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INDIANS OBSERVED: MORAVIAN MISSIONARY
JOHN HECKEWELDER'S
ACCOUNT OF THE HISTORY, MANNERS, AND CUSTOMS OF
THE INDIAN NATIONS (1819)

Abstract

The experiences of missionaries are experiences of otherness. Missionaries can only be successful in their main enterprise if they perceive and understand these others in their otherness, or at least if they try to do so. Moravian missionary John Heckewelder (1743-1823) was an expert, profoundly knowledgeable about the ways of the Indians of the Eastern Woodlands, especially the Delaware tribe, towards whom he was well disposed. After a brief summary of Heckewelder's life and his Moravian mission, this essay addresses questions of authorship, structure, and composition in Heckewelder's Account of the History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations (1819). It analyzes Heckewelder's experience with Indians as others: how he described, presented, and interpreted them. Special attention is devoted to Heckewelder's presentation of the Indian concept of property and to his description of the Indians' treatment of captives.

This essay focuses on a work written by the Moravian missionary John Heckewelder (1743-1823). He was an expert on Indians of the Eastern Woodlands, especially the Delawares, and possessed a profound knowledge of their ways, having lived among them for many years. Via James Fennimore Cooper (1789-1851), who drew extensively from his research for the Leatherstocking Tales (from 1823), Heckewelder molded the nineteenth-century's image of the noble as well as the degenerate Indian. His Account of the History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations Who Once Inhabited Pennsylvania and the Neighbouring States (1819) was written at the request of the renowned American Philosophical Society, and was scholarly in purpose. Heckewelder's personal experience, his "intimate knowledge [...] of the languages and manners of various Indian nations," and the extent of his cohabitation with them, the
committee specifically noted: "among whom he resided more than forty years," recommended him for this early ethnographic project. Stressing that his History was "the result of personal knowledge, of what I myself have seen, heard and witnessed, while residing among and near them, for more than thirty years," Heckewelder claimed scientific reliability. It was his experience as a missionary that both recommended Heckewelder as a scholar and legitimized him in his own eyes. The experiences of missionaries are always experiences of otherness. The nature of the task they undertake causes them to approach the experience of otherness with the aim of converting those others whom they encounter, meaning, making them non-others with regard to religion. Missionaries only can be successful in their main enterprise if they perceive and understand these others in their otherness, or at least try to do so.

Clearly, as a missionary, Heckewelder engaged in a number of different binary oppositions: missionary versus heathen, European or settler versus Native American, white man versus black woman. Furthermore, it has to be taken into consideration that the contemporary British colonial society in North America never regarded Indians as being on the same level as white men, and ultimately considered them to be unpredictable, inscrutable and, at the very least, only partially comprehensible. Indians were others whose otherness had a distinctively negative connotation.

Tsvetan Todorov has pointed out that America’s colonizers quickly confined alterity within a hierarchy where difference was understood as deficiency. Difference meant that Indians could not be equals according to colonial logic. Difference and equality were mutually exclusive. In this way of dealing with alterity, “difference was corrupted into inequality,” legitimizing subjection and exploitation, or, following the same logic in the opposite direction, alterity was denied and “equality [was corrupted] into identity.” After a brief outline of Heckewelder’s vita and his Moravian mission, I will give a summary of his History, the context of its publication, and then investigate which experiences with Indians as others Heckewelder described, and how he interpreted them.

I Heckewelder and Moravian Missions

When Heckewelder, who travelled from England to America with his parents at the age of eleven, began to write his book on Indians in 1815, he could look back on fifty years of close contact with them. He spent fifteen of these years exclusively as a missionary, living among Indians in their settlements and as a walking missionary. Later on, he acted as an expert in Indian affairs, as a chief negotiator, as a land surveyor and as a justice of the peace. He did this on behalf of the Moravian Church, as an agent of the government, and as deputy and agent of the Society of the United Brethren for Propagating the Gospel Among the Indians (founded in Bethlehem, PA in 1788). One year after the publication of his History, he published a history of Moravian missions (A Narrative of the Mission of the United Brethren Among the Delaware and Mohegan Indians, from its Commencement in the Year 1740 to the Close of the Year 1808, Philadelphia 1820). He also wrote his memoirs, as was customary with Moravians.

