

# *The Story of Religion in America*

AN INTRODUCTION

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# *Introduction*

Christopher Columbus saw what he wanted to see. On October 12, 1492, he landed on an island in the Caribbean he believed was off the mainland of Southeast Asia, then called India. There he and his entourage met a native people who identified themselves with the word “Taíno,” by which they meant both “people” and especially “good people,” in contrast to their more aggressive neighbors the Caribs. All of this was lost on Columbus. He reported later to King Ferdinand of Spain that the natives on this and other islands were of childlike innocence, eager to give the Spaniards valuables, including gold. The Taíno should be easy to convert, thought Columbus, as he later wrote the king: “They do not hold any creed nor are they idolaters; but they all believe that power and good are in the heavens and were very firmly convinced that I, with these ships and men, came from the heavens, and in this belief they everywhere received me after they had mastered their fear.”<sup>1</sup> Columbus captured twenty-four Taíno natives on his first voyage to take them back to Spain and have them trained to be forced missionaries to their own people. Six would survive to join the second voyage.

Those Taíno left on the island of San Salvador (as Columbus renamed it) were treated little better than those on nearby Hispaniola, where, during the visit of his second voyage, Columbus began to require tribute. Each male over 14 years of age was expected to mine and deliver a hawk’s bell full of gold (about ¼ ounce) every 3 months, or lacking this, 25 pounds of spun cotton. If this tribute was not paid, the Spanish cut off the delinquent Taínos’ hands, letting them to bleed to death. And why did Columbus need the gold? Because, influenced by the Spiritual Franciscans, he believed that he and his contemporaries were living in the last 150 years before the end of time and the gold was desperately needed to help Spain recapture Jerusalem from Islam, part of the same plan that saw the expulsion of the Moors from Spain and, in the year 1492, led Spain to execute 30,000 Jews for not converting to Christianity. Even before his first voyage, Columbus was reminding Ferdinand and Isabella of his gold-for-crusade plan: “I urged Your Highnesses to spend all the profits of this my enterprise on the conquest of Jerusalem and Your Highnesses laughed and said that it would please them and that even without this profit they had that desire.”<sup>2</sup> Christopher Columbus was a religious zealot.

Perhaps it was for the best that Columbus proved so poor in inquiring into the religious beliefs of the Taíno, for their religion was polytheistic, featuring worship of zemis, or spirits. Yúcahu, a male spirit, was god of their main crop, yucca, and the sea. His mother, Atabey, was the goddess of the moon, fresh waters, and fertility. Lesser spirits accounted for every other aspect of life, including why hurricanes sometimes came and where people went when they died. Between disease, enslavement, and cultural annihilation, the Taíno would be destroyed nearly everywhere except present-day Puerto Rico, where a remnant of their DNA and tribal ways are still preserved, nurtured, and celebrated. The way religion was involved in the conflict between Spaniards and indigenous people in the 1490s is not an isolated event. American religious history is replete with clashes of cultures and beliefs, often with lives at stake.



Five hundred and nine autumns later, on the North American mainland at New York's Yankee Stadium, an extraordinary religious gathering took place to mourn the deaths of 2,606 people in the September 11, 2001, attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center. Gathered there were the families of victims, with police, firefighters, celebrities, politicians, and musicians in abundance. The event, introduced by James Earl Jones and emceed by Oprah Winfrey, ran for well over two hours. It featured rabbis of every branch of Judaism, Catholic priests and bishops, archbishops—Catholic, Greek, and Armenian Orthodox—Sikh and Hindu leaders, Muslim leaders (male and female), and Protestant leaders from the black church, mainline, and evangelical wings. Police officers and firefighters read Scriptures, the shofar was blown, children sang, and tears were shed.

American religious history had come a long way in five centuries: people were able to openly offer their religious prayers of lament and for healing across faith lines. New York's religious leaders were also on their best behavior that autumn day, aware that the attacks—on the World Trade Center, on the Pentagon, and an aborted one that ended in a plane crash in a Pennsylvania field, presumed to be targeting the White House—were themselves motivated by a violent brand of religious interpretation of Wahhabism Islam emanating from Saudi Arabia. Those gathered at Yankee Stadium to sing, chant, recite Scripture, and pray all sought to fight violent religion with their own brands of peaceful wisdom of the ages. If one were to analyze what the individual faith representatives said that day, one would notice that they were leaning hard in the direction of inclusion—offering the most open-minded things that their traditions had to say to neighbors and strangers, versus the “our way to ultimate reality is the right way” kind of messages

that account for there being so many different religious groups in the first place. One clear exception was one Protestant representative of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, Rev. David Benke, President of its Atlantic Division, who used pointedly Christian language throughout his prayer. The first of his three petitions went like this:

Oh, Lord our God, we're leaning on you today. You are our tower of strength and we're leaning on you. You are our mighty fortress, our God who is a rock. In you do we stand. Those of us who bear the name of Christ know that you stood so tall when you stooped down to send a Son through death and life to bring us back together. And we lean on you today, oh, Tower of Strength. Be with those who mourn the loss of loved ones. Bring them closer to them—to us day by day.<sup>3</sup>

Benke's prayer included allusions to Martin Luther's "A Mighty Fortress" and was as evangelical as anything said that day. He even ended his prayer "in Jesus' name," thus making the rest of the audience Christian, at least by implication. It was surprising to some, therefore, that of all of the people who participated in the interfaith service televised nationally from Yankee Stadium, it was Pastor Benke who was sanctioned by his church for participating. For this participation, he was accused by other pastors in his denomination with six sets of ecclesiastical violations, including syncretism (mixing religions), unionism (worshiping with non-LCMS Christian clergy), and violating the Bible's commandment against worship of other gods. Hence David Benke was suspended from that denomination's roll of pastors. He never apologized for his action and was restored to the ministry on appeal the next year. During the interim he was asked about his decision to step forward as a spiritual leader, and he told reporters, "The religious impulse is extremely strong and vital in the human heart, and will lead people to places they would not go on their own. . . . It is not only a high and altruistic thing; it is a dangerous thing."<sup>4</sup>

This history of religion in America from pre-Columbian times to the present century is a history of contraries—of inclusion and exclusion, of abiding piety that leads to wisdom and reform, and passionate righteousness that leads to schism, dissent, and even more.

