

"Jenkins has written an indispensable book." — *Books & Culture*

PHILIP JENKINS

Author of *The Next Christendom*

An abstract, high-contrast image featuring vibrant red and orange streaks and flames against a dark background, suggesting fire or intense energy.

DREAM CATCHERS

HOW MAINSTREAM AMERICA DISCOVERED
NATIVE SPIRITUALITY

Dream Catchers



Also by Philip Jenkins

The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice

Images of Terror: What We Can and Can't Know About Terrorism

The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity

Beyond Tolerance: Child Pornography on the Internet

Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way

Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History

The Cold War at Home: The Red Scare in Pennsylvania 1945–1960

Synthetic Panics: The Politics of Designer Drugs

*Moral Panic: Changing Concepts of the Child Molester
in Modern America*

A History of the United States

Hoods and Shirts: The Extreme Right in Pennsylvania 1925–1950

Pedophiles and Priests: Anatomy of a Contemporary Crisis

Using Murder: The Social Construction of Serial Homicide

Intimate Enemies: Moral Panics in Contemporary Great Britain

A History of Modern Wales 1536–1990

Crime and Justice: Issues and Ideas

The Making of a Ruling Class: The Glamorgan Gentry 1640–1790

Dream Catchers



*How Mainstream America
Discovered Native Spirituality*

Philip Jenkins

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2004

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford New York

Auckland Bangkok Buenos Aires Cape Town Chennai
Dar es Salaam Delhi Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi Kolkata
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai Nairobi
São Paulo Shanghai Taipei Tokyo Toronto

Copyright © 2004 by Philip Jenkins

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

www.oup.com

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,
without the prior permission of Oxford University Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Jenkins, Philip, 1952–

Dream catchers : how mainstream America discovered native spirituality /
Philip Jenkins.

p. cm. — Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-19-516115-7

1. America—Religion.

2. Indians—Religion—Influence.

I. Title.

BL2500.J46 2004 299.7'93—dc22 2003026909

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

To Elliott Leyton

This page intentionally left blank

Contents



	Preface	ix
	Terminology	xi
	Acknowledgments	xii
1	Haunting America	I
2	Heathen Darkness	20
3	Discovering Native Religion, 1860–1920	47
4	Pilgrims from the Vacuum, 1890–1920	65
5	Crisis in Red Atlantis, 1914–1925	92
6	Brave New Worlds, 1925–1950	113
7	Before the New Age, 1920–1960	135
8	Vision Quests, 1960–1980	154
9	The Medicine Show	175
10	Thinking Tribal Thoughts	197
11	Returning the Land	223
	Conclusion: Real Religion?	245
	Notes	257
	Index	299

This page intentionally left blank

Preface



This book describes a radical change in mainstream American cultural and religious attitudes over the past century or so, namely in popular views of Native American spirituality. Though the process of toleration and dialogue between any of the major religions has been slow, gradual, and often depressing, many Christians historically faced special difficulties in recognizing what American Indians were doing as authentically religious, let alone as something that could be permitted or accommodated. Yet attitudes did shift dramatically, until today, the vast majority of Americans respect and admire the Native tradition. Indeed, millions try, controversially, to copy it, to absorb Indian spirituality into their own lives. Americans today are prepared not just to grant that once-unfamiliar religions have virtues, but to admit that the whole concept of religion is much broader than they might once have imagined.

From the end of the nineteenth century, a growing number of white Americans came first to appreciate Native spiritual traditions and then to see in them something that was conspicuously lacking in the mainstream culture. Ideas that originated among a few intellectuals and artists reached a general public, until today they have become social orthodoxy. The extent

and speed of that change suggest that an eager market existed for this more favorable view of Indians and Indian culture. Rightly or wrongly, mainstream America has seen Native spirituality as a means of fulfilling a hunger that could not be satisfied from its own cultural resources. This book describes how white America has deployed Native religious traditions for its own purposes.

My goal is to use the attitudes of mainstream, non-Native Americans as a means of tracing some critical themes in modern American religion: notions of religious diversity and pluralism; the legal position of religion and religious toleration; the cultural and religious impact of relativism; the shifting definition of “religious” actions or behavior; the growing recognition of women’s spirituality; and a growing reverence for the primal and the primitive. In tracing the attitudes of the social and religious mainstream, we will also see the persistence of esoteric and mystical strands in American religion.

I should stress what the book does not attempt. It does not describe or analyze American Indian religions, or offer a history of their fate under U.S. rule. To take an obvious example, any worthwhile history of official religious repression in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would have to make use of Native voices themselves; and many such are available, in the form of oral history records. I do not use these materials, because they are not germane to my purpose of describing the changing attitudes of the mainstream society.

Also, this is an *American* study, meaning the United States. I will be dealing with the changing ideas of white, non-Native, Americans, rather than of Europeans. European fascination with American Indians has been a powerful cultural theme, especially in Germany, but exploring or explaining that would really require a different book. Discussions of non-American attitudes will be confined to Europeans whose work had a major influence on American thought. In this category, we should certainly include such key figures as Aldous Huxley, Carl Jung, D. H. Lawrence, Ernest Thompson Seton, and Jaime De Angulo.

Especially when dealing with indigenous peoples, modern national boundaries make little sense. In the Native view, the Americas composed the continental landmass known as Turtle Island, and cultural interactions proceeded with little regard to what would some day become the political borders of the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Today, the homelands of some Native peoples sprawl over U.S. borders. For present purposes, though, I focus on the United States rather than Canada or Mexico, which

represent quite different stories. And for similar reasons of what can feasibly be accomplished in a single book, I will not primarily be discussing how non-Natives imagined the civilizations of Central or South America. Again, that is a vast theme, albeit one that does overlap occasionally with the study of North America. At least for some New Agers, images of Central American pyramids and jaguars tend all too easily to get confounded with the world of North American Native spirituality.

