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A Christian Nation: How Christianity united the people of the Cherokee Nation

Mary Brown
CUNY City College

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A Christian Nation: How Christianity united the people of the Cherokee Nation.

There is not today and never has been a civilized Indian community on the continent which has not been largely made so by the immediate labors of Christian missionaries.¹

-Nineteenth century Cherokee Citizen

Mary Brown
Advisor: Dr. Richard Boles
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¹Timothy Hill, *Cherokee Advocate*, “Brief Sketch of the Mission History of the Cherokees,” (Tahlequah, OK) April 18, 1864.

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Time Line

- 1799-1802- Moravians arrived in Cherokee Country (southeast United States)
- 1802-Gideon Blackburn opened 2 “Presbyterian” schools in Cherokee Country
- 1809- Sequoyah begins work on Cherokee alphabet
- 1818-American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission (ABCFM) started mission in Chickamagua, TN
- 1821-1823- Sequoyah’s invention of the Cherokee Alphabet is complete
- 1824-1827-White Path’s Rebellion
- 1825- Two factions, “Christians” and “Traditionalists” were distinct by this date.
- 1827-Charles Hicks and John Ross held meeting with White Path and united factions to oppose Removal
- July 1827- First Constitution of the Cherokee Nation is ratified
- 1828- First issue of the *Cherokee Phoenix* is published in Cherokee and English
- Oct. 24, 1829- Blood law is voted in by Cherokee General Council
- May 28, 1830- Indian Removal Act (U.S. Congress)
- May 23, 1836- Treaty of New Echota ratified (giving tribe two years to move west)
- May 24, 1838- Cherokees began being forcibly moved west
- June 1838- Title to Cherokee lands in NC, Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee expired
- June 22, 1839- Major Ridge, John Ridge, and Elias Boudinot (leaders of the Treaty Party) were murdered.
- July 12, 1839- Act of Union between the Western (Ross faction) and Eastern (Old Settlers and Ridge Party) Cherokees was signed.
- Sept. 6, 1839-Constitution of the *reunited* Cherokee was written.
- 1839- Constitution included a clause that allocated federal funding for public schools.
- 1851-Cherokee Male and Female Seminaries opened their doors.
- Feb 8, 1887- Dawes Act (U.S. Congress)
- June 28, 1898- Curtis Act (U.S. Congress)

Introduction: Defining Nationalism, and the roots of Factionalism in nineteenth century Cherokee Country

If one were to call the Cherokee Nation and be put on hold, the famous Christian anthem plays: U-ne-la-nv-hi-u-we-tsi-i-ga-gu-yv-he-i-hna-qu-tso-sv-wi-yu-lo-se-i-ga-gu-yv-ho-nv, sung to the tune of “Amazing Grace.” Twentieth century Americans might reasonably think Christianity to be the antithesis of native culture, considering recent movements to restore native “traditionalism.” The Cherokee Nation, however, exhibits Christianity as a prominent part of their culture. In fact, Cherokees have been using their version of Christianity as a primary tool for creating a national cultural identity since the early 19th century. The Cherokee people found it overwhelmingly necessary to claim sovereign nationhood apart from the United States, first, in 1827 with the beginning of the removal crisis, and then again during the crux of the removal crisis in 1838. Post-removal, in 1839, the Cherokee people united themselves once again through an Act of Union. The American Civil War deepened the gap between political parties within the Cherokee Nation and yet another moment of national unity became necessary for the Cherokee to remain an autonomous people.

One might expect that Cherokee nationalist movements used traditional religion, like the popular Ghost Dance movements, to maintain autonomy from the Christian nation of the United States. On the contrary, Cherokee nationalist movements, during removal, post removal, and through the American Civil War, used Christianity to unite the Cherokee people and defray years of intertribal splits and controversy.² For nearly a century, Christianity was a major component

² Theda Perdue, review of *The Cherokees and Christianity in Journal of the Early Republic* 16, no 1 (Spring, 1996), 126. Perdue states in her review, “Cherokee Christianity began to emerge in the 1820s, but it became central to a new sense of Cherokee nationalism after the American Civil War. The Cherokees had become a people divided by culture as well as wealth. The Christian message of brotherhood helped them transcend those differences and reconstruct a common identity. ...Christianity had provided a basis for Cherokee nationalism, a vocabulary for

in the solidification of cultural unity for the Cherokee. If prototypical American culture is an amalgam of myriad cultures, then one could argue that Cherokee culture assimilating Christianity is a key example of how the Cherokee were and are innately American. The Cherokee Case, however, was unique because Cherokees implemented their traditional values in Christian practices. Instead of Christianity incorporating the Cherokee Nation into the United States, I argue that Christianity helped to maintain autonomy from the United States. The way the Cherokee people embedded their own culture into Christianity prevented Cherokee nationalism from fading into obscurity.

In some perceptions of Cherokee history, the more assimilated and “Christian” Cherokees are characterized as those who betrayed their people by not resisting removal. Most scholars, however, have missed the important role that Christianity played in forming Cherokee nationalism because they have too often viewed people in Cherokee history through the artificial binary of “Christian converts” vs. “resistant traditionalists.” “Traditionalists” are celebrated for opposing removal and mourned for suffering some of its worse consequences. However, my argument challenges this historical narrative by showing how Christianity was used to pursue unity and “traditionalist” goals of national autonomy and independence. Understanding how Christianity helped create Cherokee nationalism shows that Cherokee leaders, such as Elias Boudinot and John Ridge, sought to protect the autonomy and cohesion of their people. Heroes and traitors are not as easily cast in this history.

Native peoples living in what is now the United States were introduced to European Christianity³ as early as the sixteenth century. This introduction would transform the life of the

resistance, and a conviction of righteousness.” She does not seem to have published these conclusions in an article or book with supporting evidence.

³ This includes both Protestant and Catholic Christianity.

Indians and adherents of Christianity made it a significant player in Cherokee social, political and cultural spheres. Scholars have looked at the Christianization process of Indians for almost a century. The Cherokee Nation in particular has been studied extensively by scholars regarding the subject of Christianity and its effects on the nation. This scholarship particularly examines the nineteenth century, including, before, during, and after the implementation of removal policies. To date, scholars have never managed to delete the problematic dichotomy of “Traditional” vs. “Christian” and those terms have been used to categorize the Cherokee for over a century. Religion encompassed both traditional and Christian values, and the emphasis scholars have placed on the differences between “Traditionalists” and “Christians” clouds the importance of what religion in general meant to the Cherokee.

The influence of religion cannot be separated from other factors of early American life. Social and economic evolution was directly impacted by religion. According to scholar Richard Pointer, “All the principal ways natives and whites interacted in the colonial era, including trade, diplomacy, war, disease, and slavery, could have religious dimensions or meanings for both sides.”⁴ Christianity may have been foreign to the Indians of the early United States, but religion was not. The separation of church and state was not a concept adopted by the Cherokees. In fact, religion, traditional or Christian, was given credit or blame for every happening within the Cherokee Nation. This aspect of Native American life cannot be overlooked when evaluating Cherokee nation building in the nineteenth century. Ultimately, religion, specifically the Christian faith, functioned as the backbone of Cherokee nationalism from the first removal crisis of 1807 to the finalization of the Dawes Roll in 1907.

⁴ Richard Pointer, *Encounters of the Spirit: Native Americans and European Colonial Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 2007), 67.

Cherokee Nationalism: Autonomy and Acculturation

Nationalism involves the manifest spirit and will of a people engaged in a concerted drive toward unity and self-government that has become associated with the term “national identity.”⁵
–William McLoughlin

At the turn of the nineteenth century, “nationalism” had begun to surface as a significant part of Cherokee culture. Although their first constitution was not written until 1827, the Cherokee began organizing a centralized government several decades earlier. The Cherokee mounted police, a national council and police force, institutionalized Cherokee country as early as 1790. Soon after, laws were implemented that did away with specific Cherokee customs. While the national council maintained an orderly environment for the Cherokee people, the United States, and Georgia in particular, continued to disrupt it. The Cherokee nation had barely formed a municipality when the first removal crisis took place between 1806 and 1809. The crisis divided the nation and propagated a need for the Cherokee to establish a new national identity. The new Cherokee nationalism was more than a means of distinguishing autonomy from the United States; it became a part of Cherokee identity.

Acculturation quickly became an important part of what it meant to be a member of the “most civilized tribe” in the United States. It became vital that Cherokee nationalism included characteristics of nationalism in the United States. According to William McLoughlin, “the rise of Cherokee nationalism constitutes one of the most important revitalization movements in nineteenth-century Indian History.”⁶ To view this rise of nationalism as a revitalization movement is inaccurate. The first major nationalist movement was the first of its kind for the

⁵ William McLoughlin, “Thomas Jefferson and the Beginning of Cherokee Nationalism: 1806 to 1809,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (1975): 558.

⁶ McLoughlin, “Thomas Jefferson,” 551.

Cherokee. Cherokee people deviated from their matrilineal clan-based system for tribal recognition as early as 1806. Instead of clans governing and ruling themselves, Cherokee-country was set up with a system of local and national chiefs. The Cherokees who disagreed with the changes that took place in the first 20 years of the nineteenth century chose to leave Cherokee-country.⁷ Well-versed Cherokee scholars such as William McLoughlin, Edward Spicer, and Fred Gearing, concur that this time period was when the Cherokee began to connect their identity with the space they occupied.



