

Native American Religions

Background/Basic Information:

- Creating a definition of one universal “Native American religion” is impossible; every native tribe throughout the country incorporates different values, traditions and teachings into their own unique religious beliefs.
- Tribes vary in their theories of creation, how nature and human beings came to exist and where they originated from. Different traditions utilize different gods (The Great Creator, Great Spirit, Earth Mother).
- Spirituality factored into all aspects of daily life; the natural and supernatural worlds were one in the same, thus incorporating religion into everything.
- Traditions took on many similar forms between tribes: ceremonial dances, tribal gatherings and sacrifices of goods were most prominent.
- Sacred gatherings and insights were led by different members of the tribe (a medicine man or shaman) who possessed the power to engage the supernatural more strongly, through visions and dreams.
- Most, if not all Native American religions, functioned under some form of belief in animism. Tendency for tribes to hold polytheistic views led to many early settlers perceiving them as paganistic, therefore different and dangerous.
- **Animism** illustrates the belief that a living spirit resides in all things, living or not. Animals, materials, elements of nature such as the sun and the moon, all possessed an individual spirit.
- Nature is an integral role in spirituality, geography dictating traditions and cultures born out of a constant sense of gratitude; different natural entities played a crucial role in ceremony and worship (Mother Earth, sun and moon gods).
- Specifics of any Native American religious or spiritual practices were rarely recorded; oral history passed down through generations was utilized to maintain the upkeep of traditions.
- **How has the unjust treatment of Native Americans from the Colonial Era to present day denied us more in-depth knowledge concerning tribes and their religious practices?**
- Native American culture and religion is still prominent in the United States today, having been passed down through generations. [List of Federal and State Recognized Tribes](#)
- The **Native American Church (NAC)**, or the practice of Peyotism, is one of the most influential religious practices among tribes in the United States today. Officially chartered in the early 20th Century, it integrates Christian principles with ancient tribal traditions and rituals.

<https://dialogueinstitute.org/native-american-religions>

First Encounters: Native Americans and Christians

Historical Perspectives First Encounters: Native Americans and Christians First Encounters: Native Americans and Christians Summary: Diverse Native American religions and cultures existed before and after the arrival of European colonialists. In the 16th to 17th centuries, Spanish conquistadores and French fur traders were generally more violent to Native Americans than were the Spanish and French missionaries, although few Native Americans trusted any European group. The majority of early colonists did not recognize the deep culture and traditions of Native peoples, nor did they acknowledge the tribes' land rights. The colonists sought to convert the Native people in the New World and strip them of their land.

Religious and cultural difference was part of the landscape of America long before the period of European colonization. The indigenous peoples of this land Europeans called the “New World” were separated by language, landscape, cultural myths, and ritual practices. Some neighboring groups, such as the Hurons and the Iroquois, were entrenched in rivalry. Others, such as the nations that later formed the Iroquois League, developed sophisticated forms of government that enabled them to live harmoniously despite tribal differences. Some were nomads; others settled into highly developed agricultural civilizations. Along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, ancient communities of Native peoples developed ceremonial centers, and in the Southwest, cliff-dwelling cultures developed complex settlements

. When Europeans first occupied the Americas, most did not even consider that the peoples they encountered had cultural and religious traditions that were different from their own; in fact, most believed indigenous communities had no culture or religion at all. As the “Age of Discovery” unfolded, Spanish and French Catholics were the first to infiltrate Native lands, beginning in the 16th century. Profit-minded Spanish conquistadores and French fur traders competed for land and wealth, while Spanish and French missionaries competed for the “saving of souls.” By the mid-century, the Spanish had established Catholic missions in present-day Florida and New Mexico and the French were steadily occupying the Great Lakes region, Upstate New York, Eastern Canada and, later, Louisiana and the Mississippi Delta.

Many of the European missionaries who energetically sought to spread Christianity to Native peoples were motivated by a sense of mission, seeking to bring the Gospel to those who had never had a chance to hear it, thereby offering an opportunity to be “saved.” In the context of the often brutal treatment of Native peoples by early Spanish conquistadores, many missionaries saw themselves as siding compassionately and protectively with the indigenous peoples. In 1537, Pope Paul III declared that Indians were not beasts to be killed or enslaved but human beings with souls capable of salvation. At the time, this was understood to be an

enlightened view of indigenous people, one that well-meaning missionaries sought to encourage.