Finally, the book describes changes in non-Native attitudes from the mid-nineteenth century onwards—roughly, from the time of the huge territorial expansion of the United States during the 1840s. I do not mean to understate the importance of white/Native interactions in earlier periods, which have been studied by many distinguished scholars. For the purposes of the present book, however, I will discuss earlier events only to the extent that they provided a foundation for concepts of Native spirituality in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Terminology

As concepts of race and ethnicity have changed over time, so has the associated language, posing real difficulties for modern writers. Just in the past fifty years, for instance, the respectful description for the people who are today termed African American has at various times been “Negro,” “colored,” and “black,” though no serious author would today use “Negro” or “colored” except in an ironic sense. Similar, though less serious, problems exist for American Indians or Native Americans. “Indian” has fallen out of favor, because it represents a purely European perception of Native peoples, and moreover one based on a massive geographical error. Nevertheless, the word is nothing like as obsolete or offensive as “Negro,” and the vast majority of “Indians” are comfortable describing themselves in this way. The U.S. Census Bureau, always responsive to ethnic sensitivities, still lists America’s Native peoples as “American Indian, Eskimo, and Aleut.” The radical American Indian Movement, AIM, retains the Indian name. With due awareness of the possible difficulties, I will therefore be using the term “Indian.”

Other terms are more debatable. In recent years, writers on American Indian matters have tried to take account of Native pronunciation as well as cultural sensibilities, so that (for instance) “Navaho” is now commonly preferred to “Navajo,” “katsina” and “katsinam” for “kachina” and “kachinas,”

and so on. Still, the older terms remain in use: members of the “Navajo Nation” read the *Navajo Times*. One loaded term is “Anasazi,” which in recent years has given way to the archaeologically precise “Ancestral Puebloan.” However, the word “Anasazi” also has a long and reputable pedigree, and is still widely used.

Acknowledgments

I am very grateful to Kathryn Hume for having read this manuscript. Thanks also to Gregg Roeber, and Cynthia Read, my editor at Oxford University Press, for their constant support and friendship. I also want to acknowledge the excellent research assistance provided by Laura Savino.

As always, my greatest debt is to my wife, Liz Jenkins.

Dream Catchers



This page intentionally left blank



Haunting America

*The American Indian will never again control the American continent,
but he will forever haunt it.*

—D. H. Lawrence

Shape-Shifting

Across the United States, thousands of Native Americans practice their ancient religions, complex beliefs and rituals that can be traced back long before the arrival of European settlers. At the same time, many more Americans with little or no Native heritage believe that they too are following the paths of Native spirituality. They engage in ritual drumming and hold sweat lodges, they use Native-themed Tarot cards: they believe in all sincerity that they are reviving shamanic traditions. Some travel as pilgrims to places long sacred to Indian nations. Others incorporate Native ways into their everyday lives, creating their own personal medicine bundles and domestic altars, which are grandly titled “Prayer Mesas.” Roaming across the endless plains of the Internet, pseudo-Native Americans tirelessly seek out aspects of Native religious tradition that they can appropriate as their very own. Spiritual consumers buy a great deal of bric-a-brac, including videos, music, jewelry, dream-catchers, crystals, medicine bags, fetishes, and the rest. A sizable industry caters to what is obviously a vast hunger for Native American spirituality.

Throughout American history, non-Natives have invented the fantasy Indians they wanted and needed at any given time, and, as Philip Deloria has recorded, white Americans have often emulated Natives, “playing Indian.”¹ This tradition goes back at least to the pseudo-Indians of the Boston Tea Party, and runs through the chiefs and sachems of Tammany Hall, and the intrepid warrior mascots of twentieth-century sports teams. Often, imagined Indian-ness is set against American realities, offering a model of resistance. Indian stereotypes are cultivated as a means of contesting “America.” As American values change, so observers look to Indians to represent ideals that the mainstream Euro-American society is losing. By tracing the images that non-Natives construct of the first Americans, we learn about the changing needs of the mainstream society, the gaps that these invented Indians must fill.²

Attempts to understand the “white man’s Indian” are far from new, as can be seen from the volume of contemporary writing on Westerns and popular culture.³ Just as significant, though less noticed, are the reinventions of Native religious and spiritual traditions. As conceived by the non-Native public, Native spirituality has changed kaleidoscopically over time, mirroring the prevailing obsessions of the mainstream society. Originally, Indians were presented as benighted savages whose crying spiritual needs justified the colonial errand into the Wilderness. When white Americans wanted to believe that Indians were the lost tribes of Israel, they sought (and found) Old Testament parallels in their worship. When spiritualism was a national craze, Indians were exciting because of their ability to cross the worlds between living and dead. For other Victorians, Indians exemplified a pure, nature-oriented spirituality congenial to Transcendentalists and Unitarians. Later, Native pagans were thought to retain a sensual spirituality of the body that had been destroyed by the world-denying sterilities of Christianity.⁴ This process of reimagining continued through the latter part of the twentieth century. If drugs were fashionable, then Indian religion was fascinating because of its integration of mind-altering substances. If white Americans were interested in gender issues, then the emphasis was on Native matriarchy. Indians today are models of ecological gender-sensitive religion, true sons and daughters of Mother Earth.⁵

But for all these changes, we can make one general observation. Over the past 150 years, the mainstream view of Native religions has more or less reversed itself, from a shocked contempt for primitive superstition verging on devil worship, to an envious awe for a holistic spirituality that might be the

last best hope for the human race. Somewhere in the process, mainstream white Americans moved from despising and fearing Native religions to admiring and envying them. Colonial authors saw the hand of God in the wars and epidemics that wiped out their Indian neighbors; their modern descendants bemoan the destruction of utopian earth-sensitive Native societies by patriarchal sky-god worshipping Puritans. The new picture is just as religious as its predecessor, and equally apocalyptic, but the status of hero and villain has been neatly inverted.

