



A New Discovery of a Vast Country in America Louis Hennepin (1698)

Louis Hennepin was a Catholic missionary from what is now Belgium. He belonged to an order called the Recollects, who were a French branch of the Franciscans; the Franciscans had been building up missions in Spanish America since the 1500s, a fact that Hennepin mentions in this selection. As a missionary for the Recollects, Hennepin spent five years in France's North American territories, traveling through Quebec, the Great Lakes region, and the upper Mississippi River valley (which Hennepin calls the Meschasipi). The following excerpts are taken from a book Hennepin wrote after returning to Europe—a quite popular book in its day—describing North America and the indigenous people he had tried, with little success, to Christianize.

Our ancient Missionary Recollects of Canada, and those that succeeded them in that work, have always given it for their opinion, as I now own 'tis mine, that the way to succeed in converting the barbarians is to endeavor to make them men before we go about to make them Christians. Now in order to civilize them, 'tis necessary that the Europeans should mix with them and that they should dwell together, which can never be done for certain till the colonies are augmented. But it must be acknowledged that the Company of Canada merchants have made great obstacles to the increasing of the colonies; for out of greediness to keep all the trade in their own hands, these gentlemen would never permit any particular society to settle themselves in the country, nor suffer the missionaries to persuade the barbarians to dwell constantly in a place. Yet before this be done, there's no way to convert these unbelievers. [...]

Hence 'tis manifest [...] that Christianity is not like to gain much ground among the savages till the colonies are strengthened by a great number of inhabitants, artisans, and workmen, and then the treaty betwixt the barbarians and us should be freer and extended to all Europeans. But chiefly it should be endeavored to fix the barbarians to a certain dwelling place and introduce our customs and laws amongst them. Furthered by the assistance of zealous people in Europe, colleges might be founded to breed up the young savages in the Christian faith, which might in time contribute very much to the conversion of their countrymen. [...]

I cannot help saying, with grief, that there is a great deal of difference between the modern missions into America and those which our Recollects began in the New World and continued in the southern parts of America. There they daily converted millions of souls; but in Canada we find the ground barren and unfruitful, nothing but blindness and insensibility, a prodigious distance from God, and even an entire opposition to the mystery of our faith. Whole ages are required to prepare these barbarians for the gospel before we can expect to see it flourish there.

[...] These miserable dark creatures listen to all we say concerning our mysteries just as if 'twere a song; they are naturally very vicious and addicted to some superstitions that signify nothing; their customs are savage, brutal, and barbarous; they will suffer themselves to be baptized ten times a day for a glass of brandy or a pipe of tobacco, and offer their children to be baptized, but all without any religious motive. [...]

We must all of us own that almost all the savages in general have no belief of a deity, and that

they are incapable of the common and ordinary arguments and reasonings that the rest of mankind are led by upon this subject, so dark and stupid are their understandings. At the same time, we may acknowledge that now and then, in some of them, we discover some glimmerings of a confused notion of God. Some will confess, but very cloudily, that the sun is God. [...] The nations southward seem to believe in a universal spirit that governs all. They imagine, after a fashion, that there's a spirit in everything, even in those that are inanimate, and they address themselves to it sometimes and beg something of it, as we took notice of one barbarian, who made a kind of sacrifice upon an oak at the Cascade of St. Anthony of Padua, upon the River Meschasipi.

All these nations don't profess their belief of a deity out of any respect to religion. They talk of it ordinarily, as a thing they were prepossessed with, or frolicsomenly, not regarding anything they say themselves any otherwise than as a kind of fable. They have no outward ceremony to signify that they worship any deity: there's no sacrifice, priest, temple, nor any other token of religion amongst them.

Their dreams are to them instead of prophecy, inspiration, laws, commandments, and rules in all their enterprises in war, peace, commerce, and hunting; they regard them as oracles. The opinion they have of their dreams draws them into a kind of necessity to be ruled by them, for they think 'tis a universal spirit that inspires them by dreams and adviseth them what to do [...]

There's no nation but what have their jugglers, which some count sorcerers; but 'tis not likely that they are under any covenant, or hold communication, with the devil. At the same time, one may venture to say that the evil spirit has a hand in the tricks of these jugglers, and makes use of them to amuse the poor people and render them more incapable of receiving the knowledge of the true God. [...] These imposters would be counted prophets, who foretell things to come. They would be looked upon as having almost an infinite power: they boast that they make rain or fair weather, calms and storms, fruitfulness or barrenness of the ground, hunting lucky or unlucky. They serve for physicians too, and frequently apply such remedies as have no manner of virtue to cure the distemper. [...]

The great insensibility of these barbarians is caused principally by their carelessness and neglect to be thoroughly instructed. They come to us and attend to what we say, purely out of idleness and natural curiosity to converse with us, as we with them; or rather they are tempted to follow us by the kindness and flatteries we express towards them, or because of the benefit their sick receive from us, or out of hope to gain by trafficking with us; or lastly, because we are Europeans, and they think us stouter than themselves and hope we will defend them from their enemies.

We teach them prayers; but they repeat them like songs, without any distinction by faith. Those we have catechized a long time are very wavering, except some few. They renounce all, return into their woods, and take up their old superstitions upon the least croquet that comes into their heads. [...]

Another great obstacle to their conversion is this: Most of them have several wives, and in the northern parts they change them as often as they please. They can't conceive how people can tie

themselves indissolubly to one person in marriage. “See how silly you are,” cry they when we argue with them about it. “My wife is uneasy to me, I am so to her; she’ll agree very well with such a one, who is at odds with his wife. Now why should we four lead a miserable life all our days?”

Another hindrance lies in a custom of theirs not to contradict any man. They think everyone ought to be left to his own opinion, without being thwarted. They believe, or make as if they believed, all you say to them; but ’tis their insensibility and indifference to everything, especially matters of religion, which they never trouble themselves about.

America is no place to go out of a desire to suffer martyrdom, taking the word in a theological sense. The savages never put any Christian to death upon the score of his religion; they leave everybody at liberty in belief. [...] These barbarians never make war but for the interest of their nation; they don’t kill people but in particular quarrels, or when they are brutish, or drunk, or in revenge, or infatuated with a dream or some extravagant vision. They are incapable of taking away any person’s life out of hatred to his religion. [...]

The passion of revenge which they are possessed with is another great obstacle to Christianity. They are very tender and affectionate to their own nation, but cruel and revengeful beyond imagination towards their enemies. They are naturally inconstant, revilers, scoffers, and lascivious. In short, among all the vices they are addicted to we can perceive no principle of religion or morality; and, to be sure, this must needs render their conversion extremely difficult.

To persuade them to anything and dispose them to the faith, ’tis requisite to make them familiar with us and contract a good acquaintance with them; but this is not to be done presently, because first of all the colonies ought to be multiplied and planted everywhere. When they have passed away a few weeks with the Europeans, they are obliged to go to war, hunting, or fishing for their subsistence, and this depraves them extremely. They should be fixed, enticed to clear the ground and cultivate it, and work at several trades, as the Europeans do; and then we should see them reform their barbarous customs and become more civilized, as well towards one another as us.

Source: Louis Hennepin, *A New Discovery of a Vast Country in America*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 2:457-470 (chaps. 12-14), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044098889447>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

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These edited excerpts from Hennepin's book are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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