Image courtesy of New Echota Museum.
<http://www.wsharing.com/WSphotosNewEchotaMuseum.html>

The Cherokee-country was divided into two regions: lower towns and upper towns. The lower towns were home to successful “mixed-blood”⁸ Cherokee elites and the nation’s economic center of Chickamagua. Lower town politicians were proudly assimilated into white culture. A

⁷ Cherokee-country refers the geographical space the Cherokees occupied prior to removal.

⁸ Mixed-blood has an intentionally racist connotation. It is a common term used in Native American history to describe a person of mixed ancestry (Indian and white). It was coined as far back as the 18th century. Mixed bloods were generally viewed as progressive because they took advantage of their white culture and English language skills. Full-bloods, on the other hand are associated with an inability relate to white culture and can be closely associated to traditionalist. While this language is problematic, it is telling of cultural perspective in the 19th century and beyond. Blood quantum is still used in Cherokee Nation to determine citizenship status.

majority of the lower-town population remained “Traditionalists”, yet the region was still controlled by the more assimilated elites. Upper town chiefs were often full-blood Cherokees and maintained a more traditional culture. The upper town chiefs did not expect the introduction of missions to interfere with Cherokee traditions. The acceptance of education without religious acculturation was their ideal. Religious acculturation, however, did not leave space in Cherokee culture for many old laws and customs. Eventually the upper town chiefs felt violated by the missionaries and formed a rebellion. Following the War of 1812, upper town chiefs, dissatisfied with the rate of acculturation and the infiltration of missionaries, led a well-known movement called “White Path’s Rebellion.”⁹

White Path’s Rebellion was a defining moment in Cherokee national history because it clarified the people’s concern for the preservation of not only their homeland, but their religious culture as well. The rebellion is also a point of controversy among scholars. The divide between the upper and lower towns had obvious political undertones, but on the surface religion was the issue. Ultimately, the two regions agreed that threats of removal from the United States government left no room for an intertribal split. John Ross led the nation to ratify its first constitution in 1827 and included a clause that ensured religious freedom for the “Traditionalists” of White Path’s Rebellion.

Unfortunately, the new constitution did not lay out the specific details of how one might obtain official citizenship. It does, however, clearly state the geographical boundary lines of the Cherokee Nation, reiterating the importance of geographical space and nationalism. It further states only “natural-born” males have the right to vote, which insinuated citizenship status.¹⁰ The

⁹ White Path’s rebellion was a social movement that demanded the preservation of Cherokee traditionalism by removing missionaries who lived in Cherokee country, and slowing down the rate of assimilation into the United States’ economy.

¹⁰ Cherokee Nation Constitution (1827).

first Cherokee constitution, drafted in 1827, is relied on as a source of precedence in Cherokee government today.

Residency was the primary factor for determining “citizenship” in Cherokee Country in the early nineteenth century. Cherokees had not entirely done away with their matrilineal, clan membership system, but Cherokee people had begun to mimic citizenship practices of the United States. A primary difference between the Cherokee term nation and the new United States term nation was property ownership. The Cherokee people practiced, and still practice, communal ownership of tribal land. The maintenance of Cherokee land was at the root of Cherokee nationalism. The Cherokee Nation depended on its people to improve, maintain, and take pride in Cherokee-country. In article I, section 1 of the 1827 constitution, the boundaries of Cherokee-country are clearly stated, the document goes on to describe the importance of that geographical space and its relationship to Cherokee citizens,

and the lands therein are, and shall remain, the common property of the Nation; but the improvements made thereon, and in the possession of the citizens of the Nation, are the exclusive and indefeasible property of the citizens respectively who made; or may rightfully be in possession of them; Provided, that the citizens of the Nation, possessing exclusive and indefeasible right to their respective improvements, as expressed in this article, shall possess no right nor power to dispose of their improvements in any manner whatsoever to the United States, individual states, nor individual citizens thereof; and that whenever any such citizen or citizens shall remove with their effects out of the limits of this Nation, and become citizens of any other Government, all their rights and privileges as citizens of this Nation shall cease.¹¹

This residency-focused citizenship philosophy was an underlying cause of their adoption of Christian culture. The Cherokee assimilated Christianity into their national culture the moment they welcomed Christian missionaries and schools into their geographical space. Educational institutions were considered an improvement on Cherokee land. Furthermore, the schools established and led by missionaries were implemented as a communal part of the

¹¹ Cherokee Nation Constitution, art. 1, sec. 1 (1827).

Cherokee Nation.

The War of 1812 brought many Creeks into Cherokee country. These refugees were eventually forcibly removed west with the Cherokee during the 1838 Removal Crisis. Once they had arrived in Indian Territory, the Cherokees made clear distinctions for citizenship requirements. Living within the boundaries of Cherokee Nation was one of them, blood quantum was not. In the 1828 Cherokee constitution, the council wrote,

The descendants of Cherokee men by all free women, except the African race, whose parents may be or have been living together as man and wife, according to the customs and laws of this nation, shall be entitle to all the rights and privileges of this Nation, as well as the posterity of Cherokee women by all free men.¹²

Here, the Cherokee Nation does away with the matrilineal requirements for belonging in the tribe and replaces it by granting anyone who had been living “according to the customs and laws of this Nation” all of the rights and privileges of the Nation.

There was a very diverse population living in Indian Territory. The Creeks, Delawares, Keetowahs, Eastern Cherokees, Afro-Cherokees, adopted (white and Afro) Cherokees, and whites all lived in this area and benefited from Cherokee established institutions. It was not until 1907, with the finalization of the Dawes Roll that the Cherokee people solely relied on blood quantum to determine legal identity. Prior to 1907, the U.S. census was the most popular tool for the U.S. government to account for how many Cherokees were present in Indian Territory during that time. At the end of the 19th century, the census tactic of listing blood quantum was just beginning to be used to identify citizens. For those who could land legal citizenship status, financial reward followed. Unfortunately, for the folks in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the process of making oneself legally Cherokee was painstaking and complex. In addition, this process was lengthy and inaccurate, forcing Cherokee people to look outside of legal federal

¹² Cherokee Nation Constitution, 1827.

recognition to define themselves and their place in a unified nation.¹³ Subsequently, the personal identity process included the amalgamation of cultures that the diverse community in Indian Territory housed. They all, however, carried a common theme: Christianity.

Countless legal documents and events “officially” shaped nationalism for the Cherokee Nation, and created a very concrete definition of what it means to be legally Cherokee. That definition, however, did not define national sentiments. Nor did it capture the very essences of what it meant to be a Cherokee during the nineteenth century. Specific instances, however, intensified nationalists’ sentiments and unified the Cherokee people. The post-White Path’s Rebellion constitution, the Removal Act enforced by Andrew Jackson, the Treaty of New Echota, the Act of Union in 1839, the American Civil War, and the Treaty of 1866, were all major points in Cherokee history where unification was necessary to maintain an autonomous nation separate from the United States. The Treaty of New Echota, for example, was signed by members of the Ridge party, and opposed by the Ross Party. The turmoil between the two parties over this treaty eventually led to the Removal Act. The Cherokees were faced with a choice of remaining divided or joining forces against the U.S. Cherokees had to search for commonalities to overcome the conflict that arose during those times. Ultimately, the controversial political acts, treaties, and events of nineteenth-century Cherokee nationhood were diffused by something more powerful than political divisions: The Cherokee Nation’s leaders used religion to motivate their followers.

Religion, specifically Christianity, and the rhetoric used to convert Cherokees worked as a tool of unification for a divided Cherokee nation all the way through the American Civil War. While Christianity was at the root of Cherokee factionalization, it also introduced a common

¹³ Russel Thornton, *The Cherokees: A Population History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992).

cultural theme during their nationalist movements. More importantly, Christianity served as a source of identity that united the Cherokee and helped to form a “nation” among them. The use of Christianity to help form a national identity is clearly seen in 1870 through full-blooded Chief and ordained minister Lewis Downing’s proclamation that the Cherokee were becoming “a Christian nation.”¹⁴ One’s individual identity may or may not coincide with the sentiments of the nation they belong. For a nation to be a “Christian nation,” one might assume the majority of citizens in that nation were in fact “Christian.” While it is impossible to prove the religious convictions of every Cherokee citizen from 1806-1907, we are able to identify significant influences of the Christian faith throughout Cherokee nationalist movements of the 19th century. Scholars in the past relied on conversion records, such as church membership to determine the influence of Christianity on Cherokee nationalism. These records, however, are not an accurate means of proving or disproving the success of missions in Cherokee Nation.¹⁵

Christian influences spread across the Cherokee Nation thanks to a written language introduced by George Guess, also known as Sequoyah. In 1828, Sequoyah, accompanied by the white Christian missionary Samuel Worcester, was determined to create an avenue that would enable dissemination of knowledge among the Cherokee people. The invention of a written language enhanced a pre-existing nationwide desire to educate the Cherokee people. The almost simultaneous introduction of a printing press assisted in spreading both political and religious news to all Cherokee citizens, solidifying nationalist sentiment via print media. Finally, leaders like Elias Boudinot and John Ross who had advanced educations from Protestant whites,

¹⁴ William McLoughlin, *The Cherokees and Christianity, 1794-1870* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 307-310.

