

with appeals to a higher authority—whether Scripture, conscience, or reason. These conflicts began in Europe during the Reformation and took on a life of their own in America.

Native American Religions

The Reformation was still in the future when Columbus landed on the island he called San Salvador in 1492. There he saw no temples or robed priests, heard no prayers or liturgies. Columbus wrote that “Los indios . . . will easily be made Christians, for they appear to me to have no religion.”¹ Columbus was an explorer, not a sociologist of religion. Even if he had been able to see and describe the religion of the Taino people, this would have been one among hundreds of religions in North America at the time of European contact.

There is no separate word for “religion” in many Native American languages. Instead, there is a “whole complex of beliefs and actions that give meaning” to everyday life.² In Native American religion, spiritual forces helped people to carry out the central tasks of hunting, courtship, and warfare. Healing was especially important; shamans or holy people would use spiritual powers to remove the evils that caused pain and sickness, or to restore the good things that had been stolen by bad spirits.

Native American beliefs passed by word of mouth to each new generation. Stories told the people who they were in relation to the land and to other tribes and marked the rites of passage in life. In contrast to European Christians with their written scriptures and creeds, Native cultures relied on oral tradition.

Land was central to Native American religions. Land was not “private property” or “real estate.” It was sacred, the mother of all living

things. Land was revered not for its monetary value but for its beauty, for its abundance of game and fish, and as a reminder of great events and spirits of ancestors. But even before the Europeans came, native peoples could be displaced from their ancestral lands by tribal warfare or by changing patterns of climate, hunting, and trade. When the Europeans came with their relentless appetite for land, the conflicts had religious dimensions, not least because land was sacred to Native peoples.

From colonial times until well into the twentieth century, missionaries to Native American peoples seldom differentiated the Christian gospel from their own cultures. A common assumption was that Native converts must forsake all tribal ways in order to become Christian. Even so, missionaries tended to treat Native peoples more humanely than did most of their fellow Europeans. Missionaries were more likely to see Native people as human beings, with souls to be saved, than to see them as enemies to be killed or obstacles to be removed from the path to progress. Many missionaries learned the languages and customs of Native peoples. A few missionaries lived with Indian peoples and adapted to tribal ways. Missionaries sometimes became advocates for Native peoples, condemning white encroachment on Indian land or trying to stop the alcohol trade that all too soon blighted Native cultures. Some missionaries paid the ultimate price of martyrdom in their attempts to bring Christianity to Native peoples.

Even the best-intentioned Europeans, however, could unwittingly carry smallpox, measles, and other diseases against which tribal peoples had no immunities. The death toll from European diseases may never be fully known, but estimates run to the tens of millions of Native people. Hardest hit were those peoples who lived in larger, more settled communities.

For example, the Pueblos of New Mexico had roughly forty-eight thousand people in the sixteenth century. But by 1800 they were down to about eight thousand people.³ The loss of entire peoples, with their cultures and religions, can scarcely be measured.

Box 1.1: Our Lady of Guadalupe

On December 9, 1531, a Native American man named Juan Diego saw a vision of a of the Virgin Mary. She