

A HISTORY OF RELIGION IN AMERICA

FROM THE FIRST SETTLEMENTS THROUGH THE
CIVIL WAR

BRYAN F. LE BEAU



A History of Religion in America

A History of Religion in America: From the First Settlements through the Civil War provides comprehensive coverage of the history of religion in America from the precolonial era through the aftermath of the Civil War. It explores major religious groups in the United States and the following topics:

- Native American religion before and after the Columbian encounter
- Religion and the Founding Fathers
- Was America founded as a Christian nation?
- Religion and reform in the nineteenth century
- The first religious outsiders
- A nation and its churches divided

Chronologically arranged and integrating various religious developments into a coherent historical narrative, this book also contains useful chapter summaries and review questions. Designed for undergraduate religious studies and history students, *A History of Religion in America* provides a substantive and comprehensive introduction to the complexity of religion in American history.

Bryan F. Le Beau is retired from the University of Saint Mary in Leavenworth, KS, where he served as Professor of History, Provost, and Vice President for Academic Affairs. He is the author of several books on American cultural and religious history.

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- Recommended Further Reading
- Supplementary Chapter Information
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The companion website includes material which covers both volume one: *A History of America*, from the First Settlements through the Civil War and volume two: *A History of America, From the End of the Civil War to the Twenty-First Century*.

A History of Religion in America

From the First Settlements through
the Civil War

Bryan F. Le Beau

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Introduction

The principal themes of this history of religion in America are growth, diversity, adaptation, and accommodation, which are actually major themes in American history as a whole, religious or secular. These themes help to explain the unique persistence of religion in America, when it appears to be in decline throughout most of the Western world. They also allow us to address the perennial question of whether the United States is, or ever was, a Christian nation. This study focuses on religion in the context of American history. But it also addresses questions concerning that history, namely the challenges posed to religious bodies living outside the boundaries of traditional beliefs or even belief itself, as well as the resistance to new religions – at least new to the United States – which has waxed and waned but nevertheless persisted, over the centuries. Studying such resistance helps us not only to better understand the history of religion in America but also our cultural underpinnings and our understanding of ourselves.

Although each chapter is organized around a particular theme, this story of religion in America is told more or less chronologically. The themes provide the central points around which this history has been written. The chronological approach affords the opportunity to make connections between religious and secular history, thereby presenting a more coherent story. It also shows how secular events – revolution and civil war, for example – influenced, and in many cases were influenced by, religious developments. The two were inextricably linked and cannot be understood properly in isolation.

And finally, two things quickly occur to anyone who has tried to write such an expansive histories. First, given the limits of space, it is impossible to include everything and still provide enough depth to provide a satisfactory level of understanding. As a result, this history is somewhat subjective, and readers will find that some religious groups and topics have been excluded. Second, the author must rely on the work of hundreds of scholars, past and present, who have devoted their professional lives to the study of various topics of religion in American history. This author hopes that this single volume has done justice to their very fine scholarship, much of which has been cited in the numerous endnotes and recommendations for further reading following each chapter.

In the way of a brief overview, Chapter 1 explores both the diversity and common elements among the many Native American religions. It addresses the impact of European contact, settlement, and religious missions – Spanish, French, British, and American. As a result of that contact, Native Americans would be decimated and their religions nearly disappear. But both would survive, at the same time that both, while struggling and ultimately successful in maintaining their integrity, would be forced to adapt to their ever-changing environment and adopt significantly new beliefs.

Chapter 2 focuses on British colonization and the origins of what would become the dominant religious force for centuries in the United States – the Protestant establishment. It shows how in religious, and in political and economic, terms, British colonization was an extension of the English Reformation, both in its extension of that reformation and in the dissent it caused among colonists. It points to the diversity of religions, by the standards of the day, that came to exist in the colonies by the end of the colonial period and the seemingly inescapable acceptance of religious tolerance that resulted. Finally, it addresses the First Great Awakening, the nation's first great revival, and how it helped shape the nature of religion in America.

