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Introduction

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Chapter 1

Backgrounds and Beginnings
NATIVE PEOPLES

Ferdinand Columbus, the son of Christopher Columbus, described his father’s landing on the island of San Salvador in 1492 in the following way:

At daybreak they saw an island about fifteen leagues in length, very level, full of green trees and abounding in springs, with a large lake in the middle, and inhabited by a multitude of people who hastened to the shore, astounded and marveling at the sight of the ships, which they took for animals. These people could hardly wait to see what sort of things the ships were. The Christians were no less eager to know what manner of people they had to do with. Their wishes were soon satisfied, for as soon as they had cast anchor the Admiral went ashore with an armed boat, displaying the royal standard.... Many Indians assembled to watch this celebration and rejoicing, and the Admiral, perceiving they were a gentle, peaceful, and very simple people, gave them little red caps and glass beads, which they hung around their necks, together with other trifles that they cherished as if they were precious stones of great price.

For Ferdinand—and his father—the encounter between Europeans and the North American natives was in essence a meeting of Christians with non-Christians. European explorers and settlers in the New World fixed their identities within the frameworks of specific cultures: Spanish, Portuguese, French, English, Dutch. Yet in gauging their relationship with the inhabitants of the Americas, Europeans conceived themselves above all as representatives of Christian culture. Accordingly, Columbus and those who followed him undertook the exploration of the New World under a conceptual umbrella that equated Christianity with civilization and that viewed indigenous cultures as “primitive” aggregations of “customs and ceremonies.” Such a view was reinforced over the centuries in a shorthand that identified persons as either Christians or Indians. Censuses, captains’ logs, mission registers, royal charters, plantation reports, military communications, and virtually every other official document of colonial rule repeatedly drove home the perception of the essential difference in the casual usage of those two words, “Christian” and “Indian.”

The Taino story of what they saw that day has been lost. These people who met Columbus in the West Indies farmed and fished; played ball on rectangular courts; danced; organized authority in complex systems of chiefdoms; extolled the deeds of their ancestors; looked to shamans to heal their sick; and worshipped Yucahu, the lord of Cassava and the sea, and Atabey, his mother, who was associated with fresh water and human fertility. The Tainos were but one language group among hundreds in North America, and one small fraction of the continent’s 15 million inhabitants. Over a period
of thousands of years, their ancestors had explored the great American land masses, built civilizations, and developed distinctive religious worldviews.

A Distinctive Worldview

The Tainos were a tribal community, a society organized with respect to family relationships. North America at the time of Columbus was a quilt of tribes with a diversity of languages and religions and ways of life. Most North American tribes hunted. Some relied upon agriculture as well; others fished; some gathered food in other ways. The seasonal ebbs and flows of the many climatic zones of the North American continent shaped native cultures in the same way that geographical factors such as altitude, proximity to waterways and the sea, and types of vegetation conditioned the rhythms of everyday life. Through their experiences of nature, geography, and climate, as well as through their experiences within the tribe and with other tribes, and, when they came, with the Europeans, Native Americans fashioned religious worldviews. Those worldviews, which were grounded in questions and answers about human origins and destiny, frequently overlapped from one tribe to another. But these worldviews, nevertheless, always encoded distinct meanings for the local community.

In order to speak of a North American “primal religious tradition,” we must recognize that our understanding of it is necessarily qualified in several ways. First, Native American religion is in fact remarkably diverse. We should not expect, for example, that representations of the sacred among North American tribes translate intact from one context to another. A medicine bag containing snake rattles, cactus needles, white stones, scorpion carapaces, eagle feathers, and juniper berries is not likely to be recognized as a repository of sacred power in a place where there are no rattlesnakes, cacti, quartz, scorpions, and so forth. Second, primal worldviews are not always susceptible to analysis in Western terms. So, for example, the complex of meanings associated with the power of manitou (Big God; Spirit; Cosmic force) among the Algonquin simply do not fit traditional Judaeo-Christian-Islamic categories of theological investigation. We cannot expect to appreciate the intricacy of Native American religions unless we are willing to suspend some of our habits of thought about the phenomenon of religion. Third, we know only a part of the story. Our knowledge of Native American religions comes to us primarily through oral and ritual traditions and material culture. It is gleaned from stories passed by word of mouth from generation to generation and through the examination of the artifacts of ritual and everyday life: weaponry, dress, pottery, architecture, art, and so forth. Westerners, who traditionally have relied upon literary accounts to recover traces of the historical past, are only beginning to understand how to “read” a culture's history in the slope of a roof
or in a story told around a fire.

As the key unit of social organization, the tribe manifests various kinds of familial relationships. The experience of those relationships informs reflection about relationships between persons and nature, which likewise are conceived as familial bonds. The rationales for this ordering of relationships are imbedded in myths about the creation of the world, about heroes and tricksters, about monsters and ghosts, and about the end of time. Native American myths overflow with representations of kinship among nature and people; of marriages between creatures of different species; of parenting by the sun, moon, and stars; and of the remembrance of ancestors by Earth itself.

A Penobscot Indian story about the origins of humanity, corn, and tobacco begins in this way: "Kloskurbeh, the All-Maker, lived on Earth, there were no people yet. But one day when the sun was high, a youth appeared and called him 'Uncle, brother of my mother.'" An Osage story of creation establishes at the outset a similar conception of kinship: "Way beyond the Earth, a part of the Osage lived in the sky. They wanted to know where they came from, so they went to the sun. He told them that they were his children. Then they wandered still farther and came to the moon. She told them that she gave birth to them and that the sun was their father." Conversations, arguments, and marriages between animals and people are grounded in this vision of family relatedness. A Sioux story comments on the bonds between people and rattlesnakes: "We Sioux think of rattlesnakes as our cousins. They always give warning before they strike, as if they wanted to say: 'Uncle, don't step on me; then we'll get along.'" Sometimes in these encounters, the parties change their shapes, becoming like the other creature. A myth of the Potawatomi tells of a couple who had lost their only child. One day, the woman caught a fish, sang to it, and petted it, whence it turned into a baby. In other instances, people might become like other creatures even without actually changing shape, as in the case of a Pomo myth about the girl who married a rattlesnake, bore him four human boys, and eventually became more rattlesnake than human herself—although she remained human in appearance. In Native American cultures, nature—including humanity—is conceived as an interconnected web of family relations. And it is this vision that underlies the association of each clan of a tribe with a certain animal, fish, or other living thing.

Judaeo-Christian-Islamic cosmogonies are about the creation of the universe from nothing. Native American myths sometimes are structured in a similar way, with a cosmic creator playing the key role. That creator might be identified as seemingly impersonal as the Cherokee Someone Powerful, or, as, in this Cheyenne cosmogony, as Great Medicine: "In the beginning the Great Medicine created the Earth, and the waters upon the Earth, and the sun, moon and stars. Then he made a beautiful country to spring up in the far north…. In this beautiful country the Great Medicine put animals,
birds, insects, and fish of all kinds. Then he created human beings to live with the other creatures.” Among the Yakima, the Great Chief Above performs the work of creation. And in Yuma myth, there is Kokomaht the Creator, who would seem to be named but who is described as “bodiless, nameless, breathless, and motionless,” and is two beings—twins—at once.

There are many kinds of Native American creation myths. Sometimes the creator is identified as female. In a Hopi tale of creation, two goddesses, a Haruing Wuhti of the east and another in the west, caused the waters to recede, fashioned people out of clay, and taught them language. In other cases, the first man is said to have followed from woman, as in a myth of the Plains tribes in which a woman bore the first man after she was unknowingly impregnated by the sun while picking berries with her mother one day. And the Apache story of Gomoidema Pokoma-Kiaka tells of a maiden who survives a killing flood and conceives a daughter from sun and water, who, in turn, conceives the Son of God.

Frequently, creation stories weave together the exploits of an extended cast of characters, each of whom has a role to play in creation. Many feature an earth-Diver, an animal who dives deep into the waters and returns with a lump of sod. Earth-Diver tales, which are among the oldest Native American myths, are distributed throughout the continent. These myths, which differ substantially from Western accounts of an all-powerful God who creates the world from nothing, sometimes take a tone that Westerners would find surprising. A tale among tribes in the Northeast recounts how a gluttonous and licentious trickster figure, Mesho, told Mink to dive beneath the waters and return with earth. Mink returns on the verge of death but with a mouthful of mud. Mesho revives him by administering artificial respiration to his anus, during which the mud pops from Mink’s mouth and is distributed to form the Earth.

Other creation myths tell of the emergence of people and animals from places beneath the surface of the Earth. A Jicarilla Apache myth is representative: “In the beginning the Earth was covered with water, and all living things were below in the underworld. The people could talk, the animals could talk, the trees could talk, and the rocks could talk.” The animals and people played a game that ended in their building mounds that enabled them to crawl through a hole out onto the surface of the Earth. Here, as in virtually all Native American mythology, the Earth is a living creature, sharing with humans experiences of pleasure and pain, joy and sadness. As an Okanagon myth explains, “The Earth was once a human being, and she is alive yet; but she has been transformed. . . . the soil is her flesh; the trees and vegetation are her hair; the rocks, her bones; and the wind is her breath. . . . She shivers and contracts when cold, and expands and perspires when hot.”

Creation stories tell more than how the world was created. They give meaning to everyday tribal life, orienting a people to the land and to spiritual values at the same
time. In narrative and in symbols, these stories stake out the spiritual and moral landscape with reference to the physical landscape. A mountain canyon, a river, a grove of trees, and a certain formation of rocks are important in everyday life as living reminders of the power of the sacred that is manifest in the myths of creation. The hole in the Earth’s crust through which the Jicarilla Apache originally climbed into the light of day is at the same time an actual geologic feature of the land, the physical center of the culture, the standpoint by which the people orient themselves to their lives of work, play, sleep, celebration, and mourning. Landscape and myth overlap as a perennial reality, mutually reinforcing perceptions of what is valuable and good, and confirming the identity of the people and the order of the world.

The beings who populate cosmogonies and other myths perform heroic deeds, exercise enormous power, change shape, speak wisdom, and create beauty. Like humans, they also get angry, seek revenge, and are lazy, underhanded, and duplicitous. Mythological beings range from those that are readily recognizable—bear, eagle, beetle, muskrat, salmon—to those that bear little physical likeness to animals or people. In between are personified forces of nature, including plant life, geological features, bodies of water, and other elements of the natural world. Often there is fluidity in conceptions about the manner in which the sacred appears: for the Sioux, Wakan at times is a spiritual power that enlivens all of nature, whereas at other times it is identified as Wakan Tanka, a personification. In either case, the immediate and direct relationship to nature and the spiritual dimension of that experience are paramount to Native American cultures.

The religious life of Native Americans is rich with symbol, with the experience of the sacred, and with visions of kinship with people, animals, the land, and all of nature. In its ordering of the world, mythology also provides a template for morality, for guidelines about how people ought to act. A Cheyenne hero-myth begins in this way: “A long time ago the people had no laws, no rules of behavior—they hardly knew enough to survive. And they did shameful things out of ignorance, because they didn’t understand how to live.” To know “how to live,” to know the way of life of the tribe and to embrace it, is to live a moral life. But “moral” here is considerably broader in its implications than in the meanings of the word in Western monotheistic religions.

**Belief and Performance**

Hunting, fishing, and food gathering and preparation were parts of the way of life of the Native Americans who greeted Columbus. So also were games, sleeping, and the manufacture of art. All of these activities are to some extent holy exercises, governed by certain understandings of their place in an ordered world, and also demanding certain perspectives and procedures. Morality accordingly is not a separate or discrete
area of tribal life. It is not a code that is abstracted from work and play and then read back into daily activities. It is, rather, an informing fact of daily existence. To live the tribal way of life is to live morally.

Ritual transmits and confirms tribal knowledge. It expresses a religious worldview through dramatic performances, ranging from hunting rites to ritual quests for visions. Ritual is no less a language than the spoken word in terms of its effectiveness in communicating the religious meanings of events and in locating everyday life within the context of myth. In fact, tribal ritual in general is the performance of myth, the acting out of myth before an audience familiar with it. In ritual performances, persons listen to and repeat myth, shape it in new ways, adapt it, and confirm their belief in it. In ritual, a community identifies itself and rededicates itself to the tribal way of life.

Hunting, planting, warfare, and other activities important to the survival of the tribe are richly clothed in ritual forms. So also are the four principal passages experienced by persons in the course of the life cycle: birth, puberty, reproduction (marriage), and death. Tribal understanding of the meanings of each of these important events is embedded in myth. And in each case, ritual communicates those meanings to persons undergoing the passage, as well as to the community as a whole.

Pregnancy, although not usually attended with public celebrations, is nevertheless a time of life requiring rituals involving the mother and the father, and sometimes other members of the family as well. Power, mystery, and danger all are associated with a pregnant woman; even her glance could hearken disorder and disease. Accordingly, she frequently is secluded, sometimes in a structure outside the house. Both parents, recognizing that their words and actions affect the fortunes of the child, regulate their behavior in such a way as to ensure that the child’s path in life is set toward good and not evil. Among the Shoshoni, the father rises early, bathes in cold water, and moves around, thus making it easier for the child to do the same after birth.

