BOOK FORUM

Author Response

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In her review, Emily Conroy-Krutz writes that "One of the joys of working in scholarly community is learning from each other when we approach the same set of sources with different questions and different interpretive lenses." The essays in this roundtable reflect the questions and lenses that these brilliant scholars bring from their respective areas of expertise, and they reflect the joy of being in conversation and community with each other. I so appreciate Michael Baysa, Conroy-Krutz, Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh, and Rachel Wheeler for engaging with my work so generatively and generously. I am also grateful to Katherine Carté for organizing the panel on *Heathen* at the 2024 American Society of Church History meeting and to Jon Butler for organizing our comments into this roundtable. While I do not have space to respond to every point raised, I will respond to themes that I see cutting across the reviews.

I. Heathen Umbrella and Ceiling

The idea that heathenness is an umbrella that lumps people together under the colonizer's monolithic gaze is one of the key arguments that *Heathen* makes and that comes up in several of the reviews. As Baysa and Wells-Oghoghomeh point out, the heathen umbrella collapses difference between so-called heathens across time and space, while reinforcing difference between heathens and Christians.[1] At the same time, I want to acknowledge and respond to the point about diversity *within* the heathen category: specifically, how it relates to "hierarchies of heathenism," as Conroy-Krutz asks, and anti-Blackness, as Wells-Oghoghomeh describes.

The penultimate draft of the book actually leaned more into the lumping argument. A month or so before the final manuscript was due, one of my undergraduate mentors read it and told me that I had made too much of that claim. He urged me to rethink a word that appeared in the draft multiple times, "undifferentiated." As he put it, "You clearly recognize that Protestant Americans recognized differences among the various heathens, which then forces you constantly to explain why either you or they did not consider these differences important."[2] That was hard to hear so soon before submission, but he was right. I ended up deleting all but one instance of the word "undifferentiated" in the text and trying to nuance the claim.

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[1] As in my book, I do not put heathen in quotes for the sake of textual clarity (unless a usage comes from a direct quote). I also capitalize racial signifiers, including White and Black. For an explanation of both decisions, see *Heathen: Religion and Race in American History*, p. ix.

[2] Richard White, manuscript comments to author, July 20, 2021.

But a tension still remains between my argument that heathenness is a lumping category and Conroy-Krutz's insights about hierarchies of heathenism and missionary intelligence, which she describes in *Christian Imperialism* and *Missionary Diplomacy*.[3] Conroy-Krutz is absolutely right that, although there has been a kind of abiding ignorance in the U.S. about the rest of the world, missionaries were among the most educated Americans and were interested in illuminating difference and sending specific and detailed reports back to American audiences about the people they were evangelizing.

I tried to resolve this tension through the idea of the heathen ceiling – a play on the glass ceiling or bamboo ceiling, where so-called heathens might be understood to be different from each other, and differentially arrayed on civilizational ladders, but always bump up against a ceiling that they can never surpass so long as they remain heathen (and in practice, long after that, as the suspicion of lingering heathenism trailed converts, too – more on this below). In other words, while hierarchical racialization occurs *below* the heathen ceiling, the divide *between* the ceiling and the White Christian also reinforces an older binary and lumping logic that never disappears, to Wheeler's point about the enduring "simultaneity and interdependence of racial and religious categories." These categories are intertwined in "heathen sight," to use Wells-Oghoghomeh's helpful formulation, trained on land use, bodily habits, medical practices, and historical location, all of which exceed more narrow definitions of "race," and which persist beyond the decline of the term "heathen" itself.

Wells-Oghoghomeh also shows how "heathen sight" stigmatized Africana religions in particular as "mystical, foreign, exotic, demonic, and literal dark unknowns." "Heathen sight" authorized anti-Blackness, and anti-Blackness contributed to both the "splitting" of heathen hierarchies and to the "lumping" of the heathen umbrella. As Sylvester Johnson explains in *The Myth of Ham*, Black people were coded as quintessential heathens.[4] White Christians' depiction of Blackness at the bottom of heathen hierarchies helped to create the visible tropes that would be cast over the rest of the so-called heathen world.

Groups who were neither White nor Black sometimes tried to escape the umbrella by adopting anti-Black perspectives themselves and attempting to triangulate their status against Blackness and toward Whiteness.[5] When they tried to do this, though, they came up against the heathen ceiling. Some were dismayed by this and tried to enforce hierarchical distinctions, playing into colonizers' divide-and-conquer strategy of racial governance. Yet others labeled as heathens instead embraced the lumping and recognized the umbrella as a source of strength and solidarity with other colonized people in the face of similar struggles. I tried to show both kinds of responses in the book, though certainly could have done more, and I am continuing to work on this theme at a more local level in my current work on religion and Chinese exclusion.

II. Linear History and Conversion

Several reviews raise points about conversion and linear history. Conversion seems to be the ultimate linear history, a transition from one stage to another. Yet even if the

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[3]Emily Conroy-Krutz, *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), and Emily Conroy-Krutz, *Missionary Diplomacy: Religion and Nineteenth-Century American Foreign Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2024).

[4]Sylvester Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004).