If one examines, his memoirs, the fifteen years between 1771 and 1786 that he spent among the Indians, and especially the years 1772–1781, during which he lived at the Muskingum river (Ohio), clearly marked the most contented time of his life. Heckewelder ascribed this to the nature of his contact with the Indians. It is clear that he enjoyed living among them, since his writings express his love and devotion to

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4 Land surveys were necessary for contracts between white settlers and, later on, for contracts between some states and Indians to record the sale of land.
them. As far as his *History* is concerned, we can reasonably expect a certain degree of open-mindedness towards these strangers.

The Moravians were a Pietist community founded in 1722 by Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf in Herrnhut, Saxony. The name derived from the homeland of the first settlers, religious refugees from Moravia. Missionary work began in 1732, when the first two missionaries set off for the Island of St. Thomas in the Danish West Indies (now the U.S. Virgin Islands). In 1733, two other missionaries left for Greenland. Moravian missionary activity among the North American Indians began in 1740, with the establishment of headquarters at the Bethlehem settlement in Pennsylvania in 1741. From its inception, the Moravian mission met with opposition from white settlers, especially traders, who “were afraid that Christian Indians could no longer be betrayed as easily and that land acquisition and trade in liquor would become more difficult.”

In 1746, the settlement of Gnadenhütten was founded near Bethlehem. In 1755, conflicts between England and France escalated, becoming the French and Indian War, in which most heathen Indians fought on the side of the French, whereas Christian Indians remained neutral. Despite this, Gnadenhütten was attacked, eleven missionaries died, and shortly afterwards the whole settlement was burnt down.

The events of the subsequent years determined the course of Moravian missionary work in North America.

Indian mission congregations were set up following the Herrnhut model and flourished until their further development was hindered by external intervention. Non-Christian Indians and white Christians attacked the Indian mission congregations, either because they disliked the Moravians in particular, or because of general warfare in the area. Christian Indians were caught between the fronts and preferred to carry on peacefully instead of fighting. As more and more white settlers went West after the Treaty of Fort Stanwix of 1768, the Moravians decided to establish new mission congregations at the Muskingum river (in Ohio) and to resettle all Indian converts at new sites, naming them Schönbrunn, Lichtenauf, and Gnadenhütten. This last achieved tragic fame: during the American Revolutionary War, a massacre took place there on 8 March 1782. Ninety-six Christian Lenape (Delaware) Indians were murdered by colonial American militiamen from Pennsylvania. Although the Moravians later established new settlements further north, their missionary activities never fully recovered from this blow. Nevertheless, Moravian missionaries were quite successful in the eighteenth century, at least by comparison with other denominations. There were several reasons for this, foremost among them being that Moravian missionaries lived together with converts in special townships or settlements. This was attractive to the Indians: missionaries could provide them with access to white knowledge (writing, reading) and culture, as well as offering them protection against other whites (and non-Christian Indians). Besides, Moravians treated Indians as religious equals, since they believed “that God bestowed Souls on all Men without regard to colour or complexion.” In addition, Moravians had a specific understanding of their missionary work: this did not aim at converting whole nations, or baptizing as many non-Christians as possible, but focused on baptizing only those who they thought truly believed in the Savior.

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**Il Heckewelder’s “Account of the History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations Who Once Inhabited Pennsylvania and the Neighbouring States” (1819) – Structure and Date of Composition**

Heckewelder structured his work to consist of forty-four chapters preceded by roughly twenty introductory pages. The initial chapter

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5 By 1760, the year Zinzendorf died, 226 missionaries had been sent to twenty-eight regions. Cf. Carola Wessel: Delaware-Indianer und Herrnhuter Missionare im Upper Ohio Valley, 1772–1781. Halle 1999 (= Hallesche Forschungen 4), p. 69.