The reversal is symbolized by changing images of the snake, a motif that often recurs in discussions of Native American religion. For early settlers, Indians served that old serpent, the devil. A diabolical linkage was confirmed in the nineteenth century when travelers reported seeing the Hopi Snake Dance, which to their eyes represented serpent worship of the most shocking kind. Through the first half of the twentieth century, the Snake Dance was perhaps the best-known symbol of American Indian religion, and it became a vastly important tourist attraction. By the end of the century, the growing mainstream interest in esoteric and New Age thought made the serpent image much more positive and attractive, and more comprehensibly religious. In the new perspective, the snake represented forces—sexual, ecstatic, chthonic, mystical, oracular—that traditional Christianity had neglected or lost. For early white Americans, the snake symbolized the depravity of American Indian worship and its distance from authentic religion; for their modern descendants, the snake represents the inspiring alternative traditions to be found in Native spirituality.

The reversal of attitude toward Indian practices was at least beginning even during the worst years of American maltreatment of its Native peoples, a pattern too well-known to be elaborated here. Broken treaties, racism both popular and official, and the disasters of the reservation system make for a grim story. Yet white opinions were far from consistent, and pro-Indian attitudes, even idealization, can be traced back much further than is popularly supposed. Alongside the Noble Savage myth, there has always existed the notion of the Natural Mystic. At least by the end of the nineteenth century, abundant materials were available about Native religious thought and practice, and a few white Americans praised these traditions, even exalting them above Christianity. Though the fashion for Native cultures is often seen as a phenomenon of the 1960s counterculture, a real movement of sympathy is obvious fifty years previously. White Americans before the 1960s did not simply dismiss Native religion as devil worship, only to achieve sudden enlightenment

when books like *Black Elk Speaks* and the *Book of the Hopi* became popular. The New Age boom of the late twentieth century occurred when some long-familiar commodities found a new mass market.

The Tribe Called Wannabe

On occasion, too, recognition and respect has led to imitation or role-playing, as non-Natives adopted what they thought were the pristine beauties of Indian religion. Since the 1960s, this particular kind of “playing Indian” has moved far beyond play to become a major cultural phenomenon. Now, admiration does not necessarily lead to imitation. Much depends on what kind of Indian images dominated at a particular time, since some lend themselves much more feasibly to copying than others. Through the history of white/Native interactions, the mainstream society has encountered many different cultures and traditions, and at various times, particular Native groups have been taken as typical and representative. Today, the most powerful image is that of Plains nations such as the Lakota (Sioux), while in 1910 or 1920, the Pueblos of the Southwest utterly dominated the white consciousness. When Pueblo rituals were seen as the highest achievements of Indian art and culture, outsiders could try and copy them, but this activity required large-scale organization. Re-enactors always knew that even given the best settings and backgrounds, they could never catch the full flavor of performing a ritual in an evocative environment like a Hopi or Pueblo village, with its ancient kivas and dancing grounds. (Though this was not entirely impossible: as early as the 1930s, one long-enduring white “tribe” of Arizona re-enactors, the Smokis, actually did construct its own imitation ritual village, complete with kiva and pueblo).⁶ Plains rituals, while no less complex in their significance, were designed for a mobile nomadic society, and offered themselves more easily to adaptation, at least in a bastardized form. The shift of interest to the Plains has contributed immensely to the growth of neo-Indian spirituality among Euro-Americans.

The shelves of chain bookstores now feature many works claiming to offer Native spiritual teachings. We find titles like *Mother Earth Spirituality: Native American Paths to Healing Ourselves and Our World*; *Secret Native American Pathways: A Guide to Inner Peace*; *Sacred Path Cards: The Discovery of Self Through Native Teachings*; or *Meditations with Native Americans: Lakota Spirituality*. These represent only a small fraction of a much larger publishing

industry, which often finds its outlets in specialized New Age stores. In each case, the interest is meant to be applied rather than theoretical: these are books for would-be participants rather than mere observers. Besides books, the interest in Native American spirituality is manifested in countless workshops and programs offering activities such as sweat lodges and vision quests, shamanism and drumming, and “Indian” traditions in healing and divination.⁷

If there is a material symbol for popularized Native religion, an equivalent of the crucifix or the Magen David, it is the Medicine Wheel, originally a geometric arrangement of stones found in many locations across the northern Plains. Today, the image is stylized as a cross within a circle, a ragged and disjointed version of the universal symbol of the Sun Wheel, with the addition of a central cairn. According to recent books and workshops, the wheel contains within itself teachings of immense significance. One can learn to live the Medicine Wheel, to dance the Medicine Wheel, to pray it, to grow it.⁸ From the wheel, and from the world of neo-Indian spirituality, many white Americans believe they can acquire a share of the mysterious wisdom that was traditionally the heritage of Native peoples, whose ancient practices unite the powers of earth and sky.