Chapter 3 explores the Great Awakening's impact on the generation of the American Revolution, relating New Light theology, millennial thought, and evangelical rhetoric to the growing disenchantment with what an increasing number of Americans saw as British immorality and corruption. God's visible power in the Great Awakening convinced many religious leaders and those born again that the pace of history was accelerating; that the Second Coming, or God's millennium on Earth, was close at hand; and that the millennium might well begin in America, a land settled by God's chosen people, with independence from the country God had abandoned. As such, American religion was as much shaped by, and helped shape, the American Revolution. It ushered in a period of significant change in the lineup of religious bodies. Some denominations went into rapid decline, while others grew exponentially. And finally, this chapter will discuss how under the influence of the Enlightenment – conceived in Europe but realized in America, as one historian put it – a public civil religion developed for the new nation, while the centuries-old traditions of church establishment and restraints on the freedom of diverse religious expressions were gradually discarded.

Chapter 4 examines the historical process by which disestablishment and the free exercise of religion were gradually realized at the state and national levels. As it is a question that persists even today, it will treat at some length what constitutional scholars label original intent: What did the Founding Fathers intend by their revolutionary constitutional provisions for the separation of church and state and free exercise of religion included in the First Amendment? It addresses the subject of deism, which for the first time challenged in a significant manner mainstream, revealed religion. And it addresses the Second Great Awakening, which helped drive home the dramatic populist or democratic emphasis on religion in America.

Chapter 5 picks up on the ideas of perfectionism, postmillennialism, and pursuit of the Kingdom of God on Earth to explore the important role religion played in the great era of reform in America. It discusses American Transcendentalism as a movement that reflected many of the main currents of religion and reform in the nineteenth century, and it provides an overview of the unprecedented proliferation of reform movements with religious roots. The final section of this chapter takes up the significantly greater role women came to play in American religion during this period, sometimes referred to as the feminization of American culture. The home became the American woman's nearly exclusive sphere, it has been argued, and she became the moral guardian of the nation. This led to her extending her sphere of influence beyond the church to various social and cultural reform efforts.

To this point, with the exception of Native American religion, this has been a story of religious insiders, those religious groups that dominated, or came to dominate, American religion, defined the mainstream, and commanded the adherence of most Americans at the nation's founding. Chapter 6 looks at the increased importance of two religious groups that lay outside America's mainstream at that point – African Americans and Roman Catholics – as

well as the appearance of the young nation's first major native born religion, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, all of which faced similar challenges.

The discussion of African Americans will include religious life in the slave community and among free blacks, including the ongoing debate over the extent to which the character of African American religion retained ties to the group's African past. The small number of Roman Catholics in the early nineteenth century may not have lessened suspicion toward them, but it did protect them from the more hostile treatment which they faced with the arrival in large numbers of Irish and German Catholics at mid-century. And finally, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in many ways was distinctly American. Nevertheless, seen as religious outsiders, Mormons were subjected to levels of hostility matching, and even exceeding at times, that experienced by Roman Catholics, forcing them to move west, seeking their Zion in the Utah Territory.

The American Civil War was not only the crucial, even seminal, event in American secular history, it also served to reshape and redirect American religious history. Both the nation and its churches were torn asunder, and although both would survive and even grow stronger, they would be significantly changed by the experience. Chapter 7 will begin by discussing the role of religion in the Antislavery Movement and the response of Southern religious leaders to criticism by Northern evangelicals to their "peculiar institution." It will examine the divisive influence of slavery on the nation's churches, leading in some cases to the creation of separate institutions. It will discuss the role of the churches in the Civil War and the reformulation of religious thought in the war's aftermath. And it will conclude with a section on the religious beliefs and expressions of President Abraham Lincoln, especially as they appeared in his public pronouncements, which remain some of the most oft-quoted "founding documents" in American history.