A few days to a few months following birth, a child is presented to the community, in celebrations marked by prayers and dedications. At this time or thereabout, the child is given a name that is usually inherited from a dead ancestor. For the Inuit, or Eskimos, the soul of a dead ancestor accompanies its name, reincarnating in the body of the child. Inuit parents accordingly treat their children with great sensitivity in order to avoid offending the ancestor, who might decide to evacuate the body, leaving it lifeless. Among the Tlingit, reincarnated ancestors must be cleansed of the disease that killed them. Therefore, a Tlingit baby is made to vomit, thereby evacuating the disease, before the baby is allowed to nurse. A name represents connections across generations, defines relations between the individual and the tribe, and provides direction for personal growth by suggesting character traits thought appropriate for a person. The name given at birth may change over time, as part of the
flux of the circumstances of a life and the ongoing reinvention of personal realities. As persons take on new social roles or succeed in various undertakings, they are given additional names to reflect their achievements and status. In all cases, naming is rich with religious meaning: Names are foundations from which to view the order and harmony of creation, standpoints from which persons both observe and participate in the tribal way of life.

At puberty, males and females actively participate in rituals that formally initiate them into tribal life. These complex rituals bring revelations of religious truth, sacred knowledge about the people and the landscape, and an awareness of one’s responsibilities as an adult member of the tribe. For girls, the rites that mark the passage from childhood to adulthood follow the onset of menstruation, whereas for boys, the time of initiation generally is calculated with respect to their proven ability to provide food, succeed in battle, encounter the sacred in dreams or visions, or other such accomplishments.

One of the most richly detailed Apache ceremonies is the puberty rite for girls. As is the case in many other tribes, a girl is removed from the everyday life of the community when she begins to menstruate. She must observe various dietary taboos, is kept awake by singing, and is instructed in the responsibilities of womanhood by a senior female relative. Over a course of four or five days, and sometimes longer, the tribe feasts and celebrates while the girl is pledged to the most solemn and serious behavior. Central to the ritual process is the invocation of Changing Woman, who is recognized in myth for her role in the creation of the world. The girl prays to Changing Woman for the powers that will sustain her social roles and spiritual status within the tribe. She reinforces her identification with Changing Woman by representing in dance the impregnation of Changing Woman by the sun, as that event is expressed in Apache myth.

The Oglala warrior Crazy Horse was known to proclaim before a battle, "A good day to fight and a good day to die!" Indians view death as a passage into afterlife, although there are exceptions. Coming at the end of a long life, death is in certain respects the beginning of a new life. In some cases, the afterlife is envisioned as a continuation, on some level, of contact with the world that one has left, as in Pueblo belief that a person might become a rain-bearing cloud or a kachina spirit (rain spirit). Other tribal cultures envision the afterlife as a shadowy existence in a world deep in the Earth, on a mountain, or otherwise at some distant site from the land of the living.

Last rites vary in detail from tribe to tribe, but in every case they are conceived as necessary to the passing of a person from the world. These rites of passage for the Shoshoni include self-inflicted wounds and the cutting of hair among mourners. The body is dressed in fine clothes, with certain ornamental touches depending on the sex of the deceased. The dead person’s clothes and belongings are given away, except for
those that will be placed at the grave, such as headdresses and the family tent. In the case of a dead male, the man's best horse is killed at the burial site so that it can be of use to the deceased in the land of the dead. A woman likewise is buried with her kitchen utensils. Mourning may continue for up to six months, at which time the grieving family is reintegrated with the tribe: The mourners are painted with red, brought to a dance, and told to be happy again.

Some other tribes, such as the Navajo, have little interest in the afterworld, do not believe in heaven or hell, and, accordingly, perform no ceremonies to ease the passage of the deceased into another world. A body is buried without fanfare somewhere off the beaten path. The shovels can never be used again, nor can the hogan, or house, if death occurred within it. The deceased's name is stricken from the speech of the tribe, and the gravediggers must be ritually purified before they can be readmitted to everyday tribal life. Navajos believe that the ghosts of persons may return to settle outstanding accounts with the living; and, in general, the notion of the return of a person to the world in any form is fearful and abhorrent for them. Accordingly, the Navajo were indisposed to Christianity, which centers on the resurrection and second coming of a dead man, Jesus. They likewise were uninterested in the Ghost Dance movement that began in the 1870s because it included the expectation of a reunion of the dead with the living.

Hunting was essential to the livelihood of most tribes, and as such was conceived as an activity requiring various ritual purifications, prayers for both the hunters and the game, and ceremonies to celebrate the hunt's success. Hunting was a sacred activity. As a toddler, an Ojibwa male was presented with a bow and arrow. He was given a feast after his first kill, and thereafter each time that he successfully hunted a new species of animal. His puberty rites included spiritual exercises that increased the likelihood of his success in the hunt. The seclusion of girls during the rites of puberty was undertaken for the same purpose. Indeed, the ritual life of the Ojibwa was almost entirely focused on ceremonies and observances related to the hunting of large game.

War, like hunting, was clothed in spiritual meanings. The Pawnee (meaning “wolf”), one of a group of Plain Indians, mimicked the behavior of wolves while on the warpath. A Pawnee man during war sometimes broke company with his fellow warriors and, like a wolf, operated alone. The Coyote Warrior Song expressed his loneliness in that endeavor and sought supernatural protection: "O great expanse of the blue sky, / see me roaming here / Again on the warpath, lonely; / I trust in you, protect me!" The warrior seeking protection might also directly invoke the power of Tirawa, the One Above, in a dance song: "The father, him I saw / Wearing a bonnet of war, / Wearing emblem of power— / Father him I saw, / Yea, “twas the father I saw.” Protection was also available in the form of medicine bundles, sacred stones, and shields that were
decorated with emblems of the supernatural so as to deflect bullets and arrows.

Combat was itself part of a ritual process of maturation, of building a reputation, and of manifesting spiritual power. Prayers, ceremonies, and ritual purifications were an integral part of war, as both preparation for battle and as part of a process of recognizing a successful warrior’s rise in status within the tribe. Some warriors possessed stronger medicine than others in this regard. Chief Roman Nose, a Sioux, “had a powerful war medicine, a magic stone he carried tied to his hair on the back of his head. Before a fight he sprinkled his war shirt with sacred gopher dust and painted his horse with hailstone patterns. All these things, especially the magic stone, made him bulletproof.” Chief Roman Nose did not come by such power without certain ritual precautions and preparation. He could not touch anything metal while eating. He ate from stone or clay pots, using a carved horn or stick of wood, and his meat had to be cooked in a buffalo’s pouch or other nonmetal container. The day that Roman Nose, in his haste, overlooked this precaution, he died of a bullet in the chest.

Many Native American tribes believe that at death the soul leaves the body through the head. “Soul loss” could be permanent, as in death, or it could be a temporary condition leading to physical illness. In the latter case, a medicine man or medicine woman might be able to recover the soul and bring it back to the body. Entering into a trance, a shaman—a religious professional skilled in travel outside the body or in other spiritual feats—could track the missing soul in its wanderings outside the body, even to the land of the dead if the shaman was of exceptional skill and could return with the soul to the everyday world. In this way the disease of the body would be cured. Another kind of illness comes about through witchcraft, through the manipulation of malevolent power by one’s enemies so as to cause one harm. In such cases, a shaman must locate the various lethal “objects” that a witch has embedded in a person’s body and then must remove them by ritual means. Tainos in the West Indies relied on the skill of a bohuti (a shaman) to suck the object from the person’s body. Still another kind of illness is a combination of aspects of the first two: the theft of a body part, especially the heart, by a witch. In order to effect a cure, the medicine person must battle the witch and recover what had been stolen. In all cases, healing is understood as a complex process involving spiritual power, psychological status, social bonds, and relationships to the land and nature. And the purpose of healing is to restore a person to wholeness by reestablishing interdependencies within and among these key areas of a person’s life.

Indian art frequently is connected with healing, either as preventive medicine or as therapy for a specific ill. Indeed, Native American art overflows with religious meanings of many sorts. Among the best-known examples is the totem pole, carved from wood into the shapes of animals sacred to the tribe or a smaller family group. Totem poles are erected for a variety of reasons. A pole placed at the edge of the
village welcomes visitors or warns enemies. A frontal pole sometimes stands guard outside a house or lodge, whereas a memorial pole displaying certain crests and figures might be erected to honor the memory of a chief. Mortuary poles, carved with the crests of the deceased, serve as depositories for the bodies or the cremated remains of persons. Some poles feature humanlike “watchmen” figures together with animals. Others incorporate mythical creatures such as the Kolus, a supernatural bird with a large curved beak found in tribes along the Northwest coast, or the Thunderbird, which can represent a range of meanings from war to fertility, depending on its geographical context.

The specific connection of art with healing is dramatically illustrated in the Navajo sandpainting rite. Conceived as a means of removing dangerous supernatural influences from a person, this approach to healing involves remaking persons in such a way as to bring them back into harmony with the cosmos. After a medicine person has painted from memory a number of mythical figures inside a circle on the sand floor, the personages associated with the figures are beckoned by ritual means into the circle of the painting. The sick person, who sits in the center of the circle, then ritually reestablishes proper relationships with those personages through contact with the sand painted in their images. At the end of the ceremony, the sandpainting is destroyed, its artistic, aesthetic value inseparable from its religious purpose.

A Myth of Purity and Decay

Native American cultures are grounded in a worldview, in an understanding of existence that differs in many ways from the European way of seeing the world. Characteristic of that worldview is an intuition of wholeness and harmony that invests even seemingly mundane activities of life with religious meanings. This worldview is manifest in myths and performances that represent the timeless interconnectedness of sacred forces, the land, and people.

The cultural language of Native Americans—the myths, rituals, symbols, medicine, art, and all the other overlapping concerns of religion and everyday life—was not the language of Columbus. When European explorers thought about sound, motion, space, cause and effect, logic, and time, they did so in ways that did not translate easily, if at all, into a Native American idiom. Five hundred years later, it is clear that the categories of the Western worldview do not align well with the vision of primal religious traditions.

Columbus’s gift of little red hats and glass beads, so valued by the Tainos, were trifles to the Spanish. Some missionaries eventually came to understand that cultural difference was more far-reaching than estimations of the value of hats and beads. Other missionaries did not grasp the depth of the rift. Beginning with the reports of
Father Ramon Pane, whom Columbus commissioned to study the religion of the Tainos, European attempts to understand Native American religions have been akin to trying to fit the square peg of Indian religion into the round hole of Christianity. History has shown that the endeavor sometimes will succeed but that the process will alter the shape of both religious worldviews.

Europeans had hoped to find paradise in the Americas. Their initial exploration of the continent was fueled by sincere hopes for the discovery of the innocent, blessed, and pure: the Fountain of Youth, the Garden of Eden itself. This myth of a pristine land has influenced the historical appraisal of European encounters with Native Americans. In one telling of the story, Native American religions—like the Edenic land itself—are cast as having been pure and ingenuous in the precontact period. The same story suggests that Indian religions have lost the elements that made them precious in the first place, that as a result of European contact they have suffered mutation and corruption over time, and so they bear little resemblance to their pure, precontact forms. Clearly there has been a certain amount of syncretism and accommodation between Native American religions and the religions brought to the Americas by Europeans. But the religions of the American Indians and the religions that came with the Europeans remain distinct. And strands of tradition that secure the worldviews of the present time to the North American religious world before 1492 remain strong.

CATHOLIC MISSIONARIES

The Protestant Reformation and the Council of Trent

Spain and France undertook the missionary enterprise in the New World during a period of vast religious reform in Europe. The Reformation of the sixteenth century, in all of its various manifestations, marked a decisive turn in the religious history of Europe and shaped the European migration to the New World of the Americas. The Reformation is most commonly associated with Martin Luther, a Roman Catholic priest and a member of the Augustinian order of monks in Germany, and John Calvin, the French translator and theologian who worked largely in Geneva. These two dissidents were responsible for much of the biblical commentary, constructive theology, and practical instruction about religious life and morality that became the core of the Protestant challenge to Roman Catholicism. But a great many other writers and organizers also contributed to the Reformation, making it a broad and complex historical event that unfolded in different ways in different places. And the century of Reformation also included significant change within the Roman Catholic church, as forces and ideas that had been percolating within Catholicism for several centuries spilled over into a program of renewal and reconstruction—the Catholic
Reformation—and coalesced as new patterns of devotion, institutional organization, and religious ideology.