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### **A Word for Students**

If you have taken an American history course, especially in high school, you might reflect on when religion came up in the course of a typical 500-year-long story. Certain episodes are deemed religious: Pilgrims, Puritans, Prohibition, the election of Jimmy Carter, the faith of George W. Bush. Others have religious dimensions: immigration and nativism, abolitionism, Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a

Dream” speech, and protests against abortion. Yet most of the great events of American history are taught with as little reference to religion as possible, for perhaps no other reason so strongly held as the separation of church and state in its customary interpretation in U.S. public schools and consequently the textbooks they buy: to be on the safe side, the less said about religion, the better. Religion-free American history turns out to be incomplete history—a bit like learning chemistry without attention to oxygen and carbon: just as these elements are constituent of so much of physical life, so also religious ideas, organizations, motivations, and conflicts turn out to be central to a large amount of the story of America and its people. So consider this an invitation to learn American history with a new set of lenses, the ones your teachers, school boards, and politicians have conspired to keep from you.

Let us suppose you are one of the growing numbers of the so-called Nones, people who when asked for their religious preference reply “none.” What is the payoff in a religious history of America for you? Or, let us suppose you are very religiously committed to your own group and have little initial interest in learning about someone else’s religion. What do you have to gain by learning about American religion, what Henry May called “the mode, even the language, in which most Americans, during most of American history, did their thinking about human nature and destiny”? What everyone gains through this kind of study is insight into the ways Americans—Native American, black, white, Asian, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Baha’i, and so many others—thought about the meaning and the conduct of their lives. All of us live in an American culture shaped by those who went before us. Many of our fellow citizens—though also living in a world of vaccines, the Internet, television, and 24/7 cable news—also think in ways that are highly inflected religiously. So whether you are not very religious, or are very committed to a particular faith, or are somewhere in between, the history you encounter in these pages is one to which you are a recipient. These people, ideas, and groups shaped American culture for better and worse. So this is a good place to warn you that you will meet religious heroes and heroines and villains, good and bad ideas, and inconsistent people in the following pages. Learning about them will help us avoid being too solemn about religion, which after all is a *human* phenomenon; it is about *human beings* seeking and worshiping divine things more than it is about what or whom they seek and worship. Moreover, one cannot be perfectly objective, since that makes one boring (and bloodless) when it comes to people and groups who use their religions to impress and oppress, though we shall endeavor to be fair. There are no “both sides” to religiously inspired enslavement of human beings, or to forced suicides in Jim Jones’s Jonestown, for instance, though we shall try to be fair in conveying the evidence about the bleaker sides of history.

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**Difficult  
Definitions:  
America, Religion,  
and History**

It hardly makes sense to begin studying the history of religion in America without defining the key terms. Thus here we provide a brief discussion and delimitation of how this text understands and will use these three important terms, each of which are the subjects of countless books on their own.

***America***

America was not so much discovered as invented. That is, there was a great contiguous land mass running from the Arctic Circle in the north to the Southern Ocean circling Antarctica, with a great many people living on both of its major continents and many islands. But the land mass had no name until a rich financier and adventurer named Amerigo Vespucci visited parts of present-day Venezuela, Brazil, and Argentina in 1499–1504; he made and signed a map of the continent, showing that what Europeans were sailing to was not Asia. Early in the sixteenth century two subsequent cartographers—Martin Waldseemüller in 1507 and Mercator in 1538—would feminize his name into “America” and put it on their maps, first for South America, and then used it for all of the Western Hemisphere. America, therefore, is a story of invention and application to unknowing peoples who had been on both continents for perhaps 30,000 years. As a concept it also began to fire the imagination of colonizing Europeans who decided that they needed to be there—in America. In this book we will begin with the religious aspects of this invasion of America by the Spanish and Portuguese, the French, the Dutch, and finally the English. Then, as America itself begins to be more and more associated with the people and nation that became the United States, we will follow that thread of the American story most closely. Readers, however, should be alert to the places and times after 1776 where the story of American religion is characterized by geographic expanse and ethnic enrichment.

In a religious history of America, sometimes America goes from being the place *where* the history takes place to being the religious *object of devotion itself*, as in the memorial service at Yankee Stadium we referenced earlier, where the gathered sang hymns to “America, the Beautiful,” “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” “The Star-Spangled Banner,” and above all, the brassy request/demand of the Deity, “God Bless America,” that became a second national anthem of reassurance at sporting events nationwide for most of the next decade. At moments like these, scholars like to talk about a civil religion existing in America: a set of fundamental values, rituals, and beliefs that bind Americans to their nation and to one another, independent of their other particular religious commitments. Both America’s many religions and America *as* religion figure into our story.

### Religion

In a study of American religious history, it is useful to have a definition of religion that can guide us. Throughout this book we will take religion to mean “belief in and resort to superhuman powers, sometimes beings.” Readers will note that this definition, borrowed from our fellow historian Jon Butler, is capacious enough to include religious people and practices that do not presuppose a personal deity, as in the case of many Buddhists and practitioners of nature religion, along with the Muslims, Jews, and Christians who are theistic (focused on a divine or supreme being). Our definition also avoids those “religion is good faith, everything else is bad” kind of definitions that plagued religious historians and even anthropologists of the past, who liked to set up distinctions between religion on the one hand and magic, or superstition, on the other. In our view, religion is not on one side of the spectrum, with magic and superstition on the other side. Since it is critical for the sake of learning, we ask readers to stay open to the possibility that if people believed or practiced something seriously, it stands as religion. Indeed, adopting this perspective may open us up to the possibility that Americans before us (and among us still) may have occupied several serious religious stances at once. Great grandpa may have been a Freemason and a Methodist with equal seriousness. Great grandma might have been a faithful Catholic and a practitioner of Santeria. Part of the religious diversity story of America takes place in individual lives. Mother may pray to Saint Jude for healing and wear a New Age copper amulet on the same aching wrist she prays about. Religion in America? It’s complicated—and fascinating.

Americans customarily express a belief in God or a supreme, transcendent being in the upper 90 percent range in public opinion polls, even into the early twenty-first century. If this is so, others ask, why are religious congregations not packed each weekend? Are Americans religious hypocrites, or does their belief in transcendence operate both within and beyond ecclesiastical forms? We think a broader definition of religion allows us to explain something about religion in America and to remain alert to subtle signs of religion in America throughout its long history.

### History

Though the events of the past are forever fixed, their meaning and significance shifts by virtue of later interpretations, assessments, and questions put to this historical record. In this sense, it is not unfair to say that *questions create history* (in the sense of the history one learns about later). One way most contemporary courses in the history of religion in America differ from those of the middle of the past century is that attention has shifted from traditional religious groups, such as mainline Protestant denominations and Catholicism, to examining the religious dimensions of racism, gender, and social reform in America that are more clearly seen now than in the past. Was religion for or against the forces of justice in America? Did religion defend or decry slavery, for example? Did religious leaders promote women’s

rights or seek to limit them? As we shall see, often the answer is both. But which religious ideas and practices won and lost the day, and which stayed on the sidelines—these happenings often turn out to have explanatory force for things we care about in our time.