This history of religion in America ends amidst the aftermath of the Civil War. It is the most common line of demarcation for surveys of American history, religious or secular, as the specter of the nation divided provides an appropriate point at which to conclude a coherent story of the nation from its first settlements to its near destruction. But it also sets the stage for anyone wishing to further explore the role of religion in American history from that point to the present, which will be the subject of a subsequent volume. The themes remain the same, even if the historical events and the major characters change.

Native American religion and its European encounter

The importance and challenges of studying Native American religion

For most Americans, their history begins with the English settlement of North America. Barely a thought is given to Spanish and French efforts, and not much more attention is paid to those who occupied the land before any Europeans arrived. This foreshortened history has largely been abandoned, for good reason. For one thing, not to tell the full story is to perpetuate a short-sightedness induced by a preoccupation with America's European cultural heritage. Second, it limits our understanding of the complex character of religion that is not as readily apparent in the exclusive study of the West.¹

"Savages we call them," wrote Benjamin Franklin of Native Americans, "because their manners differ from ours, which we think the perfection of civility."² Much the same can be said of many Americans' attitudes toward Indian religion. Religion, however, has always been central to the Native American experience, to its identity, and to its vitality. Some continue to describe it as primitive, but in that the word primitive implies a belief system devoid of deep feelings and subtle thought it is inappropriate. Historically, Native American religion has been marked by rich symbolism and profound thought concerning the most basic concerns of man: the creation of the world, the origin of human life, and the nature of the supernatural and of the afterlife.³

The study of Native American religion poses three problems. First, there is the problem of sources. Whereas most of the major world religions have literary traditions, Native American religion has been handed down as oral tradition. Such oral accounts have little sense of linear time. And though quite lovely in their telling, metaphorical and symbolic language abounds and past and present are collapsed into a single continuum. Similarly dangerous is the use of the records of the first European and American observers of Indian culture. Explorers, traders, and missionaries witnessed firsthand many aspects of Indian life, but their accounts are framed by their cultural biases.⁴

Second, the title "Native American religion" is actually a misnomer and perhaps might better have been put: "Native American religions." Native American religion was, and still is, as diverse as the Euro American religions with which it came into contact. In brief, there were as many Indian religions as there were Indian tribes.⁵ The phrase Native American religion, then, is a fiction, but it is a convenient fiction, which will be employed, at least in part. What follows is a discussion of both the diversity that separates and the commonalities that unite Native American religions.

Third, there is the challenge of describing a phenomenon that is ever changing. Like subsequent inhabitants of North America, Indians were immigrants, and like those who followed,

they were forced to adapt – to adjust their life patterns – to their new environment, the other tribes they encountered, and in time, and most challenging, to European culture and Christianity. What is often described as traditional behavior is really the product of extensive alteration over many centuries in response to all of those encounters. This was true for Native Americans in the Pre-Contact Period, between the migration of their northeast Asiatic ancestors beginning perhaps 30,000 years ago to 1492, during which hundreds of distinct Native American cultures emerged. And it was true in the period after 1492, when Indian tribes were forced into foreign environments to which they had to adapt, encountered hitherto unknown tribes with different religious beliefs that influenced their own, and faced the oftentimes forced acculturation that followed confrontations with European and American agents of culture and religion⁶

Common characteristics of Native American religion(s)

As Peter Williams has argued, among Native Americas, as with many traditional societies,

the religious life of a people is coextensive with the people itself, and seldom extends beyond a coherent social group. . . . Society, culture, religion, and cosmos are coincident, and together constitute the sum of reality for a particular people as long as they manage to cohere as a self-sufficient group.⁷

Thus, it is not surprising that anthropologists have identified at least 500 different Native American cultures in the area that would become the United States on the eve of European contact. Euro Americans may have insisted that the truths of their religion were universal, that Christianity transcended culture, but Native Americans believed that each society or group of people had its own sacred stories and rituals.⁸ Nevertheless, it is possible to identify many common characteristics among Native American religions.