[5]See, e.g., Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics & Society* 27, no. 1 (March 1999): 105–138.

heathen converted to Christianity, they were still seen as centuries behind the White Christian, whose conversion long ago was supposed to have jumpstarted their path to linear historical progress, leaving everyone else behind. White Protestants saw conversion as a necessary rupture to move the heathen from historylessness to the forward-charging path of history. Many conversion narratives – especially those written or ghostwritten by White missionaries – paralleled the point, marking a linear move from heathenness to Christianity.

But there are narratives from self-professed converts that tell a different story. To Baysa's question about what a cyclical or continuous conversion narrative might look like, Uchimura Kanzō's autobiography offers a helpful example. Uchimura expresses continued appreciation for heathenism before and after his conversion, wonders if he is "still heathenish" years after he begins to profess Christianity, and is frustrated by the stark night-and-day contrast that missionaries try to draw between the before and after of conversion. Uchimura also asks whether White Americans might not themselves be more "Pagan-like" than Christian, suggesting that White Christians' own conversion narratives might be looping backwards through the stain of their racism, which he experienced firsthand in the United States.

Linford Fisher's description of conversion as "affiliation" is relevant here[6] – conversion for many missionized people has never been about a night-to-day change from heathen to Christian but about what makes practical sense at any given time. It is flexible and adaptable, not linear. This very flexibility and adaptability, though, has made converts to Christianity from so-called heathenism constant subjects of suspicion and doubt. I appreciate how Wheeler puts *Heathen* in conversation with her own research on Native Christians who were not seen as equals or who were seen as enemies who were never to be trusted, and against whom violence was authorized. These are painful and pertinent examples of Christians who could not surpass the heathen ceiling no matter what they said or did.

Wheeler's remarks remind me of Rebecca Goetz's *Baptism of Early Virginia*, on the emergence of hereditary heathenism as the birth of race. I find that argument compelling – that heathenness became a kind of bodily inheritance, an unchangeable stain passed on and unable to be eradicated through conversion.[7] But I also think that the power of the category cannot be tied to unchangeable difference alone. The prospect of changeability, however theoretical, remains key to the power of the heathen category. Even as doubt and suspicion trailed converts and the ceiling kept them separate from the White Christian, the idea that the heathen *could* change animated and authorized White intervention in heathen lands and colonial governance of heathen bodies. It blessed the brutalities[8] of colonialism as a means of saving the damned and helping the needy, which I describe as a "get out of jail free" card in the book.

III. Internal/External Critique

This leads me to Baysa's question about whether missions and development projects can be made less problematic, given this heavy history. Since I am not a trained ethicist

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[6]Linford Fisher, *The Indian Great Awakening: Religion and the Shaping of Native Cultures in Early America* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[7]Rebecca Anne Goetz, *The Baptism of Early Virginia: How Christianity Created Race* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

[8]I borrow this phrase from the introduction, "Blessed Brutalities," in Jon Pahl's *Empire of Sacrifice: The Religious Origins of American Violence* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

or theologian but a historian, *Heathen* does not offer prescriptions so much as it tries to amplify the voices of people in history who asked similarly hard questions and who offered suggestions of their own in response.

This includes White Protestants who used the heathen trope to critique other White Protestants. My concept of the heathen barometer describes how the aesthetics that built up around heathenness could be used not only for external but also for internal critique. I appreciate the research Wheeler shares to this end. Alice Bache Gould's letter encapsulates the problem: that the "Professional-Doers-of-Good" so often bring "death to those [they] try to help." I agree with Wheeler that more research is needed on such internal critiques.

The same goes for research on heathen aesthetics "outside of English discourses," as Baysa puts it. I hope that those with better language skills than me take up Baysa's important questions. Heathen aesthetics certainly circulated outside Anglo-American discourse, as in Manual Alvares's account of the Upper Guinea Coast, described by Wells-Oghoghomeh. Anglo-American discourse was formed in conversation with and against Spanish, French, and Portuguese observations about *paganos*, *païens*, and *pagãos*. Sometimes this discourse developed in tandem to justify similar colonizing projects, but sometimes Anglo-Protestants deployed the heathen barometer against Catholics, accusing them of insufficiently separating from the pagan Roman past.

The barometer could also be used by people on the receiving end of missions, as when Uchimura called the U.S. "pagan-like" in its racism. To the question of whether missions can be salvaged, then, I think it is critical to center missionized people, and to think with those who found the message compelling, powerful, and good despite the violence that accompanied it. I am the descendent of such people; as I write in the book, I am both the "us" and the "them." Given my background, I can both understand the missionary impulse as well as deplore the brutalities it blessed. Perhaps this makes *Heathen* too nuanced, in a sense – perhaps I should have gone in with a heavier hammer and come out with more normative prescriptions. I tried instead to understand the structures historical figures have created, authorized, occupied, and resisted, and in which we are still entangled today. But I welcome conversation with ethicists and theologians who might draw on this descriptive work to prescriptive ends.

That said, even as it is historical in orientation, *Heathen* offers an internal critique for historians. As Wells-Oghoghomeh observes, "heathen sight" has not only structured colonizers' interactions with the heathen world, but "also continues to shape the ways racist tropes masquerade as logical or raw perception inside and outside of the academic world." "Conversation about the imperative to decolonize academic discourses, processes, methods, and methodologies" is therefore critically necessary. I am most grateful to Wells-Oghoghomeh, Wheeler, Conroy-Krutz, and Baysa for joining this conversation with me.