

First Encounters: Native Americans and Christians

Summary: *Diverse Native American religions and cultures existed before and after the arrival of European colonialists. In the 16th to 17th centuries, Spanish conquistadores and French fur traders were generally more violent to Native Americans than were the Spanish and French missionaries, although few Native Americans trusted any European group. The majority of early colonists did not recognize the deep culture and traditions of Native peoples, nor did they acknowledge the tribes' land rights. The colonists sought to convert the Native people in the New World and strip them of their land.*

Religious and cultural difference was part of the landscape of America long before the period of European colonization. The indigenous peoples of this land Europeans called the “New World” were separated by language, landscape, cultural myths, and ritual practices. Some neighboring groups, such as the Hurons and the Iroquois, were entrenched in rivalry. Others, such as the nations that later formed the Iroquois League, developed sophisticated forms of government that enabled them to live harmoniously despite tribal differences. Some were nomads; others settled into highly developed agricultural civilizations. Along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, ancient communities of Native peoples developed ceremonial centers, and in the Southwest, cliff-dwelling cultures developed complex settlements.

When Europeans first occupied the Americas, most did not even consider that the peoples they encountered had cultural and religious traditions that were different from their own; in fact, most believed indigenous communities had no culture or religion at all. As the “Age of Discovery” unfolded, Spanish and French Catholics were the first to infiltrate Native lands, beginning in the 16th century. Profit-minded Spanish *conquistadores* and French fur traders competed for land and wealth, while Spanish and French missionaries competed for the “saving of souls.” By the mid-century, the Spanish had established Catholic missions in present-day Florida and New Mexico and the French were steadily occupying the Great Lakes region, Upstate New York, Eastern Canada and, later, Louisiana and the Mississippi Delta.

Many of the European missionaries who energetically sought to spread Christianity to Native peoples were motivated by a sense of mission, seeking to bring the Gospel to those who had never had a chance to hear it, thereby offering an opportunity to be “saved.” In the context of the often brutal treatment of Native peoples by early Spanish *conquistadores*, many missionaries saw themselves as siding compassionately and protectively with the indigenous peoples. In 1537, Pope Paul III declared that Indians were not beasts to be killed or enslaved but human beings with souls capable of salvation. At the time, this was understood to be an enlightened view of indigenous people, one that well-meaning missionaries sought to encourage.

Letters from missionaries who lived among indigenous tribes give us a sense of the concerns many held for the welfare of tribal peoples. A letter by Franciscan friar Juan de Escalona criticizes the “outrages against the Indians” committed by a Spanish governor of what is now New Mexico. The governor’s cruelty toward the people, de Escalona wrote, made preaching the Gospel impossible; the Indians rightly despised any message of hope from those who would plunder their corn, steal their blankets, and leave them to starve. The writings of Jean de Brebuf, a French Jesuit missionary who lived and worked among the Hurons for two years without securing a single convert, reveal the powerful force of religious devotion that compelled missionaries to leave their homes for unknown lands and difficult lives in North America.

Newcomers from England during the 17th century also brought many expressions of Protestant Christianity to the New World. Among them were profit-seeking explorers, with allegiances to the Church of England, and Puritan reformers, rebelling against the Church and in search of religious freedom. Others included English Quakers, Catholics, and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians—all seeking a place to practice their religious commitments free of interference from the state. On the whole, these English settlers saw themselves as settling in a “virgin land” where real “civilization” had not been established. They understood their right to conquest in terms of old English legal traditions based on industry and utility, in which constructing houses, building fences, and laying out plantations constituted legitimate claims to land. They took their Biblical warrant from Genesis 1:28: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.”

The early history of the colonies reveals a complex story of relations with the Native peoples. Some colonial settlers, like those on Plymouth Plantation, had positive relations with Native peoples. In Puritan Massachusetts, John Eliot mastered Algonkian and then translated the Bible into that language in 1663. His “The Indian Covenanting Confession” was printed in 1669 in both Algonkian and English. He intended to place missionary efforts in the hands of the Indians themselves. With its regard for Indian autonomy, his approach was considered novel for its time. For the most part, the many Indian Wars dominated the encounter of Europeans and Native peoples. They were often complicated by the wrenching divisions within tribes caused by the increasing numbers of “praying Indians” who had been converted by the missionaries.

From today’s perspective, one might argue that even under the best of circumstances, colonial attitudes toward their indigenous neighbors were colored by paternalism, ignorance of tribal cultures, and desire for profit. While in the early years of colonization, Europeans often criticized one another for dealing too harshly or too greedily with their Native neighbors, underneath even their most positive assessments lay romanticism about and essentialization of the “noble savage.”

From the colonial period on, relations between European and Native peoples were predominantly expressed and negotiated in terms of land. The issue of land became, in many ways, the deepest “religious” issue over which worldviews collided. Many of the colonists saw the new land as a “wilderness” to be settled, not as already inhabited, or as Michael Wigglesworth described it in 1662, “a waste and howling wilderness, where none inhabited but hellish fiends, and brutish men that devils worshipped.” The founders of some colonies, such as Massachusetts and Connecticut, wholly disregarded Indian land rights. Others drew up well-meaning treaties and purchase agreements. For example, Roger Williams and William Penn, in founding Rhode Island and Pennsylvania respectively, explicitly criticized the founders of other colonies for their self-justified acquisition of lands.

From the perspective of the Native peoples, the European discovery of the new world was more aptly an invasion. Most were deeply connected to the land but had no traditions of land ownership or private property. They often expressed astonishment that land could be sold or negotiated through treaties, since to them land was not a source of private profit but of life, including the life of the spirits. Some lands were also sacred, as they bore the graves of the dead. Over the course of nearly three centuries, the terms “removal,” “displacement,” and “cession” came to be used by European settlers. Native peoples were to be “removed” from the lands they had occupied, “displaced” to other lands, and their lands “ceded” to the newcomers. Finally, Indian tribes were forcibly “settled” on “reservations,” lands set apart.

The religious encounter of Christian missionaries and Native peoples cannot be separated from the progressive seizure and settlement of tribal territories by European colonists. Through most of American history, however, there has been little recognition of the distinctively religious claims of Native peoples to the land and its sacred sites.

The encounter of Christians and Native peoples is too complex and varied to be characterized in general. There are surprising instances, such as the late 18th century Russian mission in Alaska, where early missionaries saw the Tlingit or Sugpiaq people of Kodiak Island as deeply religious, understanding that faith in terms of their own. More often, however, Christian missionaries did not recognize the customs of the Native peoples as spiritual or religious traditions in their own right and many mission schools effectively removed Native young people from their cultures. Many Christian colonists and missionaries, even those most sympathetic to the lifeways of the Native peoples, categorized Native Americans as “heathens” who either accepted or resisted conversion to Christianity. They did not place Native American traditions under the protection of religious freedom that had been enshrined in the Constitution. It was not until 1978, almost 200 years after the Constitution was signed, that the American Indian Religious Freedom Act gave specific legal recognition to the integrity of Native American religions.