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Book Review: Unaffected by the Gospel: Osage Resistance to the Christian Invasion, 1673-1906: A Cultural Victory

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Fausz, J. Frederick, "Book Review: Unaffected by the Gospel: Osage Resistance to the Christian Invasion, 1673-1906: A Cultural Victory" (2005). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 197.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Unaffected by the Gospel: Osage Resistance to the Christian Invasion, 1673-1906: A Cultural Victory. By Willard Hughes Rollings. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004. xi + 243 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, references, index. \$45.00 cloth, \$22.95 paper.

As he did in his 1992 *The Osage: An Ethno-historical Study of Hegemony on the Prairie-Plains*, Willard Rollings expands and enhances our understanding of that historically significant, but often neglected, Native nation in this new study of Christian missions.

Focusing on the century between the Louisiana Purchase and the 1906 allotment of Osage reservation lands in Oklahoma, he argues that *all* nineteenth-century missionaries—European Jesuits and New England Protestants alike—failed miserably in trying to convert Osage full bloods. Rollings supersedes traditional antiquarian studies of individual denominations and admirably analyzes the critical distinctions between Catholic and Protestant approaches. The Osage interest in “civilization” through practical training and economic assistance from whites was consistently misinterpreted by missionaries as a desire for Christian conversion. Thwarting that “spiritual invasion” was a “cultural victory” for the Osage in the mid-1800s, but they later proved creatively adaptive in altering traditional beliefs *on their terms*.

Rollings has thoroughly researched documentary archives and secondary interpretations, but his overwhelming reliance on

Euro-American Christian sources, while omitting oral traditions or interviews with living Osage, casts doubt on his explanations and conclusions. It seems odd that a Native American (Cherokee) author would admit that “we will never be certain why they [the Osage] adopted Peyotism” without consulting tribal informants. By arbitrarily ending the book in 1906, Rollings also leaves the reader wondering why so many Osage embraced various Christian denominations just a few years later. The research of R. Michael Barnett (“Jesus among the Middle Waters: American Christian Missionaries and the Osage Nation, 1820-1920,” Master’s thesis, University of Missouri-St Louis, 2004) suggests that the evolution of Peyotism *after* 1906 actually made Christianity more acceptable to many Osages. Moreover, broader artistic and anthropological perspectives on Osage religion in the later twentieth century—such as provided by Garrick Bailey and Daniel C. Swan in their *Art of the Osage* (2004)—reveal rich details that would have improved this study.

Unaffected by the Gospel is a readable synthesis that provides an adequate introduction to the subject, but it is not definitive and far from complete. In addition to its limited scope and evidence, the book has too many errors, repetitive passages, and interpretive omissions to merit full scholarly confidence.

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