The Reformation did not come about overnight. It did not suddenly materialize out of the religious atmosphere of Wittenberg when Martin Luther, on October 31, 1517, nailed to the door of the cathedral there a list of his objections to Catholic ideas and religious practice. The emergence of humanism; the invention of the printing press and improvement of the manufacture of paper; sharpened regional political differences; the development of new schools of philosophical thought; restructurings of social class; and debates about the nature of civil and ecclesial authority all set the stage for the sweeping changes of the sixteenth century. The flashpoint was popular perception of several related problems: corrupted morals among the clergy, papal greed, and vast financial treachery on the part of the church. But even before Luther ritualistically named those failings in his act of defiance in 1517, a host of popular religious movements had dotted the map of Europe. These popular religious movements within Christianity were fueled equally by disenchantment with the Roman church and embrace of the residue of agrarian folk traditions and pagan religious cultures. They ranged from the quasi-official women’s order of Beguines to heretical movements that were investigated by the Inquisition in the centuries leading up to the Reformation and for a period of time thereafter. There was apparently little shortfall of religious piety. New churches were founded, the faithful pilgrimaged to holy sites, and the devotions to saints remained strong. But one aspect of that piety, its manifestation in movements organized and embraced by laity, increased steadily, both a sign of the religious vitality of Christians and a mark of their dissatisfaction with Catholic religious leadership. In-house reforms were ineffective. And Protestantism, as historian Lucien Febvre observed, emerged as “a remedy for the disturbed consciences of a good number of Christians . . . to propose to men, who seemed to have been waiting for it for years and who adopted it with a sort of haste and greed that is very revealing, a solution that really took account of their needs and spiritual condition. It offered the masses what they had anxiously been searching for: a simple, clear, and fully effective religion.”

That clear and simple truth of Protestantism of course took many forms, but in one of its theological embodiments, it was Martin Luther’s insistence that a person was “justified by faith.” By this, Luther meant that a person could anticipate union with God through believing, rather than the performance of officially sanctioned acts of religious devotion. Inasmuch as this claim challenged the complex and richly detailed ritual framework for Catholicism, it was considered heretical, and Luther was excommunicated. But his emphasis on interiority, on inner piety in religious life, struck a strong chord with many, and his recommendation for the dramatic revision of Catholic liturgy—reducing the seven Catholic sacraments to three (baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and penance), and rejecting the central Catholic ritual of the mass—took hold among
those who followed him, the Lutherans. John Calvin, by the same token, made straightforward proposals, thought no one who engaged his weighty tome, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, would have thought his theological system simple in any sense of the word. Calvin’s theology was, in a sense, the other side of the coin from Luther’s emphasis on interiority. Though Calvin, like Luther, embraced a Christianity steeped in soulful piety (he declared that God “wins us by the sweetness of his goodness”), he is best known for his insistence on the strict ethic of a Christian life (which was an emphasis in Luther’s writings as well). That ethic was enforced by authorities who, together with those they supervised, took the law of the church as the law of the land. Calvinism accordingly developed a characteristic attention to detail in the everyday lives of the faithful, and Calvinists came to understand themselves engaged in a covenantal relationship with God, a kind of bargain, in which the community’s moral disciplining of each and every member was a condition of the pact with God.

Lutheran and Calvinist theologies shared more than an antipathy to Roman Catholicism. They shared ideas, reinforced each other, and offered up an assortment of theological building blocks to other leaders who customized their own Protestant viewpoints in acts of borrowing as much as through theological invention. They also prodded and challenged each other to be more precise, more encompassing, and relevant to Christians who inhaled the Reformation as one would breathe fresh air. As they claimed an increasingly broad and committed following, the reformers—Luther, Calvin, the various Anabaptists, English and Scottish innovators, and others—likewise kept the Roman Catholic church to some extent off balance and provoked the convening of Catholic leaders from all over Europe in Trent, in northern Italy, in the middle of the sixteenth century. At the council, Catholics reaffirmed their doctrines in the face of Protestant criticisms, reformed many of the clerical abuses that had discouraged the allegiance of the rank and file, and recognized the importance of education to moral life. This last emphasis was developed to a great extent by the order of Jesuits, founded by Ignatius Loyola in Paris in 1534, and was at the heart of a centuries-long investment in missionizing the indigenous populations of the New World. Together with the efforts of other Catholic clergy, Jesuits shaped a world of colonial encounter in the Americas that was recognizable as much for its instances of compassion as for its cruelties, its religious compromises, and its intractable religious differences. French and Spanish Catholics were the first to launch missionary campaigns in the Americas, and those campaigns, full of religious devotion, aspirations for personal achievement, and the desire for personal salvation, even in the form of martyrdom, bore with them a memory of the religious conflict in Europe. Reemergent under the umbrella of Trent, Catholic leadership looked across the Atlantic to the new proving ground for religious doctrine, to the prospect of claiming the inhabitants of the New World for Rome. Infused with the spirit of Trent, they crossed the Atlantic flush
with confidence that they would make over the Americas as a Christian land.

**Feelings of Enchantment**

Europeans who came to the New World also brought with them a powerful religious sensibility about the crossing, the places they visited or settled, and the people whom they met. For early modern Europeans, the cosmos was a place of wonders and enchantments. The mysterious and invisible hand of God touched everything, directing individuals, nations, the weather, the motions of the heavenly bodies, and time itself in ways that kept all of creation concordant with the divine purpose. God intervened in everyday life to save persons from terrible mistakes that would harm their souls, and God also punished those who sinned grievously against him, exacting a price in the form of fires, earthquakes, pestilence, cataclysmic disruptions of the sea and air, and through other disasters. The world that God had created and that humanity inhabited was itself an extraordinary instrument of God's will, and an amazing manifestation of divine power and glory.

Europeans approached the Americas bearing in mind that the New World was brimming with enchantments. Strange and sometimes terrifying creatures, large and small, from beavers to alligators, rattlesnakes to flamingos, were present in almost unbelievable abundance. The dense forests were overflowing with game; the rivers and seacoasts so full of fish that sailors reported being able to walk on them; the waterways, mountains and deserts, and exotic vegetation that flourished in those settings were astonishing in their beauty and majesty. Christopher Columbus, who like virtually all European explorers brought with him a religious faith steeped in expectation of fantastic adventure and encounter in new lands, believed he had found the passage to the Garden of Eden as he gazed on the mouth of the Orinoco River. Spanish conquistadors and civil servants alike set off on pilgrimages of various sorts to discover the incredible treasures of the New World. They searched for the Fountain of Youth in La Florida, the Caribbean, and elsewhere, and in the southwestern borderlands for the fabled Seven Cities of Cibola, where the streets were said to be scattered with precious stones and the buildings constructed of gold and silver. The shipwrecked bureaucrat Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca (c.1490–c.1557), who penned an account of his travels across the continent from east to west, stoked the imaginations of his readers with astounding tales of his encounters with Native Americans, how they received him as a God and followed him as disciples, and how his walk through the southwest was both beautiful and terrible beyond all description. British settlers likewise were enchanted, and wove into their understandings about their relocation to America the thrill of expectation that the new land was a place of destiny, a part of the world where the hand of God was visible everywhere, and where demons, also, hovered in the air,
flitted from tree to tree in the enormous dark forests, and directed the indigenous peoples to immorality, and to vengeance against Christians.

The European exploration and settlement of America was an emotional enterprise. Rooted in a culture that was hyperaware of the strange and mysterious, Europeans were poised to experience America as a magical place, a place where anything could happen, and where every event—a hailstorm, the appearance of a wolf, the glimpse of a mountaintop, the discovery of a great river—was rich in portent and thrilling for its representation of the power of God and its call to destiny. In short, the experience of those who came to America was profoundly shaped by feeling. Christians, and others, were emotionally overwhelmed by what their senses provided to them and they struggled to organize those feelings in ways that would render their experience consistent with their religious understandings of who they were, what their purpose was, and how their mission to the New World could be made successful. Faith shaped emotion, and feeling was filtered through faith. Hope, fear, anger, love, surprise, wonder, and hatred, among other emotions, grew strong in a place so enchanted, a place on the outskirts of Eden.

THE SPANISH RELIGIOUS INTEREST

Old Spain and New Spain

Spanish first impressions of the Americas, as well as the visions and ambitions that they excited, varied greatly. We have read from one account of what Christopher Columbus saw when he came ashore at San Salvador in 1492. Thousands of other Spanish explorers saw other beaches, other forests, other birds and mammals, other villages and cities. Accounts of those impressions sometimes corresponded. Frequently, however, they did not. Even when groups of Spaniards viewed the same terrain, they saw it differently—but equally “truly”—and often professed as much. An example is the preamble in a letter sent to Don Tristan de Luna, the regional governor, by a group exploring the Florida interior in 1560: “Inasmuch as accounts given by each one in particular, although very true, cannot fail to disagree in something because ordinarily the judgments and opinions which many persons have of one and the same thing are diverse . . . we have agreed to relieve your Lordship of the confusion . . . [by reporting] with one opinion . . .”

Different views of the New World sparked different plans for exploiting it. The Crown, together with aspiring importers and merchants, saw gold, slave labor, and commodities for trade. The military saw opportunities for establishing reputation, a stage for distinction and personal honor, pundonor. The church saw an unprecedented harvest of converts. But even within these groups, there was much difference of opinion
about the role of Spain in the New World. Especially where religion was concerned, Spaniards struggled in coming to terms with the meaning of their mission. Various explorers sought out in the Americas the keys to the restoration of life and harmony, in a society that would be constructed out of the very best materials of Spanish culture. The church likewise saw in the New World a chance to restore itself, to reinvent itself, to close ranks in one monumental venture that would demonstrate unity and purpose—and in the process, to purify Christianity of the ambiguities, contradictions, and conflicts apparent everywhere in its Spanish incarnation. This part of the mission, like much civil administration, failed.

Spanish Christianity in the fifteenth century embodied several distinct personalities, and those personalities, even though sometimes contradictory, survived into later centuries. Religious orthodoxy was enforced through draconian measures, yet attraction to rituals and beliefs outside orthodox Christianity remained lively and widespread. Church and state were closely linked, yet sometimes broke out into open warfare with each other. Spanish Christianity was shaped by a keen ethnocentric sense of superiority, yet in comparison with that of other Christian nations, it was the most outspoken in its defense of the human rights of non-Europeans. Spain itself, on the eve of the voyages of Columbus, existed as an ambiguous union of the kingdoms of Aragon and Castile-Leon, ruled, respectively, by Ferdinand and Isabella. These monarchs, though married, presided over their respective realms with a significant degree of independence from each other.

Spain advanced significantly in power and prestige in 1492—not because of the discovery of America by Cristóbal Colón, but as a result of the Christian kingdoms’ victory over the Moorish state of Granada to the south. Undertaken in the spirit of the medieval crusades against Islam, the war had dragged on for decades and in the process had sharpened the militant, authoritarian, and formal elements of Roman Catholicism in Spain. It also made more familiar the crusader's simple designation as a “Christian”—a prelude to “Christian” as a generic term for those who later encountered the native inhabitants of the Americas. Religious unity, which was deemed essential to political unity, at last seemed possible. And so, having driven out the Moors, the Catholic rulers delivered an ultimatum to those Spanish Jews who had not converted to Christianity: convert or be expelled.

Jews and Muslims in Iberia, in fact, had been converting to Christianity for hundreds of years. Converted Jews were known as conversos, and Muslims as moriscos. But as Spain began to coalesce as a political and religious entity in the years before the conquest of Granada, leaders of both church and state had begun to question the authenticity of Jewish and Muslim conversions. The instrument that they settled upon to investigate suspicious conversions was the Inquisition, which had been in existence in parts of Christendom for 250 years and was imported to Castile in 1481. From there
it was extended in 1570 to New Spain (Mexico) and other parts of the Americas to police the faith of the colonists. Though not directly aimed at Indians, it set the tone for dealings with them. The well-known excesses of the Inquisition—the slightest deviation of a person from Christian orthodoxy could lead to torture and execution—made it a poisonous gift to Spanish society. Yet in the Inquisition is revealed the full devotion of early modern Spain to the ideals of pure doctrine, formal ritual, and the moral authority of the church.

Alongside this embrace of orthodoxy, Spanish Christians—from the aristocracy to the peasantry—constructed their everyday religious lives out of beliefs and rituals that did not always square with official traditions. Spanish devotions included worship at local shrines, pilgrimage to those farther away, and the cultivation of visions of the saints in heaven. The faithful anxiously sought relics—ranging from the bones and clothes of saints to splinters of the cross on which Jesus was crucified—and prized them for their ability to cure illnesses, relieve doubt, and free persons from the controlling powers of demons. The pursuit of mystical experiences frequently outpaced interest in learning catechism, and some practices that were of scant interest to Catholic authorities in Rome (or even discouraged by them) were essential to Spanish devotions. Of particular importance were rituals associated with death. Blending Christian doctrine with folk beliefs and local funeral customs, such rituals ranged from “masses for the dead” performed in ornate cathedrals to rural ceremonies involving ancient notions of the land, fertility, and the cycle of seasons.

Sixteenth-century Spanish mystics St. Teresa of Avila and her friend St. John of the Cross represented some of these patterns of religious life in their own lives. Both invested themselves in the institutional life of the church, but they also manifested the monastic ideal of withdrawal from the world and the quest for communion with God through solitude and meditation. Both adhered strictly to formal church doctrine but interwove it with their own beliefs about the nature of spiritual advancement. And Teresa’s corpse eventually became a relic. Her followers reported that her body did not undergo corruption after death and that an intoxicating jasmine and violet perfume emanated from it, even after it was exhumed in 1583, nine months after burial. Shortly thereafter began the process of carving her body into relics, and in time her body was distributed piecemeal to Christians around the globe. Pieces of her bones accordingly entered into the religion of private devotions, relics, and folk/agrarian rituals and ceremonies—a Spanish style of “popular religion”—that existed alongside the more formal, bureaucratic, and authoritarian Catholic orthodoxy. This blending of impulses—the mixed but not necessarily contradictory messages of popular and formal religion—set an example for Spanish missionaries in the New World. So, for example, we discover Bishop Juan de Zumárraga reporting in 1531 that he had engineered the destruction of 500 temples and 26,000 idols in New Spain—at the same time that
Christian and Aztec myths were being represented alongside each other in the decoration of Catholic churches there.

