adopt farming and settle in towns, in other words, to civilize them. There were also more than a few covetous pairs of eyes cast in the direction of the lands they occupied as part of their treaty settlements, areas that remained largely undeveloped from the point of view of settlers itching to obtain land and start their own farms. In addition, the annuities which the government paid out as part of the treaty obligations they negotiated with Indigenous communities were a considerable expense on the colonial budget, money that the administrators would have been happy to use elsewhere. In all this, the colonial government of Upper Canada had its own agenda regarding Indigenous people, an agenda that mostly regarded Indigenous people as problems rather than valued partners in the project of state building (Semple 1996, p. 162).

Methodism arrived in Upper Canada (the southern portion of the present-day province of Ontario) from two different directions: from the east across the Atlantic and from the south across the Great Lakes. Wesleyan Methodism from Great Britain established itself among settlers in the Maritimes, in Lower Canada (the southern portion of present-day Quebec) and in eastern portions of Upper Canada. But the western sections of Upper Canada were itinerated by Episcopal Methodists from the United States. The two versions of Methodism were not on good terms with one another. Their mutual animosity was due, in part, to doctrinal and polity differences but was greatly aggravated by national and international politics. The War of 1812 between Britain and America heightened nationalist feeling in Canada. The Episcopal Methodists, associated as they were with Americans, were regarded as highly suspect. Another factor in the tension between the two denominations was envy. The Episcopal Methodists were having far more success in growing their churches in Upper Canada among both the settler and Indigenous population than the British Wesleyans to the east, a fact that the British Wesleyans resented.

While the Wesleyans were content to remain attached to the British church, Episcopal Methodists in Canada were feeling some pressure, in large part due to the above-mentioned geopolitical tensions, to establish a Canadian denomination distinct from their American parent church. Canadians formally petitioned their American co-religionists for an autonomous conference in 1822 (Semple 1996, p. 72) and, by 1828, had managed to establish an entirely separate denomination north of the border. During that time, their membership among settlers grew by leaps and bounds, reflecting the parallel success of the Indigenous community. Membership jumped from 6875 to 9678 and then, by 1832, reached 14,999 (As noted above, 1090 or 7.2% of that number were Indigenous members.). The number of preaching circuits and preachers, as with the Indigenous Methodists within the denomination, also increased markedly (Semple 1996, p. 76).

Missions to Indigenous people by settler Methodists, Wesleyans and others were intertwined with political objectives. The colonial oligarchy knew that, if they had the ear of the missionaries who had the ear of the Indigenous peoples, it would be much easier to provoke Indigenous peoples to do as the government wished. For the government, missions
became an important means of maintaining the loyalty of their Indigenous subjects and safeguarding the status quo vis-à-vis the British colonial governance of the province of Upper Canada and guarding against unwanted republican influences (Grant 1984, p. 81). In the early nineteenth century, it was the Church of England that the colonial administration felt was most helpfully aligned with its political objectives. Uninvited incursions by Methodists into Indigenous communities where the Church of England had a mission presence, even if merely nominal, were viewed as a threat (McLaren 2019, p. 76). With the support of the government, the Church of England told Indigenous communities that material support would be provided or withdrawn depending upon their adoption of and adherence to Anglicanism. An influential bishop, for example, offered the Mississaugas of the Credit community funds to build a settlement if they switched to Anglicanism (Grant 1984, p. 83; McLaren 2019, pp. 76, 90ff).

But, if Anglicans had to share the missions to Indigenous people in Upper Canada with Methodists, they much preferred it be with the Wesleyan Methodists from Britain rather than the Episcopal Methodists of American extraction. The Wesleyans were much more comfortable with the British status quo and did not mind if Anglicanism became the official religion of British North America (Semple 1996, p. 79). With this less threatening stance vis-à-vis the establishment, they were able to secure government funding to support their missionaries in Upper Canada (Ibid.). Sometimes, the government feigned impartiality when it came to religion, but it always secretly favored the Church of England and then the Wesleyans, convinced that the Methodist Episcopal denomination was a threat to political stability (Semple 1996, pp. 166–67).

