An Interview with Jennifer Graber

Jennifer Graber is a professor of Religious Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, as well as the Shive, Lindsay, & Gray Professor in the History of Christianity and Associate Director of the Native American and Indigenous Studies program. Her first monograph, The Furnace of Affliction: Prisons and Religion in Antebellum America, explores the intersections of church and state during the formation of the nation’s first prisons. Her second book, The Gods of Indian Country: Religion and the Struggle for the American West (2018), focuses on the changing contours of religious identity among Kiowa Peoples and Anglo-Americans, as these groups battled over the area now known as Oklahoma. Dr. Graber discusses this work in the interview below.

Interview by Timothy Houge

How did you initially become interested in this project?
While finishing my first book, I read about several episodes of Native incarceration. Around the same time, I was asked to teach a Native American religions course at the College of Wooster. After lots of reading, I planned to write a book on what are often called “the Indian Wars” with an emphasis on Native and missionary engagements. Kiowa involvement in the Red River War and their subsequent incarceration were going to be one chapter of that book. But the Kiowa ledger drawings, as well as Quakers’ involvement in reservation administration drew me in deeper and deeper.

*The Gods of Indian Country* focuses on both Native American and Christian gods in your underlying approach to this history of struggle in “Indian Country,” and suggests that whoever controls religious belief systems controls cultural identity. Is that the overall message here?
I’d put it a different way. Native peoples and Euro-Americans brought the whole of their cultural and historical experiences to their conflicts with one another. This included their relationships to God, gods, and more-than-human powers. Consequently, Kiowas engaged powerful forces as they defended their sovereignty and Euro-Americans considered expansion within their understanding of providential history.

The book revises past histories of Indian-white relations by bringing Native Americans (Kiowa, in this case) from the periphery to the center of the story. What larger lessons do we learn from this shared and more complex approach to this tragic history of cultural conflict and transformation?
I wanted to show that Native history is U.S. history, and specifically U.S. religious history. The latter is my field of specialty and continues to marginalize Native religions. This is partly because of training. Very few scholars working in the field have deep engagement with American Indian history, and more importantly, Native American and Indigenous Studies. Over the last few decades, the field has expanded as a result of work in critical race studies and gender studies. I’m hoping for a similar expansion in regard to Native studies, which will bring a whole new set of materials and concepts into the field.
You stress that Christian missionaries claimed to be, and likely genuinely believed, that they were “friends of the Indian,” yet were fundamentally agents of colonialism and the official long-term U.S. policy designed to secure Native lands. How did they rationalize this contradictory practice?

Missionaries and their allies constructed identities as “friends of the Indian” in direct contrast to those who took a militarized approach to the so-called “Indian problem.” We have to remember that, at times, leading Americans argued that Native “extermination” was the only solution. When measured against these advocates of forced removal and annihilation, it’s easy to see how missionaries understood themselves as fundamentally different. But by a different measure, such as their commitment to dispossession of Native lands, undermining Native sovereignty, and forcing assimilation, missionaries shared in the wider colonial project.

You write that Native American spiritual beliefs and practices did not constitute a religion in the Western sense of the word, but how do we best characterize those traditions?

Kiowas did not identify a distinct sphere of life marked by ritual work and storytelling involving more-than-human powers. They had no word that paralleled the English word, “religion.” I wanted to highlight the words they did use, especially dwdw, or sacred power. I focus on the particularities of Kiowa engagement with more-than-human powers without collapsing them into an interpretative frame developed in relation to Christianity.

Can you generally describe your time and research activities with the Kiowa? What were some of the major ways in which Kiowa tribal members and leaders assisted and enlightened you on traditional preparations for ceremonials and rituals, and changing spiritual practices?

I’m not an anthropologist, so I did not engage in formal interviewing or field work. However, I made several visits to Kiowa Country and those experiences taught me a great deal. While there, I had conversations with folks at the tribal museum, attended the oldest church on the former reservation, went to birthday parties, visited cemeteries, and joined an annual gathering of a dance society. I also spent time driving around and walking on the land. Those experiences offered me a glimpse into Kiowas’ ongoing commitment to each other and to place. It prompted me to approach archival materials and material culture, which were the bulk of my historical sources, as potential evidence of those commitments.