Just as there was a good bit of play between formal elements of religion and those derived from extraecclesiastical sources, so also was there a significant amount of give and take between church and state in Spain. The state and the church were closely linked throughout the period of the Spanish empire in the Americas, but during that same time, the conflicting interests of the two parties frequently made for an abrasive relationship.

State control of the church increased as Spain’s star rose in Europe, so that by the latter sixteenth century, during the reign of Philip II, the crown exercised authority over not only clerical appointments, but also over church finances, the interpretation of doctrine, and the implementation of papal and conciliar directives. Spanish religious leaders and state officials joined forces under the assumption that a well-funded church, a regulated clergy, and the coordination of moral teachings with civil policies were essential to the stability of both church and state. Rome assisted in the process by granting the crown the rights to all religious offerings collected in the New World, as well as a central role in the appointment of church officials there.

Against the background of this relationship between the church and the crown, a continuous series of conflicts severely tested the resolve of each party to uphold the arrangement. Debates between clerics and royal authorities about Spanish policies in the Americas frequently revealed fissures in the church-state alliance. Church leaders on occasion were forced to choose between their loyalty to Rome and their duties to a Spanish monarchy that sometimes snubbed its nose at Rome. When riots broke out in Madrid in 1766, the government blamed the Jesuits (from whose dress came the name the "Hat and Cloak Riots"). The state subsequently undertook to expel the Jesuits from Spain and its overseas empire, and also to confiscate Jesuit property, which was enormous. Those proceedings reaped a whirlwind of ill will among some New World populations that had worked constructively with the Jesuits. In response, the government strove even more determinedly to reduce the power of the church. The clergy, in turn, protested individually and collectively in various ways. Clergy in the New World sometimes advocated radical responses, as in the case of Miguel Hidalgo, a native priest who led the first Mexican war of independence.

For the Spanish, the project of converting the inhabitants of the Americas to Christianity began with the second voyage of Columbus. On board the ship was a Benedictine priest charged with the evangelization of the Indians. Representatives of other religious orders followed, especially Dominicans, Franciscans, and Jesuits. Spanish domination exacted an immense toll in lives—especially as it brought European diseases to populations that carried no immunities to them—but by degrees the missionary enterprise unfolded. Spreading outward from the Caribbean, it developed
along the paths of conquest in the Americas.

From the beginning, the Spanish debated how the natives were to be evangelized and introduced into the fold of Spanish culture. The hard-line approach, which was taken by the government and by contingents within the clergy, proposed that Native Americans were to be forcibly brought into the church. Juan Gines de Sepulveda declared that the scriptural passage “force them to come in” (Luke 14:24) be acknowledged as a guide to relations between Christians and Indians; and the Jesuit Alonso Sanchez argued that the New World would be Christianized only through Spanish domination. This approach rested on assumptions about the Indians themselves and above all on the view that Indians were incapable of choosing what was best for them. Missionaries concluded that the New World “noble savages” had to be resettled into communities centered upon the church, and there they would be immersed in Christianity until they agreed to embrace it. The spectacle of a Spanish garrison outfitted in armor frequently expedited the process of conversion. But such conversions even then were frequently challenged. The Council of Lima (1552) decided to withhold the eucharist from Indians because it viewed their conversions as superficial. Moreover, the problem sometimes arose from the methods of the missionaries themselves: Pedro de Gante’s announcement that he baptized 14,000 Indians in a single day suggests a style of evangelizing that counted heads first and asked questions later.

Some of the clergy advocated the return to a view of missionary work common in Europe before the fields of missionary glory were opened in the Americas. This view conceived of evangelizing as an enterprise that allowed potential converts to choose freely to become Christian. Alongside of this they proposed sweeping revisions in the treatment of Indians: the abolition of slavery, respect for native cultures, and civil justice. These threads of protest were intertwined as a movement to defend Indians from the cruelties of Spanish conquest. The movement to defend them, which grew to significant proportions in the sixteenth century, included a wide assortment of clergy and lay advocates. Preeminent among those who argued the case for the Indians was Bartolomé de las Casas, a priest and plantation overlord (encomendero) in Hispaniola and Cuba. In 1514, las Casas suddenly renounced his office as encomendero, took up the cause of the Indians, and over the course of the next twenty years experimented with new models for relations between Indians and missionaries. He also immersed himself in the study of theology and authored groundbreaking works on the nature of the missionary enterprise. Returning to Spain, he gained influence at court and helped to bring about the New Laws of 1542, which put an end to further enslavement of the Indians and mandated far-reaching reforms in the encomienda system.

“The Friars Were Watching”
As conquistadores and explorers widened the sphere of Spanish influence in the New World, gold and other commodities, shipped eastward on the swift Atlantic current, found their way into the treasuries and storehouses of the government. The arrangement between church and state dictated that from this treasure the crown would fund missions to the Indians. The church organized a system by which to search out candidate populations for conversion and to administer the ecclesiastical apparatus once it was put into place. The enthusiasm and determination of the religious orders in this regard brought them renown, but at the same time, it kindled conflicts with the military and the supervisors of commerce over exploration priorities and the distribution of resources. But the clergy continued to see the New World in their own way, or, as an observer to an expedition in Florida wrote in 1560, “And the friars were watching, hoping that a greater population might be discovered to convert and maintain in the Christian creed.”

Florida disappointed the hopes of the Franciscan friars who traveled with the military along its coast and across the interior. Some of Spain’s most accomplished explorers, including Juan Ponce de León and Hernando de Soto, came looking for treasures, but the land yielded neither a Fountain of Youth nor golden cities. An incentive for the settlement of Florida was found, however, in the 1560s, when the discovery of French Huguenot settlements nearby to the north alarmed the sensibilities of both the friars and their military escorts. Spain subsequently established a base for operations against the Protestant French, naming it San Agustín, in keeping with the occasion of the first Roman Catholic mass offered there, the feast of St. Augustine, in 1563. Its Jesuit founders were replaced by Franciscans in 1566, who operated missions in San Agustín and other coastal towns for the next century. Their labors occasionally were rewarded by dramatic mass conversions but were plagued by equally dramatic mass defections.

Spanish missionary activity in Florida developed very slowly. In 1680, the Province of St. Helen (the Franciscan administrative designation for the region of Florida) was the smallest of the seventeen provinces in the Americas, numbering only eleven houses and a total of ninety friars. The mission compounds were of humble wattle-and-daub construction, not the commanding structures that would be built on the other side of the continent. The Indians, by the eighteenth century, were beginning to discover the benefits of alliance with the English and so drifted away from the influence of the Spanish clergy. The Franciscans themselves were plagued by internal conflicts, the most important being the erosion of cooperation between clergy who were born and trained in the Americas and those imported from Spain. Governor Manuel de Montiano in 1738 described the situation as a “deep abyss of enmity and disunion” between the two groups. When Florida passed into the hands of the English in 1763, little more than an empty husk of Catholicism remained.
New Spain, or Mexico, proved more profitable to both church and state than Florida. The spectacle of the magnificent Aztec civilization fired the imaginations of the government bureaucrats and clergy, who dreamed of empires of gold and God, respectively. The religious orders found their work less difficult in New Spain because Spanish domination in the region was decisive, and the environment accordingly offered a greater measure of stability and familiarity than did Florida. But the interests of neither clergy nor crown could be confined to familiar territory. Tales of fabulous wealth to the north began circulating in Mexico City. In 1540, a soldier by the name of Francisco Vásquez de Coronado, together with Fray Marcos de Niza, a young priest, led an expedition northward from New Spain on a journey that would take them all the way to Kansas. Although they found no streets paved with silver and gold, they discovered in the Pueblo villages and the camps of Plains Indians a target population for evangelization.

The Franciscan missionary ventures in New Mexico began in 1581, eight years after the Spanish Ordinances of Discovery outlined a strategy replacing “conquest” with “peaceful and charitable” encounters with Indians. By 1598, whatever regulation the Ordinances might have brought to exploration of the lands north of Mexico City was subverted when Juan de Oñate was granted a contract to colonize New Mexico. Oñate, the son of a fabulously wealthy Spanish silver-mine owner in Mexico, visited a host of cruelties upon the Pueblo Indians in the course of establishing Spanish authority in the region. The Franciscans who accompanied Oñate in turn portrayed themselves to the Indians as powerful wonder-workers, who could bring rain, heal the sick, and attract game. And they did not hesitate to remind the Indians of the Spanish conquest by regularly staging dramatic reenactments of it (in which the Indians played the roles) and by requiring that Indians greet a priest by kissing his feet. Such rituals clothed the friars with an authority over public life. That authority was essential to the efforts of Franciscans to bend the life of the people into a strict framework of Christian moral behavior—especially in the area of marriage and sexual relations—for it was the Franciscan strategy to reach the soul by first changing the behavior of the outer person.

However, as was the case in Spain, the exercise of ecclesiastical power and the drive for conformity (at least in terms of everyday behavior) was accompanied by flexibility in certain areas. Franciscans adopted a strategy of introducing Indians to Christian rituals by performing those that bore the appearance of similarity to Indian rituals. Also, the missionaries sought out ways in which to absorb native conceptualizations of religious power into their presentations of Christianity. Accordingly, Christian chapels were constructed on the sites of Indian shrines. The kachina cult—the Pueblo devotion to a variety of powerful spirits—was blended with the Christian veneration of the saints. Native rituals celebrating the passage of persons from childhood to adulthood, and others connected with the fertility of the land and
the abundance of game likewise were allowed to mix with Christian practices. The Pueblo prayer-stick coalesced with the Christian cross. The calendar for the celebration of Christian feasts and holy days was adjusted to fit the cycle of Pueblo ceremonialism, so that Christmas and the rituals of the winter solstice were merged in the Pueblo mind. The drama of the crucifixion of Christ paralleled the ritual ordeals required of tribal leaders and male warriors. In short, the missionary endeavor in New Mexico, and, consequently, the religion of the converted, were characterized by a complex blending of strictness and adaptation. New Mexico was not Spain, however. In Castile, a certain amount of ambiguity in religion did not pose a threat to church or state because the culture had deep roots in Christianity. In New Mexico, the circumstances of Pueblo conversion were markedly different: Recent domination, not a long history of shared cultural presuppositions, proved inadequate as a glue to hold together the tensions present in the Christianity of the Indians.

The superficiality of the Pueblo Christianization became apparent in 1680 when the Indians revolted and chased the Spanish from New Mexico. Reflecting on the event, the Franciscans maintained that the Antichrists—the colonial governors—were responsible for the revolt because they poisoned the relationship between the missionaries and Indians by their brutality in establishing dominion over them. This accusation against the civil authority, which had made possible the missionary enterprise from the start, was in keeping with the conflicted relationship between church and state in Spain at the time. The accusation also significantly altered the plans of missionaries for how they would go about their work.

Christianity returned to New Mexico, but very slowly, since the environment had been poisoned by Spanish rule. Missionary initiatives in adjacent areas (Texas and Arizona) met with limited success. By the late seventeenth century, about the time that the Franciscans were driven from New Mexico, the Jesuits had carved out a thriving mission enterprise of their own among the Yaqui Indians, in the rich mining country of northwestern New Spain. Jesuit influence extended northward into the Pimería Alta in the person of Eusebio Kino, who founded a mission among the Pima Indians near presentday Tucson, Arizona. Kino proved more effective as an itinerant evangelist and sometime rancher than as a mission administrator, however, and in any event, the changes he brought to the religious life of the Indians were largely diminished by the Yaqui revolt of 1740. In Texas, on the other hand, a battle between Mexicans and American settlers in 1836 brought lasting fame to a mission—the Alamo—that otherwise was undistinguished.

Prior to their expulsion from the Spanish dominions in 1767, the Jesuits had established a string of missions in Baja California. The Franciscans took control of these in 1768. The following year, news of Russian posts in the Pacific Northwest made its way to the chambers of José de Galvés, a representative of the crown in New Spain.
Galvéd subsequently ordered the settlement of California to buffer Russian encroachment on Spanish interests. Guided by Fray Junípero Serra and his successor Fermín Lasuén, the Alta California venture eventually numbered eighteen missions, founded between 1769 and 1823. The mission buildings that have survived evoke moods both of this-worldly practicality and other-worldly spirituality, and are frequently cited as evidence of the success of Spanish missionaries in the land that became the United States. In fact, there were fewer missions in California than in either Florida or Texas, and the efforts of numerous extraordinary missionaries in California resulted in no extraordinary record of Christianization of the Indians.