Within this context, missions to Indigenous people were undertaken by settler Christians with much more than a sense of selfless Christian duty. They often preached that Christ’s last command “provided for the instruction of the world” and that to make disciples of all nations was “the great and fundamental principle laid down in scripture”. But, in fact, an active and successful mission to Indigenous people in Upper Canada could reap real political and material benefits. For all Christian denominations, missions were a source of influence and prestige (Semple 1996, pp. 166–67). Indigenous missions, and Indigenous missionaries in particular, were effective fundraisers (Semple 1996, pp. 160–61). For the Episcopal Methodists, the Indigenous missions were a project that lent their work in British North America legitimacy. It earned the respect (and fear) of the colonial government. In terms of their acceptance within British North America, missions to Indigenous people were something the denomination could point to as proof of their selfless religious purpose, a purpose that rose above the thorny nationalist politics of the times (McLaren 2019, p. 61). It was, in effect, legitimation for their presence in the Canadian colony. For these, and other reasons noted above, Indigenous Christians could expect the motivations of the settler Christians engaging them to be mixed at best, and these motivations often had less to do with helping them than with helping themselves. Indigenous Christians in early-nineteenth-century Upper Canada, therefore, faced a number of thorny religious and political issues (Semple 1996, pp. 166–67). Tension between the religious factions affected Indigenous Christians negatively and, at times, drove them out of the church (Robins 2021, p. 6). But, in general, many remained committed to Christianity and many continued to join the new religion, particularly the Methodist Episcopal church.

5. What Indigenous People Found in Christianity

One cannot help but wonder how, in the midst of all the political intrigue and religious squabbling, Indigenous people found anything of value in the Christian religion beyond the politico-economic benefits of being aligned with one privileged and influential settler group or another. It is true that there was an element of the prosperity gospel in Indigenous Christianity. Kahkewaquonaby told the Dorcas Society in his community, for example, that, in addition to spiritual benefits, there were also material and educational benefits: “[B]ehold sisters! What the Lord has done for us through missionary operations! We now [. . .] live in houses and begin to enjoy the comforts of our white friends”. It has been
posited that conversion of Indigenous people took place at times of social, cultural and economic crisis, when they felt themselves to be most vulnerable. Said one old Indigenous man to an Indigenous itinerant, “we feel thankful that you have come to talk to us and tell us how Indians are to live. We are indeed very poor, our fathers who were once very numerous in this place have all died off and we whom you now see are left alone”. It is held, for example, that the War of 1812 “significantly accelerated the dissolution of native society by destroying much of that society’s economic base and undermining it’s internal cohesion and spiritual values” (Semple 1996, p. 151). These conditions, it has been further suggested, drove Indigenous peoples to the new settler religion for support (Smith 2013b, p. 73). Similar dynamics were observed in conversions in other times and other places, such as in Korea at the beginning of the twentieth century (Kim-Cragg 2022, p. 40ff). But this interpretation unfairly reduces the positive response of Indigenous people to the Christian message to a desperate gambit for political and economic aid.

There is ample evidence that there was more at work in the spread of Christianity among Indigenous people in Upper Canada in the early nineteenth century than political and economic expediency. Based on the historical record, it appears that Indigenous Christians were attracted to Methodist preaching by its focus on a personal conversion experience and a commitment to a new way of life. “The Methodist camp meetings, with their highly emotional release of spiritual energy”, said one historian, “struck an especially receptive chord among the [Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee]” (Semple 1996, p. 163). It was common for Indigenous people to be moved to the point of spiritual extasy by the sermon of an itinerating preacher (Smith 2013b). “The Lord then poured out his spirit upon them”, reported one preacher, “and they began to shake, and to tremble, and to call on the Lord Jesus for mercy”. Numerous other reports were made in the first year of the Christian Guardian of Indigenous Christians who “got happy”. Sometimes, the spectacle scandalized settler Christians who had not experienced this phenomenon before. The idea of similarities between Methodist and Indigenous spirituality elsewhere in Canada was supported in a study by Susan Whelan and serves to bolster the claim that Methodism could indeed resonate with non-Christian Indigenous experiences (Neylan 2005, p. 91). This is not to say, however, that personal spiritual experience and individual conversion necessarily negated Indigenous values of communalism. As we shall see, there was much that Indigenous coverts felt they could retain of their Indigenous culture even after adopting the new religion.

