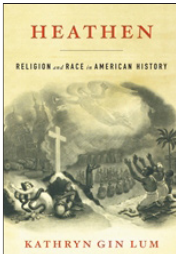
REVIEW



Kathryn Gin Lum, *Heathen: Religion and Race in American History*

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022. 368 pages. Hardcover, $35.00. ISBN 978-0-674-97677-1.

Kathryn Gin Lum's *Heathen: Religion and Race in American History* is a breathtaking work on the discourse of the "heathen" through American history. Gin Lum, who teaches at Stanford University, is a leading historian of race and religion in America, and her previous publications include *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Race in American History* (coedited with Paul Harvey, 2018). Though *Heathen* primarily focuses on North America, the book will be of interest to a wide range of scholars of religion, for "heathenism" was, after all, such a foundational category to the thinking regarding religion in general in the modern world.

Gin Lum begins the book with a critique of what she calls the "replacement narrative." According to this widely held assumption, the discourse of human hierarchy shifted from one based on *religious* differences to one based on *racial* differences. In this narrative, the notion of the "heathen" is understood to be a thing of the past that was "replaced" by racial hierarchies in the modern world. It is this master narrative that Gin Lum challenges in this book. Far from one being replaced by the other, the categories of "religion" and "race" have been, she argues, closely entangled with each other to this day. It is such "simultaneity of religious and racial othering" through American history that this book attempts to unpack (9–10).

Following the introduction, the author undertakes a meticulous genealogy of the "heathen" throughout the centuries. The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 covers the usages of the term "heathen" from ancient Greece to medieval Europe (chapter 1), to the early modern colonies in the Americas (chapter 2), and to the antebellum United States (chapters 3 and 4). One recurring theme in the European and Euro-American writings was the idea of "degeneration," which held that heathens *used to* worship the true religion (that is, Christianity) but later fell into a corrupted or degenerated condition. This idea dates back at least to the late antiquity, as is evident in the work of the Christian polemicist Eusebius (49–50). But it was,

as chapter 2 shows, the early modern European and Euro-American authors, such as José de Acosta and Joseph-François Lafitau (both Jesuit) and Jonathan Edwards (Congregationalist), that further developed this theory. Native Americans and all the other "heathen" peoples were, in these authors' eyes, "degenerated Christians" who awaited the evangelization and their subsequent return to their *original* status.

Gin Lum further highlights that the "heathen" status was not all about their religious or spiritual inclinations. In fact, heathenness was closely associated with otherness in terms of skin color and bodily practice. The Jesuit missionary Lafitau, for one, found Native Americans deviant not only from the original religion (Christianity) but also from the original skin color (white) (56–57). The physical appearance of heathens is further discussed in chapter 4, where Gin Lum explores the writings of American Protestant missionaries in the early-to-mid nineteenth century. According to the author, what these white missionaries tried to remedy about heathens was not just their spiritual or internal status. In their judgment, the unholiness or impurity of heathens permeated both internal *and* external conditions of their beings. Therefore, to convert heathens must mean to change them in their entirety—including how they were clothed, how they treated their bodies, and how they raised their children.

Part II explores the practical implications of the "heathen" discourse in the nineteenth-century United States. Surveying both domestic and transnational contexts, Gin Lum discusses how white Christians employed the rhetorical weapon of heathenness in a variety of political projects, including colonization and missionary projects in Africa (chapter 5), the exclusion of Chinese immigrants (chapter 6), and the annexation of Hawaii (chapter 7). As these chapters reveal, Anglo-Protestants found heathens everywhere they looked. Any immigrant group could be labeled "heathens" insofar as their habits and economic conditions seemed different from those of Anglo-Americans. The anti-Chinese immigrant literature in this period was full of such descriptions, and remarkably, even European groups like Irish and German immigrants (many of who were poor Catholics) could be called "heathens" (146–47). And of course, heathens were found overseas, too. Africa and Hawaii among other places were depicted as lands of heathenism that needed salvation and, with this justification, American missionaries and colonizers sailed the seas.