6 Ibid., p. 70.

7 Ibid., pp. 70-72.

8 Ibid., p. 72. By 1772, 721 Indians had been baptized by Moravians. In 1775, 414 baptized Indians lived in the Ohio region; they were served by fifteen missionaries. Ibid., p. 73.
addresses Indian history, and continues with a description of their
general characteristics. This must be regarded as the pivotal chapter,
and I will return to it later on. The following chapters give accounts of
tribal governments, education, languages and signs, manners,
marrige and treatment of wives, respect for the aged, pride and
magnanimity, after which there are chapters on war and warfare.
Further chapters then deal with general aspects of everyday life,
discussing food, dress, dances, medical treatment, but also scalping
and physical appearance; yet later chapters consider the Indians’ faith,
after which Heckewelder addresses various topics, such as
knackness, funerals, friendship, and advice for travelers. In the last
chapter, Heckewelder compares Indians and whites, and the fact that
his book concludes with this topic gives us valuable insights into his
point of view.

In the introduction, Heckewelder wrote that he intended to inform
“those who are desirous of knowing the true history of those people,
who, for centuries, have been in full possession of the country we now
inhabit; but who have since emigrated to a great distance.”11 His
History “principally meant to show what the Indians of this country
were previous to the white people’s arrival, rather than what they are
now.”12 He was aware that his views contradicted the prejudices
towards Native Americans, the original inhabitants, fostered by those
who saw themselves as civilized beings.13 Heckewelder took as a
starting point, that: (1) the Indians were honorable people before the
whites arrived, (2) contact with the whites had made them adopt their
bad habits and traits, (3) the whites’ relationship with Indians was
determined by prejudice, i.e., they believed they were superior.
Lastly, although predominantly emerging from between the lines of
the text, that (4), the whites had expelled the Indians from their native
land.

In the early nineteenth century, almost all Delaware Indians were
expelled from Pennsylvania and Ohio, where Heckewelder had
worked as missionary. This meant the definitive end of any attempts,
fragile though these had been, at coexistence between the Indians and
the white settlers. The mission to convert the “heathens,” as all non-

11 Heckewelder (fn. 2), p. XXIII.
12 Ibid. p. XXIX.
13 Ibid. p. XL.

Christians were called, played an essential role in this expulsion and
displacement of Native Americans. Indeed, conquest and settlement
on the part of the Europeans were justified as fair exchange following
the logic “of the valuable gift of the gospel in exchange for Indian
land.”14 As anthropologist Rachel Wheeler maintains: “By imagining
that the Indians would gain a chance at eternal salvation and be
rescued from their heathen ways, the Puritans justified their claims to
Indian land.”15 However, Heckewelder did not explicitly link
missionary work with the right to seize land, but only with white
colonial settlement; indeed, Heckewelder harshly criticized early
tenenteenth-century American society, and the settlers who were at that
point becoming a majority of the inhabitants in the land. This
acceleration of ‘land grab’ was accompanied by vehemently anti-
Indian propaganda, the main points of which implied that Indians
were not civilized, that they insidiously attacked peaceful settlers, and
that they were extremely cruel. Their savageness in warfare and
especially their treatment of prisoners were key elements in
establishing the negative image of Indians. The myth of the infamous
Indian, who stealthily sneaks up on innocent settlers and scalps them
from behind, far outlived the Indians themselves, in twentieth-century
Westerns. That Indians worshipped idols, were superstitious, and had
a casual attitude towards sexuality, since they married for a certain
time rather than forever, were also aspects of these populations that
were frowned upon. A second and later focus was on the image of the
dissolute, dirty, and mostly drunken Indian, for example, Injun Joe in
The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, who served as proof that Indians
could not be civilized and were ultimately destined by God to die out,
while the whites were predestined by divine will to rule America.16
This led to white Americans treating Indians with what, as
Tocqueville noted in 1831, amounted to: “a total lack of empathy, a
kind of mercilessness and cold egoism.”17 We can assume that Heckewelder had this contemporary attitude in mind as he wrote his book.