Since all history can be defined as *change over time*, our study of American religious history will look closely for those things that have changed in the historical record. Yet the narratives that are composed about those changes, including this one and the ones readers will form for themselves, are the products of the questions brought to the historical record about what changed and about who mattered when. Thus history, what happened, has a dynamic relationship with historiography, the written accounts given of what happened. The questions we ask can sometimes bring to light new, previously unexplored dimensions of the past. For example, students in the past learned much about the two-hour-long sermons preached by early American male ministers. These students' questions "Where are the women in this story?" and "What did people listening to these sermons think?" led to exciting discoveries about female piety, church membership, and lay disobedience even in the most pious towns; these learnings figure into the way this book relates the story of early American piety. Likewise, questions about enslaved persons constantly subjected to the biblical text "Slaves, obey your earthly masters" (Ephesians 6:5 NIV) led to historians' discovery of neglected primary sources about the "invisible institution" of so-called slave religion and revised the historiography reflected in this textbook.

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**Where to Begin:  
A New World for  
Everyone**

Much of the popular and scholarly debate in American history in recent decades surrounds the question of where to begin. Does one begin American history with Jamestown, with Plymouth, with the Spanish and French, or with the indigenous peoples who were already living in the Americas? Or does one try to avoid the vexatious question of beginnings by pursuing a thematic approach instead? American religious history is not exempt from this debate, but we have chosen to tell the story with a chronological frame since it is the one most familiar to students already schooled in American history. Consequently, we begin with large-scale contact in the Americas between Europeans, native peoples called "Indians," first by mistake (in this book we prefer tribal group names when known, but use Native American, Indian, and indigenous as appropriate to the context because these are all widely used by the descendants of indigenous people to positively refer to themselves).<sup>5</sup> Next we move very quickly to regard Africans from more than three dozen different linguistic and ethnic groups, brought here in slavery. For all of these people, this became a new and transformed world, however much they sought to hold on to or transplant the ways of their homelands.

This had profound consequences for the religious and cultural history of the Americas and particularly the nation that would emerge as the United States.

America is a land of many beginnings when it comes to religion: what we call Alaska, Florida, Arizona, Virginia, Massachusetts, and what was once called Huronia are all good places to begin the tale. Yet every religious group and religious person thought, in some measure, that their beliefs and practices were coming with them as religion with a capital *R* (the only and right Religion). Thus they approached the New World as a place where their religion would be continued—a fresh beginning of their own, if you will. As it turned out, the religious story of America became how much the new context transformed the old faith, because in the end process was as important as place. Some of the great successes and failures—even for the dominant Europeans, as we shall see—came by virtue of being remade in the process of indigenization or creolization (mixing). They were not just Europeans abroad since they tried to re-create London in Boston, Charleston, and other cities over time. For Africans the adaptations were complex. The middle passage, the division of families, and even separation from people of one's native tongue on the auction block meant that North America was for some an utter disconnect from previous life. Others found places and people with whom to continue to practice Muslim prayers, plant food familiar from West Africa, and even continue such familiar religious practices as Conjur under conditions of plantation slavery. After 1492, Native Americans also dealt with a new world: they were confronted by disease and Europeans who wanted to trade, take their land, or “save” their souls—the one path unavailable was remaining unchanged.

The religious consequences of peopling North America from so many stocks did not end in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however. An extraordinary dimension of the religious story of America is that people kept coming, bringing their religions with them, and changing American culture in the process. That is as true for the early Quakers coming to New England and Pennsylvania as it is for recent Yazidi refugees coming to America in the wake of the Islamic State's attack on their homeland in Iraq (beginning in 2014).

People and their faiths drive our story, so American religious history is not just about the Pilgrims, who yet are interesting; we will tell their story early on and add more and more fascinating people to the history along the way. Amid the astonishing diversity readers will encounter—the authors warn you—are mostly different kinds of Christians who did not recognize one another as being as similar to each other as we would today. It would be unfaithful to the people who populated America in earlier times to paint a more interfaith picture than existed, but we shall be certain to notice religious diversity as it arrives in our story (thus drawing your attention to how much the diversity story begins as an intra-Christian set of struggles and

competitions). We will focus on Christian parts of the story more because there were more Christians. But we will also attend to other parts of the story of religion in America as they arise, especially since the numbers of other religions' adherents mean that they achieve a greater historical impact.

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**The Action:  
Exclusion and  
Conflict; Inclusion  
and Consensus**

Readers hearing that a mostly Christian cast of characters will appear in these pages need not fear that the plot will lack for action. It does not take many people (religious or otherwise) to stir up the question of whether civil society should be influenced more by faith or whether government should be free of religious influences. Historically, Americans like their own particular brands of religion and do not like anyone else imposing theirs upon them. The so-called French and Indian War was, after all, a seven-year-long war about the Catholic or Protestant destiny of North America. Native Americans themselves had religious conflicts leading to war long before Columbus arrived. Conflict is an old story. A related theme throughout our history is who is to be included and excluded in American society when it comes to religion and myriad other matters. It may come as a surprise to think of Baptists and Catholics as at one time among the excluded, but they were. Inclusion is a moving goal.

Even when we learn someone is, say, a Methodist, that can mean very different things at different points in time. There have been times when that religious identification would have clearly required differentiating oneself from society, as in the case of eighteenth-century Methodists banned from wearing metal buttons or any other display of finery, and other times when such a religious identity fit in well with what it meant to be an average middle-class suburbanite in the 1950s.

Religion, therefore, is not just believed; it is also performed, by behaving in ways the adherent finds fitting, or not. Finally, if one is looking for action, watch how many times religion raises the stakes in conflicts in American history. If someone believes God is on their side in a war, or its supposed moral equivalent, woe be to those who take the opposite position. And yet, at times of great national crisis, Americans of the same and different faiths have found themselves drawing on their religions to provide solace in the face of loss or purpose in the face of a seemingly insurmountable challenge.



