

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

NORTH AMERICAN RELIGION

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Overview Religious diversity has been a hallmark of North American culture during much of its history. While the earliest inhabitants appeared to share many core concepts and beliefs, such was not the case when the Europeans came to the North American continent. The resulting diversity of religious thought has to do with a desire for hegemony on the one hand, and on the other, a desire for autonomy and freedom of thought and spiritual practice.

PreHistory

Clovis culture (18,000 – 8,000 BC): From what we can tell from artifacts and petroglyphs, the early religion of the Clovis culture was shamanistic, with also an emphasis on the moon, sun, and stars.

Classical

Southwest Pueblo (1200 BCE – 1300 AC): Pueblo Indians. The Pueblo culture is known to us through rock paintings and petroglyphs. In the desert Southwest, near Blythe, California, large geoglyphs of animals, people, and constellations are visible from above, making it possible that there were beliefs here as well as in other American cultures the principle Creation Myth involved contact with beings from the stars.

Eastern Woodlands (1000 BCE – 1000 AD): The indigenous peoples of the Eastern Woodlands shared a belief in the Great Spirit as the creator of the world, in which the most important feature was the harmonious co-existence between all animals, plants, landforms, and life forms (including people). The spiritual world was believed to interact with the physical world, and that it could be seen in often unexpected manifestations such as messages transmitted by means of animals, etc.

Mississippian (800 – 1500 AD): Throughout the Mississippi River embayment and Mississippi, Ohio River, Red River, and Arkansas River watersheds, there are ruins referred to for years as “mounds.” They are the ruins of temples / ceremonial courts / ball courts. There were clear connections between the spiritual beliefs of the trading partners, with shared knowledge of the stars, moon, sun and calendars. There was potential sacrifice of human beings, but it does not seem to have been as widespread as to the south.

Colonial (Early Modern)

Dutch Colonies: Facing persecution in Catholic France, the French Huguenots, who were Protestant, emigrated to countries where they were likely to receive better treatment. Many relocated to the Dutch Republic, where they lived before relocating again to North America. The Huguenots settled in South Carolina and also in New Amsterdam (New York) along the Hudson River and in Long Island as early as the 1560s.

Spanish Colonies: The missions (Franciscan in California, Dominicans, Jesuits) were supported by the Viceroyalty of New Spain with the shared desire to convert and conquer the Southwest part of what is now the United States. They extended from what is now Mexico to as far north as San Francisco. Three orders of Spanish priests established missions, including the Jesuits, Franciscans, and Dominicans. There are missions in Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, New Mexico, and Texas. The Franciscans were the first to arrive, and they focused on education, and conversion through meditation and contemplation, which was a slow and respectful way to convert the indigenous people. The Spanish government became impatient with them. The Jesuits were the “warrior priests” and had a very different philosophy of conversion. They established “reductions” (something like prison camps) where the indigenous peoples were compelled to convert and the provide free labor. The Dominicans were primarily

in the Caribbean and in Florida. They were champions of the rights of the native peoples and protested the “encomienda” system which enslaved indigenous peoples.

French Colonies: The French-controlled regions of North America were predominantly Catholic, with some exceptions (Acadia in Nova Scotia, for example) where Protestants fled for their lives, echoing what had happened in France itself. The French Catholicism was very different than the Catholicism of Spain and Ireland. There were no missions, for example, and the relationship with the indigenous was more commercial than compelled (as in the case of the encomiendas).

English Colonies: The English colonies were populated by a panoply of pragmatists and utopian thinkers who found themselves in the “out” group, not only for their religious thinking, but for their desire to participate more fully in the economy of England. They were a destabilizing force, particularly since they rejected the unification of church and state as represented in the Church of England fashioned by Henry VIII. The first group to emigrate en masse was the Puritans, who established not only churches, but also art, literature, and a philosophical framework for a new world. Later the free-thinkers represented by Roger Smith who was also an advocate of the dignified treatment of the American Indians. William Penn was granted a charter by Charles II in 1681 for what was to become Pennsylvania. He encouraged religious dissidents from all of Europe to settle that land, thus attracting Quakers and others from Europe as well as oppressive colonies such as the Massachusetts Bay Colony (Puritans).

Nineteenth Century

Protestantism: Protestantism continued its rapid growth in the new United States, where it was often the cultural and social glue that held communities together. New types of Protestantism flourished, because it was possible to start a new religious domination very easily, usually by means of a charismatic preacher who would travel a circuit where he would organize tent revivals, which would inspire converts who would then set up their local congregations. It was in that way that the Baptists, Southern Baptists, Methodists, Pentacostals, and many other church denominations flowered and flourished. They were especially important in the frontier areas where the church was often the only social safety net, and also gave people a chance to connect and form a community with shared values, vision, and social goals. In the case of immigrants from Germany, Scandinavia, Greece, Russia and other locations, the church served as a way to preserve cultural identity.

Catholicism: All Roman Catholic churches had in common a unifying relationship with the overall structure, which was a clear and rigidly maintained hierarchy, with the Pope at the head of the church, and resources administered through Rome and later through regions, reflecting in many ways the structure of the Roman Empire. Depending on the origins of the community, the local Catholic church would emphasize certain saints over others. For example, in the Desert Southwest, the Virgin of Guadalupe was important, while in the areas predominantly Irish, Saint Patrick figured prominently.