¹⁵ David A. Snow and Richard Machalek. “The Sociology of Conversion.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 10 (1984):167-190.

Linford D. Fisher *The Indian Great Awakening: Religion and the Shaping of Native Culture in Early America*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

incorporated Christianity into their agenda for a united Cherokee people. While Cherokees maintained autonomy over their “nationhood,” a great political and cultural divide among the citizens remained. The differences between the divided parties, referenced by scholars as factions, were mostly political in 1839. However, the factions were originally created because of conflicting religious sentiments. The political and cultural history behind the aforementioned factions will help to articulate the importance of religion as it related to Cherokee nationalism. While religion may not have always been the source of friction between factions, the varying cultural motivations of each party provide necessary insight when relating nationalists’ movements towards Christianity.

Cherokee Factionalism: The Roots of Acculturation

“The Cherokees had become a people divided by culture as well as wealth. The Christian message of brotherhood helped them transcend those differences and reconstruct a common identity.”¹⁶
-Theda Perdue

Cherokee factionalism, from a macro perspective, is seemingly simple and politically motivated. In 1839 the Cherokee Nation had been forcibly removed from their homeland and Cherokee people found themselves in one of three parties: the Old Settlers, the Ridge Party, and the Ross Party. Roughly two decades prior to removal, the Old Settlers moved to Arkansas in search of a more autonomous life. The Ridge Party and the Ross Party remained in Georgia. The Ridge Party was led by Major Ridge, father of notorious Chief Stand Watie, and the Ross Party was led by the well-known chief of the Cherokees John Ross. During the Removal Crisis, the United States government was willing to accept any form of cooperation from Indian nations, and recognized the Ridge Party as authoritative figures among the Cherokee, even though they

¹⁶ Theda Perdue, review of *The Cherokees and Christianity*, 126.

were not supported by a majority of the Cherokee people. In 1835 the United States signed the Treaty of New Echota.¹⁷ The Ridge Party, thereafter known as the Treaty Party, took the money allotted them and their followers and moved west to Indian Territory - what is present day northeastern Oklahoma. John Ross and his followers were vehemently opposed to removal. Ross inspired his followers to stay behind and “fight” for their homeland/Nation; thereafter the Ross party became known as the National Party. In 1839, the National Party was forcefully removed from Georgia and herded to Indian Territory via the infamous “Trail of Tears.” Soon after, the leaders of the Treaty Party - Major Ridge, John Ridge, and Elias Boudinot, were murdered for their so-called treason against the Cherokee Nation. Following their murders, Stand Watie took over the title of Treaty Party chief. An Act of Union was then signed by both party chiefs. The joined forces became what is known today as the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma.¹⁸

This story, however, is missing vital components that are directly related to Cherokee identity. Cherokee faction history must be evaluated on a micro level, in order to unravel why and how the Cherokee people went from a unified country in 1828 to a deeply divided nation only ten short years later. In 1828, the year the first Cherokee constitution was drafted, removal was opposed by nearly everyone in Cherokee-country, including the Ridge family. Those who favored removal, the Old Settlers,¹⁹ had already moved west so they might live a more autonomous life. How then, did a unified people who strongly shared the same political agenda

¹⁷U.S. Department of State. “Treaty of New Echota,” Dec. 29, 1835, “Indain Affaris: Laws and Treaties,” edited by Charles J. Kappler (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1904) <http://digital.library.okstate.edu>. The treaty of New Echota was instigated and signed by the Ridge Party and the U.S. government. It granted \$5 million to the Cherokees for voluntary removal west.

¹⁸ Theda Perdue and Michael Green, *The Cherokee Nation and the Trail of Tears* (New York: Penguin, 2008).

¹⁹ The Old Settlers refers to the group of people who moved west during the first 20 years of the nineteenth century. They vehemently disagreed with acculturation and felt their only escape was to flee Cherokee country and establish a new community in the west.

divide so aggressively in less than a decade's time?

A more detailed story of Cherokee factionalism begins with the Cherokee's principal chiefs, Path Killer and Charles Hicks. During the years prior to the ratification of the 1828 Cherokee constitution, both Hicks and Path Killer, along with promising warriors Major Ridge, and John Ross, fought in wars and battles for the United States. At times, they even fought directly for General Andrew Jackson, who would later betray them with his vicious removal policy. It is that rarely mentioned fact that explains why Major Ridge may have trusted President Jackson to do right by the Cherokee people. War stories, however, were not the only thing shared between powerful whites and Cherokee elites. Path Killer, Hicks, Ridge and Ross were all successful participants in the United States economy. These leaders were quick to equate assimilation with progress due to their individual gains. The acculturation of the Cherokee people was ultimately a conscious choice intended to better the lives of Cherokee individuals. Unfortunately, not all Cherokees benefited from the acceleration of acculturation. Early on, Hicks, Path Killer, Ridge and Ross all shared similar political and cultural agendas. They hoped to further Cherokee economic participation with the United States by emulating white culture, which included Christianity. The most impactful piece of American culture adopted by Cherokee leaders was education via missionaries. Path Killer, unlike the other elite leaders, was a full-blood traditionalist. Regardless, he agreed that education should be brought into Cherokee country, even if it was brought by Christian missionaries. Cherokee leadership seemed to believe in the possibility of a culturally plural society. Eventually, the attendance of their local meetings was affected by Christian influence and the leaders of the upper towns found that Christianity began to threaten the existence of specific Cherokee traditions. As a result, Cherokee "Traditionalists" who opposed acculturation formed and created a political divide between the

upper and lower towns within Cherokee country. No existing evidence has pointed to removal as a point of contention until after 1828. Yet the root of Cherokee factionalism is still a controversial topic among scholars. Was the divide of the Cherokee Nation due to political opposition to assimilation, or were factions created out of a desire for religious autonomy?

Robert Berkhofer was one of the first scholars to dissect this question. He ultimately viewed the factions from a political macro-perspective: those who removed and favored removal, and those who did not. Berkhofer claimed that by the time missionaries were introduced into Cherokee country, the Cherokee were already divided.²⁰ William McLoughlin later investigated the same question via new evidence that insinuated anti-mission sentiments among Cherokee leaders. He argues that although the Cherokees disagreed in regard to the rate of acculturation, the opposition to missionaries furthered the divide. “Anti-mission factionalism may, in the case of large, advanced tribes scatter over wide regions, be better understood as conflict over speed and degree of acculturation, particularly when a prominent group of well-to-do or nominally Christian mixed -bloods assert undue influence over political centralization.”²¹ White Path’s rebellion, according to McLoughlin, carried the agenda of “discarding of Christianity.”²² The missionaries viewed White Path and his followers as “the heathen-party,” while Christian Cherokees, Hicks and Ross led the successful conservative party. The perplexing question remains: how did the mixed-blood, Christian-conservative John Ross win over the full-blooded “heathens” and become the most famous leader of Cherokee “Traditionalists”?

It is through the evidence during White Path’s rebellion that scholars have reached the

²⁰ Robert K. Berkhofer, *Salvation and the Savage: An Analysis of Protestant Missions and American Indian Response, 1787-1862* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965).

²¹ William McLoughlin, “Cherokee Anti-Mission Sentiment 1824-1828,” *Ethnohistory* 21, no. 4 (Autumn, 1974): 361-370.

²² McLoughlin “Cherokee Anti-mission Sentiments,” 361.

conclusion that religion did in fact play a pertinent part in early Cherokee factionalism. White Path and his followers represented the “Traditionalists” of the Cherokee Nation and were deeply opposed to political centralization and acculturation. Letters from the upper town chiefs to Path Killer and Charles Hicks are the only evidence that remains of this rebellion. Christianity is the main subject of these letters. A leader in White Path’s Rebellion writes, “They are trying to do away with our common custom of meeting in our townhouse...it is our wish that the missionaries here should be moved back to Chickamauga to the religious society they belong to.”²³ The significance of the missionaries doing away with “common custom of meeting” exhibits the interconnected relationship of religion and politics in the Cherokee Nation. Hicks understood this clearly, because in his reply he notes,

the complaint appears to have risen in consequence of some of our people having joined the religious society there by reason of which they would not attend all night dances and drinking with them; the religion of which they had embraced forbids them to be at such places; and I am confident that the society to which they have joined do not forbid our people to exercise their publick authority which any of them may be vested with.²⁴

The local chiefs clearly conducted legitimate political meetings during these all night dances, and the absence of the new converts was a pressing issue. The letters to chief Charles Hicks, highlighted the importance of religion within the structure of acculturation.²⁵ McLoughlin recognized the importance of Christianity within factionalism, but because it was overlooked during the unification of 1827, he argued that it never came to fruition as a main source of tension.

The death of Charles Hicks was followed by the appointment of John Ross as principal chief. At approximately the same time, the infamous Andrew Jackson was elected president of

²³ McLoughlin, “Cherokee Anti-mission sentiment,” 368.

²⁴ McLoughlin, “Cherokee Anti-mission sentiment,” 369.