American religion is to be found in weekend congregations' worship, to be sure, but it is also to be found in the diaries of frightened Civil War soldiers,

in civil rights marchers' determined faces, in presidential rhetoric, and in the caretaking rituals that kick in when a neighborhood child is struck with cancer. Religion binds people together, drives them apart, occupies their inward thoughts, and plays all day and night on cable television. Religion is present even in the midst of the worst of American history, serving as a chaplain to slavery *and* providing the motivation to resist it. It was the source for patriotic love of God and country, and the fundamental basis for resisting the war in Vietnam as an unjust war. To comprehend these phenomena we must embrace their breadth.

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**Primary Documents:  
A Special Feature  
of This Book**

The authors want to make it possible for readers to examine the evidence for themselves and so have included with this book access to *several dozen* primary documents from the history of religion in America. Together, they might easily double the length of this historiographical account of the history of American religion; yet used in classroom discussions or for personal research, they can not only give a vital flavor of a religious actor or movement in the past, but also allow twenty-first-century people to engage in a kind of time travel, pondering how the past is truly a different country. Many of these documents are briefly introduced in the text at a point where it is relevant to the narrative, and links to these documents are located on the Westminster John Knox Press website for this book ([www.wjkbooks.com/TheStoryOfReligionInAmerica](http://www.wjkbooks.com/TheStoryOfReligionInAmerica)). This feature helps instructors and students minimize the cost and hassles of obtaining, clearing, and posting collateral readings.

# 1. *Catholic Missions, European Conquests*

Over time, Protestantism ascended to a dominant position in the United States. It did not begin that way, however. First on the scene in the Americas were indigenous peoples, who had religious systems of their own. Then explorers and conquistadors dashed on the scene to win the land for European empires—and for the Roman Catholic Church. This chapter examines this troubling history, especially the often-violent association of mission and conquest.

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## **Religions of the Land**

Religious diversity is nothing new in American history. From the beginnings of civilization in North America, various peoples practiced many different religions. Much of what we know about these religions comes from the work of anthropologists and archaeologists, who study many different kinds of evidence, including material sources like pottery, tools, and architecture. In addition, experts in “ethnohistory,” an approach to history that combines historical and anthropological methods, have made great strides in understanding indigenous peoples and their religions.

Historians and anthropologists tell us that the original Americans whom the Europeans later encountered may have journeyed across a land bridge (flooded by the rising sea 13,000 years ago) from Siberia to Alaska. But there is much debate about how North America was originally settled. Did people come from Asia or from Europe, or perhaps both? And when did they first arrive? Likely up to thirty thousand years ago, according to the latest estimates. As these peoples spread throughout what we know as the North American continent, they shaped new cultures, and they also shaped the land, building structures that amaze us today, including ceremonial mounds as large as—and often older than—the Egyptian pyramids.<sup>1</sup>

Native American religions were diverse and like many other religions, including Christianity, had views of sacred beings, powers, and objects. We see this diversity reflected in the many languages they spoke. There were several main linguistic families, including Algonquian along the Eastern Seaboard and Northeast, extending as far as the Midwest; Hokan-Sioux, extending from the Southeast all the way to southern California; Uto Aztecan

in much of the Southwest; and Eskimo-Aleut in Alaska. This diversity is significant to note because, as Catherine Albanese wrote, “For Native Americans, culture was tradition was religion; so there were as many American Indian religions as there were separate people and societies.”<sup>2</sup>

Native American religions reflected their way of life. Some were hunters, like the Oglala Sioux, who moved from today’s Minnesota to the Great Plains. They hunted buffalo and practiced the ritual of Sun Dance, a summer celebration of the hunts that brought many tribes together for a four-day ceremony. The Sioux would build a lodge, place a pole in the middle, cover it with symbols, mainly of the buffalo, and have Sioux warriors attach themselves to the pole, usually with bands that painfully dug into their skin. The warriors would then dance around the pole, focusing on the sun for the entire day or until they fell from exhaustion. This was a rite of sacrifice, with the dancers symbolically sacrificing themselves in return for the life-giving nourishment of the buffalo. The point was for hunters to endure pain in appreciation for the gifts of buffalo in the hunt.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, the Hopi did not hunt buffalo on the plains. They were a Pueblo people, so named because they, like several other tribes in the Southwest, lived in apartment-type dwellings constructed from stone or adobe. Unlike the hunters of the Oglala Sioux, the Hopi farmed, growing beans, squash, and corn. They performed many of their religious rituals in pits called kivas. Because they were farmers, the Hopi followed the pattern of the seasons. And because they farmed in dry, desert lands, their rites focused on water, their most precious resource, much like the buffalo was for the Oglala Sioux.<sup>4</sup>

Whether they were buffalo hunters on the plains or farmers in the Southwest, indigenous peoples shaped religious traditions and rituals around the practical details of their lives. Not all religions were like this, however. Many religions—like Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism—are “world religions” in that they exist throughout the world and are not tied to one particular region. In contrast, many Native American religions connected to the land in a more intimate way. It would be difficult to export the religion of the Hopi people from the American Southwest, for example. Missionary zeal was not a mark of most Native American religions because the land played such an important part in their religion. The land was a spiritual guide: it was sacred, directing the people, showing them how to live.<sup>5</sup>

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## Myths

Central to most religions are “myths,” stories about a people and their values, some of which are origin stories, describing how the world and/or a people came to be. Historians label these stories “etiological” myths (from the word “etiology,” which means “cause”). We also see stories like these in the Bible, as when the story of Noah’s ark explained the origin of the rainbow (Genesis 9:14–15).

According to one Cherokee myth, animals had lived in Galunati, a vault in the sky, until they needed more room, forcing them to venture below into the primordial waters. Leading the way was a water beetle named Dayunisi, who plunged into these waters and brought up mud that later expanded to form the dry land now covering much of the earth. Another figure, the Buzzard, carved the Cherokee's homeland out of the dry land, shaping it into great mountains. This was just one of many stories of creation; most peoples had them, and they often involved mythic figures who shaped the land and the cultures that developed on it.<sup>6</sup>

Native American myths often featured tricksters, who, as the name indicates, lived by deception, tricking others to get what they wanted. Tricksters lived by their wits; they were clever heroes, but not always kind or even moral, not to mention reverent. Tricksters were notorious for their embarrassing sexual and bawdy antics, and they often changed their appearances, assuming various animal disguises. One trickster well known in the Northwest, the Raven, brought the Sun's light to earth by stealing it in a box owned by the Sky Grandfather. This was another etiological myth, explaining how sunlight came to be. Another common trickster was the Coyote. In a myth told by the Nimiipuu people of the Pacific Northwest, the Coyote traveled to the place of the dead to retrieve his deceased wife. He found her but was warned against any contact with the dead, a rule Coyote ignored. He embraced his wife, an act that carried a curse with it. From that time onward, any being who lived would also die. As with the story of the Raven, we see here a story that is both a trickster story and an etiology myth. It shows a trickster acting impulsively, breaking the rules, and it explains why death is universal.<sup>7</sup>