Four prominent features linked the diverse expressions of North American Indian religion: a similar world-view, a shared notion of cosmic harmony, emphasis on directly experiencing powers and visions, and a common view of the cycle of life and death. Native Americans generally believed that human existence was designed by the creator divinities – in some cases holding a single, particularly powerful, creator god primarily responsible – at the time of the “first beginnings.” They agreed that, in those days, all beings were more or less human but that a change took place that turned many primeval beings into animals and birds. Thus the close affinity that remains between people and animals, as well as the animistic concept of spirits as animals and animals as spiritual.⁹

Although clearly not monotheistic, as were principal Western religions, the Native American notion of cosmic harmony emphasized the unitary system of the universe made up of humans, animals, trees, and plants – nature as a whole – and the supernatural. The roots of this idea may be traced to Indian hunting origins, thereby explaining its continued prominence in later hunter-gatherer tribes, but it was equally at home among agricultural Indians. Simply put, all living beings had their supernatural guardians. Each animal had its guardian, usually a mysterious spirit larger than ordinary members of the species. In the case of humans, a Supreme Being played a superior but not exclusive role.¹⁰

Native Americans emphasized the direct experience of powers and visions. Among the Great Plains Indians, this was commonly represented in the vision quest, one of the most powerful rituals in Native American religions. The vision quest may have originated as a puberty rite, where young men were required to seek the assistance of a guardian spirit to

withstand the trials of existence and luck in hunting, warfare, and love. Parents or elders sent young men into the forest or wilderness to fast, suffer from the cold, and be subject to the attacks of wild animals, from which might result a vision of the spirit that henceforth would become a guardian spirit. The vision quest was transformed, however, on the Plains into a ritual for grown men, wherein hunters or warriors repeatedly withdrew into the wilderness to seek guardian spirits, each serving a different purpose.¹¹

Native Americans, in contrast to those living in Western culture, conceived of time as cyclical, rather than linear. Rather than seeing time as a straight line, from an origin through the present into the future, implicit in which is the notion of progress, American Indians understood time to be an eternally recurring cycle of years and events. So too each person made a cycle of time from birth to death, death marking both the end of the old and the beginning of a new life, either on this earth, reincarnated into another human or some animal form, or in a transcendent hereafter.¹²

Native Americans possessed a strong sense of continuity between the self and outside realities and between themselves and the things they held sacred. They saw reality as more mysterious and symbolic and what they saw as more holy and mysterious as closely related to, if not inseparable from, their daily existence. Whereas Euro Americans conceived of a three-level universe of God, human beings, and nature, each inhabiting different realms, Native Americans envisioned a world to which all were bound by ties of kinship. There were grandfathers who were Thunder Beings, there was Grandmother Spider, and there was the Corn Mother. Animals took on human form, like Coyote the Trickster, and shamans – holy people – who were said to fly like birds and talk to animals.¹³

In the Western world-view, the natural world was a resource for man; as noted in Genesis 1:28, man was “to have dominion over . . . every living thing that moves on earth.” The secular and the sacred were distinct, and the human relationship to the natural environment fell into the secular sphere. Native Americans made no such distinction. For them, land belonged, for lack of a better word, to the tribe only insofar as they were inhabiting it and making use of it. While occupying that land, however, they made certain aspects of that space symbolically important. Mountains, for example, could be associated with a particular god or gods or with a unique story of creation. But Indians also conceived of animal and plant guardians as sacred beings, who, at some point in the distant past, had pledged the bodies of their species as food for man. This led Native Americans to create elaborate rituals for hunting and planting, offering gifts to the spirits of the life they took and being careful not to waste any portion of that which they killed or harvested.¹⁴

