

# DECOLONIZING THE BLOSSOMING: INDIGENOUS PEOPLE’S FAITH IN A COLONIZING CHURCH

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My grandfather was a medicine man, a practitioner of a ceremony called the Blessingway—*Hozhoojii*. The Blessingway is described as the foundation of Navajo spirituality, the “scriptures” if you will. This ceremony informs and organizes the spiritual life and community of the Navajo people. Singers, or medicine men, perform this ceremony in times of both joy and sadness. It re-affirms one’s status as a child of “eternal goodness and beauty” and the capacity for one to become “eternal goodness and beauty” themselves. It is the organizing force of Navajo. My grandfather’s role as singer for over sixty years was one of service: singers or medicine people are not paid, and they do not expect remuneration for their spiritual work. Rather, they view what they do as a calling that ensures the fabric of Navajo society remains tightly woven around the broad notions of family, which also means happiness.

My grandfather subsequently left this practice and joined the Church at the age of 84. He described the doctrine of the Church as pure as the dew in the morning, and he noted that the ceremony he performed for decades felt incomplete once he heard the gospel. The Church doctrine completed the Blessingway ceremony for my grandfather. At the age of 87, he and my grandmother were sealed in the Mesa Arizona Temple. My father took him through the temple. As

my grandfather was washed, blessed, and anointed, he wept and was overcome with emotion.

My father accompanied him, translating the temple ceremony into Navajo. My grandfather later described his experience with the temple: “for years, our people have performed a similar ceremony. We would wash and anoint the people on their loins, their eyes, their lips, their hands, and we would utter a similar prayer.” He saw the temple ceremony as the pure ceremony lost by our people. His ability to accept and adopt new truth enabled him to negotiate his spirituality and his place in the Church.

There are stories from other Indigenous members of the Church who have described the ritual, doctrine, and practices of the Church as completing their Indigenous spiritual framework. They, like my grandfather, found ways to synthetically honor both without compromising the truth they found in the Church.

My family, like my grandfather, respectfully negotiated the doctrines of the Church with their Navajo practices, always viewing the Church structure and organization within the broader context of colonization. Missionaries did not convert my grandfather, White people did not convert him. Rather, he engaged my father (his son) in conversation (over fifteen years) about his new religion.

The local and regional Church leadership was ecstatic that a medicine man had joined the Church and they immediately begin to use it as an example of the blossoming of the Lamanites prophesized in the scriptures (e.g., D&C 49:24). My grandfather’s story was quickly framed as a “pioneer” story, the implication being that my Navajo family had Mormon pioneer ancestry.

This family story raises several questions: to what extent has a Euro-American mythology of Indigenous emergence and spirituality penetrated and replaced the Indigenous mythos? What technologies are

employed to operationalize the replacement? And why do Indigenous people remain?

In responding to these questions, we must engage the following: 1) a theory of settler colonialism; 2) the Church as a settler colonial apparatus; and, 3) Indigenous faith as an act of resistance.

## Settler Colonialism

The central premise of the Book of Mormon is—according to Church leadership, curriculum, and the book itself—to “convince the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the eternal God.” However, it also becomes a tool of erasure for Indigenous people’s rightful claim to land, politics, economies, and power.

These dual functions often work together, the second regularly stemming from the first. This erasure and replacement is one facet of settler colonialism.

Settler colonialism is about elimination. The premise of settler colonialism, according to Patrick Wolfe, is the elimination of the native from their land. Land is life, he argues. “The logic of elimination not only refers to the summary liquidation of Indigenous people, though it includes that. . . . [S]ettler colonialism has both negative and positive dimensions. Negatively, it strives for the dissolution of native societies. Positively, it erects a new colonial society on the expropriated land base.” Wolfe argues that “settler colonizers come to stay: invasion is a structure not an event.”<sup>1</sup> The implications of this framing are vast.

Thus, the struggles of native peoples in the United States—and in the Church—becomes a struggle against elimination, against their erasure. The implicit consequences of this struggle are significant, particularly in the context of the Mormon expansion westward and Mormon

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1. Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 388.

settlement in lands they did not own. Indigenous scholars have read Mormonism as nothing more than a uniquely American structure of native elimination. I will push back on this notion in a bit.

The theory of settler colonialism describes a structure of invasion and replacement. The Book of Mormon functions as both a tool of invasion and replacement, but also, strangely, as an instrument of resistance against the Church itself.

If the Book of Mormon functions as a tool of epistemic and ontological invasion and replacement, can one be Indigenous and still believe? This is an important question to reflect on, as it pushes back against the biopolitics operational within Indigenous communities. Tejaswini Niranjana describes “one of the classic moves of colonial discourse . . . [which] is to present the colonial subject as unchanging and immutable.”<sup>2</sup> Citing this tendency, Brendan Hokowhitu argues that “many Indigenous scholars have themselves canonised [sic.] tradition in their re-search. Such a focus is debilitating when predicated upon the search for a nonexistent authentic precolonial past.”<sup>3</sup>

This tension is rather complicated. The Book of Mormon serves to both erase and renounce the “unchanging and immutable” Indigenous tradition of the non-Mormon colonial discourse, while seeking to build up an “authentic” precolonial past of Indigenous people, which, by function, erases the history of the people.

This mechanism remains complicated. It suggests there is no space of negotiation for the Indigenous person to adopt, assimilate, and invite different belief systems into already-existing belief structures. If decolonization is about de-centering power out of white spaces and re-centering it into Indigenous spaces, then the capacity

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2. Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1992), 37.