The Delaware Indians, who originally inhabited the region around the river named after them, had fled from the white settlers, retreating further and further to the west and northeast during the eighteenth century, reaching, as well as other regions, the Muskingam river (a tributary of the Ohio River), where Heckewelder lived among them as a missionary. During the colonial wars, they entered into a variety of alliances with the English and French, above all because they wanted to prevent white settlers from intruding further into their territory, but also to gain support for their struggles with other Indian tribes. However, as Heckewelder points out, they were ultimately drawn into fighting the white men’s battles. They suffered a decisive defeat after years of conflict with the white settlers in the period following American independence. The Treaty of Greenville (1795)18 forced the Delawares and other Indian peoples to give up the greater part of their territories. All the land they then had left consisted of the reservations. In the years following the peace treaty, Heckewelder was called to survey land, and to mediate as an interpreter and spokesman for baptized Indians. In 1829, ten years after Heckewelder’s History was published, the United States forced the Delaware Indians to give up

III Heckewelder’s Description and Perception of the Delaware Indians

Heckewelder addressed various aspects of Indian life. His relationship and experience with Indians will be examined on the basis of two passages chosen for the way they highlight Heckewelder’s attempt to come to terms with otherness.20 How did the white missionary Heckewelder perceive Indians? How did he reconstruct actions, practices, and attitudes, the meanings of which were not directly open to him as a white man, and was he able to “entertain the possibility of a different frame of reference,”21 i.e., did he reflect on how, for Indians, these aspects of life had a different meaning than they had for whites? In that respect, the material is not only interesting for what he wrote, but also by virtue of what he omitted.

In chapter six, “General Character of The Indians,” Heckewelder relates an incident involving pasturing horses; it is a story about notions of ownership and the Supreme Being:

17 Tocqueville is quoted from Urs Bitterli: Tocqueville und die Indianer. In: Überseegeschichte. Beiträge der jüngeren Forschung. Festschrift für Eberhard Schmitt. Ed. Thomas Beck et al., Stuttgart 1999, pp. 87–97, here p. 92. Tocqueville continues, stating: “Often during our journey we met up with honourable citizens, who told us in the evenings in their cozy homes that this world belongs to us [...] as God did not endow native Americans with the ability to become civilized, he predestined them to die out.” Satisfied by this way of reasoning, the American goes to church, where he repeatedly listens to the vicar telling him that all men are brothers.” (ibid.)

18 The Treaty of Greenville was signed at Fort Greenville (now Greenville, Ohio), on August 3, 1795, between a coalition of Native Americans and Frontiersmen, known as the Western Confederacy, and the U.S. following the Native American loss at the Battle of Fallen Timber. It put an end to the Northwest Indian War. In exchange for goods amounting to a value of $20,000 (such as blankets, utensils, and domestic animals), the Native Americans turned over to the United States large parts of modern-day Ohio, the future site of downtown Chicago, the Fort Detroit area, Maumee Ohio area, and the Lower Sandusky Ohio area.


21 Ibid.
Some travelling Indians having in the year 1777, put their horses overnight to pasture in my little meadow, at Gnadenhütten on the Muskingum, I called on them in the morning to learn why they had done so. I endeavoured to make them sensible of the injury they had done me, especially as I intended to mow the meadow in a day or two. Having finished my complaint, one of them replied: "My friend, it seems you lay claim to the grass my horses have eaten, because you had enclosed it with a fence: now tell me, who caused the grass to grow? Can you make the grass grow? I think not, and nobody can except the great Mannito. He it is who causes it to grow for both my horses and for yours! See, friend! The grass which grows out of the earth is common to all; the game in the woods is common to all. Say, did you never eat venison and bear's meat? — Yes, very often." — Well, and did you ever hear me or any other Indian complain about that? No; then be not disturbed at my horses having eaten only once, of what you call your grass, though the grass my horses did eat, in like manner as the meat you did eat, was given to the Indians by the Great Spirit. Besides, if you will but consider, you will find that my horses did not eat all your grass. For friendship's sake, however, I shall never put my horses in your meadow again."22