What, then, is the legacy of the Spanish mission to the Indians in America? The Spanish missionaries faced a number of exceedingly difficult challenges in the New World. Indian cultures were strange to them, and the translation of religious language into the native idioms proceeded slowly and imperfectly, especially when notions such as the Christian Trinity were involved. The mission enterprise was usually shorthanded, only occasionally well funded, and always locked in a complicated relationship with military and commercial interests. Large-scale missionary ventures had not been a part of Spanish Catholicism for hundreds of years, and so the friars and priests were forced to improvise almost every step of the way. Finally, Spanish missions in Florida, California, and the Southwest suffered because of their location on the periphery of real Spanish interests far to the south.

Against this background it is more appropriate to speak of the significance of the Spanish missionary enterprise than of its success. It is significant because it set the tone for a style of Christianity grounded in the interpenetration of Catholic orthodoxy and local traditions. The reinterpretation of the Virgin Mary as a nurturing goddess, the coincidence of specific saints with local deities, the confluence of ritual traditions, the connections between Indian and Spanish religious objects, and a host of other instances of religious syncretism characterized the Catholicism of the Indians. The remnants of this syncretism are still alive within twentieth-century Hispanic Catholicism in America—in celebrations of the Day of the Dead, in the de-emphasis of institutional Catholicism, in the attention given to the passion of Christ, and in numerous other ways.

**FRENCH MISSIONS AND INSTITUTIONS**

**Religious Disagreements and the Problem of Organization**

French exploration of North America began with the voyages of Jacques Cartier, whose reconnoiterings in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the St. Lawrence River in 1534 and 1535 set the stage for permanent French settlement in the New World. The islands and land mass charted by Cartier were not the sites of initial French ventures, however.
Failed attempts in Brazil and, as we have seen, by French Huguenots in Florida preceded the founding of Acadia at the mouth of the St. Lawrence in 1604. Now included in the Canadian maritime province of Nova Scotia, Acadia—with its trading center of Port Royal—was settled by both Catholics and Protestants, and it was geared from the outset to the exploitation of commercial possibilities rather than religious missions. Clergy, who were present at the founding, died or returned to France. The Huguenot merchant underwriters of the colony balked at sending Catholic priests to Acadia, and when Jesuits finally did arrive in 1611, their doctrinal and personal quarrels with Protestants undermined the missionary work of both parties. The repercussions of those public disputes over doctrine were not lost on Samuel de Champlain, founder of Quebec (1608), explorer of the St. Lawrence River, and namegiver of Port Royal. Champlain reported to Cardinal Richelieu years afterward that "the Indians sometimes took one side, sometimes the other, and the French taking sides, according to their different beliefs, said everything that was bad of both religions." When the English captain Samuel Argall of Virginia reduced Port Royal in 1613, thereby ending for a while the French experiment in Acadia, French missionary policy in North America was still without a blueprint.

The floundering start of French missionaries in the New World was not simply the consequence of personality conflicts, language barriers, and English terrorism. Church authorities who envisioned the spread of Christianity in the New World were slow in developing a strategy for evangelization because of complex and deep-rooted problems in France. Not the least of those problems was the diversity of Christian belief. The dawn of the seventeenth century witnessed not only the obvious differences between Catholics and Protestants in France, but also a considerable latitude in belief among Catholics themselves. Old agrarian traditions in the form of "folk beliefs" lived alongside official Catholic doctrines in the everyday lives of many French, and the combination was vexing to church leaders. The clergy lamented the ignorance of the peasantry, the shabby education of priests, and the ineffective efforts of church leaders to engage and channel the religious interest of the populace. Typical was the complaint of a priest of Nanterre that his congregation was ignorant of "those most common things that one must absolutely understand in order to receive the sacraments and be saved." Though clergy sometimes exaggerated in their estimations of the religious state of affairs, such sorry judgments about religious education at home help to explain why French missions abroad in North America fared poorly. In neither case was there a proven strategy of religious education.

In contrast to the Catholic state of affairs (and it was not limited to France) was the Protestant world of concisely articulated doctrines, compact ritual, and church organization that favored strict local control of religious life. In France, Protestantism took the form primarily of the Huguenots, or French Calvinists, who after a period of
conflict with Catholic authorities lived more or less peaceably alongside the majority Catholic population in the early seventeenth century. In time, however, as Catholicism was renewed in France, this arrangement deteriorated. The production of a lively culture of Catholic devotion, guided by the earlier reforms of the Council of Trent (1545–1563), together with government maneuvers to consolidate power, nurtured the political will of French Catholicism. One consequence was renewed persecution of Huguenots, most of whom fled to neighboring kingdoms, though some sought refuge in North America. After Cardinal Richelieu consolidated his power over government in the 1630s, Huguenots and other Protestants were forced to leave French territories even in North America.

The religious changes in France in the first half of the seventeenth century included reforms in several areas. French clerics and lay persons organized an assortment of men's and women's religious orders, the church enlarged seminary education and more diligently enforced church discipline, and the nation experienced a resurgence of pride in the distinctive features of the "Gallican" (French) church. Among the religious orders for women that were founded or greatly expanded during this time were the Ursulines, the sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame, and a congregation of sisters organized by Jean Eudes in 1641. Counterpart male orders were the Recollects, Capuchins, and Sulpicians. All found work in New France alongside the Jesuits, although their associations were marked by disagreements about the relation of church to state, claims to financial resources, and the nature of the missionary enterprise.

**Catholicism in the St. Lawrence Valley**

In spite of their disagreements, French missionaries made significant progress in organizing Catholicism in the St. Lawrence Valley. Immediately after the reoccupation of Quebec, which had been in English hands from 1629 to 1632, missionary activity in New France unfolded primarily as a Jesuit enterprise. Jesuit missions to the Huron and to the Five Nations of the Iroquois met alternately with success and disaster, but even the failures succeeded in producing tales of heroism, suffering, and martyrdom. Those tales enshrined as legendary servants of God the "Black Robes," such as Jean de Brébeuf, Isaac Jogues, and Charles Garnier, and nurtured missionary zeal for generations of Canadian clergy and laypersons. At the same time, the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) launched a series of initiatives aimed at developing an institutional base for Catholicism in New France. Fundamental to these efforts was the support of the Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement, a powerful society that was founded by wealthy Catholics in France in the mid-1630s and that was so secret in its operations that it remained invisible to historians for three hundred years. With influential friends in
France and with hostilities with the English to the south temporarily suspended, Jesuits in Quebec were able to found a college, the Côte des Jésuites (1635), a seminary for French and Indian males (1636), and, in joint ventures with Augustinian and Ursuline nuns, a hospital and a convent school (1639). At the same time, they developed means by which to nurture the faith of French Catholics, through religious instruction and the administration of worship, and in other ways to fashion a religious infrastructure to serve their stated purpose of building “A New Jerusalem, blessed by God and made up of citizens destined for heaven.” English Protestants, who recently arrived in Massachusetts Bay, were at that very moment using virtually identical language to describe their own vision of Protestant destiny in North America.

Quebec thrived as a fur-trading center and soon became the hub of French activity in North America. From there the French moved again upriver to settle Montreal in 1642. Under almost constant siege by the Iroquois, Montreal managed so little progress in commerce that in a matter of just a few years, the balance of power in administrating the town shifted from representatives of the Company of New France to Jesuits who were determined to preserve Montreal as a base from which to evangelize the Indians. The religious infrastructure, accordingly, began to grow. Marguerite Bourgeois, who was canonized a saint in 1984, founded a school for girls. Jeanne Mance established a Catholic hospital. Various other enterprises slowly advanced, so that by the late 1650s, Montreal boasted four hundreds residents (half the population of Quebec), a growing contingent of priests and nuns, a government that favored local control, and at least one miraculous healing.

Jesuit missions among the Hurons to the west rose and fell, depending on the mood of the powerful Iroquois, who waged intermittent campaigns against Hurons and French alike. And the fur trade that was carried on in the territory between Montreal and Lake Superior was unsteady and would remain so until the glut of beaver fur at the end of the century finally caused the bottom to fall out of the European market. Nevertheless, the French settlement of North America, in its religious as well as governmental aspects, had begun to evidence the rough contours of a colonial order, as if the blueprint lacking at Acadia had at last been discovered and implemented. Catholicism in New France, carried forward by the financial and political support of pious Catholics back in France, was essentially shaped neither through sparkling achievements in the mission field nor through partnership in a thriving trade venture; rather, it defined itself in the relentless elaboration of institutional religious life in churches, schools, hospitals, ecclesiastical hierarchy, a college, a seminary, boardinghouses, and the formalized sharing of power with civil magistrates. In short, it began to approximate the religion of its Catholic benefactors in France.

The work of French missionaries nevertheless remained the central aspect of the development of a colonial presence in the St. Lawrence valley, Great Lakes, and
Mississippi valley. Far from the gradually evolving institutional structures of the eastern St. Lawrence, missionaries pursued the conversion of Indians through visits to villages and forts, and by joining with explorers and traders who traveled the wilderness waterways. The writings of Jesuits indicate the powerful emotional tenor of those experiences. Like the Spanish and the British, the French relied upon religion to direct their feelings. In the case of the Jesuits, religion furnished a model, especially, for understanding their role as servants of God whose lives were characterized by suffering, compassion, selflessness, and hope. Jesuits were emotionally committed to seeking the conversion of Native Americans at all costs, and they pursued that end in the face of capture, torture, and martyrdom. Their bravery was remarkable. But not far below the surface of their reports to their superiors were feelings of shame, guilt, fear about the afterlife, unworthiness, and even despair. The complexity of the Jesuit experience in the New World, then, cannot be underestimated. The institution-building that succeeded in Montreal and Quebec never took place in most of the rest of the places where Jesuits traveled to convert Indians. Forts came and went on the frontier as relations with Indians fluctuated, and evangelization moved in fits and starts as villages converted, lost faith, and converted again. Indians could be friendly to missionaries and they could be mortal enemies. Most Jesuits arrived filled with enthusiasm for the mission field and ready to meet its challenges. At times, they despaired of ever seeing any success. Jesuits felt conflicted because their experience was conflicted.

Institutional Support

The development of institutional support lurched ahead in 1659 with the arrival of François de Laval as the first bishop of New France. Laval urged the crown to intercede in North America, in order to unite Quebec, the maritime colonies (some of which were under the control of the English), and the semiautonomous settlement of Montreal under the umbrella of royal authority. In 1663, with France at peace with its European neighbors and with Louis XIV’s power consolidated at home, Louis took control of New France from its merchant board of governors and made it a royal province. The subsequent reconfiguration of power in New France proved advantageous for the church in at least one sense, namely, that the authority of the bishop to shape policy was formally recognized alongside that of the governor and intendant (or “chief manager”). Royal control also provided a kind of ballast for the ship of state that enabled it to endure the growing disagreements among Jesuits, Sulpicians (who began arriving in 1657), Ursulines, Recollects, and the missionary priests trained at the Paris Seminary for Foreign Missions (founded in 1663). On the negative side, the church discovered that its enhanced status was sometimes not sufficient to carry forward its
programs against the interests of a strengthened civil government. Typical was the case of Laval’s proposed banning of the brandy trade with the Indians, a measure that was overruled by the civil magistrates.

The development of French interests in North America, including the activities of French missionaries, was significantly broadened after 1663. Expeditions to survey the Great Lakes and their tributary waterways set off from Montreal and Quebec with increasing frequency. Jesuits played a key role in many such ventures. Jacques Marquette arrived in Wisconsin in 1669, and a few years later, paired with Louis Jolliet, came upon the Mississippi River, exploring it as far as its junction with the Arkansas River. In 1682, René-Robert Cavelier de la Salle charted the remainder of the river to its labyrinthine delta at the Gulf of Mexico, naming the territory after the King of France. This Louisiana Territory eventually made its way into the United States, after a period of occupation by the Spanish, when it was purchased during the presidency of Thomas Jefferson in 1803.

Between 1663 and 1803, the work of priests and nuns in French territories progressed in fits and starts. In the valley of the St. Lawrence, missionaries continued to approach Indians who had shown only slight interest in Christianity. Occasionally, their efforts would be rewarded, as in the case of a Mohawk woman, Kateri Tekakwitha, who was baptized in 1676 by Jesuits. At the age of twenty, she relocated to the Christian Indian village of St. Francis Xavier near Montreal, where she remained until her death a few years later. Her example of piety impressed French and Indians alike, and her remains were brought to the Indian reservation of Kahnawake, where they have been revered as relics. In the west, a string of forts and missions in the Great Lakes region had appeared by 1690. Jesuit priests such as Claude Allouez, Claude Dablon, Henri Nouvel, and Charles Albanel worked among the Illinois Indians; and Jesuits visited the Cahokia, Tensa, Natchez, and other tribes along the length of the Mississippi from its source to New Orleans, which was founded in 1718. By the early eighteenth century, however, the turf war between Jesuits and the seminary-trained priests had reached a critical juncture. Neither group wished to share mission territory with the other, and the Jesuits balked at teaching the native languages to their missionary competitors. As the number of priests trained in the seminaries in Paris and Quebec grew, the influence of religious orders was diminished, so that by 1704, all Jesuits were gone from Louisiana, and those who remained in the mission field were limited in their activities by policies hatched in Quebec.