Of course, the appropriation of these Native ideas has been anything but straightforward, since these are fitted into a larger cultural pattern of esoteric and New Age thought. Ironically, since much of the appeal of Native religion is its supposedly ancient, timeless quality, many of the symbols and themes of the new synthesis are very new indeed, and their origins can be traced back no more than a few decades. This is obviously true of the UFO and space lore that now pervades pseudo-Native religion. Just as recent is the recovery and self-help therapy so often found in books purporting to unveil Native teachings, which use psychological concepts dating from the 1970s and 1980s. In the way the symbol is currently used, the Medicine Wheel itself dates only from the Nixon era.

Yet despite all these contradictions, neo- or pseudo-Indian spirituality has now achieved the status of an authentic new religious movement. The degree of interest or commitment varies enormously, from people who assume Native identities and wholeheartedly espouse Native spirituality as a religion, to those who just read avidly in the area. Perhaps millions graze the various materials on offer, sampling and adopting ideas that they find congenial. Many of the associated neo-Indian ideas have entered mainstream culture. Even a cartoon treatment like *Pocahontas* offers a tendentious crash course in Native spirituality. Critics speak disparagingly of the wave of

would-be Native spiritual leaders, the Astroturf shamans and plastic medicine men (and, at least as often, women). Native activists assign them to what Rayna Green called The Tribe Called Wannabe, or Wanabi. But whatever the nature of that tribe's beliefs, they appeal to a substantial number of people, in the United States and beyond.⁹

Prisoners of Turtle Island

When white Americans construct their ideas of Indian spirituality, they face problems quite different from what occurs when they romanticize other alien cultures like Egypt or India. These other cultures are conveniently distant, so hard facts do not have to intrude too much on the picture. When Enlightenment thinkers wished to imagine a rational secular society far superior to their own clergy-ridden reality, they projected this vision onto a China that neither they nor their readers would ever visit, and they could speculate without fear of challenge. When later Westerners created their dream picture of Tibet, facts were scarce, and speculation easily turned this land into a Shangri-La. We might think that such a process could not work a similar miracle of transformation on American Indians, who are geographically very close. And Indian communities are extremely diverse, naturally enough, since they exist in physical environments ranging from the Amazonian jungle to the Arctic Circle. As Edward Curtis observed almost a century ago, "When we have before us a proud Sioux praying to the spirit of the buffalo, do not let us presume that the corn-growing Indian of Hopi land would know aught of the Sioux's prayer."¹⁰ Since there is not and never has been such a thing as "Indian religion," it *should* be difficult to construct simple or uniform patterns.

But the popular image of Indians has rarely been too much troubled by inconvenient realities, and religious matters are no exception. The white portrait of Indians has changed over time with minimal reference to the lived realities of those societies. No later than the 1940s, white Americans were finding in Indian communities "our indigenous Shangri-La."¹¹ Time and again, mainstream observers produce accounts of Native societies that all too clearly reflect their own backgrounds, their own interests and obsessions, rather than those of the Natives they claim to be studying. One result is the creation of a generic Native spirituality so amorphous that it can be adapted to the interests and ideologies of the moment. Tribal and regional

differences have been all but eliminated, so that modern New Agers borrow indiscriminately from Great Plains notions of the Vision Quest and the Medicine Wheel, and from radically different concepts taken from both the desert Southwest and the Pacific Northwest.

In most cases, we cannot describe this process as deliberately deceptive (though some outright frauds have occurred), but people find the usable Indians they are looking for. When a text becomes a major best seller—such as Frank Waters's *Book of the Hopi*, Carlos Castaneda's *Teachings of Don Juan*, or Lynn Andrews's *Medicine Woman*—it succeeds because the author is offering an interpretation that people want to hear at a particular time. Just as Western admirers of a fantasy Tibet of the mind have become what Donald Lopez has called the prisoners of Shangri-La, so millions of Americans intoxicated with Native spirituality have yielded to the temptation to become prisoners of Turtle Island. The story offers a striking tribute to the power of cultural imagination.

Most contemporary scholars have not been sympathetic to New Age adaptations of Native religion and spirituality, which they see as a glaring example of colonialist cultural intrusion and expropriation. Some writers portray the attempt to steal the Indians' religion as the latest callous phase of cultural genocide.¹² But even if the phenomenon were as simple as that, which is debatable, it still deserves closer examination. By seeing how non-Natives have understood Indian spirituality over the centuries, we are doing far more than exploring the obsessions of a fringe of emulators and enthusiasts. We are also mapping the changing contours of America's mainstream religions, and especially of Christianity.

The theme thus has a significance going far beyond the tragically small size of the Native population. In 1900, the U.S. government recognized an Indian and aboriginal population of only 250,000, around 0.3 percent of the national total; and even today, the corresponding figure is still below one percent. Though these figures obviously miss a great many individuals with part-Native ancestry, they are still tiny. (Canada's Native peoples—the First Nations—represent a much higher proportion of that country's population).¹³ Even so, the story of how outsiders have viewed the religious practices of that tiny minority carries many implications for mainstream American religion past and present, and for the legal environment in which it has operated.