²⁵ McLoughlin, “Cherokee Anti-mission sentiment,” 361-370.

the United States. Ross convinced the rebelling “Traditionalists” that removal could only be avoided with support from whites that opposed Jackson. To appease the “Traditionalists”, Ross added a clause to the new constitution that ensured religious freedom.

Ultimately, the conflict was never rooted in pro-removal vs. anti-removal sentiments. At that point in history (1810-1828) the Cherokees who favored removal had already removed themselves (The Old Settlers). The majority of Cherokees in the East, “Traditionalists” and “Christians” alike, were opposed to removal. It was this commonality that allowed them to look past religious oppositions and combine forces against the United States. Christianity was highlighted as problematic simply because it was the main source of change in Etowah. As far as the traditionalist majority was concerned, acculturation was synonymous with Christianity. White Path’s movement did not necessarily fail. Rather, it helped shape the constitution to include a clause that protected religious freedom. The movement should be credited too for going beyond “religious freedom.” The amendment made to the Cherokee Constitution because of White Path’s Rebellion clearly illustrated the flexibility of Christianity in Cherokee culture.

Section 2 of Article 6 reads,

“The free exercise of religious worship and serving God without distinction, shall, forever, be enjoyed within the limits of this nation: provided that this liberty of conscience shall not be construed as to excuse acts of licentiousness or justify practices inconsistent with the peace or safety of this nation.”²⁶

Section 1 of the same article, however, tells a different story of the author’s intention, “No person who denies the being of a God or a future state of reward and punishment, shall hold any office in the civil department in this Nation.”²⁷ These two sections outlined the importance of not only a monotheistic religion, but one that supported the binary of good vs. bad and reward vs.

²⁶ Cherokee Nation Constitution, art 6, sec 2 (1839).

²⁷ Cherokee Nation Constitution, art. 6, sec 1 (1839).

punishment. Essentially, Cherokee “Christians” are forced to include or accept traditional practices without recourse, yet Cherokees are simultaneously required, by law, to accept the singular God mentioned in article two if they desired to hold office in the Nation. To understand the sway Christian principles held during the nation building process for the Cherokees we must first transform the way “Cherokee Christianity,” and “Traditionalism,” are viewed by scholars.

Cherokee Religion: The Conversion Myth

“Christianity—and the sense of hope, self-respect, self-discipline, and spiritual power that Christianity provided—served as a crucial revitalization movement in each of their crises.”²⁸

-William McLoughlin

To place Christianity at the center of nineteenth century Cherokee nationalism, we must redefine “Christian” to include the majority of Cherokee people. This is problematic when viewing Cherokee history through a binary of “Traditionalism” and “Christianity”. The syncretic state of theology during the nineteenth century was very complex. Furthermore, the act of transitioning from “traditional” religious practices to “Christian” religious practices cannot be explained with the term conversion. Linford Fisher unveils in his work the problematic direction scholarship has taken in regard to the topic of “Native conversions” and digs into the multifaceted effects Christianity and missionary work had on the social, political, and economical lives of Native Americans. Actual conversion to Christianity, as defined by Anglo-American missionaries, never really took place among the Cherokee, instead, a hybrid version of Christianity was invented. “The sudden trope of conversion,” argues Fischer, “obscures the far

²⁸ McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Christianity*. 17.

more interesting ongoing processes of religious engagement and cultural change.”²⁹ Conversion is a complex process. For Cherokee people in the nineteenth century it did not happen overnight, nor did it result in a specific transformation of souls that can be universally labeled as “Christian.”

Christianity had many faces when introduced to the Cherokee Nation. The idea that the Cherokees interpreted Christianity the way Europeans and colonists perceived Christianity is not only ethnocentric, it clouds the historical perspective of Cherokee identity. When Cherokee became a written language, a new Christianity was created through the process of translation and interpretation. Only in translation could the written word of God be understood by monolingual Cherokee speakers. Alan Kilpatrick analyzed the theological concepts of Cherokee Christianity and dissected the “psycholinguistic process of becoming theologically literate on part of Native Americans” in his article called, “Cherokee Theological Concepts.”³⁰ Kilpatrick’s fascinating overview of how language was altered to accommodate already existing Cherokee beliefs proves that Christianity was not a zero sum game for the Cherokee. For example, the very word “Christian” translates as “tsu: nane’l(o)di,” which means “to strive to attain, they.” The monolingual Cherokee speakers would have simply translated “Christian” as a word that has no absolute or fixed final position. In addition, the concept of striving toward the greater good coincided with their traditional views. “Cherokee “Traditionalists”, then as now, seem to make little distinction between their involvement with esoteric forms of magic and their dutiful participation in the worship of Christian faith.”³¹ Baptism is another great example Kilpatrick presented. For many denominations, baptism was the key factor in actual conversion.

²⁹ Fisher, *The Indian Great Awakening*, 67.

³⁰ Alan Kilpatrick, “A note on Cherokee Theological Concepts.” *American Indian Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (Summer, 1995): 389-405.

³¹ Kilpatrick, 396.

Not only did baptism denote the conversion of a soul, it gauged the success of missionaries. Baptism did not hold the same meaning to the Cherokee. Traditional Cherokee beliefs had a similar ceremony that involved purification known as amo':hi atsv":sdi ("water to go and return to, one").³² Therefore, baptism cannot be held as a valid indicator of conversion. These two examples are significant enough to disprove a simplistic or Euro-centric understanding of the conversion process. The Cherokee people did not have to discard traditionalism to accept Christianity. In addition, Kilpatrick's findings coupled with the language of article VI in the 1839 Cherokee Constitution also refutes simplified conversion.

Ultimately, Christianity in the Cherokee Nation became an amalgamation of values that would benefit the Cherokee people. Cherokees were aware of their social disadvantages in relation to the U.S. citizens. This acknowledgement encouraged change in their political and social identities. Assimilation via a unique version of Christianity ironically became the best way to maintain any sort of autonomy.

English Christian beliefs were not the only ideas infused into Cherokee religion. Slavery was a reality for Cherokees. The overlap of cultures, Native American and enslaved African was unique. For example, the Cherokee children played sports with and attended dances with enslaved black children. Yet, the cruelty of European treatment of slaves was reflected by the actions of Cherokee slaveholders on both the women of the household and the slaves. Despite Cherokee acceptance of slavery, however, the relationship between Cherokees and their slaves differed greatly from the relationship of white elite Southerners and their slaves. The Cherokee people undeniably had a common thread with their slaves. White Americans treated both groups

³² Kilpatrick, 398.

as inferiors. Cherokees and their Afro-Cherokee kin, “envisioned a conjoined liberation.”³³ To some extent, together the slaves, Afro-Cherokees and Cherokees formed a cohesive society. The relationships African American slaves held with their Native American masters allowed for a sense of belonging within the Cherokee Nation. Christianity was the glue that ultimately bonded this relationship.

Traditional methods of worship included meetings and revivals that functioned as religious, political and social gatherings. These meetings, like the ones mentioned in White Path’s Rebellion, are essential to understanding Cherokee Christianity. Eventually, these meetings included entire communities, slaves, Indians, and whites together. Because the Baptists were more tolerant of such gatherings, the relationship between Evan Jones, prominent Baptist missionary to the Cherokees, and the “Traditionalists” can be better understood. Ultimately, a coalescent society that included African, European, and Indian culture was formed and labeled “Christian.”

The main concept that should be adopted here is that Christianity and Cherokee Traditionalism were not necessarily opposing sides of a binary. It insults the very nature of Cherokee identity to label Cherokee Christianity anything other than Christian. To identify the practice of Cherokee traditionalism within the construct of Christianity as “syncretic,” is as problematic as labeling it folk religion. The Cherokee of the nineteenth century believed themselves to be fully Christianized, as is evidenced through their nation’s educational and political structures.

³³ Tiya Miles, *The House on Diamond Hill: A Cherokee Plantation Story* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 5.

Spreading the Word: Literacy and Education in the Cherokee Nation

“Religion, Morality and Knowledge being necessary for good government, the preservation, liberty and happiness of all the people, schools and all means of educations shall be forever encouraged in this nation.”³⁴

-Cherokee National Council

According to the early missionaries, language was the most significant obstacle in fulfilling their goal of fully converting the souls of the Cherokee people. When adhering to the missionary-focused perception of Cherokee history, “the gospel and Christian civilization could not be carried over to the Indians except by using the English language.”³⁵ Schools were quickly established to teach English so that the Cherokee might fully understand the Trinity.³⁶ Christianity, as far as the missionaries were concerned, was essentially lost in translation to the Cherokee. This highlighted the importance of the Cherokee having a written language of their own.

A man by the name of George Guess soon changed the missionary agenda. Guess, also known as Sequoyah, a monolingual Cherokee invented syllabry to enhance Cherokee life. Sequoyah drew his inspiration from Moravian missionaries as early as 1809. He then devoted the next 15 years of his life to making a “talking leaf for the Cherokees.”³⁷ One of his first initiatives was translating the Christian Bible. Along with spreading the word of God, written

³⁴ John L. Adair, *Compiled Laws of the Cherokee Nation by Cherokee Nation* (Tahlequah, OK: I.T., National Advocate Print, 1881) <https://archive.org>.