You use oral and pictorial sources, among others, to identify the transformations of Kiowa customs and practices. Generally, what were the main resource types, and when were they created?

Kiowas did not have a written form of their language until the twentieth-century. If I wanted to work with Kiowa sources, I had to get creative. Like many historians, I engaged in critical reading of sources produced by Euro-Americans. But I focused on materials Kiowas produced throughout the nineteenth century. These included sai-cut, or calendars, a visual form of history keeping on hide or paper. I also examined ledger drawings, which men created to depict a variety of experiences. I also considered cradleboards, which Kiowa women made for their children and involved intricate beadwork. Later anthropologists also interviewed scores of Kiowas in the 1930s and 1960s. Again, these sources must be read critically. But it was invaluable to read everyday Kiowa people's recollections of the second half of the nineteenth century.
What are some of the most striking cultural and spiritual changes among the Kiowa that you found pictured in material sources, particularly those produced by Kiowa prisoners at Fort Marion, Florida, in the 1870s?

Several men incarcerated at Fort Marion recalled ritual practices from their homeland, especially the Kiowas’ version of the Sun Dance. They also depicted their encounters with the Christian message. They showed prisoners packed into chapel, their jailer preaching to them, and local women teaching them. The contrast in these depictions is striking. Later drawings detail emerging peyote rites, the Ghost Dance, and forms of Christian practice.

What were some of the greatest challenges and triumphs you encountered during your research process and in using the sources?

The learning curve was steep. I read histories of Kiowas and other Native nations, American expansion into the west, federal administration of Indian affairs, and missions. I did Kiowa language study and read museum anthropologists and art historians on material culture. These were new materials for me, which proved challenging, but also invigorating. The research process, which involved visits to archives and museums was wonderful. I encountered everything from intricately cataloged materials at Yale’s Beinecke Library to a milk crate full of papers and pictures found in a closet at the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. My “triumphs” involved archival finds, including a letter in which a relative made visual depictions of Plains Indian Sign Language signs in order to communicate with a Kiowa student at an off-reservation boarding school.

It is revealing to read about the rivalries between missionary groups, particularly between Protestants and Catholics, as they sought official approval to establish missions and schools among the Kiowa. What were their basic differences in goals and methods?

Protestants and Roman Catholics shared the goal of saving souls through conversion and baptism, as well as prompting Native peoples’ cultural transformation. They differed in that Protestants also saw themselves as remaking Native peoples into American citizens. In contrast, most Roman Catholic missionaries and sisters in Indian Country were from Great Britain and Europe. They represented the Vatican’s effort to spread and standardize Catholic practice around the globe. They did this especially by emphasizing Marian devotion and participation in the Eucharist.

How did the fact that these religious orders viewed their work in “Indian Territory” as part of an international missionary effort influence their work and strategies?

Benedictine missionaries in Kiowa Country are a great example. They compared their work with Native peoples to Saint Benedict’s original labors among Europe’s “pagans.” They also emphasized North America’s history of Spanish missions, which significantly predated Protestant efforts. In this way, they claimed to be most experienced and best prepared for work among Native peoples.

You find that the era of President Ulysses S. Grant’s “Peace Policy” was one of conflict and coercion. What changed for the Kiowa, and what caused the violence on both sides?

Kiowas signed a treaty that established a reservation just before Grant inaugurated the new policy. Kiowas’ transition to reservation rule, then, was supervised by Grant’s newly appointed religious representatives. In this case, a Quaker farmer from Iowa administered the reservation Kiowas shared with their Comanche allies. While the Quaker reformer was committed to pacifism, he soon called on nearby troops to assist him with everything from ration distribution to quelling unrest. The “Peace Policy” allowed Quakers and others to promote their “friendly” approach to Native people even as they relied on military threat and action. It’s no surprise, then, that Kiowas and other Indian nations considered violent resistance as the Peace Policy years involved constant threat.
How did U.S. policies toward the Kiowa change after the Red River War in 1874?
Reservation officials demanded many more concessions from Kiowas after the war. They had leverage to do so. More than 70 southern plains men who fought in the war were incarcerated in Florida. They had not been charged, and their sentences were indeterminate. Kiowas petitioned for their relatives’ return, which was not forthcoming. Over the next few years, they supported these requests by referencing their acquiescence to American requests. They built more houses. They sent more children to school. They farmed more acres. They asked officials to remember these changes as they considered the prisoners’ fate.