It was through interacting with Native religions that American Christians first confronted the critical issue of how to live alongside non-Christian

faiths. Even after the growth of the Jewish presence during the nineteenth century, Natives were still better known as religious outsiders in many parts of the country. To appreciate just how remarkable this encounter with a living paganism was, we should recall how very few European countries faced anything like a comparable situation. By the late Middle Ages, organized paganism had ceased to exist in Europe, except in the furthest reaches of northern Scandinavia and the eastern limits of Russia. Elsewhere, pagan survivals continued only as Christianized folk customs. Even then, many such customs had nothing like the overt pagan ancestry that optimistic antiquarians liked to believe, especially in the Celtic lands. Interreligious dialogue in the European homelands involved competing Christian denominations, or rival branches of the Abrahamic faiths. Yet although European Christians were dealing with traditions that were closely akin to them spiritually, their encounters, more often than not, were disastrous. How would a Euro-American Christian society respond when confronted with the full-scale primal religions of the American Indians, with their animism and shamanism?¹⁴

Religious Toleration?

For much of the interaction between Natives and non-Natives, any thought of religious tolerance or diversity was simply not a question. This in itself affects our understanding of the U.S. Constitution, which famously forbids Congress from making “any law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Well into the twentieth century, this noble clause had no effect whatever on the Indian policy of the federal government, which had as its explicit goal the spread of Christianity, preferably in Protestant forms.¹⁵ From the 1880s through the 1930s, federal Indian policy sought to destroy most Indian religious practices, and that effort proceeded virtually unopposed. Only as late as the 1920s was there any serious suggestion that principles of religious liberty ought to apply to Indian issues. Between 1922 and 1924, an official attempt to suppress Native dances and other practices generated a national controversy over Indian religious rights, a debate that marks a critical turning point in the nation’s religious and cultural history. The official principle of Indian religious freedom was established as late as 1934, and even then, the ideal was often violated in practice.¹⁶

The enduring intolerance of Native belief should not be seen as a rare exception to an otherwise-comprehensive tradition of religious tolerance. In

the late nineteenth century, American courts were quite prepared to curb any religious conduct that was thought to be dangerous or antisocial. Mormons were imprisoned for polygamy, and in the First World War, the government paid scant respect to the conscientious objections of religious pacifists facing military service. Nevertheless, Indian religion was singled out, in the sense that it was targeted for utter elimination: the only good Indian religious practice was a dead one. Given this desire for cultural extermination, it is surprising how little Indian policy features in standard works on religious liberty. When the theme does appear, it is usually in the context of peyote use.¹⁷

Changing attitudes to Native religious rights arose from shifts in the self-confidence of American Christianity. Through the nineteenth century, most Protestants had no doubts about the truth and certainty of their faith, or about their right and duty to spread it to others less fortunate. Of course there were exceptions to this rule, people who believed that all religions contained a seed of truth, or much more than a seed. When the Transcendentalists of the 1840s popularized the Hindu scriptures, they saw them as worthy counterparts to the Judeo-Christian holy texts. But at least these were recognizably the scriptures of an organized religion with its buildings and hierarchies. This was quite different from acknowledging the seemingly primitive customs of America's own aboriginal peoples.

The idea of religious toleration grew by the end of the nineteenth century, partly in recognition of the growth of diversity, as both Catholic and Jewish populations swelled. Also significant was the rejection of even token Christian adherence among many of the social and intellectual elites. Protestant Christianity became more pluralist as liberals came to doubt Christianity's claims to a monopoly on religious truth.

Much of the change occurred between about 1890 and 1925, and reflected the growth of theological liberalism and critical Bible scholarship. The American war between modernists and fundamentalists is commonly taken to have begun in 1893, with the heresy trial of Presbyterian leader Charles A. Briggs. Applying the new critical scientific scholarship, Briggs declared that "in every department of Biblical study we come across error . . . reason is a fountain of divine authority no less savingly enlightening than the Bible and the Church." (Modern feminist Bible criticism dates from these same years). Over the next thirty years, debates over Biblical authority rent many seminaries and colleges, and ultimately provoked the notorious fiasco of the Scopes trial in 1925. In the era of debates between Modernists and Fundamentalists, religious claims to exclusive truth became suspect. Also, liberals

growing accustomed to seeing the Christian scriptures as essentially mythical were less likely to look down on tribal peoples who lacked authoritative scriptures of their own. As anthropologist James Mooney argued in 1892, the patriarchal ancestors of the Biblical Hebrews “had reached about the plane of our own Navaho, but were below that of the Pueblo. Their mythologic and religious system was closely parallel.” If much of the Bible was the record of the barbarous tribes of ancient Israel, how could it be presented as superior to the legends and tales of the Navajo or the Cherokee? Myths are myths.¹⁸

Meanwhile, globalization created a new awareness of other religions. At the World’s Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893, the great religions conversed on notionally equal terms, although within a framework devised by Protestants. At least among the social elites, Buddhist and Hindu teachers now acquired a cachet they would never entirely lose.¹⁹ A new cultural relativism affected views of America’s own Other religions. Within the first quarter of the twentieth century, views about Christian exclusivism that would once have been normal and customary were now denounced by hostile terms like bigoted, narrow, and fundamentalist. By the end of the century, the whole idea of missionary endeavor anywhere on the globe had become suspect in most of the mainline churches, and most liberal Protestants utterly rejected any idea of trying to convert monotheists such as Jews and Muslims.