³⁵ Henry S. Babcock and John Y. Bryce, *History of Methodism in Oklahoma: Story of the Indian Mission Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (Oklahoma City: Times Journal Publishing Company, 1937).

³⁶ Robert K. Berkhofer Jr., *Salvation and the Savage: An Analysis of Protestant Missions and American Indian Response, 1787-1862* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 32.

³⁷ John B. Davis, “The Life and Work of Sequoyah.” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 8, no. 2 (June 1930):149-178.

Cherokee prompted the creation of a mass print culture, including newspapers such as the *Cherokee Phoenix* and the *Cherokee Advocate*. Sequoyah's invention not only made the spread of Christian principals possible, it also allowed for a genuine interpretation of Christian principals as they would apply in the Cherokee cultural sphere.

A few short years after Sequoyah invented a written language for the Cherokee people, the National Council issued an act that ordered literate Cherokees to create a paper that would inspire the Cherokee people to be a unified nation. In addition to a national newspaper, the Cherokee National Council appointed its editor as an elected, paid, position of the Cherokee Nation. *The Cherokee Phoenix*, the first paper in the Cherokee Nation, was established in 1827. The first paper issued a prospectus written by the editor, Elias Boudinot, included specifically religious language:

We would now commit our feeble efforts to the good will and indulgence of the public, praying that God will attend them with his blessings, and hoping for that happy period, when all the Indian tribes of America shall arise, Phoenix-like, from their ashes, and when the terms "Indian depredations," "war whoop" scalping-knife," and the like shall become obsolete and ferv[o]r be buried deep underground.³⁸

The paper was filled with nationalist sentiments, "as the Phoenix is a national newspaper, we shall feel ourselves bound to devote it to national purposes."³⁹ In addition to laws and public documents, the paper was flooded with Christian thought. Boudinot makes no qualms about Christianity being part of the publication; he instead assured the readers the varying types of Christianity would not be disputed in the paper, indicating the audience of the *Phoenix* was unanimously Christian.

³⁸ Henry T. Malone, "The Cherokee Phoenix: Supreme Expression of Cherokee Nationalism," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (Sept 1950).

³⁹ Elias Boudinot, letter to the public regarding the *Phoenix* in *Cherokee Editor, The Writings of Elias Boudinot* edited by Theda Perdue (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983).

We shall avoid as much as possible, controversy on disputed doctrinal points in religion...yet we conscientiously think, and in this thought we are supported by men of judgement that it would be injudicious, perhaps highly pernicious, to introduce to this people the various minor differences of “Christians”. Our object is not sectarian.⁴⁰

The Cherokee Constitution, correspondence with the U.S. government, and a letter from Thomas Jefferson encouraging the Cherokee people to form a republic were all included in the first issue. The Cherokees believed the printed word in native Cherokee tongue was the foundation of Cherokee progression.

The *Phoenix* would not have been possible without the help of Samuel Austin Worcester, missionary for the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM). Worcester was highly involved in the publication of the newspaper and acted as a mentor and confidant for Boudinot. With two devoted Christian men issuing each paper, it necessarily included Christian sentiments and ideals. Henry Malone described the *Cherokee Phoenix* as, “a religious journal in some respects. It also, however, like any newspaper of today, chronicled more or less routine events in Cherokee life reflecting the religious influence.”⁴¹

Ultimately, the *Cherokee Phoenix* was purposed to serve as proof of progress in the Cherokee Nation. It meant to illustrate to the U.S. government that the Cherokee people were advancing in religion, education, and other aspects of “civilized” life. It was also used to sway the Cherokee people to adopt and add specific aspects of the “white-man’s” ways to their own lives. A central ideology of what it meant to be Cherokee was created and distributed to the Cherokee people via print. Even then, as early as 1827, Christianity laid the foundation of what it meant to be a Cherokee nationalist. Due to lack of funding the *Cherokee Phoenix* stopped in

⁴⁰ Perdue, *Cherokee Editor*, 92.

⁴¹ Malone, “The Cherokee Phoenix,” 172.

1837. Removal and the murder of Elias Boudinot made it impossible for the *Phoenix* to continue publication.⁴²

Removal did not deter Cherokee nationalism. If anything, it created a fervor that inspired the Cherokees to prove their worth as an independent Nation. In 1844 another national paper commenced. It was called *The Cherokee Advocate*. *The Cherokee Advocate* motto: “Our Rights, Our Country, Our Race,” inspired Cherokee People to self-govern. Like the *Phoenix* it was printed in Cherokee and English, and the editor of the *Advocate* was an elected position of the National Council. Aside from the national act that ensured funding would come from the Cherokee government, the editor of the advocate viewed the paper as a national organ and was very ardent in presenting it as such. In an article titled “The ‘Advocates’ Mission” *Advocate* editor W.P. Boudinot states,

The time has come for one thing to be said, and with emphasis... This journal is made the National “Organ” by operation of Cherokee law. As such, it must be the mouth-piece of the current Administration, and should show how the people regard, or should regard, all questions of consequence demanding popular action... The Advocate is published at the Nation’s expense; the Advocate man is paid to express the Nation’s views and to defend the Nation’s rights.⁴³

The *Cherokee Advocate* initially lasted from 1844-1853. It was revitalized in 1870. The editor was William Penn Boudinot, a son of Elias Boudinot. The *Advocate* was littered with Christian ideology and fully embraced the acceptance of the Cherokee Nation as a “Christian Nation.” A “scriptural enigma” was printed in the paper and letters to the editor often included stories of grace. One in particular was titled “A WARNING TO YOUNG MEN” in this letter a young man described his desire to renew his relationship with God and take advantage of the

⁴² Malone, “The Cherokee Phoenix,” 170.

⁴³ *Cherokee Advocate* (Tahlequah, OK) October 1849.

spring season as a time of change.⁴⁴ Educating the Cherokee people in their native tongue via the *Cherokee Phoenix* and *Advocate*'s Christian motivated texts were not the only avenue for the spread of Cherokee nationalism. Formal education was also a major tool used by the Cherokee government to shape their Christian Nation.

As a colonial construct, education was one of the most ironic aspects of Cherokee autonomy. Schools were first introduced to the Cherokee nation by Moravian missionaries. In fact, Cherokees welcomed the missionaries and even asked for their presence so that their children might be educated. Ultimately, these schools became the source of tension between lower and upper town chiefs. The missionaries were not there to simply educate Cherokee children. They were on a mission to convert the "heathens" of Cherokee country. It was not until the missionaries opened schools in Cherokee country that the local chiefs started to relate cultural changes to religion. This disruption is what eventually led to what we know as White Path's Rebellion. Following the War of 1812 the relationship between Cherokees and U.S. was restructured because of the United States' more prominent desire to occupy Indian Territory. In 1819 Congress passed the "Civilization Act" that provided money for missionary societies to open schools in Cherokee Country (and other Indian territories). The ABCFM and the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions (BBFM) infiltrated Cherokee Country in the 1820's and followed them on the journey west. The representatives of each mission, Samuel Worcester for the ABCFM and Evan Jones for the BBFM, played major roles in Cherokee nationalism.⁴⁵

The missions and schools built primarily by the ABCFM and the BBFM eventually evolved to become national schools, or schools funded primarily by the Cherokee Nation.

⁴⁴ *Cherokee Advocate* (Tahlequah, OK) April 18th, 1864.

⁴⁵ McLoughlin, *The Cherokees and Christianity*, 60.

Education became an essential part of Cherokee national culture and was a key source of pride in Cherokee identity. By 1842 the Cherokee Nation had opened its first public school and by 1843 eleven schools were established. The following year seven more were instituted and by 1847 there were twenty-one primary schools distributed among the eight districts of Indian Territory, current day Oklahoma.⁴⁶ The Cherokees were renowned educators. Education became one of the main aspects of Cherokee nationalism and Cherokee pride. The minutes of a National Council Meeting published in the 1889 *Advocate* states,

What is necessary for people to know when arrived at maturity is provided by law to be taught in our common and high schools at an age when people can be taught. "Train up a child in the way he should go." Etc. That is what public schools supported at the public expense are for.⁴⁷

Education, like all other aspects of Cherokee nationalism, was not secular. Christianity was a major part of the school day and ten of the twenty-one Cherokee schools were taught by missionaries.⁴⁸ In the 3rd annual message from Hon. J. B. Mayes (principal chief of the Cherokee Nation) Mayes states,

The Cherokees can never afford to decrease, but must increase, the means of education which will eventually be their greatest source of protection against the tidal wave of the Anglo-Saxon race that seem destined to sweep over the entire American Continent. Let the Cherokee people learn to speak correctly the English language. Let their sacred rights be recorded not only in their history, but in the eloquence, music and poetry that come from the Indian himself...Let this work continue until every Cherokee will not only know his rights, but will be able to stand up and defend themselves before an enlightened world.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ James G. McCullagh, *The Teachers of the Cherokee Nation Public Schools 1870-1907* (Tahlequah, OK: Cherokee Heritage Press, 2012).

⁴⁷ *Cherokee Advocate* (Tahlequah, OK), October 1889.

⁴⁸ McCullagh, *The Teachers of the Cherokee Nation Public Schools*, 10.

⁴⁹ *Cherokee Advocate* (Tahlequah, OK), November, 6 1889.