To understand what motivated Indigenous people to turn to the new religion, clues can be found in what they themselves said and how they framed their Christian convictions within the colonial context they faced. It has been noted elsewhere that Indigenous Christians were capable of using the written medium to manipulate, reject and challenge settler approaches to mission and that they simultaneously illustrated “genuine evangelicalism and an indigenized Christianity” (Neylan 2005, p. 90). However, written personal accounts of the work and views of Indigenous evangelists are rare treasures (Brock et al. 2015b, p. 9). The Christian Guardian, a widely read Methodist Episcopal periodical of its time and place, with multiple Indigenous contributors, can then be regarded as a veritable treasure trove. An important settler publication in its day, it was also a public platform used by Indigenous Christians to promote and explain their experience and the reasoning behind their adoption of Christianity. Let us turn our attention to that publication and examine the reasons why it was possible for Indigenous Christians to use it as an effective vehicle for sharing their own understanding of Christianity despite the negative colonial pressures and machinations of settler Christianity at the time.

6. The Christian Guardian and Indigenous Christians

Part of the attraction of the Methodist Episcopal denomination for the settler community, as the colonial oligarchy recognized and feared, was its activist engagement with colonial politics. The Methodist paper, the Christian Guardian, under the editorship of young firebrand Egerton Ryerson, was raising hell with the colonial establishment. Indeed,
part of the Methodist quarrel was with the establishment church, the Church of England. Bishop John Strachan, an equally fiery and partisan leader of Anglicanism, represented the desire to maintain the colonial status quo and keep the Methodists in their place, especially Methodists of the American persuasion (Semple 1996, p. 76). The Episcopal Methodists north of the border were under some pressure to assure the Canadian public that, despite the southern origins of their polity, they were not republicans but rather loyal subjects of the Crown who simply desired a more equitable society and freedom to worship in the church of their choice (Semple 1996, p. 77; McLaren 2019, p. 9). In the words of one of the men involved in establishing it, “we had long felt the need of a press at our command, [that] not only could explain our doctrines and polity, but more especially to fight the battles in which we were engaged for equal rights and for religious equality”. This was part of the magazine’s official mandate. The periodical was also important as a means to make the case that the Canadian Methodist Episcopal church was independent of its American founders and to defend it against its rivals who suggested it was a threat to the Crown (McLaren 2019, p. 108).

The publication did not only succeed in meeting the needs of Methodist Episcopalians in Upper Canada. Due to its strong political perspective, which resonated with many settlers who were dissatisfied with the colonial status quo, it also grabbed the attention of the general public and quickly became one of most influential papers in the colony (Semple 1996, p. 75). In this sense, the Methodist Episcopalians in Canada, like Indigenous people themselves, were fighting for a place in Canadian society. This may have given each an affinity for the other.

But the Christian Guardian also had a strong settler agenda, and it struck a decidedly colonial tone. Its very first issue, for example, featured a harangue against Muslims, victims at that time of European incursions into north Africa and the Middle East. Its readership was majority White British immigrant. Given prevalent attitudes, it is likely that, despite sharing a common struggle for acceptance within Canada, most regarded Indigenous people as pawns in the game of colonial politics rather than as partners in that struggle. Faced with the challenge posed by the Church of England, the Methodists worked hard to win the fight for public opinion. This they did by vigorously printing and distributing denominational materials, a significant portion of which was connected to missions among the Indigenous peoples of the land (McLaren 2019, p. 76). As mentioned above, a strong mission to Indigenous people was a source of prestige in Upper Canadian society. Recognizing this strategy, the Church of England and colonial authorities did their best to steal the Methodists’ thunder and published Indigenous-related material in presses not controlled by its Methodist competitors (McLaren 2019, p. 96). But the Christian Guardian remained an effective means of associating the Methodist Episcopal church with Indigenous missions in the mind of the public.

Almost as soon as the Christian Guardian started rolling off the presses in 1829, Indigenous missions were featured prominently. A significant percentage of this material, 3.1%, was written by Indigenous Christian leaders themselves. This was part of the publication’s strategy to gain support from settler co-religionists. But Indigenous leaders used this platform for their own distinct purposes as well. Among other things, they used it to assert their leadership, language and culture within the Canadian church and society. The number and strength of Indigenous contributions to this colonial-era religious magazine may be a surprise to contemporary readers. Why was this voice so pronounced? What was the thrust of the stories shared by Indigenous writers? Can they be regarded today as a trustworthy representation of Indigenous Christianity in the colonial context? These are all important questions to consider.