Tricksters did not only cause trouble; they also performed acts of service, such as when the Raven brought light to earth. Most often tricksters were heroes, although flawed and often entertaining. Some of these trickster legends even originated with real people and real events.<sup>8</sup>

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## Rituals

When many people think of religion, they think less about theology and ideas and more about rituals, especially practices and ceremonies. For Native Americans, rituals allowed people to interact with gods or other holy beings, commemorate rites of passage (rituals that mark changes in life such as from adolescence to adulthood), and celebrate important seasons (such as harvest). Rituals often sought to make things right with the world. When the world seemed out of sorts, such as during a long drought—perhaps the people suffered the drought because of a damaged relationship to sacred beings—rituals could heal the relationship, allowing the people to prosper again.<sup>9</sup>

Rituals tell us a lot about the people who practiced them. Some Native American people hunted to survive, so they had thanksgiving rituals,

allowing people to give thanks for a good hunt. We saw an example of this with the Sun Dance of the Oglala Sioux, who danced to give thanks to the buffalo for a hunt. Other hunting peoples had similar practices. The Inuit believed that all living things had *inua*, an essence or spiritual nature that made them unique and survived even after the body had died. If all beings, including animals, had a sacred inner nature, then hunters could not treat animals as mere objects for slaughter. If hunters killed a bear, for example, they had to value the bear's *inua*, which meant thanking the bear for giving its life for the hunt. If hunters failed to perform this ritual, the bear's *inua* would inform other bears, who may retaliate by refusing to cooperate with hunts in the future. No bears for hunts meant less food for the people, which led to starvation. Ritual, therefore, could be invaluable to the food supply.<sup>10</sup>

Europeans of colonial times did not typically believe that all beings had a sacred inner nature, so they could not always understand why Native Americans dealt with animals as they did. A Moravian missionary in colonial America was puzzled when he saw a Delaware hunter shoot a bear and then talk to the bear while it writhed in pain: "Hark ye! Bear; you are a coward, and no warrior as you pretend to be. Were you a warrior, you would show it by your firmness and not cry and whimper like an old woman." The hunter continued, "Our tribes are at war with each other, and . . . yours was the aggressor." Then he accused the bear of stealing his people's hogs. Note the language of two "tribes": the Delaware tribe versus the bear tribe. We can see why the Delaware people respected bears. Not only could bears walk upright like humans, but bears also were not just helpless victims; they could also be predators, turning human hunters into prey. Bears were worthy adversaries. The bear needed to understand, therefore, why the hunter shot him: the Delaware and the bears were at war, so the bear should not hold it against the hunter. He hoped the bear would not seek spiritual payback against the Delaware people, cursing them and their future hunts. These rituals dumfounded Europeans, who could not understand why anyone would talk to an animal and expect to be understood. Native Americans disagreed, believing that conversation between hunter and hunted was important, as was respect for the carcass of the slain animal.<sup>11</sup>

As these examples demonstrate, some of the earliest written sources about Native Americans were from Europeans, often missionaries, who wrote about the people they encountered in the "New World." While we learn much from these sources, we must do what we should do with any source—understand its agendas and contexts. Just as there are no completely neutral, unbiased people, there can be no completely neutral, unbiased sources. This doesn't make such sources useless or inferior, but we need to keep their agendas in mind as we evaluate the sources.

Most of these Europeans assumed they were culturally superior to any other people in the world. That is, European culture—a broad term that includes beliefs, values, social practices, education, and technology—was

superior to that of any other people, many of whom were considered to be primitive and sometimes even barbaric.

As Christians, these missionaries also believed that Christianity was the world's one true faith, superior to all others. These two related assumptions—European cultural superiority and Christian religious superiority—affected how the missionaries viewed Native Americans and their religions, which affected how they described what they encountered with these peoples. We should also remember that most missionaries came to the Americas with the permission of European monarchs who were more interested in American lands and riches than in American souls. From the beginning, therefore, missions and conquest went hand in hand.

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### **Divided Christianity, Mission and Empire**

An important phase of the European encounter with Native Americans began when Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) first sailed in 1492. A few months before Columbus set sail, the Muslims in Granada surrendered to Christian Spain, ending the Reconquista (Reconquest), in which the Spanish Empire completed a “reconquest” of territory that Muslims had controlled since the 700s. This was a triumph for the Catholic Church and the Spanish Empire. Also, 1492 was near the beginning of the Spanish Inquisition (1478–1834), which Spanish rulers devised to centralize their power while fighting what they considered to be false belief or “heresy.” Those condemned as “heretics” (believers in false doctrine) were often tortured to death. This was a violent age, when European monarchs, like Spain's Ferdinand II and Queen Isabella I, sealed an alliance of empire and church as they sought to expand their reach in the New World.<sup>12</sup>

For Columbus and other Europeans, Christianity and civilization went together. About three decades after Columbus sailed to the Americas, the Protestant Reformation erupted in Europe, separating upstart protesters, or “Protestants,” from the Roman Catholic Church. As the Reformation revitalized and fragmented Christianity, new political and religious structures formed. France, Spain, and England each wedded itself to a different form of Christianity, resulting in a rivalry of empires combined with a rivalry of religions, pitting French Catholics, Spanish Catholics, and British Protestants against one another.<sup>13</sup> All had plans for the land—including exploration, settlement, and acquiring wealth—and all had plans for the people already living in the Americas, including conversion to Christianity and, if they resisted, conquering them by military force. Missions were not just religious efforts; they were also imperial efforts, tied to empires.