The mainline churches also lost much of their power to influence secular public affairs. Though the United States did not undergo a straightforward pattern of secularization in the early twentieth century, older Protestant churches did suffer a decline of prestige. They faced new rivals, namely Roman Catholicism, and the new secular professions, which took over many social service functions that would once have been regarded as religious. The Prohibition experiment created sharp divisions between secular society and the once-dominant Protestant churches, and made religious interventions in politics more suspect. The liberation of Native American religions in the 1920s and 1930s is part of a broader social trend.²⁰

New Ages

The toleration of Native religions did not arise solely from a principled belief in diversity, but also from a growing recognition that Indian beliefs and practices had much to offer the Euro-American majority. This was not just a matter of live and let live. For the Protestant and evangelical traditions that

have so often dominated American culture, the thought that Indian religions might have anything to teach them would be ridiculous. At every point, Indian cultures contradicted such basic evangelical principles as the supremacy of written texts, the stress on literacy, and the rejection of intermediaries between God and humanity. But evangelical Protestantism has never been the only strand in American religion. From earliest times, esoteric and metaphysical themes have always been in evidence. Since the mid-nineteenth century, these alternative traditions have enjoyed wide influence, often by deploying innovative means of merchandising and spiritual consumerism. Often, these ideas have enjoyed such widespread influence that it is difficult to think of them as “fringe” rather than as another section of the mainstream. And the fringe has often found much to value in Indians.

Esoteric and mystical themes have repeatedly reached mass audiences: at the start of the twentieth century, between the two world wars, and again from the 1970s onwards, in the well-known form of the New Age movement. In each era, such movements became popular because they capitalized on powerful social and intellectual trends. At the start of the twentieth century, as at its end, women played a critical role in the new esoteric movements, as their religious aspirations reflected their growing social and political involvement. In 1900, women led and organized influential new groups, including Spiritualism, Christian Science, Theosophy and New Thought. The emerging sects taught a new multicultural sensitivity and a respect for non-Christian spiritual traditions. Their message also appealed to the contemporary faith in science, with the popular belief in evolution and progress now applied to spiritual matters. Just as scientific insights and methodologies fueled the modernist debate, with the importance of Biblical criticism and the rise of evolutionary theory, so the esoteric movements preached their distinctive versions of science and evolutionism. Instead of a Judeo-Christian universe some thousands of years old, with a final vision of heaven and hell, many esoteric movements offered a vision of multiple worlds millions of years old, in which individuals reincarnate through countless lives.²¹

Repeatedly, esoteric believers have cherished the Native religions, onto which they have projected their own beliefs and doctrines. If reincarnation was a cardinal belief of the alternative religious worldview, then someone would argue that this belief was central to Indian thought, and likewise for later ideas like Goddess worship, UFOs, or shamanism. Because Indians were viewed as mystical teachers of unparalleled authority, as guardians and guarantors of spiritual authenticity, their image was borrowed to validate claims

not apparently central to Indian traditions. However misguided the readings of Native traditions, this cultural sympathy was politically valuable, especially when the government was seeking to repress or destroy Indian practices. Esoteric or New Age well-wishers gave Native faiths a substantial constituency prepared to support them on issues of religious and cultural freedom.

Toleration for Indian religious beliefs was achieved late, slowly, and grudgingly. Yet before modern Americans feel smug about our own toleration for diversity, in contrast to earlier benighted ages, we should remember that Native religious issues are still contentious. As recently as 1990, the Supreme Court ruled in the *Smith* decision that Native use of peyote was not protected under principles of religious freedom, a finding that alarmed mainstream religious bodies. The subsequent history of Constitutional law on religious freedom has been shaped by *Smith* and its aftermath.²²

What Is a Religion?

The fact that Victorian Christians were less tolerant than their modern successors need surprise no one, but even so, the long-standing disregard for Native religions is still startling. It also contrasts sharply with Protestant attitudes to other traditions. While most Victorian Protestants had no love for Catholicism or Judaism, few thought of forcible mass conversion. What placed Native Americans beyond the bounds of toleration was the view that they were not in fact practicing anything worthy of the name of religion. What Jews and Catholics were doing might be objectionable to Protestant eyes, but at least it was incontestably religious. But what about Native Americans? No observer of Native communities could fail to see that these people held strong beliefs about the supernatural, and carried out rituals based on that worldview. But did they actually have *a religion*? Many thought not. Meeting the Guanahaní Indians in 1492, Columbus remarked that “I believe that they would become Christians very easily, for it seemed to me that they had no religion.”

We are observing a fundamental theme in the history of religious attitudes: namely, how mainstream Americans over time have come to perceive what is and is not religious; and, a rather different issue, what is “a religion”? The seemingly simple word is quite complex. Modern Western usage acknowledges the existence of religions, in the sense of overarching and mutually exclusive belief structures. A Christian, Jew, or Muslim belongs to one

particular religion and, by definition, is not a member of others. Such major religions are seen as important human institutions. Even so, the whole idea of “a religion” is a relatively recent development. In medieval England, someone “entered religion” only when they joined what would today be called a religious order. At this time too, the distinction was between the Faith, namely the Christian faith, and the various forms of error held by Muslims and others.

The notion of separate religions, each with valid claims to truth, is a modern construct. As Westerners explored the outside world during the nineteenth century, they reimagined the religious systems they encountered in terms they could comprehend, often imposing their own familiar concepts, such as core scriptures, prophetic leaders, and central orthodoxies. Under Western eyes, Hinduism was now reconstructed as a more uniform system than it had ever been historically, and texts like the *Bhagavad Gita* were now presented as pivotal scriptures analogous to the New Testament. In response to Western pressure, Asian religious traditions now presented themselves as coherent religious systems in a way that hitherto had not been thought necessary.

Linked to the idea of “a religion” is that of “religious” behavior. This is also defined in quite narrow ways that separate it from other seemingly related activities, such as superstition and philosophy, though it is not always easy to understand the differences. Is a belief in UFOs a religious doctrine? It has much in common with religious notions, given the concept of superior beings who live Up There and who deign to visit this globe, bearing messages of warning or enlightenment. Is the U.S. flag a religious symbol? It must be, if it can be “desecrated.” American courts agonize whether particular symbols are religious, and so cannot be displayed on public property, or whether they are merely seasonal and civic. What about a crèche at Christmas or a menorah at Hanukah? What is religious, as opposed to “just” cultural?

