



Do Native Americans have religion? *A brief history of competing answers*

At times it has been asserted that Native Americans do not have religion. There are basically two, very different, versions of this assertion: one was characteristic of the era of European colonialism (roughly 1500-1950) while the other emerged during the postcolonial era (roughly 1950 to present).

Denying Native American “religion” in the colonial era



As Europeans colonized the Americas, some Europeans saw similarities between elements of Old World cultures that the Europeans called “religion” and elements of Native American cultures. These Europeans extended the label “religion” to the analogous elements of Native American cultures, such as beliefs about supernatural beings and ceremonies intended to produce healing or successful crops or hunting. However, other European observers maintained that Native Americans did not have religion. In some cases, this was because the observers equated “religion” with devotion to the Christian God. In other cases, observers expected “religion” to have trappings familiar to them from Christianity, which many Native American cultures lacked: written texts, or buildings dedicated to a deity, or services in which congregants sat and listened quietly to a preacher.

In the late 1800s, in an effort to Christianize and civilize Native Americans, the US government outlawed on reservations ceremonies such as dances and the rites performed by medicine men. Instead of calling the outlawed practices “religion,” officials spoke of “superstition,” “savage rites,” or “heathenish customs.” The effect of this language was to exclude Native American customs from the protection afforded by “freedom of religion.” Some Native Americans reacted by protesting that the outlawed

practices did, in fact, constitute their religion. For example, in 1896, the army officer who oversaw a reservation in Nebraska reported that Omahas there were insisting they had “a right to their religious observances” (referring to ceremonial dances). The officer countered that what the Omahas called religious observances were “in fact the barbaric customs of their progenitors.”

Source: U.S. Department of the Interior, *Report of the Secretary of the Interior*, 54th Cong., 2d sess., House Document 5, vol. 2 (Washington DC: GPO, 1897), 198, https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/SERIALSET-03489_00_00-001-0005-0000.

Protecting Native American “religion” in the postcolonial era



During the postcolonial era, US government policy shifted to declaring that Native Americans do have traditional “religions,” which they are entitled to practice freely. The American Indian Religious Freedom Act, passed by Congress in 1978, granted legal protection to practices that a century earlier the government had outlawed.

Native American traditionalists have been only partly satisfied with the new legal climate. They have succeeded at securing protection for ritual practices not bound to specific sites, such as dances or peyote ceremonies. They have been less successful at arguing that Native American religious freedom requires banning commercial or recreational activities on lands that tribes regard as sacred but don’t currently own. One rationale government officials have given for not implementing such bans is that restricting people’s access to public lands based on Native American religious sensibilities would create an unconstitutional “establishment of religion.” Some critics have ruefully concluded that US law protects only settler colonial, not indigenous, models of “religion.”

Denying Native American “religion” in the postcolonial era



While the postcolonial era produced a climate of increased respect for Native American “religions,” it also produced a new version of the claim that Native Americans do not have religion. As part of the postcolonial reckoning, scholars became more critically conscious that the category “religion” is a Western invention, born from processes of secularization in Western societies. This recognition has led some to argue that the category does not apply to the traditional cultural patterns of non-Western societies, including Native American cultures. These cultures, the argument goes, do not make a distinction between things that are “religious” and things that are “secular.” Therefore, in a traditional Native American society, there is no separate sphere that can be designated “religion”; instead, the kinds of beliefs, practices, or concerns that Westerners label “religious” pervade the culture. Rather than “religion,” people who adopt this view are likely to speak of Native American “lifeways” or, in a more popular register, “spirituality.”

During the colonial era, the claim that Native Americans did not have “religion” was used by Westerners to mark Native American cultures as inferior. By contrast, the postcolonial version of the claim seeks to place Native American cultures on equal standing with Western cultures by rejecting the imposition of a Western category. Consequently, where Native American traditionalists resisted the colonial-era version of the claim (protesting that Native Americans do have religions, which should be legally

protected), some traditionalists have embraced the postcolonial version. The postcolonial version has been embraced also by non-Native scholars who aim to “decolonize” the study of Native American cultures.

At times the postcolonial claim is used—especially in popularized forms—to assert that Native American spirituality is superior to religion. In these cases, theologically conservative Christianity typically provides the model for “religion” to which Native American “spirituality” is contrasted. Thus it is asserted that while religion designates only some things as sacred or spiritual, Native Americans view all things as sacred or spiritual. Where religion encourages human beings to dominate nature, Native American spirituality encourages human beings to see themselves as one with nature. Religion focuses on other-worldly salvation, is creedal and dogmatic, and demands to be accepted as the exclusive truth. Native American spirituality is said to be the opposite of that and is therefore held to be better. Such assertions not only stereotype “religion”; they also frequently stereotype Native American cultures as well as Christianity.

There is a potential paradox here. If *(a)* the claim that Native Americans do not have religion takes the form of asserting that Native Americans recognize all, not just some, things as sacred; and if *(b)* we assume, as scholars in the field of religious studies commonly do, that assertions about what is sacred fall into the conceptual domain of “religion”; then *(c)* claiming that Native Americans do not have religion is synonymous with claiming that Native Americans assign religious meaning to everything.

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