Native Americans believed they were constantly surrounded by spiritual forces in animals, plants, and the land. In contrast, many European Christians found most spiritual insights in Scripture. We see the influence of the

Bible almost everywhere, including in the career of Columbus. Although he was far from an expert on the Bible, he perceived his voyages from within a biblical perspective. “God made me messenger of the new heaven and the new earth of which he spoke in the Apocalypse of St. John after having spoken of it through the mouth of Isaiah; and he showed me where to find it,” Columbus wrote.<sup>14</sup>

Isabella and Ferdinand, according to Columbus, promoted “the Christian faith, and are enemies to the doctrine of Mahomet [Muhammad], and of all idolatry and heresy.” At stake was not only the New World, but also the global conflict between Islam and Christianity. Columbus intended to explore the East Indies, convert the people he encountered to Catholicism, and strengthen an eastern opposition to the Muslims who, much to the horror of the Christian world, still controlled Jerusalem (the Holy Land). New World conversions would also bring riches under the control of the Catholic Church, yet another way to strengthen the Spanish Empire. All these ambitions for conquest, conversion, and exploration were understood through a biblical perspective, as Columbus described in his *Libro de las Profecias* (Book of Prophecies).<sup>15</sup> “Neither reason nor mathematics,” Columbus wrote, “nor world maps were profitable to me; rather the prophecy of Isaiah was completely fulfilled,” referencing Isaiah 46:11: “the man that executeth my counsel from a far country.”<sup>16</sup>

Although the Bible was Columbus’s map of the future, he could have used a better map of the Atlantic Ocean in his present. Granted, Columbus knew more than many today give him credit for. He knew the world was not flat, but he still chased the dream many Europeans had of finding an easier way to the Far East by sailing west. Columbus believed he could find this route, but he did not know how far it was to China and Japan. So, when he arrived near the present-day Dominican Republic, only about 3,500 miles away, he thought he had reached India. Columbus landed, founded a community, and named the island Hispaniola. There Columbus met thousands of Taínos, who would soon wish they had never seen Columbus or his ships. As more Spaniards followed Columbus to the New World, the majority of Taínos died in droves while others would work the rest of their lives in slavery.<sup>17</sup>

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### COLUMBUS’S TROUBLED LEGACY

Christopher Columbus, for all his religious motivations and justifications, was a conqueror and enslaver of indigenous peoples. Columbus did not care much for converting the native peoples to Christianity, despite his claims otherwise. In 2006 some previously undiscovered texts came to light, revealing the full extent of the horrible cruelties that Columbus inflicted on the native peoples under his control.\*

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\*See David Treuer, *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the Present* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2019), 23–24.

It is worthwhile to pause here to consider the horrific influence of diseases on Native Americans. Although war and genocide took unnumbered lives, diseases killed more people than swords. Europeans knew about catastrophic diseases. Perhaps 100 million Europeans died of the plague in the 1300s and later. Another “Black Death” on a similar scale devastated indigenous peoples who came in contact with Europeans but had no immunity to European illnesses like smallpox. Some, like the Puritan governor of Massachusetts, John Winthrop, had a chilling take on such deaths: “For the natives, they are neere all dead of small Poxe, so as the Lord hathe cleared our title to what we possess.”<sup>18</sup>

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### Founding a New Spain in the “New World”

Europeans tried to replicate their old-world empires in the Americas. Even the names of the places they founded show us this desire: they wanted a New Spain, a New France, and a New England. Early on, the contest for dominance among empires was no contest at all because the Spanish took the lead. Thirty years after Columbus first arrived in the New World, the Spanish had begun a conquest of the Americas, with Conquistador Hernán Cortés (1485–1547) moving into Mexico to challenge the Aztecs. Cortés,



**FIGURE 1-1.** Hernán Cortés, portrait by José Salomé Pina, circa 1879 (Wikimedia Commons, P003430)

like Columbus, believed that the Bible justified his conquest. In the Old Testament, the Israelites conquered the Canaanites to seize the Promised Land. Likewise, Cortés would conquer the Aztecs to claim Mexico for the church and for Spain.<sup>19</sup>

These mixed motives for conquest were clear in Cortés's letter to the king of Spain, Charles V, recently crowned as the Holy Roman emperor: "We were in a position to win the greatest kingdoms and dominions in the world for Your Majesty. . . . We were only doing what we were obliged to do as Christians, by fighting against the enemies of our faith." Earthly riches and glory blended with religious duty. God would fight on behalf of God's chosen people, who, according to Cortés, were the Spanish.<sup>20</sup>

The letters of Cortés included dramatic narratives of deliverances in battle, including one case in which he and his men were trapped by "an hundred thousand warriors, who surrounded us on all sides." Despite the long odds, "it truly appeared that it was God who battled for us, because amongst such a multitude of people, so courageous, and skilled in fighting, and with so many kinds of offensive arms, we came out unhurt."<sup>21</sup>

At the time the undisputed conqueror of Central Mexico was Montezuma II (1466–1520), who ruled from Tenochtitlán, the Americas' greatest city in the sixteenth century and the site of modern-day Mexico City. Tenochtitlán must have been a sight to behold for Cortés as he approached. Spain had no city as large as Tenochtitlán, which even rivaled Paris in size. Cortés likely marveled at Tenochtitlán's stone pyramid, the site of Aztec rituals, including human sacrifice.<sup>22</sup>

The meeting between Montezuma and Cortés was monumental, a scene of two conquerors from rival civilizations, greeting one another. It also was a monumental confusion. As any dignified Spaniard would, Cortés walked up to embrace Montezuma, not knowing that it was forbidden to touch the great leader. The embarrassment of that first meeting aside, they did exchange necklaces, and Montezuma honored Cortés by allowing him to stay at his father's palace. But there are usually two sides to every story, and the fact that neither side recognized the other's language did not help. According to Cortés, Montezuma presided over a ceremony where he willingly submitted to the Spanish king and pledged allegiance to Spain. Montezuma likely did no such thing; Cortés probably misinterpreted or misrepresented what the Aztec ruler said.<sup>23</sup>

Later Montezuma did submit to Cortés—by force, as the conquistador captured Montezuma and "transferred" the Aztec Empire from Montezuma to Emperor Charles V. Despite what Montezuma really said in the ceremony, Cortés did not need much justification to conquer the Aztecs because, as he saw it, he was a Christian and an agent of the Holy Roman emperor, while Montezuma was an uncivilized pagan ruler. Cortés thought it was his civic and religious duty to replace Aztec paganism with Spanish Catholicism.