The horses left to graze on Heckewelder's — and yet not Heckewelder's — meadow point to two subtexts in which the author deals with the Indians' otherness. The first revolves around the notion of property, and, more precisely, the differing attitudes of whites and Indians towards property, a difference that whites exploited to the Indians' disadvantage, as we know only too well today and which the author implicitly acknowledges critically. Even if Heckewelder, in this chapter, does not mention the Indians' then current plight — the loss of their land by sale, treaties, or expulsion — the scene described does, in fact, reflect this issue. Two different notions of property are confronted in this scene. Heckewelder cannot comprehend how the Indians could simply let their horses graze on his meadow; the Indians, in contrast, are unable to understand how Heckewelder could declare the meadow to be his personal property, that is, not recognize their right to use it. In 1777, no conflict arose in Gnadenhütten at the Muskingum, because Heckewelder confronted the Indians with his complaint and they argued their case. On a larger scale, however, similar constellations of white claims to Indian land led to wars, to the expulsion of Indians from their domains and, in 1782, to the massacre at Gnadenhütten mentioned above. Heckewelder's description of difference and what he says about the different notions of property suggest the following interpretation of the Indians' actual plight: if

they perceive the land as belonging to all, then they, in the end, cannot sell it, or, conversely, if someone buys it from them, then something is very much amiss. Time and again, Heckewelder gives voice to Indians' complaints, in which they articulate that they had initially not minded placing land at the early settlers' disposal, but that the whites were never satisfied and continued to demand more land than they needed, until they fenced in the land, made treaties and expelled the Indians.23

The second subtext is closely intertwined with the first. Heckewelder shows how, for the Indians, land cannot be possessed by anybody, and that this is fundamental to their religious convictions, in keeping with the idea of their God, Manitou. By writing that the Indians considered it their utmost duty, with which they gratefully complied, to worship this Supreme Being, he was stressing two things: their piety and their adherence to a monotheistic belief in the Manitou, the Supreme Being, the Great Spirit, i.e., only one God. Profoundly acquainted with the culture and language of the Delaware, Heckewelder must have known that Manitou was the singular of Manetuwak. In the Delaware worldview, these Manetuwak were invisible beings who were "in every animal, but also in plants and objects,"24 and to whom the almighty creator of the world, Kishelemukong, had confided their maintenance after his withdrawal from earth. Although he treated them elsewhere, Heckewelder did not mention these gods or spirits in the chapter on the "General Character of the Indians." I suppose that this was an intentional attempt to underline the similarity of Indians and Christians. A good Indian, it would seem, complies with the first commandment — even if he is unaware of the fact — by worshipping one God. Manitou is, so to speak, almost God, almost Jesus. To overstate the point, ultimately there is no difference between the pious Native American and the pious white American, or, more generally, between Christians and Indians. Indians are virtually like Christians. They have only to be converted and baptized. Baptized Indians then would represent all the affirmative characteristics of the original Indians, which the other — heathen — Indians had lost in the course of their contact with whites.

22 Heckewelder, History (fn. 2), p. 102.
23 See, for example, ibid., pp. 76, 335.
24 Wessel (fn. 5), p. 35.
It is significant that Heckewelder takes a similarity between Indians and whites as his point of departure. By doing so he assimilates the Indians; they are no longer the others. This can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, he thus pursues his aim of increasing the acceptance of Indians as Native Americans and helping his contemporaries comprehend their ways. The majority of whites, as previously stated, despised Indians and by no means considered them their equals. If, however, the Indian God is almost like the Christian God, then native people lose their different nature. They are then actually no longer heathens, but essentially pious monotheists waiting to become real Christians.

On the other hand, assimilation can be understood as a strategy of colonialism, however unwitting, as Todorov saw it. In contrast to slavery, which intends to possess, to exploit, and, in the end, to annihilate the stranger, colonialism wants to understand, to get to know the strangers, the others, and hopes to exploit them more effectively by doing so. For a missionary this would not result in conquest and settlement of land or in gold, but in baptisms. Assimilation, as Todorov has shown, is a key praxeological approach in relating to the other, forcefully modeling the stranger's image after one's own.25 At the epistemological level, the otherness of the stranger is denied by this approach.26 Maybe the two sides are inextricably intertwined for the pious friend of the Indians and proto-ethnologist: he can promote a positive view of Indians only by accentuating their similarities with whites, and, as a missionary, he obviously focuses on notions of the divine, of faith. Whatever the circumstances, the scene with the Indians' horses put out to pasture illustrates that Heckewelder tried to see his meadow through the eyes of the Indians.