For the agricultural-based tribes of the Southwest, harmony with nature was paramount, and that was expressed in their rituals that marked the changing of the seasons and that honored the Father Sun, Mother Earth, and the gods that brought precious rain. Prime among the last group were the kachinas, who visited villages during the first half of the year, bringing rain from their homes in the nearby mountains. Kachinas (see Figure 1.1) were not so much worshipped, as they were considered friends. They were represented by male dancers, who danced themselves into a state in which their spirits were joined with the kachinas they impersonated. As part of the rituals, the dancers gave carved dolls to the children, which were not intended as toys but rather as sacred objects for the home.¹⁵

Native Americans held sacred the inner world as well. Dreams revealed holy, hidden things that often could not be known in other ways. Tribes had rituals wherein individuals brought their dreams to tribal councils or holy men so that their meaning could be discerned. Especially on the Plains, leaders of the hunt were chosen from among those who had dreams



Figure 1.1 Kachina dancers

Source: Granger Historical Picture Archive/Alamy Stock Photo

deemed relevant to the hunt, while many tribes believed that, in dreams, the soul was free to travel to distant places to learn and to return with information, or visions, from guardian spirits.¹⁶

The inner world that dreams disclosed was intimately related to the outer world, and in order to bridge the gap between the two, people were given a name that indicated their kinship with nature and that told something of their inner essence. Those names could, and often were, changed as significant deeds or events occurred. Black Hawk, for example, might become Afraid of Horses, White Rabbit, or Moves from Your Sight Little Red Star. And the colors were significant, in that each of the four directions had its color, and each color its quality: the red of the north might signify wisdom; the white of the south, innocence; the black of the west, deep thought or introspection; and the yellow of the east, inner light.¹⁷

Belief in shape-shifting was common. Trickster figures such as the Coyote could assume any form they chose, even in the very midst of their adventures. Thus, they were seen as beings of creative power, who had helped put the present world in order, as well as disorder, and who often disturbed the regular working of society. Shape-shifting tricksters could shift from sly cunning creatures, who could outwit their opponents, to the fool, who, according to

one tale, fought himself because his right arm and left arm did not know that they belonged to each other. They were without boundaries, able to become whatever inspiration and circumstance decreed, and belief in such transformations reminded Native Americans that the world was, after all, one substance.¹⁸

Native Americans lived their lives in accordance not only with the four directions, as noted above, but also with sacred numbers – four, for the directions of the compass, for example, and seven, which added a vertical dimension to the four, namely the zenith, nadir, and center – and with shapes, most notably the circle. Circles were sacred for Native Americans because they reflected shapes they saw in nature both in space and time. To be in harmony with nature meant to live as part of the circle, or the medicine wheel of the world. It meant living securely in what they saw as the middle of that circular world from which they did not venture toward the edges, or frontier.¹⁹

Also similar were Native American accounts of their origins as humans on earth. Most tribes pictured their primordial ancestors as having ascended from the darkness under the earth. A hero, often accompanied by a god, liberated them, freeing them to emerge from the darkness into the light. Those who came to Earth ascended a tree (alternately a vine or mountain) in the order to which they would assume their place in society, chiefs and shamans first. That tree, with its roots in the underworld and crown in the upper, was represented by such ritual structures as the sun dance post or sacred pole.²⁰

Native Americans generally ascribed the origin and existence of good and evil to dual creation, or to the product of two creative spirits – often twins – almost always related but in conflict. They commonly credited the good spirit with having fashioned a positive and beneficent world for human beings. They saw the evil one as having introduced into the world elements that would thereafter frustrate them and make their lives more difficult, like disease and pestilence. Similar accounts told of the heroes or gods, who gave men such indispensable gifts as fire, the ability to hunt, and skill in planning.²¹ Central to Native American religion was the quest to align themselves with good, or benevolent, spirits and to distance themselves from the bad, harmful, or evil spirits.