How did the Kiowa generally understand treaty making, and what were some of the difficulties and communication issues they faced in negotiations?
Kiowas had a long history of treaty making and alliance building with other Native nations and colonizing countries. For them, agreements involved making promises by way of verbal statement, ritual acts, giving gifts, and sometimes, marriages. Kiowa-American interactions included some of these elements, namely speeches, smoking, and gifts. But there were also complications. No officials or missionaries spoke Kiowa. Proceedings relied on Native translators, who moved back and forth between English, Kiowa, and also Comanche.

How did the U.S. policy of “allotment” in the late 19th century go beyond earlier policies in promoting assimilation and citizenship for Native Peoples?
The allotment process initiated in the 1880s sought to break up communal land holding by assigning plots to individual Native men and selling off the “surplus” lands to non-Native settlers. It’s one thing to encourage English, wood houses, and farming. It’s another to break treaty agreements, undermine Native sovereignty, and break apart political and communal bonds. Allotment proved devastating across Indian Country as federal officials seized millions of acres of treaty-guaranteed lands in the process.

Education of Native American children also became a widely accepted strategy for ending traditional tribal identity and survival. How extensive were those education policies?
While many missionaries operated day schools, on and off-reservation boarding schools expanded significantly after 1880. There is evidence that officials coerced Native families into sending their children to school. Some threatened to withhold parents’ rations and annuities. Even Native children who attended on-reservation boarding schools experienced extended separation from family, which officials only increased over time in order to break down tribal connections.

It seems that the Kiowas’ increasing inability to hold their annual Sun Dance celebration over the course of the 19th century and the arrival of the Ghost Dance were symbolic of the decline of their society. How was that so?
I would not say Kiowa society declined. Indeed, Kiowas diligently defended their ties to each other and their lands even as reservation and army officials suppressed the Sun Dance. This defense took a number of forms, including religious activity such as the Ghost Dance. It also involved political action, like lobbying efforts against allotment and eventually a case taken to the Supreme Court. Kiowas no longer performed the Sun Dance. And eventually they stopped the Ghost Dance. But they continued (and continue) other empowering acts, such as peyote rites, Christian practices, language preservation, and dance societies and powwows.
How did Supreme Court cases in the late 19th century most directly impact the Kiowa?
In *Lone Wolf v. Hitchcock*, the court ruled that Congress could abrogate treaties with Native nations for any reason determined necessary. For Kiowas, this meant that the allotment process could not be stopped or reversed. After a land run, settlers claimed lands throughout the broken-apart reservation. The case also had broader implications. Every treaty made between Native nations and the US was now more vulnerable to dissolution.

You write of the importance of historical context, that Anglo-Saxon Protestant subjugation of Native Americans must be seen in the wider context of the suppression of other groups “ill-suited for liberty,” such as Catholics, Mormons, and Chinese. What were the main religious arguments for such tests of “Americanness?”
By the 1880s and 1890s, Nativism and anti-Black racism were at another high point. Some leading Americans claimed a variety of peoples simply could not be assimilated as their cultural traits were incompatible with liberty. Problematic religion could be one of these traits. According to these thinkers, Catholics had a foreign pope. Mormons were theocratic. Native peoples were primitive. Chinese immigrants were heathen. One might think that African Americans had an advantage in this calculus as so many were Protestant Christians. But racist tropes about the primitive nature of Black religiosity, even as it was expressed in Christian forms, was widespread. Religion, then, served as one of the measures for fitness.

How are the Kiowa promoting the preservation and renewal of cultural traditions and religious practices in our own time?
I can give you so many examples. The tribal museum supports language classes, singing events, drumming programs, beading workshops, and even lessons in traditional tipi construction. Dance societies and descendant organizations gather regularly to celebrate with story, song, and dance. Churches sing hymns in Kiowa language. And daily life includes an ongoing stream of practices, including naming ceremonies, gift giving, and prayer. All of these activities bind Kiowas to each other, their land, and their history.