3. Brendan Hokowhitu, “Indigenous Existentialism and the Body,” *Cultural Studies Review* 15, no. 2 (2009): 103.

of Indigenous “conversion” becomes an act of resistance against the structure of invasion.

### Settler Colonial Apparatus

The Church continues to assert itself as a colonizing institution. In 2007, Elder Jeffery R. Holland spoke to a gathering of Navajo members stressing to them they are “Latter-day Saint first, and Navajo second.” Many Navajos at the time reacted with some degree of offense and hostility. After centuries of overt colonization, theft of land, paternalistic government and Church policies, many felt a sense of obviation at this call to a Mormon logic of success that cannot be separated from a politics of whiteness. Being a Latter-day Saint meant being “white” rather than Mormon, and not something that speaks to the spiritual center of Navajo being.

The biopower of the Church in structuring identity under the premise of agency furthers the colonial reach of not only the Church, but of the white supremacy within the US itself. Indigenous Mormon communities are replete with stories of local Church leaders acting with impunity in order to ensure the social structure of the Church (a structure built and maintained through a politics of whiteness) remains firmly locked within a Latter-day Saint logic of success. Any deviation, through the use of Indigenous spirituality to enhance their views of a gospel doctrine, is repudiated.

### Resistance

Yet, the paradox at play here is that the attempt to control and structure the identity of faithful members of the Church by making them abide by a logic of Latter-day Saint whiteness denies their acting in consonance with the core purpose of the Book of Mormon. It is at this moment that the Book of Mormon becomes both an agent of colonialism and a tool of resistance. Many, like my grandfather, negotiated membership into

the LDS Church on their terms, destabilizing the power of conversion politics while retaining tenets of faith not consistent with the logics of Latter-day Saint success. Rather, his faith rested on what he considered as epistemic and ontological commensurability. It was not governed by the promises of an afterlife, or the inability of Mormon faith to adequately grasp the meaning of family, especially in light of the meaning of sealings. His faith was not governed by historical inconsistencies, by debates on the Trinity, the godhead, or by notions of grace and works. Rather, in the LDS Church, his faith thrived due to what it could complete and add to what he already believed and practiced as a Navajo spiritual leader. What mattered to him was the way the Book of Mormon furthered and enhanced his understanding of what it meant for him to be Indigenous, even if his belief in being an Israelite was not complete. In this model, then, his faith was both loyal and an act of resistance.

Several modes of resistance emerged from Indigenous communities. Despite the ways in which the Church promoted a mythology designed to replace their own, Indigenous peoples resisted in significant, but marginal, ways. Passive non-compliance is a key mode of resistance and simultaneously an act of faith. Its main focus concerns re-centering power. The biopolitical power of the Church attempts to structure and dictate what is and is not culturally appropriate. For example, Church leaders swiftly reprimand Indigenous people for attending native ceremonies, yet participating in these ceremonies expands their understanding of the central core doctrines of eternal connectedness or family. They attend these native ceremonies as a response to the Church's obsession with individuality and its limited ability to understand the meaning of family, especially within the sealing context. These ceremonies provide a core meaning that is missing from the lexicon of the Church. The Church, in many instances, is constructed upon premises that privilege upholding whiteness, which is itself ultimately centered on notions of individualism. Thus, Indigenous people continue to participate in their own ceremonies because these ceremonies expand the meaning of

Church doctrine and reify the core purposes of the Book of Mormon. This mode of passive non-compliant resistance is premised on faith itself.

### The Blossoming

The blossoming is controlled and strictly guarded by Church leadership and the logic of Latter-Day Saint whiteness undergirding its approach to the faith. The logic of the blossoming must be internally consistent with the principles of erasing Indigenous people from stolen land, and must uphold deflection of complicity in that theft. Therefore, the blossoming must be consistent with a logic of Latter-day Saint whiteness. It must be controlled, policed, and intelligible only by the power centers of Mormonism.

I would argue, then, that faith as resistance is about obviating this Latter-day Saint logic and reclaiming ownership of the narrative around the “Children of Father Lehi” and by extension, Indigenous people defining for themselves the criteria that constitute the blossoming. In many Indigenous circles, the blossoming has been expressed as a political, economic, and sociological ideal—it is not limited simply to the spiritual. This approach reflects the Indigenous worldview: an Indigenous ontology sees no distinction between the spiritual, the political, or the economic. They are related. Thus, by simply being attentive to their own moral framework and folding Mormonism into it, these Indigenous people pose a threat to the structures of Mormonism.

Indigenous people and their interactions with and relationships to Mormonism are obviously complex and complicated. What I have shared here does not to dismiss or diminish the views of those who are not part of the Church but whose lives have been disrupted in real and significant ways due to the colonizing influence of the Church. At the same time, I find it important to emphasize that there are various ways of resisting the inherent logic of settler colonialism that has historically been part of the interpretation and doctrine derived from the Book

of Mormon. The Church would benefit from a more nuanced understanding of the ways faith emerges and enacts conversion as a gesture of complement and completion rather than rejection. It must come to terms with the fact that faith itself becomes an act of resistance to the cultural whiteness underlying the social and political structures of the Church. For Indigenous members, faith does not imbue the Church with meaning. Rather, faith synthesizes meaning. Put another way, this Indigenous faith *blossoms*.