The history of Indigenous people in print in Canada is a complex one. Coverage of Indigenous people in Canada through the ages has often not been positive, but it has not been uniformly negative either. What is more predictable is the fact that what was written about Indigenous people had more to do with settler stereotypes, good and bad, than it did with the actual reality of Indigenous people themselves (Francis 2012, p. 22).
These stereotypes were almost always connected to the deep discomfort settlers felt about their position as newcomers to the land (Francis 2012, p. 236). And they were also often weaponized against Indigenous people as the number-one settler desire was to obtain land (King 2012, p. 216). Canadian historian Sarah Carter, for example, showed how the narrative of settler women endangered by Indigenous men was a tool used to justify the oppression of Indigenous peoples on the Canadian prairies (Carter 1997, p. 7). The first year of the Christian Guardian revealed that it was not immune to such stereotypes. Indigenous people were often described here as bloodthirsty, ignorant, savage, lost and benighted. Indigenous ways of life were characterized as inferior and needing to be replaced by the trappings of White settler society, the smoky bark wigwams exchanged for the houses of “civilized” White settler Christians. Indigenous people were portrayed as war-like and bloodthirsty, the war whoop and scalping knife being suggested as somehow characteristic of Indigenous peoples in their pre-Christianized state. It must be said that these negative views were mixed with more positive settler missionary and editorial contributions which praised Indigenous leadership and defended Indigenous rights within the colony. Nevertheless, these more positive approaches were severely compromised by the more prevalent negative ones.

But settlers were not the only ones contributing to or reading from the Christian Guardian. Of the 47 extant issues from the first year of its publication, a qualitative analysis revealed that 21,614 words were written by identifiably Indigenous authors. That is 3.1% of the overall total words of the magazine and 36.2% of the total Indigenous-related content. So, just as it seems that Indigenous people made up a good proportion of the Canadian Methodist Episcopalian church, they were also strongly represented in the denomination’s magazine as well. Some negative stereotypes, though not the ugliest, flowed from the pen of Indigenous writers, showing that Indigenous Christians had perhaps internalized some settler prejudices. Indigenous Christians in the Guardian, for example, described the pre-Christian condition of Indigenous people as “the night of ignorance and superstition”. However, a careful reading reveals that this is by no means the whole story. Their views of Indigenous culture and religion were more nuanced. For example, Indigenous authors more often described their non-Christian neighbors as “pagan” rather than “heathen”, the more derogatory term most frequently employed by their settler missionary colleagues. They often compared non-Christian Indigenous people and culture to pre-Christian European people and culture. Indigenous writing also contained many rich and sympathetic descriptions of Indigenous people, places and conversations, descriptions that often diverged from the views of the settler missionary colleagues working alongside them.

It is also important to note that settlers were not the only ones reading the Christian Guardian. Peter Jacobs, an Indigenous Christian who learned to read and write in both English and Anishinaabemowin in a Methodist mission school, was one of the publication’s first subscribers. In a letter to the editor printed in 1930, Jacobs spoke of how important the magazine was to him and to his community: “When I get your good writing talk every week, then comes a good many of our brothers to hear the good news, so I read and interpret it unto them in our talk”. No doubt, part of the importance of the Christian Guardian for Jacobs and his people was that it was a source of Indigenous information and perspectives. An Indigenous readership may have encouraged Indigenous writers to tell their own stories in their own ways. It may also have kept them accountable for what they wrote. This may, therefore, partly explain how the Indigenous witness in the magazine was able to cut through some of the settler politics and articulate an authentic description of Indigenous Christianity and offer genuine encouragement to Indigenous Christian readers. Three central features of Indigenous Christianity that emerged from the reports written by Indigenous Christians and printed in the Christian Guardian can be summarized as: 1. strong leadership in viable Indigenous communities; 2. linguistic and cultural resilience; and 3. compatibility of at least some important aspects of Indigenous wisdom and knowledge with Christianity.
7. Features of Indigenous Christianity Found in the Christian Guardian

The coverage in the first year of the Christian Guardian named many Indigenous actors in the drama of missions to Indigenous peoples in British North America. Many of the heroes of that drama, as the Christian Guardian tells it, were Indigenous. The special effectiveness of Indigenous leadership only became more obvious in future years, as these leaders carried Christianity across the province, into the United States and over the Great Lakes. It was a fact that these leaders shared a cultural and spiritual context, not to mention a language, which was a key factor in their ability to spread the message (Semple 1996, p. 160). Indeed, the most compelling stories of Indigenous missions and missionaries were told by Indigenous people themselves. The first-person narratives of Indigenous authors expressed a sense of self-worth, dignity, confidence and conviction. A careful reading also reveals an appreciation and positive evaluation of Indigenous culture, as well as a sensitivity to the question of how to honor and live that culture within the new Christian faith.