Back in Quebec and in the towns in the St. Lawrence valley, Christianity was by no means well established. The supply of locally trained clergy was insufficient to meet all of the religious needs of Canadian Catholics. By 1700, just 60 secular priests (i.e., those not associated with a specific religious order) served a population of 15,000. There was one church for every 223 persons, a difficult situation for a population
scattered over a very large area. The formal machinery of ecclesiastical bureaucracy had been put into place, but the state of affairs at the parish level was less than what church leaders had hoped. Jacques de Meulles, the intendant in New France, reported in 1683 that the French inhabitants rarely attended church and that their knowledge of Christianity barely surpassed that of Indians encountered by missionaries. Partly to blame were the paltry funds appropriated for the support of parish priests, and many clergy opted for the mission fields to the west and south. Of more importance, the experiences of many settlers simply did not correspond with the clergy’s visions of a religious future. The notion of a “New Jerusalem” meant little to traders who gathered periodically at Montreal’s fur fairs or to soldiers (a substantial part of the population) who polished their bayonets and counted the days before they could return to France. Other events further complicated the situation. When war with Britain ended with the capitulation of New France in 1760, the British enacted anti-Catholic measures, chasing entire religious orders back to Europe and hobbling the remaining ecclesiastical bureaucracy—a process expedited by the suppression of the Jesuits in France and its territories in 1764. In 1774, on the brink of conflict with its American colonies, England sought to shore up its position with Canadians by restoring civil rights to Catholics. And so, church leaders once again flexed their political muscle, the ranks of the clergy grew, and the infrastructure of religious life was revived.

The steady growth of Catholicism in Canada after 1780 did not go unnoticed in the United States. From the early days of the English settlement of Massachusetts, Protestants in New England looked suspiciously upon their Catholic neighbors. England’s war with the French and Indians in North America during the 1740s to the 1750s was fueled by inflammatory British rhetoric about the designs of French Catholics to overrun and dismantle the Protestant regime in New England. In the nineteenth century, church leaders in the United States again characterized Canadian Catholicism as a danger to the destiny of Protestantism in North America. And in the late nineteenth century, the growth of Protestant churches in Canada itself brought Protestant Anglo-Saxon prejudice to Englishspeaking Ontario. That prejudice, or nativism, was particularly evident during periods of internal migration of French Catholics from Quebec to Ontario. Canadian Catholics, in turn, closed ranks and embraced a distinctly conservative and ultramontane (i.e., characterized by a close adherence to Roman leadership) Catholicism. Some Catholics, including clergy, left Canada for the United States. In fact, by the late twentieth century, the number of Franco-Americans of Canadian origin exceeded the number of French Canadians in Canada. Some of these immigrants settled in places where the French legacy remained strong, such as Louisiana, northern New England, and parts of the Midwest. Others mingled with immigrant Catholics recently arrived in the United States from various European countries, including France.
The projects of French Catholics in North America differed from those of the Spanish. Like their Spanish colleagues, French missionaries saw in North America a potential harvest of souls for Christianity. Both the Spanish and French spilled blood—their own as well as that of the indigenous peoples—in the process of claiming those souls. French missionaries, more so than Spanish, were encouraged in their work by stories about martyrdom, including the possibility of their own. And the Black Robes who were active in New France typically undertook their evangelization of the Indians as an ongoing series of forays into Indian villages and lands, rather than through the establishing of mission complexes to which Indians were invited for catechizing and acculturation (although these strategies were also used). Nevertheless, the French in Quebec, like the Spanish in Mexico, produced enduring and highly elaborated machinery for the administration of Catholicism in the New World. For the French, that machinery developed in the service of French colonists, so that even as missionary efforts brought discouragement, the institution-building continued in the centers of French trade. The fact of the durability of those Catholic institutions, together with recurrent ultramontanism in Canada, shaped the development of Catholicism both north and south of the Canadian border. That Catholicism, in presenting theological and ideological challenges to Protestants in the United States, has at the same time influenced the formation of Protestant understandings of nationhood.
Introduction: Religious America: Diversity and Freedom
Before you begin to read this chapter, ask yourself what your attitude is toward those whose religious beliefs and practices are different from your own. Do you feel curious? Interested to know more about them? Defensive? As if their religion is not “true” or “right”? Would you want to convince them of your own views? Do you think your own point of view might be enriched by dialogue with them?

Religious diversity in the United States and throughout the world is increasing. All of us can expect to be part of communities, workplaces, and social groups that include people of many faiths and of none. The development and growth of this diversity comprise an important social phenomenon and one that extends far beyond the confines of religion:

The radicalism of religious diversity is a fact of contemporary life and may well become the most significant feature in the development of society and culture in the twenty-first century. . . . A Muslim living in the United States today is not a Muslim only when he [or she] visits the mosque, recites Allahu akbar, or fasts during the sacred month of Ramadan. He is a Muslim when he votes in a local election, goes to market, visits a museum, or reads the newspaper. He is, indeed, a Muslim when he meets a Christian or a Jew in the local park.

We also encounter many other kinds of diversity—racial, lifestyle, political, and sexual orientation, to name but a few. Thinking through our responses to religious diversity can help us be more conscious of how we respond to diversity of other kinds, as well. There is also a particular feature of religious diversity that we should note. Most—although certainly not all—religions make claims to absolute truth. The existence of wide-ranging religious diversity coupled with absolute truth claims poses a particularly interesting challenge for thoughtful, reflective response.

**Responding to Religious Diversity**

Each of the five responses described in this section stems from authentic human concerns. Many are grounded in the sacred writings of their proponents’ religious tradition or in specific interpretations of those writings. Each has its adherents within most of the religions, as well as among the different religions. Various authors who write on responses to religious diversity may use the terms differently, as well.

We first need to distinguish all of these responses from *tolerance*, which may go along with any of them. Tolerance refers to the willingness to grant basic civil liberties to members of a faith other than one’s own, regardless of how one feels about that
other faith. Tolerance encompasses the willingness to grant freedom to gather for
religious meetings or to speak publicly in the hope of winning other people to one’s
viewpoint, as well as avoiding religious discrimination in matters of employment or
housing, for example. A person who is tolerant may disagree, may be convinced that the
other’s position is wrong, but is still willing to see the other person share these
fundamental freedoms.

The first response, exclusivism, is the most clearly defined. The exclusivist holds
that, because religion deals with ultimate truth, there can be only one true or correct
religion and the rest are completely wrong. Exclusivism is found within most of
humankind’s religions. The following statement from *Evangelical Affirmations* provides a
good example:

> Without Christ and the biblical gospel, sinful humanity is without salvation. . . .
> Any “gospel” without the Christ of the Bible cannot be the saving gospel, and
> leaves sinners estranged from God. . . . We affirm that only through the work of
> Christ can any person be saved and resurrected to live with God forever.
> Unbelievers will be separated eternally from God.

Although exclusivism is a prominent response within the three monotheistic religions
of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, it is not wholly confined to them. Buddhism, for
example, exhibits a great deal of openness toward other faiths, but followers of
Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism regard it as the only correct interpretation of Buddhism and
the only way that people can achieve the Buddhist promise of release from the
suffering that affects all of humankind.

*Relativism* is at the opposite end of the response spectrum. There are different
forms of relativism, but all of them share the premise that all perspectives are limited,
even those that lay claim to absolute truth. There is no unlimited viewpoint from which
a truth that is relevant for all times, places, and persons could ever be known or
expressed. This perception may lead the relativist in one of two directions: One
approach is to maintain that, because religions claim absolute truth and absolute truth
cannot be known, no religion is worthy of one’s commitment. This approach leads to
secularism or irreligiousness. Another kind of relativism, however, holds that, in the
absence of knowable absolute truth, it is simply up to individuals to pick the religion
that feels right for them.

*Inclusivism* is a third approach. The inclusivist holds that there is one true or
best religion, one that holds within itself the fullness of religious truth and human
salvation. However, inclusivists believe there is something of this truth in some other
religions, as well. Most Muslims believe, for example, that the revelation of God to the
Jews and the Christians was true and brought salvation to its followers but that it had
been distorted by Muhammad’s time. God’s revelation to Muhammad is believed to
confirm the truth of earlier revelations, while eliminating the distortions. The Second
Vatican Council of the Catholic Church also affirmed an inclusivist view:

From ancient times down to the present, there has existed among diverse peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human life; at times, indeed, recognition can be found of a Supreme Divinity and of a Supreme Father too. Such a perception and such a recognition instills the lives of these peoples with a profound religious sense… The Catholic church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these [non-Christian] religions… Yet she proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (2 Corinthians 5:18–19), men find the fullness of their religious life.

The fourth viewpoint may be called synthesis. This view holds that all religions are essentially the same beneath a veneer of cultural particularity. Synthesis downplays the differences among religions in favor of the similarities among them. Thus, all will—or should—come together in a unity.

Hindu theologian and former president of India Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan takes this position, believing that what he calls Sanatana Dharma (the “eternal religion,” a name often used by Hindus to describe their faith) is the one religious reality that encompasses all others and toward which all others will eventually evolve. As human beings collectively mature religiously, the various manifestations of religion will converge on “the One Spirit which takes us beyond the historical formulations,” which are only “imperfect halting expressions.”

The relatively recent world faith of Baha’i also holds a view that humankind is evolving toward one world religion. For Baha’is, one world religion is a central aspect of a larger belief in a global civilization that will include a worldwide government,judicatory system, and currency. The authors of The Baha’i Faith: The Emerging Global Religion state that “in reality, there is only one religion, the religion of God.” Baha’u’llah, the founder of Baha’i, is quoted as saying that “all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religion should cease, and differences of race be annulled.”7 (See Figure 1.1.)

We can describe the fifth response as the affirmation of religious diversity. This view holds that the different religions are simply different, not headed toward a synthesis and not subsumable under the big umbrella of inclusivism. At the same time, each is ultimately true and must be honored as such. Affirmation makes for both commitment and openness. Describing this perspective, religious studies scholar Harold Coward writes:

It is a recognition that deep religious commitment is necessarily felt as
absolute and, as such, functions as the validating criteria for all of one’s personal experience. This, however, does not impose it on others or rule out the recognition that in other persons there is a similar absolute commitment to a particular experience, which . . . will be different from one’s own. . . . Thus, one is able to honor one’s own commitment as absolute for oneself and at the same time respect the different absolute commitments of others. . . . In a dialogue this would mean the preservation of our differences in dignity and mutual respect.

In discussing how such dialogue could go forward, Coward notes that it requires people to have accurate information about one another’s religions. In light of the fact that many persons are not well informed about their own religion, let alone those of others, the academic study of religion has an important role to play. It facilitates dialogue informed throughout by accurate information and animated by a spirit of inquiry and respect for the experience of others without compromising one’s own commitments.

In her thorough discussion of this stance, which she labels “pluralism,” Diana Eck, Director of Harvard University’s Pluralism Project, notes these five points that help to clarify what an affirming stance is, as well as how it differs from some of the other views I have described:

1. It is not just the fact of religious diversity but “active positive engagement with it.”
2. It is not simply tolerance and a commitment to insure the rights of the followers of all faith traditions but “the active effort to understand difference and commonality through dialogue.”
3. Although relativism does not allow for commitment, affirmation assumes that members of the different communities of faith are deeply committed to their chosen paths while practicing openness toward the chosen paths of others.
4. It does not expect all religions to fuse together but looks for “ways to be distinctively ourselves and yet to be in relation to one another.”
5. The foundation of affirmation is interreligious dialogue based on understanding rather than on agreement, holding that the understanding of difference is as important as agreement.

The attitude we hold toward those whose religion differs from our own has pragmatic ramifications as well as philosophical ones. For example, it influences our willingness to grant freedom of religious expression to them. A Christian pluralist, for example, would be more likely to willingly give a Muslim employee time off from work during Ramadan, Islam’s holy month, than would a Christian exclusivist. A college student whose approach was pluralistic would respond differently to a roommate of another faith than would a student who was an exclusivist. Our attitude toward
religions other than our own also helps determine whether we try to "convert" others to our own viewpoint.
The History and Memory of Religion in America
Americans like to quote from Alexis de Tocqueville’s 1835 book *Democracy in America*. It’s seen by some as a “one-stop-shop” for insight into the character of a new and expanding nation that, according to the 25-year-old Frenchman, served as a model of democratic principles for the world to aspire to. Originally commissioned by the French government to study the American prison system, Tocqueville was so “struck” by “the general equality of condition among the people” of the United States that he enlarged the scope of his inquiry to include all of “American society.” He was especially interested in knowing how America’s democratic experiment might translate to Europe’s “Christian nations.”

Tocqueville wrote *Democracy in America* with a firm belief in divine providence. He argued that the spread of democracy was a gift from God, and that the United States was the nation that best represented the progress and promise of God’s will on earth. Tocqueville began his book with a description of the geography of North America before European colonization, a vast and beautiful landscape that “seemed prepared to be the abode of a great nation yet unborn.” As for the native inhabitants of the continent, Tocqueville believed that they were “placed by Providence amid the riches of the New World only to enjoy them for a season; they were there merely to wait till others came.” The “others” who came, according to Tocqueville, were Anglo-Saxon colonists from England, the most important being the Pilgrims who settled at Plymouth with “their national characteristics … already completely formed.” The Pilgrims were Puritans, a Protestant sect described by Tocqueville as “not merely a religious doctrine, but corresponded in many points with the most absolute democratic and republican theories.” Why did the Puritans leave their homeland for North America? According to Tocqueville, it was to “live according to their own opinions and worship God in freedom.”