IV The Treatment of Captives

For Heckewelder's readers, the treatment of captives exemplified the epitome of barbarous Indian practices. Regarding such issues,

25 Todorov (fn. 3), pp. 185, 168.
26 Ibid., pp. 146, 168. As far as I can see, Heckewelder, by letting his Manitou virtually be God, is not applying one of Todorov's two "great figures, which inescapably limit the room of relation to the other," that is, "to degenerate equality into identity." Todorov, p. 177.

Heckewelder could not rely on any understanding on the part of his readers, but he could also not ignore the matter. Therefore, one chapter dealt with "Scalping — Whoops or Yells — Prisoners" (chapter 27). He begins the section about prisoners with the confession: "I am now come to a painful part of my subject; the manner in which the Indians treat the captives whom they take in war. It must not be expected," he continued, "that I shall describe here the long protracted tortures which are inflicted on those who are doomed to the fatal pile, nor the constancy and firmness which the sufferers display, singing their death songs and scoffing all the while at their tormentors."27 Others had written enough about these "disgusting horrors," and, as a Christian, he would not "endeavour to excuse or palliate them."28 Nevertheless, Heckewelder attempted to relativize them, though diffidently, by stressing the fact that "those dreadful executions" were "by no means so frequent as is commonly imagined." Indeed, captives were generally "adopted by the families of their conquerors in the place of lost or deceased relations or friends,"29 and they then belonged to their new families, in which they were treated amicably. He drew the reader's attention to the fact that captives were hardly ever burnt or tortured to death, except when "it is thought necessary to revenge the death of their warriors slain in battle,"30 or when enemies had willfully murdered their women and children. Initially, Heckewelder played down the issue, stating that captives were seldom tortured to death and that Indians normally adopted their captives.31 Then, again, he tried to foster understanding for Indian culture by relating that only certain incentives led to the torture of captives (such as the desire for revenge).32 However, "it
cannot but be acknowledged that the Indians are in general revengeful and cruel to their enemies. The problem inherent in acknowledging this fact was that it brought Heckewelder very much in line with contemporary views on Indians that he did not agree with. The missionary solved this dilemma by resorting to a convincing interpretation that I quote here in full:

Deprived of the light of the only true Christian Religion, unchecked by the precepts and unswayed by the example of the God of peace [the Saviour, PS], they indulge too much, sometimes, the violence of their passions, and commit actions which force the tear from the eye of humanity. But, upon the whole, are we better than they are?

This is demonstrably a rhetorical question. The alterity expressed in their cruelty is ultimately due to the fact, he argues, that they are not Christians and, therefore, are ruled by their passions. According to the subtext, they cannot be made responsible for their behavior in the end. If we additionally take into account the prior episode, in which Heckewelder presented Indians in their worship of Manitou virtually as Christians, he seems to suggest that they were principally capable of controlling their passions by being baptized, i.e., by becoming true Christians.

This he cogently argued in the Indians' case: if they were cruel, then this was because they were not Christians yet, and because they were not Christians, they could not control their passions. Heckewelder could, however, only argue in this way by ignoring that the torture of captives was not motivated by passions at all, but rather had to do with a specific feature of Indian culture, ritualized torture, in which the individual prisoner was given the opportunity to prove his courage and his spiritual strength by enduring pain. The Delawares and several other Indian tribes were convinced, that "the torture victim's stoic suffering" garnered not only respect and honor for his nation and for his tribe, but also "brought with it a chance of rebirth."

By failing to recognize the ritualized character of torture, Heckewelder did not notice that "the spiritual grammar [of Moravian religious culture, P.S.] was," as Rachel Wheeler has shown, "not unlike that of native religious practice"; that in fact "the Moravian symbolism surrounding communion intersected in powerful ways with native rituals of torture." Whereas Moravians attached a special significance to Christ's gruesome death and worshipped his wounds, especially the pleura, in an emphatic blood-and-wound cult, the Delawares placed cultural emphasis, as previously described, on the ability to endure pain and suffering. The analogous aspect in the Christian religion made it potentially attractive to Indians. The Moravian Church, with its particular focus on Christ's suffering, integrated ritualized torture according to the Indians' way of thinking. The crucifixion of Christ virtually made an Indian of him, because of his exemplary and stoic endurance of ritualized torture.