In addition to these Christian leaders, many of whom were the authors of articles in the Christian Guardian, the first year of publication contained a description of at least 23 Indigenous chiefs, and a number of other Indigenous people besides, whose stories were deemed important enough to include. These names were not merely listed but were made part of an engaging story that was woven together with places and events in a memorable way. Even those chiefs who thoughtfully disagreed with the missionaries’ religious agenda and rejected their message were given a voice in Indigenous reports and respected as intelligent dialogue partners.

Not only were readers of the Christian Guardian introduced to several Indigenous leaders of diverse perspectives, they were also educated regarding the places where they lived. Thirteen significant Indigenous communities in Upper Canada were located and described for readers in the first year of the publication. Other smaller ones were also mentioned, as well as three locations in present-day Michigan. The readers of the Guardian, then, Indigenous and settler, would have been able to situate themselves within a geography where Indigenous people were active and present, living alongside non-Indigenous settlements.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about the coverage of Indigenous people and themes in the Christian Guardian during its first year of print is the degree to which it incorporated Anishinaabemowin, the language of the Anishinaabeg. Several vocabularies in the language were introduced in the publication. An interested settler might have been encouraged to begin to learn the language based on the material published and also to appreciate in some small degree the ways that Christianity was taking on a new cultural complexion within that language. For Indigenous readers, the use of Anishinaabemowin for religious concepts may have been taken as a sign that Christianity was being successfully absorbed into the Anishinaabe world view. The Anishinaabe “Getche Munedoo” was used to refer to God and often deployed in its translated form, “Great Spirit”, indicating a degree of inculturation of the religion.

Further strengthening the position of the Anishinaabe language, a letter was printed entirely in Anishinaabemowin, with an accompanying translation. Kahkewaquonaby, a regular Christian Guardian contributor, introduced it as “the first letter written in the Chippeway [Anishinaabemowin] that I have ever seen” (See Note 15). Kahkewaquonaby was not simply pleased to see his language in print for the first time. He also understood that preserving the language was indispensable if his culture, with its own spiritual wisdom, was to survive (Semple 1996, p. 160). The Christian Guardian was not the only place where Kahkewaquonaby actively promoted Anishinaabemowin. He dedicated much of his life to translating the Bible, hymns and other religious material into the language for use in Indigenous communities (Ibid.). But its inclusion in the Christian Guardian signaled to settler and Indigenous readers alike that the language had now entered the realm of print media as another viable language alongside English.

The Guardian published stories about how Indigenous missions were providing bilingual education to their children. The long-standing desire of Indigenous parents to have
their children receive an education in both English and their own mother tongue was acknowledged. So, too, was their hope that their offspring would learn the new ways of the settlers while holding onto traditional knowledge about hunting and harvesting medicine (Smith 2013a, p. 237). The fact that Indigenous parents supported sending their kids to Western schools may surprise people today who have been impacted by the stories of Canadian residential schools notorious for their efforts to erase Indigenous culture and language from the hearts and minds of children. The coverage in the early Christian Guardian, in contrast to this bitter history, communicated a sense of anticipation that a new and exciting chapter in Anishinaabe culture and language was in the process of emerging.

Indigenous missionaries published in the Christian Guardian reported that the Indigenous people they met, both Mohawk and Anishinaabe, were interested in receiving religious material printed in their language. The motivation to read was partially religious. As chief Keketoonce told Kahkewaquanby, “I shall desire to see my children read the good book. As for myself, I am too old to learn and if I can only hear my children read I shall be satisfied with what I hear from them”. Kahkewaquanby reported in his journals that “the Mohawks [Haudenosaunee] are very much pleased, and will be very much profited by the new edition of the Mohawk scriptures[. . .] as also with the new edition of the Mohawk hymnbook and spelling book”. The Indigenous missionary noted that the Anishinaabe also “highly valued” the printed material as “it will give a new impulse to the children, and even to many of the older people, to learn to read” (Jones 1860, pp. 221, 225–27). The very existence of the printed word in an Indigenous tongue seems to have excited the interest and desire to learn in many. Once assured that they could be taught to read, the printed word lost its intimidation factor and became a source of joy. As an Indigenous missionary recounted of a group that received hymnbooks and scriptures, “they became very anxious to have us read and sing the hymns and to read the scripture translations to them which they were very fond to hear read”. Together with the translation of the Bible, prayers and hymn books, this inclusion of Anishinaabemowin in the Christian Guardian was a sign of renewal of Anishinaabe culture, or even a “cultural revolution”, as one historian dubbed it (Smith 2013b, p. 66ff). For Indigenous contributors to the Christian Guardian, the Christian faith was contributing to this renewal and re-emergence as a force to be reckoned with.