Developing a proprietary language facilitated the adoption of “foreign” cultural concepts and dogma. Education and literacy were seen as strategically important for cultural identity and autonomy.

Two seminaries, for males and females, respectively, were planned for in the 1840’s and established by 1851. In 1844, a time capsule of sorts was placed in the original building of the Cherokee Female Seminary. It contained a pamphlet of Cherokee Laws, a recent newspaper, a spelling book, almanac, and a copy of the Holy Scriptures in Cherokee. The scripture is a testament to the importance of Christianity in Cherokee National Schools. The number one, official rule of the Female Seminary was that, “all students are required to attend chapel services.”⁵⁰ In addition to the heavy missionary influence, an act was added to the Cherokee Constitution that required any applicant for employment as a teacher to submit, “a declaration of his belief in the truth of the Christian religion and a credible certificate of good moral character, signed by at least three persons of his acquaintance.”⁵¹ Clearly, Christian influence was important to the Cherokee National Council. The National Council, however, was made of mixed-blood, Cherokee elites.

The National Council’s ultimate goal was for the Cherokees to teach in their own schools. By 1856, eighteen of the twenty-one schools did just that. The requirements involving religion did not falter. Rather than the “Traditionalist” majority defying the Christian religion, they became a part of it as they perceived the education of their people to be a necessary addition to their culture.⁵² By 1884, the Cherokee Nation had a population of 22,000. Of those 22,000 over half could read, and two-thirds could speak English. There were 75 schools and 64

⁵⁰ R. Halliburton Jr., “Northeastern’s Seminary Hall,” *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* L1, no. 4 (Winter 1973-74): 391-398.

⁵¹ Adair, *Compiled Laws of the Cherokee Nation*.

⁵² Adair, *Compiled Laws of the Cherokee Nation*.

churches. Indian Schools exhibit a direct example of Linford Fischer’s “conversion over time” theory. The pupils in Cherokee Nation schools naturally ended up practicing what some have labeled “a syncretic version of Christianity,” but it was a version of Christianity nonetheless.



Cherokee Female Seminary- T

Ultimately, the Cherokee nation viewed their education system as a key component in their ability to govern themselves successfully. In an address to the U.S. congress in 1896, the Cherokee National Council stated,

He[the Cherokee] believes in common education...Now with a population of thirty thousand Cherokees, we have over one hundred common schools, running nine months in the year, with capable, competent teachers, generally comfortable school-houses, where all of necessary appliances, books, and c., are supplied by the Cherokee Nation; a male and a female college of brick and stone, at a cost of exceeding each over one hundred fifty thousand dollars, afford to the youth of both sexes an opportunity for higher education. The several missionary societies have not less than fifteen or twenty schools

in the various parts of our country, encouraged by generous gifts of land upon the part of the Cherokees.⁵³

It is apparent that the Cherokee nation was not only proud of their accommodated culture, they made a point to build physical structures that proved their worth and effort. Common education implemented and funded by the Cherokee national government was considered (by the Cherokee people as seen in the address above) to be one of their greatest national accomplishments. The Cherokees felt as if they had gone beyond successfully mimicking American culture. They believed they had surpassed most states concerning education, literacy, and making information available to their public. Christian national sentiments were spread in a uniquely Cherokee fashion thanks to a written language, national newspapers, and common education.

⁵³ *Letter of the Principal Chief and Delegation of the Cherokee Nation to the United States with Reference to Conditions in the Cherokee Nation* (Washington D.C.: Gibson Bros Printers and Bookbinders, 1986).

The Cherokee Leaders and Their Missionaries: A closer look at the relationship between Cherokee leaders and the missionaries who inhabited Cherokee Country and Indian Territory

“Those who are engaged for the good of the Indians of every tribe , and who pray that salvation, peace, and the comforts of civilized life may be extended to every Indian fire side on this continent will consider us co-workers together in their benevolent labors.”⁵⁴

-Elias Boudinot

The leaders of the Cherokee Nation in the nineteenth century were fully immersed in missionary culture. Likewise, the missionaries living and thriving in Cherokee Country and Indian Territory were also fully immersed in Cherokee culture. Scholars have attributed the creation of a dichotomy between missionaries and Indians to colonial missionaries. Neil Salisbury touches on this subject in his article “Embracing Ambiguity.” He claims missionaries were responsible for a divide in Indian culture between converted Christians and non-Christians. Other scholars have also argued that missionaries created a dichotomy in Indian culture. Historians, who rely so often on missionary writings, continue to fall into the same trap. I believe historians have created this divide. The Christian/non-Christian dichotomy must be discarded in order to understand the relationship between Cherokee leaders and their missionaries. The following section will provide evidence that shows Evan Jones and Samuel Worcester did not hold the Cherokees hostage to the binary of Christian vs. non-Christian. Their successes had little to do with conversion. I have yet to find evidence that suggests Evan Jones or Samuel Worcester viewed non-converted Cherokees as non-Christian. Once conversion is accepted as a myth, the perspective of a history we already know is changed.

⁵⁴ *Cherokee Phoenix* (New Echota, Cherokee Nation) Feb 21, 1828 found in *Cherokee Editor, The Writings of Elias Boudinot*, edited by Theda Perdue (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983) 92.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the Cherokee people, located in rural Georgia and Tennessee, welcomed Christian missionaries to live with them. Men who came to the Cherokee Nation to spread the “good word,” such as Evan Jones and Samuel Worcester, became respected advisors to the Cherokee Nation’s leaders. It was through their Christian teachings and denomination-specific preaching styles that the leaders of the Cherokee Nation were able to rally disparate Cherokees and unite them under one government. The evolution of politics in the Cherokee Nation from 1807-1907 was heavily influenced not only by missionaries, but by mixed-blood and full-blood Christian leaders. These gentlemen were not just influential in the Cherokee Nation; they were prominent members of southern society at large.

It would be unfair to Cherokee leaders of the nineteenth century to solely give credit for Cherokee education and politics to the missionaries living in Cherokee country. It is, however, impossible to tell the history of the Cherokee Nation and exclude missionary influence on Cherokee political culture. The history of two missionaries, Evan Jones and Samuel Worcester, demonstrate how religious culture was used to counter diverse political thought and help create a united nation for the Cherokee people. A diverse platform of varying Christianity-based religious beliefs was maintained as a part of Cherokee nationalism throughout the nineteenth century. The missionaries assigned to the Cherokee Nation became so involved in Cherokee life that they hardly fit the stereotypes of their specific missions. They essentially became a part of Cherokee culture and adapted their own belief system to fit their new environments.

Missionaries were living in Cherokee society and fully immersed in Cherokee culture for decades before Jones and Worcester arrived in Cherokee Country. Both Evan Jones and Samuel Worcester spent the majority of their lives with the Cherokee people. Their children, life-long

citizens of the Cherokee nation, continued their parents' missions after their deaths. McLoughlin was aware of the unique relationship between these missionaries and the Cherokee people. In his later work he goes on to state, "While the missionaries tried to remain politically neutral, they were inevitably caught up in conflict. Ethno-historians need to define this relationship more clearly, particularly for large advanced tribes scattered over wide areas with sophisticated mixed blood leaders."⁵⁵ The relationship between missionaries and tribal leaders that McLoughlin referenced must be viewed as an exchange. The Cherokees and the Cherokee missionaries created a community based on an amalgamation of cultures. Nationalism in the Cherokee Nation was centered on a combination of Euro-centric Christian ideals and traditional Cherokee values.

These missionaries were introduced to Cherokee country where an anti-mission sentiment permeated through much of society. The white missionaries, however, were essential for the Cherokee fight against removal. It is important to recognize that before the Act of Unity in July, 1827, there were certainly anti-mission sentiments, but the majority faction who opposed the infiltration of missionaries into Cherokee society overlooked their involvement for the better of the nation. Members of White Path's Rebellion feared that missionaries would extirpate Cherokee culture. This fear highlights how influential missionary work was in the Cherokee Nation. Ironically, some saw acculturation as their only hope for autonomy and cultural preservation. Christian missionaries were eager to aid Cherokees in transforming their society and therefore became key players in the acculturation and accommodation of Cherokee political culture.

Evan Jones has long been considered the most successful missionary of the Cherokee Nation. The most prominent scholar on this subject, William McLoughlin, created a checklist

⁵⁵ McLoughlin, "Anti-mission sentiments," 364.

for a missionary to be successful. His checklist included the following: Showed respect and equality to those being served, rather than being ethnocentric and paternalistic. Learned the language and customs of those being served. Created a ministry that allows for the people being served to serve themselves. Finally, led by example.⁵⁶ It seems, however, that the most important key to a missionary's success in the Cherokee Nation was left out in his analysis; meddle in politics. As McLoughlin goes on to state in his text *Cherokees and Christianity*, "The great failure of most nineteenth century Christian missionaries was...they were more concerned to save souls one by one than to save the corporate soul of the tribes to which they ministered."⁵⁷ This was not the case for Evan Jones or Sam Worcester. It was especially untrue for the recorded twenty Native Baptist preachers and evangelists, nine of which were ordained pastors.⁵⁸

Jones was a Baptist who trained and ordained Cherokees between the years of 1821 and 1872. Traditionally, the Baptist mission sentiments involved active participation from the Cherokees themselves. It was encouraged by Baptist missionaries for Cherokee men to become ordained ministers and spread the word to their own people. Evan Jones is credited as being the most successful missionary in Cherokee country because of this trait. The unorthodox style Jones used to spread the word of the Christian God allowed Cherokees to evangelize themselves. The men he trained became respected leaders within the Cherokee Nation. Jones' worked directly with the full-blood majority, also known as the "traditionalist." He was a dear friend, advisor, and sometimes secretary to Chief John Ross. Jones gathered with the Aquohee people at the church of Peter Oganaya on June 13, 1838 and with the Aquohee Cherokees, he awaited

⁵⁶ McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Christianity*, 33.