Illness was seen as the result of a lack of harmony between the afflicted and the spiritual world. Disharmony might be the result of natural causes, in which case herbal medicine might be applied. Illness might also result from contact with ghosts, witchcraft (in this case meaning the intentional use of spiritual powers by an individual to harm others), or “soul loss,” in which case a supernatural remedy was required to reestablish harmony. Such remedies were the province of medicine men, especially shamans. Shamans – who, depending on the tribe could be male or female – were recognized by their communities as intermediaries between humans and the supernatural. They accessed the supernatural through dreams or visions, and they applied that knowledge to healing the sick.²²

Similarities existed in Native American attitudes toward death and the afterlife. To begin with, there was no sharp difference between the existence led by the living and the dead, the two realms of which were more in continuity than disjunction. Some tribes espoused theories of reincarnation, wherein the deceased person might return to earth in a different form, commonly an animal. At the same time, their three-level view of the universe led Native Americans to believe that the deceased departed for either the level above, where they might enjoy a happy life of plenty and contentment, or the level below the earth, of darkness, which did not necessarily involve torture but that was deprived of warmth and satisfaction. Good people would be rewarded in the afterlife, and the bad not, thereby providing a sense of the world as a moral place which favored good and opposed evil.²³

Most Native Americans believed in ghosts, or the spirits of the recently departed existing for an interim period between earth and their final dwelling places. They commonly performed ceremonies to appease such spirits, especially for the first year following a person's death. Visits from the deceased in their survivor's dreams were common, thereby relaying important messages about decisions that needed to be made and warning of problems that lay ahead. And finally, the retelling of myths – meaning stories that explained the ways of the cosmos – assured harmony between humans and the spirits, or powers, of the universe. Myths varied from tribe to tribe, but what they had in common was their assuring a sense of order out of chaos – to maintaining, or restoring, harmony between humans and the divine.²⁴

European contact and the impact of Christian missions

Native American religion was never static, even in the pre-Columbian period. Change was never so swift, however, as it was when Indians came into contact with Europeans and Euro Americans, especially Christian missionaries. One of the great motivating forces underlying Christian European expansion into the New World was the missionary spirit of Christianity. A central agent in its colonization was the Christian church, leading some to describe the process of colonization as “colonialism in the name of Christ.” The belief that the heathen should be converted as a Christian duty was not limited to priests and ministers. Financial supporters of the earliest expeditions, ministers of state and colonial officials, sought to carry out what they regarded as a moral duty. Colonization was closely equated with the spread of civilization, the carrying of an alleged superior European and later American culture to the so-called primitive areas of the world.²⁵

Missionaries were constantly frustrated by the reluctance of most Indians to be converted, the very idea of a native Christian identity being culturally problematic. Indians recognized no line of distinction between religious and cultural life; once an Indian became a Christian, he was seen as having rejected more than the religious component of his former life. He called into question the cultural values by which he had been nurtured, resulting in the mind of many in deracination. Because, at the same time, the convert was seldom fully accepted into white society, conversion could result in isolation from both the white and Native American worlds.²⁶

Frustration among the Indians led to many revitalization movements. To a large extent, these were primitivist movements or attempts to return to their cultural and religious origins. But as Anthony F. C. Wallace argued in his seminal essay on revitalization movements, and as we will see, they were more complicated than that. These movements commonly blended elements of the old and new, often proving to be “both restorationists and revolutionaries.”²⁷

Wilcomb Washburn has argued that, despite the number of converts and the apparent strength of the Christian movement among Native Americans, the effects of conversion were too often either “peripheral, divisive, or narcotic.” Christianity “helped the Indian accept the poor place the white world offered him and helped him overcome the rage and despair he might otherwise have felt because of his inability to prosper in that world.” But Richard White may have put it best when he summarized the results of Christian missions in one story with two endings. The story: “Indians are the rock, European peoples are the sea, and history seems a constant storm.” The two outcomes: “The sea wears down and dissolves the rock; or the sea erodes the rock but cannot finally absorb its battered remnant, which endures.”²⁸