Letters from missionaries who lived among indigenous tribes give us a sense of the concerns many held for the welfare of tribal peoples. A letter by Franciscan friar Juan de Escalona criticizes the “outrages against the Indians” committed by a Spanish governor of what is now New Mexico. The governor’s cruelty toward the people, de Escalona wrote, made preaching the Gospel impossible; the Indians rightly despised any message of hope from those who would plunder their corn, steal their blankets, and leave them to starve. The writings of Jean de Brebuf, a French Jesuit missionary who lived and worked among the Hurons for two years without securing a single convert, reveal the powerful force of religious devotion that compelled missionaries to leave their homes for unknown lands and difficult lives in North America.

Newcomers from England during the 17th century also brought many expressions of Protestant Christianity to the New World. Among them were profit-seeking explorers, with allegiances to the Church of England, and Puritan reformers, rebelling against the Church and in search of religious freedom. Others included English Quakers, Catholics, and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians—all seeking a place to practice their religious commitments free of interference from the state. On the whole, these English settlers saw themselves as settling in a “virgin land” where real “civilization” had not been established. They understood their right to conquest in terms of old English legal traditions based on industry and utility, in which constructing houses, building fences, and laying out plantations constituted legitimate claims to land. They took their Biblical warrant from Genesis 1:28: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.”

The early history of the colonies reveals a complex story of relations with the Native peoples. Some colonial settlers, like those on Plymouth Plantation, had positive relations with Native peoples. In Puritan Massachusetts, John Eliot mastered Algonkian and then translated the Bible into that language in 1663. His “The Indian Covenanting Confession” was printed in 1669 in both Algonkian and English. He intended to place missionary efforts in the hands of the Indians themselves. With its regard for Indian autonomy, his approach was considered novel for its time. For the most part, the many Indian Wars dominated the encounter of Europeans and Native peoples. They were often complicated by the wrenching divisions within tribes caused by the increasing numbers of “praying Indians” who had been converted by the missionaries.

From today’s perspective, one might argue that even under the best of circumstances, colonial attitudes toward their indigenous neighbors were colored by paternalism, ignorance of tribal cultures, and desire for profit. While in the early years of colonization, Europeans often criticized one another for dealing too harshly or too greedily with their Native neighbors,

underneath even their most positive assessments lay romanticism about and essentialization of the “noble savage.”

From the colonial period on, relations between European and Native peoples were predominantly expressed and negotiated in terms of land. The issue of land became, in many ways, the deepest “religious” issue over which worldviews collided. Many of the colonists saw the new land as a “wilderness” to be settled, not as already inhabited, or as Michael Wigglesworth described it in 1662, “a waste and howling wilderness, where none inhabited but hellish fiends, and brutish men that devils worshipped.” The founders of some colonies, such as Massachusetts and Connecticut, wholly disregarded Indian land rights. Others drew up well-meaning treaties and purchase agreements. For example, Roger Williams and William Penn, in founding Rhode Island and Pennsylvania respectively, explicitly criticized the founders of other colonies for their self-justified acquisition of lands.

From the perspective of the Native peoples, the European discovery of the new world was more aptly an invasion. Most were deeply connected to the land but had no traditions of land ownership or private property. They often expressed astonishment that land could be sold or negotiated through treaties, since to them land was not a source of private profit but of life, including the life of the spirits. Some lands were also sacred, as they bore the graves of the dead. Over the course of nearly three centuries, the terms “removal,” “displacement,” and “cession” came to be used by European settlers. Native peoples were to be “removed” from the lands they had occupied, “displaced” to other lands, and their lands “ceded” to the newcomers. Finally, Indian tribes were forcibly “settled” on “reservations,” lands set apart.

The religious encounter of Christian missionaries and Native peoples cannot be separated from the progressive seizure and settlement of tribal territories by European colonists. Through most of American history, however, there has been little recognition of the distinctively religious claims of Native peoples to the land and its sacred sites.

The encounter of Christians and Native peoples is too complex and varied to be characterized in general. There are surprising instances, such as the late 18th century Russian mission in Alaska, where early missionaries saw the Tlingit or Sugpiaq people of Kodiak Island as deeply religious, understanding that faith in terms of their own. More often, however, Christian missionaries did not recognize the customs of the Native peoples as spiritual or religious traditions in their own right and many mission schools effectively removed Native young people from their cultures. Many Christian colonists and missionaries, even those most sympathetic to the lifeways of the Native peoples, categorized Native Americans as “heathens” who either accepted or resisted conversion to Christianity. They did not place Native American traditions under the protection of religious freedom that had been enshrined in the Constitution. It was not until 1978, almost 200 years after the Constitution was signed, that the American Indian

Religious Freedom Act gave specific legal recognition to the integrity of Native American religions.