⁵⁷ McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Christianity*, 33.

⁵⁸ McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Christianity*, 84.

the soldiers escort on the trail of tears.⁵⁹ William McLoughlin even credits Evan Jones for the institution and successes of the Cherokee Ketoowah Society.⁶⁰ The Baptists allowed full-blooded, uneducated Cherokees to become ministers, therefore Cherokees were able to define Christianity to suit their own cultural experience.⁶¹ Jones' relationship with John Ross coupled with his preaching style is ultimately why he has been viewed as the most successful missionary to the Cherokees.

Samuel Worcester was a Congregationalist whose style for missions followed a more regimented pattern than his Baptist counterpart. He has received less attention than Jones in scholarly literature. Education was essential to be ordained as a Congregationalist pastor and the social restrictions that surrounded Congregationalism made it perceivably difficult for Cherokees to make it their own. There were, however, Cherokee Congregationalists who managed to do just that. John Ridge and Elias Boudinot are great examples of Congregationalist Cherokees who never compromised their Cherokee patriotism in light of their religion.

Worcester was Elias Boudinot's right hand man. Boudinot's history is often told as a story of betrayal and tragedy, as recently articulated by John Demos. Because of this, his immense influence on Cherokee National sentiments are sometimes overlooked. Boudinot was the editor of the first Cherokee newspaper, and that paper, *The Cherokee Phoenix*, would never have made it to print if it were not for Samuel Worcester.⁶² Worcester also meddled heavily in Cherokee politics and was even arrested and jailed on behalf of the Cherokee people for refusal

⁵⁹ Will Chavez, "Aquohee Cherokees' Trail of Tears Journey Shared," *Cherokee Phoenix* (Tahlequah, OK) May 2014.

⁶⁰ Found in McLoughlin *Cherokees and Christianity*. The Keetoowah Society is a complicated organization that is now recognized as a separate sovereign nation than the Cherokee Nation. Evan Jones certainly did not help to organize this society. The Keetoowahs claim to have existed since the beginning of time. I will explain in more detail in my conclusion.

⁶¹ McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Christianity*, 125.

⁶² The ABCFM funded the first Cherokee press, Worcester worked to get the ABCFM to furnish a press with the Cherokee syllabary.

to adhere to the strict policy Georgia placed on whites in Cherokee Country during the 1830s.⁶³ Worcester was also affiliated with George Guess, also known as Sequoyah. Worcester played a key role in translating English texts, such as the Holy Bible, to the written language Guess invented.

Rather than focusing on the differences between the two factions that the above men helped to form and lead, I would like to reiterate their main similarity: John Ross' traditionalist party and the treaty party led by John Ridge were both under the advisement of Christian missionaries. Their political interactions with the United States always involved these missionaries. All of the Cherokees, "Traditionalist" and "Christian" alike, had great respect and admiration for the Christian missionaries who defended their cause for sovereignty. "Christianity—and the sense of hope, self-respect, self-discipline, and spiritual power that Christianity provided—served as a crucial revitalization movement in each of their crises," according to McLoughlin.⁶⁴

John Ross and his party of "Traditionalists" are the primary example historians have used to prove the successes of Evan Jones. Theda Perdue, another prominent Cherokee scholar praises Ross saying, "Ross represented "Traditionalists" and did so without exerting any pressure on them to change their beliefs or their way of life."⁶⁵ Her main defense for this claim is his association with Evan Jones and the preaching style used by Baptist during that time. Chief Ross and John Jones were not full bloods yet they represented full blooded Cherokees. It could be

⁶³ Worcester v. State of GA, 31 U.S. 515 (1832) <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com>.

Georgia's laws over Cherokee territory were illegal and unconstitutional. Samuel Worcester brought the controversial laws to the Supreme court after he was arrested for residing in Cherokee Country without adhering to Georgia state law. The Supreme Court ruled that the Cherokee Nation had sovereign status, however, Jackson refused to enforce the ruling in favor of the Cherokees

⁶⁴ McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Christianity*.

⁶⁵ Perdue, *Cherokee Editor*, 33.

argued that his affiliation with the Baptist church allowed the Cherokee “Traditionalists” freedom of religion, even though it was within the construct of the Christian religion.

Ross is commonly known as the “Chief of the Cherokee Nation” from 1828 until his death in 1866. Cherokee political history, however, tells a different story. Nationhood was new to the Cherokee people and although the idea of unity was popular, there remained a constant struggle to actually coalesce the Cherokee people. The traditional clan-based system did not highlight a need for centralized government. The Cherokee clans were essentially different factions of the tribe. Interactions with the U.S. changed that dynamic. The U.S. perceived the Cherokee as a unified group, and Cherokee leaders recognized the need to unify to manage their relationship with the U.S. This turning point in Cherokee history is pertinent for understanding the viewpoint of a nineteenth-century Cherokee citizen. It is likely that the transition from local chiefs to a singular chief was not universally accepted, at least not immediately. To have varying factions in the tribe with different leadership was not unusual. Once the veil over two opposing factions is lifted, the true relationship between Cherokee leaders and missionaries and the majority “Traditionalists” they interacted with can be revealed.

John Ridge, son of Major Ridge, a respected chief, was certainly regarded as a leader not only in Cherokee Country, but in the United States. Along with Elias Boudinot, Ridge was educated at the Foreign Mission School in Cornwall Connecticut. John Demos points out in his most recent work the significance these two leaders had in the Cherokee Nation. Elias Boudinot and John Ridge lived to see the Cherokee Nation succeed in their struggle for autonomy. They believed, not unlike John Ross, that acculturation was inevitable. Removal, however, would secure property for the Cherokee to thrive and this is where Ridge and Boudinot’s beliefs

differed with the Ross Party. The Cherokee newspaper and educational system are greatly owed to these leaders. Unfortunately, their tragic ending is what primarily lives on in history.⁶⁶

Historians hold White Path's Rebellion as the key factor for the political split in the Cherokee Nation. However, the events that took place from 1827 to 1839 weigh more heavily on Cherokee faction history than do the happenings of White Path's Rebellion. The leaders of the nation, which included missionaries, drove the Cherokee people into political parties. At the time of Boudinot's death Samuel Worcester issued the statement, "To me he was a dear friend, a most intimate companion and a valued helper."⁶⁷ The leaders of both the Ridge Party and the Ross Party aided the two most successful missionaries in Cherokee history with their mission of Christianizing the Cherokee people.

Public Statements: Nationalism and Religion Expressed through Public Statements

The Cherokee people and leaders publicly expressed Christian sentiments throughout the nineteenth century. The Cherokee worked tirelessly to unite under a Christian government and adhere to the Christian standards set by the U.S. for civilization. The Cherokees used respected American citizens to speak on their behalf, so that their voices may be heard louder. John Ross sought out John Howard Payne, a well-known actor, and songwriter of his time who had shown interest in the Cherokee cause. He invited Payne to Cherokee country and as a result, Payne penned "A Letter to his Countrymen." The Cherokee trusted the U.S. government, in part because of their claim to be Christian. "Yes! And you are honest. You are Christians."⁶⁸ The

⁶⁶ John Demos, *The Heathen School: A Story of Hope and Betrayal in the Age of the Early Republic*, (New York: Knopf, 2014), 221-245.

⁶⁷ Will Chavez, *Cherokee Phoenix*, (Tahlequah, OK) July 2014.

⁶⁸ John Howard Payne, *John Howard Payne to His Countrymen*. Edited by Clemens de Baillou, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1961), 52.

Cherokee were sincere in their plea with the U.S. regarding Christian principles. The Cherokee were proud to have been acculturated. John Ross used Payne to send that message to the U.S.,

They would not be confounded with other tribes, because they have made greater advances in civilization and they dread the influence around them of such habits as those from which they are just emerging, because they know the human mind is ever in motion, that if it does not go forward, it goes back, and they would qualify themselves hereafter to improve their brethren, not place themselves where even their own power and ambition to improve may be paralyzed by the influences of envy, idleness, ignorance and prejudice.⁶⁹

Payne goes on to plea for the Cherokees,

A nation asks you to join with it in imploring the Universal God—a nation, to whom that God has been but newly revealed, but who now looks to Him as their Hope in desolation. Some of you have said we were of the wanderers of that peculiar people whence true religion sprang. If it be so, imagine how glorious the effort to secure those wanderers a home, and such a home as may realize the bright predictions which still exist unclaimed, for the lost race of Israel.⁷⁰

The belief that the Cherokees were one of the lost tribes of Israel is a great example of the religious undertones that permeated the Cherokee nationhood and unity. The Cherokee wished to express to the U.S. they were united under the same God that hypothetically united the U.S. They were essentially using their religious kinship to humanize their tribe to the American public in hopes that it would keep them from losing their sovereignty.