Despite his belief in the power of God to spread democracy, Tocqueville still recognized the “great evils” aimed at people of Native American and African descent. “I believe that the Indian nations of North America are doomed to perish,” he wrote, while “oppression has, at one stroke, deprived the descendants of Africans of almost all the privileges of humanity.” He foreshadowed the expansion of the United States to the Pacific, and with it the continued displacement of Native Americans and expansion of African slavery. He also anticipated “great calamities” between Northern and Southern states over slavery. But he wrote little about the religious beliefs and practices of Native Americans and Africans, saving such commentary for white “Christians of America.” Despite “a multitude of sects” within Protestantism, Tocqueville had “seen no country in which Christianity is clothed with fewer forms, figures, and observances than in the United States, or where it presents more distinct, simple and general notions to the mind.” Why so much religious diversity and tranquility in the United States? If you
asked Tocqueville, the answer was democracy. Tocqueville was one of the first people to comment on religion in America for massive audiences in Europe and the United States. But he wasn't the last, as we will see in this chapter on how people have interpreted the history and memory of American religions. On one hand, I share in Tocqueville's recognition that Europeans, Native Americans, and Africans were the main actors who shaped the complex religious entanglements of American history (Asians weren't strongly represented in the United States when Tocqueville wrote his book). But I deviate from Tocqueville's providential and democratic attitude toward the trajectory of that history, as do most of today's scholars. This turn away from exceptionalist narratives of religion in America is a relatively new phenomenon, and one that still provokes the censure of those who view the past through a combination of nationalistic and Christian lenses.

It is not my intention to debate the matter, but simply to demonstrate that the religious past of the United States is a contested topic with a long history of revision. Most of this chapter tracks the evolution of scholarly interpretations of American religious history. It begins in the nineteenth century, an era deeply influenced by a so-called “Protestant moral establishment” which perpetuated the image of America as a Christian nation. And it ends in the present, at a moment when the study of religion in America is a reflection of the modern attention to diversity and pluralism. The last section of the chapter takes a critical look at the so-called “civil religion” of America and the ways in which religion has been memorialized in the public sphere. Controversies over the portrayal of religion reinforce the point that the legacy of religious entanglement in American public life is a live matter, and therefore one that requires careful historical evaluation.

**CHURCH HISTORY AND THE PROTESTANT MORAL ESTABLISHMENT**

There's no denying the influence of Protestantism in American history. The early nineteenth century, in particular, saw the rise of what the historian David Sehat called the "Protestant moral establishment." Far from a land awash in religious freedom for all, Protestants fused law and politics with religious ideology in ways that diminished the rights of minority religions like Catholicism, Judaism, and Mormonism. The separation of church and state, supposedly enshrined in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, wasn't always upheld during the antebellum period. States provided financial support to select churches; prosecuted citizens for blasphemy and violations of the Sabbath; established laws favoring some religious organizations over others; and required Bible study and Protestant prayer in public schools.

Historians have likened the rise of a Protestant moral establishment to an “evangelical empire.” This surge in adherence to evangelical forms of Protestantism
occurred during a period known as the Second Great Awakening. Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist churches rode a wave of revivalism through both urban and rural areas of the nascent United States. According to historian Martin Marty, “they set out to attract the allegiance of all the people, to develop a spiritual kingdom, and to shape the nation’s ethos, mores, manners, and often its laws.” These predominantly white Protestant groups were sometimes inhospitable, if not outright violent toward African Americans and Native Americans, to say nothing of non-Anglo ethnic groups emigrating from European and Asian countries.

It was in the midst of this evangelical awakening that Robert Baird (1798–1863) wrote one of the first historical accounts of religion in the United States. Baird was a Presbyterian minister with a background in the American Bible Society and the American Sunday School Union. He spent much of the 1830s and 1840s in Europe as an agent of the Foreign Evangelical Society. In 1842, while living in Geneva, Switzerland, Baird wrote Religion in America, wherein he represented evangelical Protestantism as a wholly progressive movement in American history. Non-Protestant groups threatened that progress. Specifically, Catholics “buried the Truth amid a heap of corruptions of heathenish origin,” while Mormons followed “the grossest of all the delusions.” For Baird, the past, present, and future of the United States depended on the power of evangelical Protestants to shape civil society into a voluntary assembly of people who took “the Bible as their inspired and sole authoritative guide.”

Baird’s fusion of Protestant theology and American history remained a common mode of historical analysis during the second half of the nineteenth century. Philip Schaff (1819–93), a Swiss-born and German-trained theologian based in Pennsylvania, took Baird’s theological approach to the study of the past to new levels. He wrote America: A Sketch of Its Political, Social and Religious Character in 1855. In it, he argued that the separation of church and state caused the diversification of Protestantism into sects, which he considered unbiblical and therefore evil. Yet the alternative – established religion of the kind found in the Catholic nations of Europe – was far worse in his opinion. Like Tocqueville, Schaff believed that “America is, without question, emphatically a land of the future…. It is the favor of Providence … that [Americans] may faithfully and conscientiously fulfill their mission” to save all of humankind. “Christianity” – and by Christianity, Schaff meant Protestantism – “is the only possible religion for the American people.”

Schaff, like many Protestants, connected American history to the events of the Bible. On the question of slavery, Schaff looked to the New Testament for guidance. “The relation of the Gospel to slavery wherever it still exists,” he wrote in 1861, “remains the same to day as it was in the age of the apostles.” The epistles of St. Paul instructed slaves to obey their masters and warned against the social dangers of emancipation. And although Schaff admitted that slavery could be evil, civil freedom
was secondary to the spiritual freedom found in the Bible and in the Christian tradition. “For the good of America, of Africa and the world,” Schaff implored Protestant Americans to “have patience and forbearance and wait the time which Providence” might allow for the abolition of slavery. In the meantime, Schaff believed that “the people of the South eminently deserve the hearty sympathy ... of their brethren in the North.”

After the American Civil War, some scholars in the United States grew suspicious of those who associated theology and scripture with historical studies. Schaff and his fellow scholars of church history, however, insisted on maintaining a confessional attitude toward the past, culminating in the founding of the American Society of Church History (ASCH) in 1888. The purpose of the ASCH was to combine the professional standards of secular history departments with the theological missions of seminaries and divinity schools. The ASCH would define the study of religion in the United States well into the twentieth century. Church history became a field dominated by white Protestant men writing about the dominance of white Protestantism. However, this is not to say that church historians spoke with one unified voice about all things religious in the United States. Writing from Rome near the end of his life, Schaff noted, “History is long, life is short. The longer we study, the more we find out the limitations of our knowledge. Others will follow, and do better work.”

CONTESTED NARRATIVES IN THE AGE OF CHURCH HISTORY

Emphasis on the Protestant character of American history belied seismic shifts in the religious composition of the United States during the nineteenth century. The 1890 U.S. Census – just two years after the foundation of the American Society of Church History – painted a picture of racial, ethnic, and denominational diversity. Roman Catholicism, with its 6,257,871 members, ranked as the largest religious group in the United States, followed by Methodists (4,589,284), Baptists (3,712,468), Presbyterians (1,278,332), and Lutherans (1,231,072). Most African Americans (12 percent of the total population) fell largely into the denominational categories of Baptist and Methodist, further contributing to the heterogeneity of the two largest Protestant sects in the United States. And then there were the dozens of smaller denominations – Episcopalians, Mormons, Quakers, Adventists, Mennonites, and others – that dotted the religious landscape. Protestant historians like Baird and Schaff recognized the growing diversity of religion in the United States. But that didn’t mean they liked it. The fifteen million people who immigrated to the United States from 1820 to 1890 threatened to destabilize the Protestant moral establishment, while over 7 million African Americans posed an obstacle to the supremacy of white institutions during the era of Jim Crow. Not surprisingly, these ethnic and racial minorities didn’t fit neatly into the white
Protestant American narratives of church historians. This discrepancy in historical accounts of religion in America did not go unnoticed. Catholics and Jews of European descent, as well as African American Protestants, produced alternative narratives that challenged traditional depictions of American church history. Additionally, there were professional historians who replaced theological interpretations of American history with social, economic, and political theories of the past. Yet despite these new approaches, the Protestant orientation of church history remained strong well into the twentieth century, further perpetuating many of the same themes articulated by church historians like Baird and Schaff.

John Gilmary Shea (1824–92), a native of New York who considered joining the priesthood as a young man, was the most prolific American Catholic historian of the nineteenth century. He viewed Catholicism as central to American history. In the preface to his four-volume *History of the Catholic Church in the United States* (1886–92), Shea boasted that “the Catholic Church is the oldest organization in the United States, and the only one that has retained the same life and polity and forms through each succeeding age.” Not surprisingly, Christopher Columbus (1451–1506), an Italian-born Catholic who led Spain’s first successful expedition to the Americas, was one of Shea’s favorite subjects. Much of Shea’s work focused on the lives of priests and bishops, as well as the institutional development of dioceses from Baltimore, Maryland, to Santa Fe, New Mexico. But he also wrote books like *The Story of a Great Nation: Or, Our Country’s Achievements, Military, Naval, Political, and Civil* (1886), in which he exhibited an eagerness to demonstrate Catholic assimilation into American society.

Shea’s success as an historian, combined with the economic and political gains of second- and third-generation Catholic immigrants, led to the foundation of Catholic historical associations in the 1880s and 1890s. These scholarly organizations fostered scholarship that usually fell somewhere between Catholic distinctiveness and American assimilation. Like their Protestant counterparts, Catholic historians viewed America’s past through the lens of church history, but from a Catholic perspective that downplayed Protestant claims on the providential promise of the United States.

Jews established historical societies at the end of the nineteenth century that reflected a distinctive Jewish perspective on American history. In 1890, approximately 400,000 Jews from a variety of ethnic and sectarian backgrounds lived in the United States. In 1892, a group of Jewish historians and biblical scholars founded the American Jewish Historical Society. Their official mission was “not sectarian, but American – to throw an additional ray of light upon the discovery, colonization, and history of our country.” Unofficially, their goal was to curtail the rise of anti-Semitism that came with the immigration of Russian and Eastern European Jews to the United States.

Oscar Straus (1850–1926), the first president of the American Jewish Historical Society and the first Jewish member of a U.S. president’s cabinet, set his sights on the
four-hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus’s “discovery” of the Americas. He commissioned an historian to write the book *Christopher Columbus and the Participation of the Jews in the Spanish and Portuguese Discoveries* (1894). He also wrote a book on the influence of the Old Testament on the origins of republicanism in the United States, as well as two books on religious liberty: *Roger Williams, the Pioneer of Religious Liberty* (1894) and *The Development of Religious Liberty in the United States* (1896). Why focus so much on religious freedom? Because without it, Jewish citizens of the United States would have suffered even more under the anti-Semitism of America’s Protestant moral establishment and growing Catholic population.

The history and mythology of Columbus was also a touchstone for a growing body of professional historians who, not to be outdone by religious historians such as Schaff, Shea, and Straus, tried to avoid making arguments from a particular religious perspective. Arguably the most influential contribution to the direction of American historical studies came in 1893, when the historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1861–1932) delivered a speech entitled “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” to a gathering at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. For Turner, the western frontier, not the Protestant establishment, was most responsible for the Americanization of people from many religious and ethnic backgrounds. Democracy and individualism were the chief products of Turner’s concept of the frontier experience.

Turner’s “frontier thesis” proved highly influential to many church historians of the twentieth century. Peter Mode applied Protestant notions of providentialism to Turner’s argument for American exceptionalism in his 1923 book *The Frontier Spirit in American Christianity*. According to Mode, this “frontier spirit” was most manifest in the Protestant revival movement of the Second Great Awakening and the spread of evangelicalism. William Warren Sweet (1881–1959), founder of what came to be known as the “Chicago School” of thought on religion in America, extended Mode’s emphasis on revivalism to his book series *Religion on the American Frontier*, which included denominational histories of Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists. Despite the obvious signs of religious diversity, church historians continued to identify these four Protestant denominations as the heart and soul of American Christianity.

African Americans, most of whom came from Protestant backgrounds, did not fit neatly into the narratives of church historians like Mode and Sweet. Carter Woodson (1875–1950), born in Virginia to former slaves and with a Ph.D. in history from Harvard, filled that void with his 1921 book *The History of the Negro Church*. In addition to tracking the development of African American churches, Woodson joined his friend and sometimes rival W.E.B. Du Bois in reflecting on the past through the lens of race and racism. Unlike Schaff, who highlighted the benefits of slavery to African Americans, Woodson made what was then a bold statement for a professional historian: “The white people of this country are not interested in the real mission of Christ.” He criticized
white Christians, both in the North and South, for "deceiving the multitude with the doctrine that the Anglo-Saxon [was] superior to other races by divine ordination." Additionally, he identified "the Negro church" as one of the most important social forces in American history, not only for its benefits to African Americans, but also for the way it influenced white Christians.