<https://pluralism.org/first-encounters-native-americans-and-christians>

Native American Prayers-*Prayers inspired by those who practice Native American spirituality and its traditions.*

Great Spirit Prayer

Oh, Great Spirit,
Whose voice I hear in the winds
and whose breath gives life to all the world.
Hear me! I need your strength and wisdom.
Let me walk in beauty, and make my eyes
ever hold the red and purple sunset.
Make my hands respect the things you have made
and my ears sharp to hear your voice.
Make me wise so that I may understand
the things you have taught my people.
Let me learn the lessons you have hidden
in every leaf and rock.

Help me remain calm and strong in the
face of all that comes towards me.
Help me find compassion without
empathy overwhelming me.
I seek strength, not to be greater than my brother,
but to fight my greatest enemy: myself.
Make me always ready to come to you
with clean hands and straight eyes.
So when life fades, as the fading sunset,
my spirit may come to you without shame.
- Translated by Lakota Sioux Chief Yellow Lark in 1887

Prayer for Life

Our old women gods, we ask you!
Our old women gods, we ask you!
Then give us long life together,
May we live until our frosted hair is white;
May we live till then.
This life that now we know!

- Tewa (North American Indian) Traditional Prayer

Only For a Short While

Oh, only for so short a while you
have loaned us to each other,
because we take form in your act of drawing us,
and we take life in your painting us,
and we breathe in your singing us.

But only for so short a while
have you loaned us to each other.
Because even a drawing cut in obsidian fades,
and the green feathers, the crown feathers,
of the Quetzal bird lose their color,
and even the sounds of the waterfall
die out in the dry season.

So, we too, because only for a short while
have you loaned us to each other.

- Aztec Indian Prayer

The Garden is Rich

The garden is rich with diversity
With plants of a hundred families
In the space between the trees
With all the colours and fragrances.
Basil, mint and lavender,
Great Mystery keep my remembrance pure,
Raspberry, Apple, Rose,
Great Mystery fill my heart with love,
Dill, anise, tansy,
Holy winds blow in me.
Rhododendron, zinnia,
May my prayer be beautiful
May my remembrance O Great Mystery
be as incense to thee
In the sacred grove of eternity
As I smell and remember
The ancient forests of earth.

- Chinook Psalter

Earth Prayer

Hey! Learn to hear my feeble voice.
At the center of the sacred hoop
You have said that I should make the tree to bloom.
With tears running, O Great Spirit, my Grandfather,
With running eyes I must say
The tree has never bloomed.

Here I stand, and the tree is withered.
Again, I recall the great vision you gave me.
It may be that some little root of the sacred tree still lives.
Nourish it then
That it may leaf
And bloom
And fill with singing birds!

Hear me, that the people may once again
Find the good road
And the shielding tree.

- *Black Elk*

Cherokee Prayer Blessing

May the Warm Winds of Heaven
Blow softly upon your house.
May the Great Spirit
Bless all who enter there.
May your Mocassins
Make happy tracks
in many snows,
and may the Rainbow
Always touch your shoulder.

- Found on: <http://www.sapphyr.net/natam/quotes-nativeamerican.htm>

Cherokee Prayer

Peace and happiness are available in every moment.
Peace is every step. We shall walk hand in hand.
There are no political solutions to spiritual problems.
Remember: If the Creator put it there, it is in the right place.
The soul would have no rainbow if the eyes had no tears.
Tell your people that, since we were promised we should never be moved,
we have been moved five times.

- Found on: <http://www.sapphyr.net/natam/quotes-nativeamerican.htm>

Earth, Teach Me

Earth teach me quiet ~ as the grasses are still with new light.
Earth teach me suffering ~ as old stones suffer with memory.
Earth teach me humility ~ as blossoms are humble with beginning.
Earth teach me caring ~ as mothers nurture their young.
Earth teach me courage ~ as the tree that stands alone.
Earth teach me limitation ~ as the ant that crawls on the ground.
Earth teach me freedom ~ as the eagle that soars in the sky.
Earth teach me acceptance ~ as the leaves that die each fall.
Earth teach me renewal ~ as the seed that rises in the spring.
Earth teach me to forget myself ~ as melted snow forgets its life.
Earth teach me to remember kindness ~ as dry fields weep with rain.

- Found on: <http://www.sapphyr.net/natam/quotes-nativeamerican.htm>

An Ute Prayer

Treat the earth well.
It was not given to you by your parents,
it was loaned to you by your children.
We do not inherit the Earth from our Ancestors,
we borrow it from our Children.