Lewis Downing, a full blooded Cherokee and ordained Baptist minister, is credited for bringing peace between the full bloods and the mixed bloods. He became Chief after Ross's death in 1866. Downing worked to unite the people of the Cherokee Nation by taking the focus away from blood politics. Despite the factions that divided them, Downing tried to inspire and unite Indians living in Indian Territory through evangelistic sermons and speeches.

⁶⁹ Payne, 59.

⁷⁰ Payne, 60.

Amid the general decay of Indian Nations...the five nations of the Indian Territory have not only survived but increased in numbers—accumulated property—advanced in civilization, adopted the Christian religion, and are now building churches and school houses...All this prosperity under God and His gospel, we owe to our separate national existence.⁷¹

Here, Downing made clear the Cherokee were interested in separating themselves from the United States and uniting as a Christian people. By 1866, five mission organizations found a home in Indian Territory. The prominent members of Cherokee society that attended and supported these missions left their notion of a divided nation behind and embraced unity and solidarity through Christianity.

The *Cherokee Advocate* is littered with public statements from citizens and high standing officials. In the 3rd annual message from Hon. J. B. Mayes (principal chief of the Cherokee Nation) published in the *Advocate*, regarding the sale of land to the “white men”

we must acknowledge that the God of the white man is our God and has, in his mercy, been on the side of the Indian; that He in his wisdom has not only protected us as a nation of people in the ownership of our lands and in the right of self-government but he has caused it to rain upon our land and it has brought forth bountiful harvests for the subsistence of our people.⁷²

Mayes sought to humanize his people and use Christianity to validate their successes as a nation.

In doing so, he presented prototypical example of how Christianity was used to assert Cherokee autonomy and nationalist sentiments. A few months later, Chief Hayes published this 1889

Thanksgiving proclamation:

As a Christian Nation of people, it is but meet⁷³ that the Cherokee people should give thanks to the Christian’s God for his continued protection of our tribe in the enjoyment of their government and homes...It is but proper that we, as a nation, should pause and give earnest thanks to God that we have been permitted to live in the enjoyment of this life, and the peace and prosperity that surrounds us. Now, therefore, I, J.B. Mayes, Principal

⁷¹ Lewis Downing, in McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Christianity*, 308.

⁷² *Cherokee Advocate* (Tahlequah, OK) November 6, 1889.

⁷³ Unsure if this was a typo in the paper, but this is how it clearly reads in the November 6, 1889 issue of the *Cherokee Advocate*.

Chief of the Cherokee Nation, do issue this, my proclamation, to the Cherokee People, asking that you set apart Thursday the 28th Day of November as a day of Thanksgiving, that you assemble at your usual places of worship and give thanks to God and beseech Him to bless us once more, and shield us from the dangers that surround us, and earnestly ask him to let us live, as other Nations and States around us, in the full enjoyment of the gifts that he has given us.⁷⁴

There is no doubt that the Cherokee Nation, led by such ardent Christian men relied on Christianity for hope in uniting their divided nation and maintaining autonomy from the U.S. This attempt ironically involved adoption of U.S. traditions and customs in order to display that the Cherokee were capable of “modern day” civilities.

In a letter to the Congress of the United States from the Principal Chief and Delegation of the Cherokee Nation in 1896 the delegates pled for sovereignty and the very life of their nation by expressing their national responsibility for mission work,

To these earnest Christian worker in our midst we also appeal, in our time of extremity for national existence, to assist us in refuting the false charges made with no other motive, we believe, than to induce Congress to withdraw its powerful protection from us, that we might become easy prey of unscrupulous avarice and greed, as the hungry beast devoured his milder companion of the forest. These religious denominations among us, who brought to us the beautiful Christian religion, who witnessed the sowing of its seeds and now behold its plant of vigorous growth in the full bearing of its fruits, can bear us witness of the many false charges of retrogression, immorality, lawlessness, and crime among the Cherokees... Churches are everywhere organized throughout our land, and their efficient powerful auxiliaries, the Sabbath schools, are conducted every Sunday in our various churches and school-houses, where the same lesson papers are used that your children study throughout this land and elsewhere...All of this, is done at no expense whatever to the United States, but entirely at the expense of the Cherokee Nation.⁷⁵

This particular statement is important because it emphasizes to the U.S. that the Cherokees have taken on the responsibility of Christianizing themselves as part of their nation building process.

The National delegates are very plainly calling on their fellow “Christians” for support in their

⁷⁴ *Cherokee Advocate* (Tahlequah, OK) November 20, 1889.

⁷⁵ *Letter of the Principal Chief and Delegation of the Cherokee Nation to the United States with Reference to Conditions in the Cherokee Nation* (Washington D.C.: Gibson Bros Printers and Bookbinders, 1986).

fight for sovereignty, and they are connecting national existence, corporate identity, and Christianity in direct ways.

CONCLUSION

During the attempted extirpation of indigenous people in the Americas, the Cherokees made an ironic effort to maintain their sovereignty by integrating specific aspects of colonial life into their communities. Assimilation into colonial life included the incorporation of missions and schools. Successful cultural preservation was less about exclusion and more about inclusion. This perception complicates the history of the political parties or factions that were created within the Cherokee Nation during the nineteenth century. Naturalization laws prohibited Cherokees from being U.S. citizens and forced them to maintain a form of legal “citizenship” of their own. The matrilineal clan-based system for tribal recognition was not working in the modern assimilated society the Cherokees had formed. In 1827, the Cherokees wrote a constitution. Paradoxically, the 1827 Constitution and the treaties that followed shaped a government in the Cherokee Nation that mirrored the government of the United States. The fight for autonomy was stifled by the Cherokees eagerness to assimilate.

The colonial period in the United States should be viewed as a period where diversity led to an amalgamation of cultures. The introduction of Christianity and the way it flourished in the Cherokee Nation serves as miniaturized example a coalescent society. By the Civil War era, the Cherokees were three generations deep into colonial submersion. A rigid dichotomy of “colonist” vs. “colonized” mentalities is used throughout Native American scholarship. The

colonial process cannot be bifurcated in such a simple manner, as some external “colonial” influences were largely welcomed and seen as beneficial additions to Cherokee culture.

In addition, the way that Cherokees viewed religion did not categorize religion in the same way that Anglo-Americans did. The complex question of Cherokee culture and anthropology cannot be answered until a clearer concept of what it meant to be a Cherokee “Christian” is accepted. Conversion is mythical. This paper is not intended to argue that notion; rather, I have embraced this concept and have applied it to faction history to better understand the role of Christianity in Cherokee Country and nationalist movements of the nineteenth century.

While redefining what it means to be a Cherokee “Christian”, it is important not to label Cherokee Christianity separate from “Christianity” in general. Much like the label “folk religion” separating Cherokee Christianity from Christianity as a whole diminishes the very core of Cherokee identity. The current Cherokee newspaper, the *Cherokee Phoenix*, is still printed both in Cherokee and English. Each issue contains a letter from the chief, titled, “Chief’s Perspective.” It is rare for one of these addresses to be absent of a direct reference to Christianity and in most cases Jesus Christ. The 2014 Christmas edition, specifically, opened with Chief Baker saying:

We celebrate Christmas to honor the birth of Jesus Christ and his life of service...while the Christmas season is...the perfect time to reflect on the year and see how we’ve helped our fellow man by emulating the virtues of Jesus Christ.—with God on our side, brighter tomorrows are inevitable. More than ever, it is important to share this message of hope and inspiration today. In that spirit of grace, let us reaffirm the values that define us as Cherokee.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Chief Bill Baker, “Chief’s Perspective: The Season of Hope,” *Cherokee Phoenix* (Tahlequah, OK) December 2014.

Messages like the ones from Bill Baker, current Chief of the Cherokee Nation, are not uncommon. They have been spread for over two centuries in Cherokee Nation. The Cherokee nation evolved to be more secure in their claim as a “Christian nation.”

Cherokees not only accepted and embraced Christianity; they implemented Christian ideals in treaties, policies, and constitutions. Ultimately, Christian constructs were at the center of nineteenth-century Cherokee political and national identity. It is a myth that missionaries failed their mission of “civilizing”⁷⁷ the Cherokee people. Cherokee traditionalism simply evolved to accommodate Christianity. Nineteenth-century Cherokee tribal culture embraced the idea of expansion and accommodation.⁷⁸ The Cherokee People simultaneously assimilated external cultural practices while maintaining, and in order to maintain, their sovereignty as a nation. The glorified history of resistance in the Cherokee Nation ultimately belies the reality of accommodation: Cherokees were aware of their social disadvantages in the United States. The real story of Cherokee resistance lies in their strategic adoption of Christianity in order to maintain autonomy.

⁷⁷Nineteenth-century mission organizations are documented to have been on a “civilizing mission.” For the nineteenth-century Christian missionary, “civilizing” was synonymous with “Christianizing”

⁷⁸Gregory Evans Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745-1815* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992).

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