Clearly, one of the most contentious issues between Christian and non-Christian Indigenous people, as well as between Indigenous and non-Indigenous missionaries, was the question of whether and to what degree Indigenous cultural and religious practices were compatible with Christianity. On this question, Indigenous Christian leaders often found themselves arguing on both sides, trying to hold Indigenous ways and Christianity together. There has been no direct articulation of what that balance was for Indigenous missionaries writing for the Christian Guardian. But we can discern something of their position on this question from what was published. For one thing, the fact that their opinions sometimes caused discomfort for their settler missionary colleagues shows that settler and Indigenous missionaries drew different conclusions on this question. In the twelfth edition of the Christian Guardian, published on 6 February 1830, for example, the following preface was included ahead of an account by Kahkewaquanby of a meeting with a chief of the Muncey people:

To the editors of the Christian Guardian

Messrs Editors,

I enclose a private letter which I received a few days since from Mr Peter Jones [aka Kahkewaquanby]. Its details may be interesting to many of your readers, and I see no impropriety in publishing it. […] You will no doubt recollect that the celebrated Indian orator, Captain Snake, is a heathen and inimical to Christianity. He with some others has latterly wished to adopt a modified Christianity, which he could hold in connection with “the religion of his fathers” … The converts whom we have received are not of this character, they have given up all for
Christ, and have declared that the idols of heathens are “vanity”. Let us pray that Captain Snake also may “take hold of Christ with both hands” (See Note 2).

Yours &c, George Ryerson
Muncey Town, May 20th 1830 (See Note 15).

The tone of the preface suggests that Kahkewaquonaby’s settler missionary colleague was worried readers would get the wrong idea from the Indigenous missionary’s report. What was at stake was the notion of the superiority and exclusivity of Christianity when it came to Indigenous religious understandings and culture. The settler missionary was eager to share the report by the Indigenous missionary, but, while he insisted that he could see no “impropriety” in publishing it, the fact that he felt the need to nip in the bud any idea of the complementarity between Christian and Indigenous religious world views serves as a tacit acknowledgement that some of their White readers might, indeed, have been scandalized by what Chief Snake suggested. The settler missionary needed to reassure readers that, though Chief Snake may have said that he could reconcile his Indigenous spiritual teachings with those of Christianity, Indigenous converts that Methodist missionaries had made were under no illusions about the need to completely abandon Indigenous ways and adopt Christianity exclusively. But was this truly the case?

Kahkewaquonaby’s report not only shows that some Indigenous leaders were willing to entertain the idea that Christianity and Indigenous religion are compatible, its silence on that specific question raises further questions regarding what his own view on the question was. He wrote:

[Chief Snake] preceded to give a history of the wars and treaties, [...] Towards the close of his speech he again touched upon the subject of their becoming Christians, and said, “We Munceys take hold of the white man’s worship with one hand, but with the other hand we hold fast our fathers worship. Both ways are good. Our way forbids drinking, strong drink, as well as the white man’s religion” (See Note 15).

Kahkewaquonaby was simply repeating the words of Chief Snake. He was not trying to explain or contradict them. This is likely because he appreciated Chief Snake’s reasoning on a question that many other Indigenous people were working out.

This above was not the only report in the Christian Guardian featuring a respectful challenge to settler missionary assertions of the exclusive truth of Christianity. The chief Pa-zhe-ka-zhick-quash-cum asserted that both religious traditions had the same object of worship. It is remarkable that Kahkewaquanoby not only included his speech in his report but even characterized it as an “ingenious and singular reply” to the missionary message:

‘brothers and friends’ the Great Spirit, who made all things, has brought us together.
‘Brothers’ I have listened to your words. I will now tell you what is in my heart.
‘Brothers’ the Great Spirit made us all. He made the white man and he made the Indian. When he made the white man he gave him his way of worship, written in a book and prepared a place for his soul above. The Great Spirit also gave him his mode of preparing and administering medicine to the sick.
‘Brothers and friends,’ when the Great Spirit made the Indian, he gave him instructions in regard to his way of worship, and mode of administering medicine, altogether different from that of the white man.

