

BOOK ROUNDTABLE

Forum Discussion of *Heathen: Religion and Race in American History*, Kathryn Gin Lum: Introduction

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The question of how Christians perceived and related to non-Christians – heathens – is of pressing historical importance in every era of the history of Christianity. It lies at the core of the historical category of “religion,” particularly as it developed through European colonial expansion in the early modern era, and it plays important roles in the globalizing processes of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. Kathryn Gin Lum’s book, *Heathen: Religion and Race in American History*, winner of the ASCH’s 2023 Philip Schaff Prize, chronicles that history. Through her narrative, she queries the ways historians engage categories of difference and the role of religion in creating social and political hierarchies.

In January 2023 at the ASCH’s annual meeting in San Francisco, scholars Michael Baysa, Emily Conroy-Krutz, Rachel Wheeler, and Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh engaged with Gin Lum’s arguments, each from their own perspective. The essays in this forum grow from the presentations given that day. Baysa ponders the concept of “heathen” from the perspective of the racialized convert, one who both endured and challenged the concept of heathen applied to them by white Christian missionaries. Conroy-Krutz takes on Gin Lum’s mode of engaging the dynamic relationship between race and religion, particularly as it raises questions about the nature of conversion. Wheeler finds resonances of Gin Lum’s arguments across the span of American history, highlighting the historical complexity in the ways that awareness of “heathenness” among whites – aggressors and do-gooders alike – worked in countervailing and yet mutually reinforcing ways. Wells-Oghoghomeh highlights the visuality of the “heathensight” Gin Lum outlines, and its consequences for bodies, land, and particularly anti-Blackness.

Perhaps most strikingly, all the essays presented here look to the broadest implications raised by Gin Lum’s work, especially the meanings of linear and non-linear time and the present-day implications of our intellectual categories. Collectively, these scholars demonstrate the myriad ways that investigating the single concept of “heathen” can implicate global histories and transhistorical processes. Their work, and Gin Lum’s, lay the groundwork for opening rich new theoretical questions.

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