The different words—religion, superstition, philosophy—carry powerful value judgments. A religion is more respectable and venerable than an unsystematic collection of beliefs and rituals. Similarly, religious behavior is taken as being more serious and worthwhile than mere superstition, and the critical distinction between *religio* and *superstitio* has its roots in Roman times. (Christianity was at first dismissed as an illicit *superstitio*.) In separating the different categories, modern scholars sometimes betray a rather Protestant suspicion of rituals and popular religious practices, which are treated condescendingly as mere folk religion, not quite the real thing. Once a cultural package has been labeled as religious, that designation shapes how

observers see the particular society, which is interpreted according to the patterns familiar from the Great Religions. Outsiders are then more likely to describe the cherished tales of the society by respectful terms like myths or scriptures, rather than mere folklore.

These distinctions help explain the extreme official hostility toward Indian religions. When in the late nineteenth century, U.S. administrations prohibited Indian practices such as dances, the potlatch, and the activities of medicine men, they genuinely did not believe that they were attacking religion or religious practices. Indians were free to pursue their religion as it was perceived by white authorities, namely an ethical worship of the Great Spirit, which was only a variant form of Protestant Christianity. For bureaucrats or missionaries, this noble Indian creed could easily be isolated from the evil habits with which it had regrettably become associated, such as dancing. For a Pueblo or a Cheyenne, though, the dancing and related customs were not only inextricably linked with the religion, they *were* the religion, quite as much as the cerebral beliefs that enchanted white observers. Suppressing Indian practices was not seen as a violation of religious freedom precisely because these were aspects of superstition rather than true religion. As an alarming parallel, imagine a government informing a Jewish community that while it was welcome to retain its religion, it would have to abolish outdated and sinister customs like circumcision, the food laws, the Sabbath, and the cycle of high holy days. The religion was fine, but the superstitions would have to go.

During the nineteenth century, we see a gradual and rather grudging recognition that Native American cultural practices might deserve the label of religion, however much they were polluted by superstitious additions. Critical to this acknowledgment was the publication of what certainly looked like “scriptural” texts, of chants, hymns, and rituals. By the early twentieth century, observers could speak more confidently of Indian religion, and even to recognize the dances, shamanism, and rituals as a fundamental part of it. That change constituted a minor revolution in religious sensibility.

Doubts about the nature of Indian religions survived into recent times, when public attitudes toward Native cultures had become vastly more sympathetic. One instructive moment came in 1970, when Congress passed a major bill returning to the Taos Pueblo control of the Blue Lake that was sacred to them. On signing the measure, President Nixon spoke warmly of the Pueblo struggle for justice. Then he added, oddly, “This bill also involves respect for religion . . . long before any organized religion came to the United States, for seven hundred years, the Taos Pueblo Indians worshiped in this

place.” The sentiments are impeccable, but why did he contrast the Taos practices with “organized religion,” here used as a synonym for Christianity? Were the Pueblos not practicing religion, or was it—all appearances to the contrary—not organized?²³

These supercilious attitudes sound odd from a contemporary perspective, since much of the modern appeal of Native culture is that it does *not* constitute a religion in the accepted Western sense, with all the left-brained dogmas and constraints that term implies, all the Puritan inheritance. While nineteenth-century Americans despised Indians for having less than a true religion, their modern descendants extol Native peoples for their spirituality. This quality rises far above the tawdry claims of mere religion, and especially that much-maligned category, *organized* religion.

Pilgrims from Civilization

Writing about Indian cultures in 1867, Francis Parkman brusquely dismissed Native spiritual practices as a

chaos of degrading, ridiculous, and incoherent superstitions. . . . Among the Hurons and Iroquois, and indeed all the stationary tribes, there was an incredible number of mystic ceremonies, extravagant, puerile, and often disgusting, designed for the cure of the sick or for the general weal of the community. . . . They consisted in an endless variety of dances, masqueradings, and nondescript orgies.

Indian religion taught little morality, and encouraged no scientific or philosophical questioning:

It is obvious that the Indian mind has never seriously occupied itself with any of the higher themes of thought. . . . In the midst of Nature the Indian knew nothing of her laws. His perpetual reference of her phenomena to occult agencies forestalled inquiry and precluded inductive reasoning. . . . No race, perhaps, ever offered greater difficulties to those laboring for its improvement.²⁴

Such a tirade is multiply offensive to modern readers, who expect a comprehensive tolerance for religious beliefs and practices, and who have learned an instinctive sympathy for the beauties of Indian ceremonies. The hostile

accounts of Native rituals and ceremonials that were absolutely normal through the nineteenth century remind us that a remarkable shift has occurred in religious and cultural sensibility. At some point, describing customs as pagan and primitive became praise rather than condemnation.²⁵

How and when, then, did mainstream Americans come to appreciate Native religions, not just as a tentative and inferior draft of Protestant Christianity, but as vibrant and inspiring traditions in their own right? Once again, the early years of the twentieth century mark a critical period of transition. Apart from purely religious developments, such as the liberalization of Protestantism and the growth of metaphysical thought, we can also see the impact of other social factors in the booming United States of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. One was the emergence of new academic traditions, and the appearance of scientific anthropology, ethnography, and archaeology. These disciplines were based in universities and museums, which were heavily funded either by the government or, more commonly, by private sponsors, tycoons prepared to distribute some of their largesse for the encouragement of science and learning. In consequence, far more people were enabled to research and write about Native religions, and in an objective and secular way.