... ‘brothers’, I am glad to see you as brothers, but I will not become a Christian. This is all I say (See Note 18).

Kahkewaquonaby regarded the chief as a scoundrel but seems to have respected the way he framed his decision. This and other Indigenous missionary reports did not shield readers from powerful arguments coming from Indigenous people who opposed Christianity. Neither did they disagree with claims that Indigenous ways and knowledge were at
least partially valid. This fact suggests that there was an ongoing and respectful dialogue within Indigenous society about the compatibility of traditional ways with Christianity, as well as ongoing discernment on the part of Indigenous Christians about which traditions and teachings they could keep with them on their Christian path and which they should let go of.

Some came to believe that Christianity could complement and bolster important Indigenous teachings. One of the important convergences, as Chief Snake saw it, was with regards to the avoidance of alcohol consumption (Semple 1996, p. 155). But there were other places where the spiritual world views of both cultures were in sync. It has been noted, for example, that, with the exception of the command to worship God exclusively and avoid the worship of idols, eight of the ten commandments delivered to Moses on Mount Sinai are similar in teachings among the Indigenous spiritual traditions of Upper Canada. And, in the area of spiritual experience, there is common ground as well. Indigenous converts related visions of Jesus in the same way they might have spoken of visions of spirits in their traditional spirituality (Smith 2013b, p. 75).

In Indigenous reports of conversions, it is often unclear what, if anything, converts decided to give up of their Indigenous way. In one account in the Christian Guardian, the new Christians emphasized the joy of coming into the new faith but said nothing at all about rejecting their Indigenous culture or beliefs. In another report, it is not clear whether the reference to giving up traditional ways referred to religious aspects of the culture or simply the nomadic hunter/gatherer lifestyle given up in favor of farming (See Note 18). On the question of healing, Indigenous missionaries were quick to point out, in opposition to settler missionaries, that Indigenous knowledge about medicine was legitimate, only that it should not be mixed with religious practices that were contrary to Christian teachings. The following is an example of such an exchange: “Early in the morning the chief sent for us in his Wig ke waum (sic) and asked us, ‘what kind of medicine shall I keep, and what shall I throw away?’ We told him that all the medicine that was good to heal or to drink when anyone was sick he might keep, but all the medicine that they used in their juggling arts, they ought to throw away.”

In another exchange, Kahkewaquonaby was asked what his response was to the settler missionaries’ claim that Indigenous medicine is not good. He responded by saying, “I think great many roots are very good for medicine. The Great Spirit planted and makes them grow. The doctors among the white people make a great deal of their medicine from roots and barks—all these things are very good”. But Kahkewaquonaby did reject the use of conjuring, dancing, feasting and drinking alcohol as a means to heal. “When any Christian Indian doctors, he has to pray to the Great Spirit through Jesus Christ, to bless the medicine and the sick person, and then if the Lord sees fit he will make this person well”.

It is clear that Indigenous missionaries did not accept all the spiritual traditions and religious practices of Indigenous culture. But they did not reject them wholesale either. And converts were very wise about discerning the truth in both traditions for themselves. Said one man to Kahkewaquonaby,

“someone […] say he won’t worship old way. But I tell him, last old way—old way was good. But now Muncey’s [his nation] get their way from all nations, some from the white people, some from the Chippeways [Anishinaabeg], and some from other nations. Now he think he got the old way, but this is a new way, because he lost the old way,—now I hear minister about Jesus, and the good way, and it is the same as I used to hear in old times. Good many Munceys now prayed to the Great Spirit”.

Though it is not entirely clear, it appears this person was saying that the new teachings of the Christian religion reflected the good teachings in the older traditional ways of his people, the Muncey. In general, based on the reports in the Christian Guardian, Indigenous Christians did not disparage all aspects of Indigenous spirituality but, instead, tended to incorporate a great deal of it into their new religious practices. Indeed, rather than
replacing Indigenous cultural wisdom and identity, some saw Christianity as a means for preserving it.