Why did Heckewelder ignore the ritualized nature of captives' torture, and, even more importantly, why did he fail to recognize the similarity of the two beliefs' spiritual grammar? Why did he not see that the Indians, by worshipping Manitou, were not only almost Christians, but that, from their point of view, Christ was practically an Indian because of his stoicism in suffering? It is obvious that, besides rituality, Heckewelder disregarded another key fact concerning the cruel treatment of captives although he must have been acquainted with this detail, as he was an expert on Indian culture. Gender played a role in the whole issue: in North American Indian culture, women decided what was to be done with the captives brought home by the warriors from war. Women decided if captives were to be adopted — an Indian custom, as Heckewelder was well aware — or be subjected to the ritual of torture, meaning ritualized killing, the rituality of which Heckewelder had overlooked. According to Indian culture, the dead family members demanded either the death

33 Heckewelder (fn. 2), p. 106.
34 Ibid.

Chloe 46
or adoption of the captives; these were the only two ways of appeasing the spirits of deceased relatives.39

I would posit that the Indian women’s autonomy to decide between life and death was such a scandalous idea for Heckewelder, that it clashed so thoroughly with bourgeois notions of femininity, which constructed women as the “moral sex” to such a degree that, to put it in psychoanalytic terms, it had to be repressed. The fact that the Delawares conferred this power and duty on women rendered gender relations among them so different from his own tradition as to leave them beyond his comprehension. Here, Heckewelder, as a white middle-class man, reached the limits of his capacity to understand Indians, both as a missionary and as a subject of enlightenment. And we have to read his learned account as much within the context of enlightenment as within the context of bourgeois gender construction.40

39 “Captives were seized from enemy tribes to appease the deaths of family members. The power, and the obligation, to quench the crying blood of lost relatives belonged to women, who could appease the deaths, either by adoption of the captive, or by mandating torture and death.” Wheeler (fn. 35), p. 36.

40 I thank Barbara Becker-Cantarino for her comments on this essay.
Migration and Religion
Christian Transatlantic Missions, Islamic Migration to Germany

Edited by
Barbara Becker-Cantarino
CONTENTS

Preface ..................................................................................... 1

Barbara Becker-Cantarino:
Religion and Migration: Christian Missionaries in North America, Muslim Populations in Germany ........................................ 5

Wolfgang Breul:
Theological Tenets and Motives of Mission: August Hermann Francke, Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf ...................... 41

Pia Schmid:
Indians Observed: Moravian Missionary John Heckewelder’s Account of the History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations (1819) .... 61

Ulrike Gleixner:
Remapping the World: The Vision of a Protestant Empire in the Eighteenth Century ................................................... 77

Ulrike Strasser:
From “German India” to the Spanish Indies and Back: Jesuit Migrations Abroad and Their Effects at Home ........................ 91

Cornelia Niekus Moore:
“A Source of Praise”: The Wanderings of a Devotional Book .......... 111

Rebekka Habermas:
Islam Debates around 1900: Colonies in Africa, Muslims in Berlin, and the Role of Missionaries and Orientalists ................ 123

Claudia Breger:
Christian Universalism? Racism and Collective Identity in Twenty-First-Century Immigration Discourses ........................ 155

David Gramling:
“You Pray Like We Have Fun”: Toward a Phenomenology of Secular Islam ................................................................. 175

Kamaal Haque:
Iranian, Afghan, and Pakistani Migrants in Germany: Muslim Populations Beyond Turks and Arabs ............................. 193

Thomas Schmitt:
Mosque Debates as Space-Related, Intercultural, and Religious Conflict .......................... 207

Karl Ivan Solbakke:
Muslim Migration to Germany: A Response to Thilo Sarrazin, Deutschland schafft sich ab ........................................ 219

List of Contributors .................................................................. 237

Index ................................................................................... 239