- Found on: <http://www.sapphyr.net/natam/quotes-nativeamerican.htm>

A Pueblo Indian Prayer

Before our white brothers arrived to make us civilized men,
we didn't have any kind of prison. Because of this, we had no delinquents.
Without a prison, there can be no delinquents.
We had no locks nor keys and therefore among us there were no thieves.
When someone was so poor that he couldn't afford a horse, a tent or a blanket,
he would, in that case, receive it all as a gift.
We were too uncivilized to give great importance to private property.
We didn't know any kind of money and consequently, the value of a human being
was not determined by his wealth.
We had no written laws laid down, no lawyers, no politicians,
therefore we were not able to cheat and swindle one another.
We were really in bad shape before the white men arrived and I don't know
how to explain how we were able to manage without these fundamental things
that (so they tell us) are so necessary for a civilized society.

- John (Fire) Lane Deer, Sioux Lakota (1903-1976)

Lakota Prayer

Wakan Tanka, Great Mystery,
teach me how to trust
my heart,
my mind,
my intuition,
my inner knowing,
the senses of my body,
the blessings of my spirit.
Teach me to trust these things
so that I may enter my Sacred Space
and love beyond my fear,
and thus Walk in Balance
with the passing of each glorious Sun.

- Found on: <http://www.sapphyr.net/natam/quotes-nativeamerican.htm>

Ancient Indian Proverb

You have noticed that everything an Indian does in a circle,
and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles,
and everything and everything tries to be round.

In the old days all our power came to us from the sacred hoop
of the nation and so long as the hoop was unbroken the people
flourished. The flowering tree was the living center of the hoop,
and the circle of the four quarters nourished it. The east gave peace
and light, the south gave warmth, the west gave rain and the north
with its cold and mighty wind gave strength and endurance. This
knowledge came to us from the outer world with our religion.

Everything the power of the world does is done in a circle.
The sky is round and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball
and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls.
Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours.
The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon
does the same and both are round. Even the seasons form a great
circle in their changing and always come back again to where they were.

The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is
in everything where power moves. Our teepees were round like the
nests of birds, and these were always set in a circle, the nation's hoop,
a nest of many nests, where the Great Spirit meant for us to hatch our children.

- *Black Elk, Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux 1863-1950*

A Chinook Prayer

May all I say and all I think
be in harmony with thee,
God within me,
God beyond me,
maker of the trees.

- Chinook prayer, Pacific Northwest Coast

A Three Step Morning Prayer

First Step: Plant your feet firmly on the earth. Using your five senses, give thanks to our Creator God for the countless ways God comes to us through creation- for all the beauty that your eyes see, for all the sounds that your ears hear, for all the scents that you smell, the tastes that you taste, for all that you feel (the sun, wind, rain, snow, warm, or cold). Pray this day that you may be open and attuned to the countless ways that our Creator God comes to us through your senses, through the gifts of creation.

Second Step: Let go of all the pain, struggle, regret, failures, garbage of yesterday - step out of it - leave it behind- brush the dust of it from your feet.

Third Step: With this third and final step, step into the gift of the new day, full of hope, promise, and potential. Give thanks for the gift of this new day, which God has made!

Amen.

- Jose Hobday

Prayer of The Seven Directions

Begin facing EAST- This is where the sun comes up, and so the direction of new beginnings, hope, promise, and potential. Pray that you may be open to receiving these gifts this day.* Each turn is a quarter turn to your right.

Turn SOUTH - This is the direction of warmth, growth, fertility (!), also known as creativity and productivity. In addition, this direction represents faith, trust, and faithfulness in relationships. Pray for these things this day.

Turn WEST - This is the direction where the sun goes down. Thus, it is the direction of rest, of our dream lives, and of closure and endings that need to take place in order for there to be new beginnings. Pray for these things this day.

Turn NORTH - This is the direction of the cold, of winds, of strength, courage, fortitude, might, single-mindedness, focus, clarity and purpose. Pray for these things this day.

Turn back to the EAST - and turn UPWARD. For Native Americans this is the direction of Father Sky. Pray that your heart, mind, soul, and spirit will not forget to look upward this day, to the One who is so much greater than we are.

Turn DOWNWARD - and touch our Mother, the earth. Pray that everything you do this day will be in honor and reverence of our Mother Earth.

Turn INWARD- Place your hand on your heart and pray that all that you do this day will be true to the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit who dwells within you.

Amen.

- Jose Hobday

<https://www.xavier.edu/jesuitresource/online-resources/prayer-index/native-american>