In support of the assertion that Indigenous Christianity differed from settler Christianity in important ways is the recent report by Victoria University of the University of Toronto on the question of what to do with the honorific use of the name of Egerton Ryerson, a prominent settler in nineteenth-century Upper Canada. As mentioned above, Ryerson was the first editor of the *Christian Guardian*, an Episcopal Methodist and a close friend of Kahkewaquonaby. The Victoria University report, which was co-authored by two Indigenous and two non-Indigenous scholars (Robins 2021, p. 2), suggested that a clear distinction can be made between the actions and attitudes of Ryerson and Kahkewaquonaby. Kahkewaquonaby, the report stated, “was a relentless advocate for Indigenous self-governance and land tenure, and had a profound ability to navigate and sometimes circumvent colonial systems for the well-being of his community” (Klassen et al. 2021, pp. 11–12). While Kahkewaquonaby was part of a network seeking to preserve his nation’s sovereignty and “worked with the goal of saving his people from the onslaught of settlers”, Ryerson, the report stated, was more interested in “assimilating them to the Canadian state by way of so-called ‘civilization’”. Kahkewaquonaby sought to help his settler friend to understand that “many of the Christian Mississaugas wanted to retain their language, autonomy, and aspects of their Anishinaabe beliefs and practices” (Klassen et al. 2021, p. 12).

8. Conclusions

Although Christianity continued to be adopted by more and more Indigenous people in the lead up to Canadian confederation and beyond, the historical record shows that few of the political, social and economic benefits that the first Indigenous Christian leaders imagined would flow from Christianity actually materialized. In fact, Indigenous people were slowly and inexorably erased from the consciousness and consideration of the new nation and even from the pages of the *Christian Guardian*, a publication that had once been an important mouthpiece for them. Nevertheless, the stories from the early Methodist publication that center on Indigenous leadership and reveal their culturally nuanced approach to Christianity complexify narratives about the erasure of Indigenous agency and culture through colonial missions. These stories show that Indigenous people could be profoundly and positively affected by the tenets of the religion that settlers introduced. What is more, they show that Christianity and its institutions were a means through which Indigenous people could exercise leadership, promote their language and preserve their culture.

While history took a turn different from the one Indigenous Christians imagined and hoped for, it can be said that Indigenous voices in the *Christian Guardian* left an important record of a tradition of Indigenous Christianity that continues to this day. The *Guardian* is an important and trustworthy source of Indigenous perspectives for a number of reasons. First, the publication was the voice of a denomination with a considerable Indigenous membership. Secondly, many of the contributors to the *Guardian* were Indigenous missionaries whose views of Indigenous people and of Christianity were discernably different from those of the non-Indigenous contributors. Thirdly, the *Guardian* boasted an Indigenous readership, a fact which suggests that Indigenous contributions would have been scrutinized for their authenticity, and Indigenous contributors would have been consciously writing for and accountable to their own people for what they wrote.

Indigenous authors in the early nineteenth century subtly but clearly challenged White preconceptions about the value of Indigenous culture and religious insight. Just as they carefully discerned for themselves which parts of settler culture to adopt and which parts of Indigenous culture to retain, so they also did for religious traditions. Those who did adopt the new faith did not necessarily abandon Indigenous spiritual wisdom, knowledge and practice. Today, we see this approach followed still by the Indigenous members of the contemporary Christian church in Canada. Pruden wrote, “The Christian mission has
allowed me and many of my family members to be faithful, unite in prayer (a universal method of spiritual thought) and search for that lost part of one’s soul. The teachings and love from my grandmother, […] have helped us live in both worlds of our Cree ways and our Christian fellowship” (Pruden 2022a). Lansdowne likewise looked to a grandparent who, she said, “was a deeply faithful Christian with all the evangelical zeal of the newly converted but also deeply deeply cultural”. There are those in the Indigenous community who disagree with her, she admitted, “but for those of us who hold or who see our traditional ways and Christianity as complementary […] Jesus can still be friend and comforter despite the fallibility of the church and the people in the church” (See Note 2). Thus, a long-held Indigenous tradition continues to hold together Indigenous and Christian identities in the face of a long-held settler tradition which denies this possibility.

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### Notes

3. In the process of writing this document a near-final draft was shared with an Indigenous colleague for feedback out of concern that the material be accountable to Indigenous knowledge and sensibilities.
4. Based on a reading of the first 52 editions of the *Christian Guardian*. These locations were Brantford (Mohawk Mission), River Credit Mission, Rice Lake Mission, Grape Island Mission, Muncey Mission, Lake Simcoe (Orillia/Rama) Penetanguishene, Mahjedusk, River Aux Sauble, Saukeeng, St. Clair, Snake Island and Yellowhead Island.
17. There were various spellings.
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