Lastly, in Part III, the author explores the lingering impacts of the "heathen" discourse in the late nineteenth to the twentieth centuries. In this period, as chapter 8 shows, more and more people found the term "heathen" offensive and inappropriate, and stopped using it altogether. Aiming at an "impartial" description of world religions, comparative religion authors in the second half of the nineteenth century, such as Lydia Maria Child and James Freeman Clarke, dismissed the term (199–200). In the meantime, a tolerant attitude toward non-Christian faiths developed in the missionary field, too, culminating in the 1932 report, *Re-Thinking Missions*. Using the word "heathen" no more than once, the report gave an ever stronger affirmation of positive values in other religious traditions (219–21). Whereas fundamentalist

Christians kept using the "heathen" discourse in the twentieth century (chapter 9), the term seems to have disappeared from the mainstream American lexicon.

At the same time, however, Gin Lum finds a continuation between the "heathen" discourse in the previous centuries and the seemingly harmless discourse of religious diversity in the modern world. For instance, the term "ethnic religions," adopted by scientifically minded scholars of religion in the late nineteenth century, was in effect keeping the connotations of the very term it allegedly replaced: "heathen religions." As Gin Lum writes, "To have 'ethnicity' meant to be partial, incomplete, confined to one part of the world, and stagnant. Ethnic or heathen religions could not hope to gain adherents beyond a regionally and racially specific nation group" (201). She casts a similar critical gaze at the term "unreached people," which twentieth-century American evangelical Christians came to use to refer to the nonwhite population in the non-Western world who still remain unevangelized (235–46). Thus disguised in mild terms, the ghost of the "heathen" discourse still haunts various places.

With this exhaustive survey of the "heathen" discourse through American history, Gin Lum's book makes a seminal contribution to the growing scholarship on religion and race in America. In the past few decades, an increasing number of historians have viewed religion and race as *constructed* categories, and examined the historical entanglement of the two. Or, as Paul Harvey puts in his recent book *Bounds of Their Habitation* (2017), "religious concepts formed racial ideas, and racial concepts infused religious ideas in American history" (2). Gin Lum's study of "heathens" excellently illustrates such intertwined or the "co-constituting" nature of racial and religious categories. As she promises in the introduction, the book indeed makes a compelling case that *religious othering* and *racial othering* have always occurred "simultane[ously]."

Whereas the book primarily focuses on how white Protestants viewed other religio-racial groups under the category of "heathens," the author highlights that religio-racial minorities also used the same rhetorical weapon against the white oppressors. In 1829, African American activist David Walker claimed that "the white Christians of America" were less than "any Heathen nation" for their barbarous treatment of enslaved Africans (129). Other protestors, such as Zitkála-Sá (Native American), Wong Chin Foo (Chinese American Confucianist), Hirai Kinza (Japanese Buddhist), and C. N. Chakravarti (Indian theosophist), strategically took the label "heathen" for themselves and rebuked white Christians for their racism, imperialism, and other hypocritical deeds (172–74, 209–19). Thus, Gin Lum's work brilliantly shows that the notion of "heathenism" was a highly *contested* one, with different groups using it for their own purposes.

Still, the book is not without flaws. Because of the author's ambition to cover a fairly long time period, readers may find her discussion of some periods rough and not fully convincing. Her treatment of the shift of the Western attitude toward Asian religions in chapter 8 is characteristically sweeping. After discussing the nascent

study of comparative religion in the late nineteenth century and the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, she jumps to the 1932 publication of the pluralistic report, *Re-Thinking Missions*, leaving readers puzzled over what happened in the period between. Likewise, this reviewer wanted to learn more about the actual process of how the term "heathen" fell out of use in the modern era. Whereas the author does a superb job in showing the lingering impact of the heathen discourse even in the era after the disappearance of the term, her discussion of how and why the term fell into disuse in the first place is relatively brief. The task of subsequent scholars will be to pick up specific themes in this book, to deepen them, and to revise Gin Lum's fabulous if occasionally rough genealogy.

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