

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Presbyterian Missionary Attitudes Toward American Indians, 1837-1893.  
By Michael C. Coleman.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7z8629xb>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 10(4)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Munkres, Robert L.

**Publication Date**

1986-09-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

By failing to distinguish tribes from language groups, Thornton counted only 25 Southwestern "tribes" with six extinctions by 1970 (11 pueblos and Puebloan language groups with two extinctions). Mooney actually listed 23 pueblos, and six Hopi villages are well known and reported. Thornton did not, in other words, even accurately transcribe Mooney's data. There were more pueblos in 1907 than Thornton counted for either 1907 or 1680.

Historic pueblo attrition was much greater than Mooney's list indicates. Franciscan missionary Alonso de Benavides (*The Memorial of Fray Alonso de Benavides 1630*, translated by Mrs. Edward E. Ayer. Chicago, 1916), reported some 69,000 inhabitants in 64 pueblos. On that record alone, 1630-1907 extinctions numbered nearer 35 pueblos than two, an error on the order of 1,650 percent.

The differences between Thornton's Puebloan analysis and historic demographic reality are representative examples of procedural defects that pervade this monograph. Demographers admittedly are accustomed to analyzing data collected by others. Custom does not, however, excuse uncritical reliance upon information that was erroneous when published more than half a century earlier, much less inaccurate reading of those data.

*Henry F. Dobyns*  
The Newberry Library

**Presbyterian Missionary Attitudes Toward American Indians, 1837-1893.** By Michael C. Coleman. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1985. 222 pp. \$25.00 Cloth.

This fact-filled and meticulously presented examination of missionary attitudes towards Native Americans is both exhaustively researched (particularly in the records and letters of the appropriate missionary societies) and relatively narrowly focused. Neither characteristic is truly unexpected in a work which began, and was to a significant degree completed, as a doctoral dissertation. It is, in fact, even a bit narrower in focus than is implied by the title since Mr. Coleman deals, not with "American Indians" as such, but rather with those members of the Choctaw and Nez Perce tribes who came into contact with Presbyterian ministers.

Thus, this is a detailed attitudinal study of a selected sample, both of Native Americans and of Presbyterian missionaries, covering the latter two-thirds of the 19th century.

Mr. Coleman's treatment of his material is, in general, very careful and judicious. Nonetheless, a reader is likely to experience some sense of repetition as the author deals, a number of different times in different chapters, with the two principal themes around which the work is organized.

The first of the organizing themes is missionary ethnocentrism, hardly an unexpected topic in any work dealing with white attitudes towards Indians. In unflinching, and unforgiving, tones, the absolute commitment of missionaries to the elimination of all vestiges and aspects of Indians' cultures is recounted. While most of the missionary attitudes were reflections of those also held in the broader society, Coleman additionally delineates those unique to missionaries because of their theological orientation. Further, he makes it quite clear that, while virtually all missionaries were totally ethnocentric, they were *not* racist. Missionaries denigrated Indian culture in its entirety, it seems, but not individual Indians. Though this distinction made it possible for missionaries to contemplate the salvation of individual "heathens" (by removing them completely from their own culture), such an absolutist position also resulted in a failure by missionaries to utilize those "common denominators" (succinctly described by Coleman) which crossed cultural barriers.

One might also raise another question about ethnocentrism, one which Mr. Coleman did not treat. Was it exclusively a phenomenon of Anglo-American culture or did the cultures with which missionaries had contact also possess this set of values? If so, were the Indians with whom missionaries had the greatest success truly representative of their tribal culture, or had they, perhaps, already begun the process of moving away from it?

"Paradox," "double-image" and "dichotomy" collectively describe the second theme presented by Mr. Coleman. All of which is to say, and Mr. Coleman says it well, that missionaries, not unlike lesser mortals of the day, were not always consistent in the views and values which they applied to Indian socio-cultural systems. Most missionaries believed that "heathenism both repressed tribal members and simultaneously allowed them anarchic freedom" (p. 6). One thing most missionaries did *not* do—attempt to understand, if not appreciate, Indian cultural

practices and values, the elimination of which they were so deeply committed. Mr. Coleman expresses his appreciation of the irony involved in this situation in this manner: "Intensity of ethnocentrism . . . may have hindered the missionaries in their attempts to achieve the goals prescribed by that 'ethnocentrism' " (p. 18).

In explicating these themes, the first of which is essentially descriptive and the second primarily explanatory or analytical, Mr. Coleman provides some very interesting and useful descriptions. The personal qualities as well as the educational and demographic background of Presbyterian missionaries is a case in point. So too, is his treatment of the motivational background against which missionary activity can be examined, including a brief treatment of Presbyterian schism in the 19th century. Mr. Coleman, of course, also provides brief descriptive introductions to the cultures of the two tribes, Choctaw and Nez Perce, with which he is concerned. On all of these topics, however, the non-expert reader may wish to consult some of the standard, more broadly focused works in the field.

So far as the long-term impact of missionary attitudes is concerned, this reviewer was left with a feeling that perhaps more attention should have been paid to two ideas introduced near the end of the book and in the "Conclusion" respectively. The first is reflected in Mr. Coleman's remark, almost in passing, that "to those on the receiving end . . . there was little perceptible difference between judgments of cultural inferiority and racial inferiority" (p. 161). The second involves the ultimate paradox, one which coupled missionary commitment to bringing about total change in the Indians with whose instruction and salvation they were charged and the fact, according to anthropologist Robert A. LeVine, "that another culture very different from one's own cannot be completely 'acquired' in adulthood. . . ." (p. 174).

In sum, this small volume represents a significant addition to the documentation of the attitudes of one activist portion of the Anglo-American population toward members of two tribes of Indians during the latter two-thirds of the 19th century. One hopes Mr. Coleman, or perhaps someone inspired by this volume, will follow up on this important work with an examination of attitudes based on a broader sample of missionaries, denominations and Indian tribes. In any event, this book will be of considerable use to anyone interested in Indian-white relations during this

time period. It should, therefore, be acquired by any library which claims to have holdings in Indian history as well as by individual scholars.

*Robert L. Munkres*  
Muskingum College

**The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture.** By Walter L. Williams. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986. 344 pp. \$21.95 Cloth.

Walter Williams has written a provocative book on a challenging subject that is bound to cause controversy. Williams, a gay ethnohistorian, has undertaken extensive fieldwork among American Indians to analyze the berdache tradition. He challenges older research that minimizes the sexual lives of berdache Indians, or that views them as mere transvestites. Williams convincingly asserts that many—not all—Indian cultures provided a third gender possibility, a “man-woman” with male genitalia who adopted women’s economic and sexual roles. The berdache was not merely a gay Indian man, but a distinct personality who performed important spiritual and community functions. Often berdache married important men, but they sometimes took serial lovers. The husbands and lovers of berdache were not regarded as gay or in any way abnormal since they took the active male role in anal sex. Oral sex was practiced in some tribes, but anal intercourse appears to have been the usual sex act of the berdache.

In aboriginal times berdache were not only well accepted in native society, but revered for their power and spirit connections. Moreover, contemporary berdache carry on the ancient androgynous traditions of their forebears. Before the appearance of Europeans, training for the berdache life began at an early age. Parents dressed their young sons in women’s garb if they manifested effeminate characteristics. Then the young berdache would begin training in women’s tasks and perhaps religious duties as well. The emergence of female traits in young boys was not a matter of parental concern but rejoicing, for berdache were thought to be powerful beings who could bless their families with good luck, status, and riches.