Cortés and his men sacked the Aztecs, removing and destroying their items of worship, which the Spanish called idols, and replacing them with Catholic icons. This infuriated the Aztecs, as did Cortés's capture of Montezuma. They eventually revolted and expelled Cortés and his men from the city. It was a short reprieve, however, as Cortés regrouped and seized control of the city in 1521.<sup>24</sup>

About 18 years later another Spanish explorer, Hernando de Soto, sailed into Florida, along with an army of about 600 Spaniards. They had heard of the challenges indigenous peoples presented, and they were ready with chains and collars in hand to capture and enslave them. De Soto's devastation in the American Southeast matched that of Cortés in Mexico. Native Americans either submitted to Spanish rule or faced dire consequences. Some were dismembered; others were burned at the stake.<sup>25</sup>

As with Columbus, perhaps more devastating to indigenous peoples were the diseases de Soto, his men, and their pigs brought with them. Native Americans sometimes understood these diseases as a mighty supernatural power possessed by the Europeans. If Europeans could bring death, perhaps they could also employ their power for good, some reasoned. After de Soto crossed into present-day Arkansas, the Casqui people asked de Soto



**FIGURE 1-2.** Montezuma receiving Ferdinand Cortez (Hernán Cortés). [www.loc.gov/item/2018756664/](http://www.loc.gov/item/2018756664/), LC-DIG-ppmsca-58839 (Library of Congress)

to cure the sick and perhaps to cause rain to fall and relieve their drought. De Soto gave them a cross instead, demanding that they kneel before it and worship Christ, the Son of the only God, and the giver of eternal life. This talk of “eternal life” gave some indigenous people the idea that Christians would never die. Yet de Soto died. To maintain the ruse of invincibility, de Soto’s successor hid his body, burying it in the Mississippi River. As far as the Native Americans were concerned, however, de Soto had risen to the heavens. Some, however, doubted that de Soto was in heaven, and one of those doubters was a fellow Spaniard, Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484?–1566), who figured that de Soto had been damned for eternity for his atrocities against the Native Americans.<sup>26</sup>

From a young age, Las Casas had been fascinated by the Americas. He had seen Christopher Columbus in a parade in Seville, celebrating his return from the New World. No doubt Columbus impressed the crowds with real-life Native Americans (Tainos), along with other exciting souvenirs from his adventures. By 1502, Las Casas was in Hispaniola, working as a Dominican religious teacher. His position gave him a clear view of the atrocities indigenous peoples suffered at the hands of Europeans, including slavery and murder, experiences that turned him into a fierce opponent of European enslavers. That compassion did not extend to Africans, however, as he suggested that Europeans enslave Africans instead of Native Americans, although he came to regret this horrific scheme.<sup>27</sup>

Las Casas stirred controversy by publishing *An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies*, an attack on Spanish mistreatment of Native Americans. The critiques of Las Casas and others got the pope’s attention, who in response issued *Sublimis Deus* in 1537, stating, “Indians and all other people who may later be discovered by Christians, are by no means to be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property, even though they be outside the faith of Jesus Christ; and that they may and should, freely and legitimately, enjoy their liberty and the possession of their property; nor should they be in any way enslaved; should the contrary happen, it shall be null and have no effect.”<sup>28</sup>

It was clear to many at the time, therefore, that the conquest of the Americas shaped a toxic alliance of violence and religion. This was never more evident than in the relations between the Pueblo tribes and the Spanish in New Mexico. There, Pueblo peoples resisted Spanish domination with an explosive revolt in 1680. For twenty prior years, Pueblos had suffered through droughts that damaged crops and fended off attacks by invading Apaches and Navajos. All these hardships proved to the Pueblos that Spanish Christians had no special relation with divine powers that could either improve the weather or protect their people. What good, then, was Christianity? It brought only trouble. More Pueblos thus rejected Christianity in favor of their traditional religions, and this revival of Pueblo religions

offended Spaniards, rousing them to attack Native American priests and ceremonies. In response, many Pueblos vowed that the Spanish had to go; it was the only way for Native Americans to return to their way of life and, hopefully, to prosper.<sup>29</sup>

But how? The Pueblo tribes had attempted revolts before, but these uprisings had faced impossible odds due to a lack of organization and planning. How could nearly 20,000 Pueblo, living in about 25 scattered villages, organize a revolt, especially since they spoke half a dozen languages? The answer came with Popé, a Tewa Pueblo and medicine man whom the Spanish had whipped and imprisoned for practicing “sorcery.” By 1679, however, Popé was free, hiding from Spanish authorities, and planning a massive rebellion.



**FIGURE 1-3.** Statue of Po'Pay (Popé), New Mexico Marble by Cliff Fragua, given in 2005, Capitol Visitor Center, Emancipation Hall, U.S. Capitol (Wikimedia Commons)

The Spanish did not see it coming until it was too late. Led by Popé, the Pueblos hit hard and fast, killing hundreds of Spanish and destroying their buildings and fields. This was partly a religious war as the Pueblo laid waste to churches, destroyed Catholic images, and tortured and executed 21 missionaries.<sup>30</sup>

After winning their independence, the Pueblo held it for thirteen years. The Spanish, meanwhile, remained in El Paso, looking for the opportunity to reconquer the land. In 1693, Spanish governor Diego Vargas, supported with an army of a hundred Spanish soldiers and some Pueblo allies, defeated the Pueblo at Santa Fe. This time Spanish rule held, even though the Pueblo tried to revolt again in 1696.<sup>31</sup>

After the Spanish reconquered New Mexico, the Franciscans (missionaries and members of a Catholic religious order named after Saint Francis of Assisi) lost much of their stature in Pueblo communities. In previous years, these missionaries had been the main mediators between the Spanish and the Native Americans. No longer. Native Americans relied less on Franciscan friars to negotiate with Spanish officials. By this time, the Franciscans were not as important to a Spanish crown that was less concerned with missionary work and worried more about the French, who had closed in on Spanish territory, carving their way through the Mississippi River Valley.<sup>32</sup>

Many Pueblo welcomed this decline in the Franciscans' power, believing the missionaries had done more harm than good. Between 1600 and 1750, when the friars had wielded authority, the Pueblo had seen their people decimated, perhaps losing 90 percent of their population. So much for Christian "salvation," many Pueblo believed. Though many Pueblos converted to Catholicism, most were probably Christians in name only.<sup>33</sup>

Spanish missions, and controversy over their methods, expanded in the eighteenth century as Friar Junipero Serra led missions into California. Serra, a professor from Mallorca, traveled to Mexico City to take a position at the Franciscan College of San Fernando. After two decades there, Serra moved west and founded Mission San Diego in July 1769, the first mission in the territory that would become California. He went on to found eight additional missions, including San Francisco, founded in 1776, just as Thomas Jefferson and his colleagues were declaring independence from the British Empire. These missions had two main goals: convert Native Americans to Christianity, and help Spain hold its claim to the Pacific coast, an important objective because others, including Russian explorers, had their sights set on the region.<sup>34</sup>