Utopian Religious Movements: Despite their insistence that all they really wanted was to be able to interpret the Bible in their own way, sing the songs they wanted to sing, and to live in harmony with each other, what really united most of the utopian religious experiments of the 19th century was sexual freedom. It is not the kind of “free love” one might expect from a century later (the 1960s), but it sought a way to break away from the rigid behavioral constraints of the Puritans and Protestant groups that soaked up the idea of sexual relations as something to be hidden and punished. The Shakers were nominally celibate, which allowed men and women to freely interact and go into what seem to have been orgiastic sublimations of sexual energy, called “dancing.” Humphrey Noyes’s Oneida Community tried to implement a system of free love called “complex marriage” where everyone was married to everyone else, and one could have relationships with everyone else, no jealousy allowed. No complaining by women was allowed, either. The patriarchs of the cult got to “teach” or “introduce” young women to sex, and the patriarchs decided which men could have which women. The population of women went into a precipitous decline (women ran away), until Humphrey fled to Canada after being charged with statutory rape and his son, Theodore, an agnostic and unwilling leader, assumed the chief role. The community rejected “complex marriage” and reformed as a joint-stock company and entered into traditional marriage

with their true loves. The joint stock company was extremely successful and well known for its Oneida flatware, knives, and other housewares.

Mormons: The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints was one of the most colorful of the utopian experiments and cults of the 19th century. They were immediately very compelling for settlers feeling somehow disenfranchised and without opportunity. The Mormons (as they came to be known, as devotees of the Angel Mormon) were extremely well organized as well as entrepreneurial, resulting in the fact that they generally were rather well-heeled and able to afford to move west and to set up agricultural settlements. Because they believed in polygamy and had other “outree” beliefs, traditional communities saw them as destabilizing. Eventually the Mormons made a mass exodus and established communities in what is now Utah. They were also very prominent in Hawaii, where they established an early community in the east side of Oahu.

Twentieth Century

Protestantism: During the twentieth century, many of the denominations that were launched in the 19th century organized themselves and became more formal. They began to develop networks of churches as well as seminaries, bible colleges, and universities. With the increasingly rigid structure and social control of the formal churches, there arose a desire for religions that promised healing, physical prosperity, and immediate happiness. Using radio, television, and later the Internet, megachurches and televangelists appealed to millions of Americans. The result was the creation of a block of like-minded citizens, as well as a politicization of religion (more overt than in the past) Jerry Falwell / Liberty University, etc.

African American churches and the Civil Rights Movement: African Methodist / African Baptist churches flourished in African American communities and were important as a social support system. They helped organize and support grassroots movements that championed the right to vote, right for equal treatment and abolishing Jim Crow / Plessy vs. Ferguson (separate but equal) towns and facilities.

Catholicism and Activism: The Roman Catholic Church was very politically active in the twentieth century, and sometimes gave support for socially conservative movements, even backing authoritarian dictators. Much changed in the 1960s with activism and something that came to be known as Liberation Theology that was involved in the Civil Rights movement and the anti-war movement. Later, when the charismatic activist Pope died, the Catholic Church became very conservative again, marked by scandals relating to abuse and coverups.

Apocalyptic doomsday cults: Behind every utopian cult lies the possibility of a dystopian counterpart. In the 20th century, a number of cults that focused on the idea of end times emerged. The apocalyptic narrative of the book of Revelations in the New Testament of the Bible was often invoked, with the idea that the destruction of the earth was imminent, thanks to the wickedness of humanity, and that only “true believers” would survive. Pushed into a corner by perceived outside threats, they committed mass suicide. Groups included Jim Jones, David Koresh, Um Hari (Japanese nerve gas), Heaven’s Gate (the Halley-Bop Comet believers).

Buddhist: Japanese and other Asian communities established Buddhist temples. Buddhism became even more prominent in the 1970s after the exodus of South Vietnamese to the United States.

Hindu: Primarily from India, Hindu traditions have been maintained especially in the form of wedding traditions and holidays. Home altars feature Ganesh (the elephant-headed household deity) and holidays such as Diwali (Festival of Lights) are celebrated.

Muslim: The Muslim faith has many different manifestations in the United States. There are a number of mosques in communities and they have traditionally focused on education and social support.

Judaism: The Jewish faith is very important in many communities in North America, where there are temples for Orthodox Jews as well as more moderate or mainstream. In all cases, there is an emphasis on learning the sacred texts and traditions, which is a strong force in creating an ongoing cultural identity.

Discussion/Questions

1. The little we know about the religious beliefs of the early Clovis-era culture often has to do with the petroglyphs found in caves. Consider the types of petroglyphs and carvings that have been found. What are some of the possible religious beliefs represented by hunting scenes and diagrams of constellations, the sun, moon, and geometrical shapes?
2. The Mississippian cultures did not have a written language, but they did leave behind their stories in the form of glyphs, shapes, petroglyphs, and earthworks. For example, the long, undulating mound in the shape of a sine wave (which has been considered a serpent), clearly ties to beliefs and stories about supernatural powers and also ideas about the constellations. Describe how you might go about finding the “literature” of the Mississippian cultures.
3. The Eastern Woodland indigenous peoples believed in a “Great Spirit” that not only created the world but also unified it, with the idea that the spirit world resides in everything and that it is the responsibility of the individual to maintain harmony. Imagine yourself in that world. How might it change the way that you perceive animals, trees, and natural phenomena such as clouds and storms?
4. In the 19th century, the United States exploded with utopian experiments, many with religion as their foundation. It was a time of “do it yourself” religion and a tremendous opportunity to express oneself by means of creating a perfect world. Religion was also used to create the social glue to knit together nascent settlements. How were some of those worlds constructed? What made them succeed? Or, what made them collapse?
5. In the 20th century, the advent of mass media profoundly changed the way that we obtain information and how we decide the best way to practice our religious beliefs. Describe how mass communications transformed religious groups from intimate networks of social co-dependency to something else, that looked like self-determination, but could be argued was mass indoctrination.

Readings

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