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Songs of Power and Prayer in the Columbia Plateau: The Jesuit, the Medicine Man, and the Indian Hymn Singer

Chad S. Hamill

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Songs of Power and Prayer in the Columbia Plateau explores the role of song as a transformative force in the twentieth century, tracing a cultural, spiritual, and musical encounter that upended notions of indigeneity and the rules of engagement for Indians and priests in the Columbia Plateau.

In Chad Hamill's narrative, a Jesuit and his two Indian "grandfathers"—one a medicine man, the other a hymn singer—engage in a collective search for the sacred. The priest becomes a student of the medicine man. The medicine man becomes a Catholic. The Indian hymn singer brings indigenous songs to the Catholic mass. Using song as a thread, these men weave together two worlds previously at odds, realizing a promise born two centuries earlier within the prophecies of Circling Raven and Shining Shirt.

Songs of Power and Prayer reveals how song can bridge worlds: between the individual and Spirit, the Jesuits and the Indians. Whether sung in an indigenous ceremony or adapted for Catholic Indian services, song abides as a force that strengthens Native identity and acts as a conduit for power and prayer.

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