In his efforts for missions, Serra worked tirelessly, although much of that work included abuse of Native Americans. Missionary work could be harsh, Serra believed, and he had no qualms about beating indigenous peoples into submission. He would whip them, lock them in stocks, and mete out other punishments so severe that a governor in the area complained of his

methods. (Usually the friars were the ones complaining that the governors were too hard on the Native Americans.) This was an issue in 2015, when Serra became Roman Catholicism's first saint to be canonized in the United States. While advocates pointed to the merits of this "Apostle of California," others pointed to his brutal treatment of the Native Americans. Serra's canonization is yet another reminder that church and crown comprised the Spanish Empire in North America. Many Spanish missionaries, although limited by the Eurocentric bias of their time, wanted to convert the Native Americans so that they would live and die as sincere Christians and thus be saved. Yet missionaries answered to Spanish governors, who had authority over the church in mission territories, a right given by the popes. This hampered missions, mainly because Native Americans could not separate the Christian faith from the imperialistic oppression that came with it.<sup>35</sup>

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### THE JUDGMENTS OF HISTORY

The debate over Serra reminds us that the judgments of history change over time. Different times have different values, and we see this especially when we consider honoring people from the past. Serra's conflicted canonization process also reminds us that people from the past, like people from the present, rarely fit into tidy categories of "hero" or "villain." Few human beings can be judged that simply. Even those who accomplished great acts of justice probably also committed atrocious acts as well, and even those who committed the worst of atrocities probably also did some good things in their lives. This does not give people from the past a pass on judgment—far from it. Historians have a responsibility to reveal the past honestly, based on the best evidence, and that means calling out injustices and holding accountable those who were responsible. History should not degenerate into nostalgia, a sentimental or romantic view of a past that never was.\*

\*See Gordon S. Wood, *The Purpose of the Past* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), "Introduction"; Russell Johnson, "Imagining History without Heroes and Villains," in *Sightings: Reflections on Religion in Public Life*, September 14, 2020, <https://mailchi.mp/uchicago/sightings-217225?e=980cc6e621>.

Finally, we should correct the common view that Europeans, like the Spanish, overpowered native peoples with little opposition. The truth is much different; it was not just a story of the Spanish running roughshod over Native Americans. For example, from the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Spanish faced new enemies on the horizon, the Comanches, who launched an empire of their own that more than matched the Spanish Empire in North America. Until the late 1800s, the Comanches controlled more of the Southwest than any European power.<sup>36</sup>

## **A New France in Canada and the Midwest**

Aside from the Comanches, another of Spain's competitors for dominance in the Americas was France, Europe's other great Catholic empire. While the Spanish focused on the Southeast and the Southwest, the French moved into Canada and territory that later became the American Midwest, exploring these lands in the sixteenth century. In the early seventeenth century, the English joined the race for colonization by founding Jamestown in 1607. The French followed the next year with the founding of Québec (city). French colonists, led by Samuel de Champlain, pursued profits through fishing and fur trading and, like many others, hoped to find the legendary "Northwest Passage," an easier way to the Far East by sailing west.<sup>37</sup>

Like the Spanish, French explorers traveled with Catholic missionaries, hoping to win Native Americans for church and empire. Unlike the Spanish, most French missionaries were not Franciscans; they were of a different religious order: the Jesuits, the Society of Jesus, founded by Ignatius of Loyola in 1540. The Jesuits differed from the Franciscans in their approach to Native American cultures. In contrast to the Spanish Franciscans, the Jesuits benefited from previous missionary experience in China, which taught them much about relating to non-Western peoples. Jesuits took seriously St. Thomas Aquinas's belief that God empowered all humans with reason, so all had some sense of morality and God, even if they had neither seen a Bible nor heard a word about Christianity.<sup>38</sup>

Jean de Brébeuf, who came to America in 1625, was a Jesuit missionary among the Huron (Wendat) peoples who worked to learn Huron cultures and languages, even if it meant suppressing the European revulsion to Native American cultures. As Brébeuf wrote to would-be missionaries, eat the Hurons' food "in the way they prepare it, although it may be dirty, half-cooked, and very tasteless. As to the other numerous things which may be unpleasant, they must be endured for the love of God, without saying anything or appearing to notice them." Above all, missionaries should "have sincere affection for the Savages," Brébeuf advised, "looking upon them as ransomed by the blood of God, and as our Brethren."<sup>39</sup>

Jesuits had success among the Hurons, in part because of their more culturally sensitive missionary practices, but also because the Hurons needed the French to help them against the Iroquois.<sup>40</sup> No Native American people had a more intimidating reputation than the Iroquois confederacy, comprised of the Five Nations of the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca. "The character of all these [Iroquois] Nations is warlike and cruel," said Paul Le Jeune, a Jesuit missionary. "The chief virtue of these poor Pagans being Cruelty, just as mildness is that of Christians, they teach it to their children from their very cradles, and accustom them to the most atrocious carnage and the most barbarous spectacles," Le Jeune wrote in 1657.<sup>41</sup> Many Native Americans would rightly dispute this claim for the "mildness of Christians."

War had great cultural value for the Iroquois. When they lost loved ones, the Iroquois would often channel that grief and anger into an attack on their enemies, a practice that came to be known as a “Mourning War.” Usually the female relatives of the dead called for a raiding party. Any captives could be adopted, repairing the spiritual void of the dead, or the mourners could assuage their anger by torturing the captives. These rituals involved ripping fingernails out, slowly burning parts of the body, scalping, and beheading. After killing the captive, the Iroquois would cook and eat the flesh. Through it all, the Native Americans respected captives who could face death and torture bravely and without emotion; in contrast, they despised cowards who pled for their lives. In war, therefore, the Iroquois celebrated and unified their people, proved their martial power, and taught their young men to face death without fear.<sup>42</sup>

Stories of the Iroquois’ torture of Jesuit missionaries have received a lot of attention, especially the killing of Jean de Brébeuf in 1649. Brébeuf faced torture and death bravely, earning the respect of the Iroquois. After Brébeuf died, his torturers paid him the ultimate tribute by eating his heart, hoping it could give them some of his courage.<sup>43</sup> Brébeuf’s death became legendary in Christian history. Catholics lifted him up as a martyred saint while Protestants described him as one who accepted the dangerous challenge of Christianizing a frontier. For the Iroquois, however, his death was likely a ritualistic killing.<sup>44</sup>



We see, then, that Native Americans’ religious views differed greatly from each other, although there were some characteristics that seemed prominent across many traditions. For the most part, they were local religions, each specific to a particular people who inhabited a certain place and lifestyle. As Europeans worked among them, Catholic missionaries from France and Spain rarely understood religious views of the people they were trying to convert. Along with misunderstandings based on cultural differences and language barriers, missionary work also suffered because of the missionaries’ often violent methods as they worked with explorers to Christianize and exploit the “New World.”