Also, social changes vastly expanded the market for new findings about Native cultures, through the growth of national tourism. The expansion of transportation networks in the late nineteenth century allowed wider popular access to Indian sites and rituals, especially in the Southwest, supporting the creation of a full-scale industry of ethnic tourism. Here, white Americans could see Native cultures that were indisputably complex societies with elaborate ceremonials, a striking contrast to the demoralized and impoverished Indians so often seen elsewhere at this time. As the Cherokee John M. Oskison wrote in 1907, while “confined to a reservation and fed on rations,” the “‘noble red man’ became of no more interest than any other stall-fed creature. Admiration for the untamed savage gave way to contempt for the dirty beggar in the streets and under the car windows.”²⁶ But that dehumanizing attitude changed dramatically when white travelers saw the ancient glories of Mesa Verde, the enduring mysteries of the Shalako ceremonial at Zuñi, or the Hopi Snake Dance. Indian cultures and religions were by the 1920s proving highly attractive products for marketing and merchandising, for presentation to a consumer audience with a new hunger for the primitive and authentic. The packaging of Native spirituality is certainly in evidence by this time, though it would receive a massive boost, from the 1960s onwards, with a new idealization of all things Indian.

But we must also understand the forces driving these successive generations of seekers. When Robinson Jeffers witnessed the tourists watching the dances at Taos Pueblo in the 1920s, he remarked on their quest for authentic religious experience that they could not find within their own worlds:

Pilgrims from civilization, anxiously seeking beauty, religion, poetry;
pilgrims from the vacuum.
People from cities, anxious to be human again.²⁷

We need not accept Jeffers's view that tourists saw their own world as a "vacuum." But after generations of exalting the glories of Western civilization, why did so many Americans feel that these glories were to be found elsewhere, in Taos or Zuñi? Why were they so ready to consume the images they were offered?

Partly, the response reflects declining confidence in the religious mainstream. As seen especially in the Southwest, Indian religious life offered several features that were not easily available in respectable mainline Protestantism: strong elements of mysticism, a very physical kind of communal worship, a highly ornate and theatrical ritual life, the manipulation of sense experiences to produce ecstatic encounters. Of course, all these elements existed in contemporary Christianity, in varieties of ethnic Catholicism and, to some extent, in Pentecostalism, but neither of these was a respectable option for educated Protestants, even for those wholly disenchanted with the mainline churches. Authoritarian Christian traditions were especially unacceptable to the liberated women of the early twentieth century, who rejected the explicitly patriarchal structures of both Catholics and fundamentalists. Mystical and ecstatic themes became acceptable, though, when presented as manifestations of a pristine paganism.

Political factors also played a role. As Philip Deloria points out, playing Indian is often a reaction to a lack of confidence in mainstream American civilization: "Whenever white Americans have confronted crises of identity, some of them have inevitably turned to Indians."²⁸ Such defections reach their height during periods of cultural or political crisis, like the 1910s, when America was riven by political, social, and ethnic conflict. A pervading sense of threat and pessimism was then reinforced by the catastrophe of the First World War. Through the early twentieth century, a growing admiration for the primitive can be traced in religion, as well as art and culture.

Even before the Great War, an interest in primitive and tribal cultures was found among the cultural avant-garde, but this became much more widespread during the 1920s.²⁹

In the Native American context, these ideas were popularized by the celebrated group of writers and artists from the bohemian circles of Taos and Santa Fe, who saw Native Americans as the bearers of an ancient and priceless culture. Commenting on Pueblo ceremonials, artist Marsden Hartley complained that “in times of peace we go about the world seeking out every species of life foreign to ourselves for our own esthetic or intellectual diversion, yet we neglect on our very doorstep the perhaps most remarkable realization of beauty that can be found anywhere. It is a perfect piece with the great artistry of all time.” This awed admiration extended fully to spiritual matters. Carl Jung, another visitor to Taos, remarked that the life of a Pueblo Indian was “cosmologically meaningful,” in contrast to the psychic and social deprivation of a modern Euro-American. John Collier found among the Pueblos a Red Atlantis, still retaining ancient values that could literally redeem the world: “They had what the world has lost. They have it now. What the world has lost, the world must have again, lest it die.”³⁰ Such figures would be decisive in publicizing Native religious grievances and in helping the Indians to victory during the religious freedom debates of the 1920s. Collier, that antimodern utopian mystic, became the overlord of federal Indian policy during the New Deal years.

Such romantic responses would surface again during periods of disaffection with Western and specifically American culture. During the Great Depression, which occasionally did look like the last days of Western civilization, we find an unprecedented effort to bolster and preserve Native culture and religion, and a new boom in cultural and religious tourism. Again, in the late 1940s, as fears of nuclear annihilation grew, the books of Frank Waters integrated the spiritual wonders of Native American religions into a broader New Age vision, creating in the process an immensely influential cultural synthesis.

With these precedents in mind, it is not surprising that a new era of starry-eyed neo-Indianism should mark the decade after 1965, the time of Vietnam and Watergate, of assassinations and urban rioting, of gasoline shortages and threatened ecological catastrophe. In somewhat altered form, the radical pro-Indianism of the counterculture years would be sustained by the renewed crises at the end of the 1970s, a time of apocalyptic war fears and renewed urban crises. These social and political stresses provide the es-