Despite the work of Woodson and other religious and racial minority scholars, the study of religion in the United States remained dominated by white male Protestant visions throughout much of the twentieth century. In the aftermath of World War II, historians from the Chicago School – men like Winthrop Hudson and Sidney Mead – fashioned consensus histories that highlighted the basic unity of Christian values in America and correlated those values with the highest ideals of American democracy. Hudson urged readers to look to America's Christian past in order to rejuvenate "a robust faith in a living God (judging, correcting, disciplining, guiding, and directing the American people)." Mead made a similar plea, but he did so with a keener eye toward the pluralistic features of religion enmeshed in American culture. The ideas of Paul Tillich (1886–1965), one of the most influential theologians of twentieth-century America, were especially noticeable in Mead's usage of the term "Judeo-Christian" to describe a general religious consensus shared by Americans throughout an otherwise fragmented religious landscape.

**THE CHALLENGE OF AMERICAN RELIGIOUS HISTORY**

Up to this point in the chapter, only men appear in my discussion of American church history. And if you were to read the books of men like Schaff, Shea, and Straus, you would also notice that almost all of them wrote solely about men. Writing in 1972, the historian Anne Firor Scott made this very point, observing in Mead's book *The Lively Experiment* (1963) that "it would appear that he is simply asserting that American history is the history only of American men," thus leaving out "the female half of the population." Add to the list African Americans, Catholics, Jews, Native Americans, Latinos, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and many other groups, and you've got a much more complete, but also terribly complicated combination of identities that have shaped the religious contours of American life.

It was also in 1972 that the historian Sydney Ahlstrom published *A Religious History of the American People*, effectively tilting the direction of American religious studies away from consensus, providentialist narratives and toward more inclusive renderings of a diverse religious past. He described the cultural upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s as a "post-Protestant era," which led him to pursue "an account [of religion in America that] should above all do justice to the fundamentally pluralistic situation which has been struggling to be born ever since this country was formally dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." He called for a "renovation of American
church history” and a “paradigm of restoration” that situated non-Protestant and non-white peoples at the heart of American religious history. Ahlstrom’s synthetic history was, to say the least, a critical turning point in the study of religion in America. It signaled the reorientation of some scholars away from church history and toward American religious history.

With the intellectual floodgates open, the challenge for scholars was to identify and fill the many gaps in the history of religion in America. Studies ranged from the religious experiences of enslaved African Americans on southern plantations and Catholic immigrants in urban ghettos to the critical reconsideration of previously accepted modes of thinking about the place of Protestantism in American history. The historian Thomas Tweed’s 1997 edited volume Retelling U.S. Religious History provides us with an indication of how scholars had turned away from their predecessors’ quest for a consensus narrative by the end of the twentieth century. Topics in Tweed’s book included sexuality, ritual, gender, colonialism, regionalism, and nationalism. By suggesting other motifs and identifying alternative settings for historical analysis, Tweed and his partners channeled Ahlstrom’s initial challenge to “look for ways to tell more inclusive stories of America’s complex religious past” while minimizing entanglement in nationalistic and theological attitudes toward that past.

The concept of “lived religion” also grew out of efforts to revise the ways scholars thought about American religious history. Like Tweed, David Hall led a group of religious studies scholars to produce the edited volume Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice (1997). Their works highlighted the quotidian, and sometimes unremarkable features, of religious practice. In the words of one of the book’s contributors, “lived religion...points us to religion as it is shaped and experienced in the interplay among venues of everyday experience.” These venues could include churches and synagogues and mosques – spaces where we’re accustomed to find religion – but they could also be homes and streets and farms – spaces that are usually less regulated by traditional religious authorities. Also critical to the study of “lived religion” was an emphasis on “dissent, subversion, and resistance, rather than harmony, consensus, and social legitimation.” Here, scholars were quite intentionally reacting to the previous century’s historical approach to the study of religion in America by reclaiming the religious lives of women, non-whites, and non-Protestants.

Today, most scholars would agree that there is a distinction between “American church history” and “American religious history.” Although admittedly simplistic, American church history operates from a confessional standpoint that privileges orthodox theology and ecclesiastical authority, while American religious history situates itself within academic disciplines that emphasize religious diversity and popular forms of religious expression. Taking the latter approach comes with the warning that we not
disregard the importance of Christian churches to American religious history. After all, religious institutions matter to many Americans, past and present. The challenge of American religious history is to respect the tension between the personal and the institutional, the theological and the practical, the ecclesiastical and the cultural. This book, in many ways, is an exercise in keeping this tension intact.

PUBLIC MEMORY AND CIVIL RELIGION

Of course, scholars aren’t the only people producing narratives of religion in America. We might even say that they’re some of the last people whose voices are heard in the cacophony of positions on the role of religion in American life. Public memory – or the means by which communities reconstruct the past for popular consumption – is arguably a more powerful and pervasive way in which we learn about religion in America. Museums and monuments, as well as popular media like blogs and YouTube videos, foster an ongoing and sometimes convoluted dialogue about matters as controversial as whether or not America was founded as a Christian nation.

Take, for example, Kirk Cameron (1970-). Once a 1980s television star in the sitcom Growing Pains, Cameron has since positioned himself at the center of a growing Christian film industry with strong ties to evangelical Protestantism. In addition to appearing in film adaptations of Tim LeHaye’s popular Left Behind book series, Cameron also produced the documentary Monumental: In Search of America’s National Treasure in 2012. In the movie, Cameron leads viewers through a version of American religious history based on the premise that “We’ve forgotten what made this nation so successful and healthy and prosperous and secure.” Who, then, have we forgotten? For Cameron, it’s the Pilgrims who founded the colony of Plymouth in 1620 whom we’ve removed from the annals of American history. According to Cameron, the Pilgrims “understood that throughout history, God has always used a small group of people who were totally committed ... and [who] knew that if they kept their covenant with God and with one another [that] God would be faithful [to them].” David Barton (1954-), an amateur Christian revisionist historian with a wide readership among many evangelical Protestants, appears in the film as an “expert” on the history of religion in America. With the aid of flimsy historical evidence, he reinforces Cameron’s version of the Christian foundation of the United States while avoiding references to primary sources and secondary scholarship that cast a much more complicated rendering of the nation’s religious origins.

The storyline of Monumental, while historically inaccurate, nonetheless captures an impulse in many Americans to associate the nation-state with religious beliefs, symbols, and rituals. Just take a walk around the national mall and memorial parks in Washington, D.C. – something that Cameron does in Monumental – and you will see temple-like structures and iconic objects devoted to the lives of great American men.
(and a few women) and American ideals. You will read the inscription, “God who gave us life gave us liberty,” on the white marble walls of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, which was modeled after the Pantheon of Rome. Look above the statue of Abraham Lincoln in his memorial, and you will read, “In this temple as in the hearts of the people for whom he saved the union the memory of Abraham Lincoln is enshrined forever.” And situated between the statues of Jefferson and Lincoln is the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial, where you can read the Civil Rights leader’s quotation from the Book of Amos: “We are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs ‘down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.’”

Why so many obvious references to God? Isn’t the United States government supposed to avoid entanglement in religious matters? To answer these questions, some scholars have used the phrase “civil religion” to describe expressions of nationalism that bear a strong resemblance to those of religious systems. Writing in 1967, the sociologist Robert Bellah (1927–2013) claimed that “the separation of church and state has not denied the political realm a religious dimension.” On the contrary, he noticed “a heritage of moral and religious experience” in American public life that often promotes the biblical archetypes of “Exodus, Chosen People, Promised Land, New Jerusalem, and Sacrificial Death and Rebirth.” The recurrence of these themes, according to Bellah, are especially pronounced in presidential inaugural addresses, references to the Founding Fathers, documents like the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and on national holidays like Memorial Day and Veterans Day.

In her 1981 survey of American religious history, Catherine Albanese distinguished between the “manyness of religions” and the “oneness of religion” in America. The manyness of religions refers to religious pluralism and the diversity of distinct religions that have made a home in the United States. The oneness of religion refers to the religious unity of Americans around a public mainstream. Albanese’s three-part conception of the oneness of religion elaborates upon Bellah’s notion of civil religion (a phrase that was actually popularized by Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) in his 1762 book The Social Contract). First, according to Albanese, the historical dominance of Protestant denominations produced a form of “public Protestantism” that proved influential even to non-Protestants. Second, “civil religion” is more or less synonymous with religious nationalism that perpetuates an image of the United States as a chosen nation. And third, Americans experience a kind of “cultural religion” throughout their daily lives in the form of popular media.

Obviously, Albanese’s historical and sociological description of the oneness of religion in America is different from Cameron’s theological and confessional argument for a Christian America. If anything, Albanese helps us understand how public representations of religion inform the stories Americans tell each other about the role of religion in the public sphere and in their private lives. Monumental, as a form of
public memory, fits rather neatly into Albanese's attention to the historical dominance of Protestantism, the powerful symbolism of religious nationalism, and the pervasiveness of popular culture and media. On the other hand, if we join Albanese in exploring the history of religious diversity in America, then we can see how a film like Monumental might attract some viewers while insulting others. It is this “dialectic between the one and the many” that Albanese describes as an “American religious reality” and “a fact of American life.”

So, as we have seen, the history and memory of the American religious landscape depend on the stories we tell ourselves and the stories we are told by others. Tocqueville and Cameron, although separated by 170 years, made strikingly similar arguments for America’s exceptional position among the world’s nation-states in the eyes of a Christian god. Many church historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, although trained in modern historical methods, also viewed America’s religious past through theological lenses, with some of their conclusions driven by evangelistic and providential impulses. It wasn’t until the second half of the twentieth century that professional historians made a noticeable step outside of confessional boxes and reoriented the study of American religious history in a pluralistic direction. All of this historical wrangling and contested storytelling has led us to the book we are reading now. It goes to show that even a basic survey of religion in America, like this one, comes out of a complex tradition of historical interpretation that is always subject to criticism.

SUMMARY

- There are many ways in which scholars have represented the history of religion in the United States, ranging from confessional arguments for America’s Christian origins to evaluations of the religious diversity of American society.
- Protestant historians dominated the field of American church history during the nineteenth century. Their studies tended to blend theological justification with historical analysis, while also focusing on the predominance of white Protestant institutions in American life.
- Alternative narratives of American church history included the perspectives of Roman Catholics, Jews, and African Americans, minority groups that were typically under-represented in white Protestant historical circles.
- During the twentieth century, some scholars started to deviate from confessional interpretations of America’s religious past. The causes of this shift included the professionalization of the field of historical studies and the changing religious composition of the American population.
- By the end of the twentieth century, many scholars abandoned the phrase “American church history,” choosing instead to use the phrase “American religious history” as a way to provide a more inclusive rendering of America’s
religious diversity. Historians of American religion placed greater emphasis on people of color, women, non-Protestant groups, and the "lived religion" of all Americans.

- Professionally trained scholars aren't the only people to interpret the history of religion in America. Popular forms of media like film and journalism also contribute to the mass consumption of information about American religious history.
- "American civil religion" refers to the combination of religious symbols and rituals with expressions of American nationalism and identity. Some features of American civil religion appear in the celebration of national holidays, visits to national monuments, and respect for national documents like the Declaration of Independence.
Sighting *white* American religion in twilight times
04:: Sighting white American religion in twilight times

A nation's religion is its life, and as such white Christianity is a miserable failure.

*W.E.B. DuBois*

So to answer your question, without further delay: no, I never learned-to-live. Absolutely not! Learning to live ought to mean learning to die – to acknowledge, to accept, an absolute mortality – without positive outcome, or resurrection, or redemption, for oneself or for anyone else. That has been the old philosophical injunction since Plato: to be a philosopher is to learn how to die. I believe in this truth without giving myself over to it. Less and less in fact. I have not learned to accept death ... I remain impervious to learning when it comes to knowing-how-to-die, I have yet to learn anything about this particular subject.

*Jacques Derrida*

**DEATH, UNCERTAINTY, AND A TWILIGHT SO LONG ENDURED**

In his first television interview, George Zimmerman defended his killing of 17-year-old African American Trayvon Martin on the grounds that it was “all part of God’s plan.” His only regret, that his “divine” actions polarized the nation. That polarization intensified in July of 2013 when Zimmerman was acquitted of killing Martin. Later that month, historian of religion Anthea Butler responded to the verdict by referring to the American god as “a white racist god with a problem, carrying a gun and stalking young black men.” In response to her accusation, Butler was called a “nigger,” “cunt,” “fat cow,” and “special kind of fucking idiot” in a barrage of online attacks. Many others assailed Butler for denigrating “god,” being a race-baiter, and otherwise conflating what many regard as qualitatively distinct, the categories of “god” and “race.” The commenters made little to no mention of Zimmerman’s rhetorical use of god, as if his divine appeal was not even more denigrating to the idea and to those who believe in such an idea. The response to Butler proved both illogical and uneven, but helps to demonstrate a long standing feature of the American way of life: We are willing to kill but not willing to die.

Both past and present, dead black bodies still hang from Americans’ lips in the tragic deaths of Emmett Till, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Ezzell Ford, and too many others to list. Whether killed by extralegal vigilante or law enforcement officials, the real killer of these African Americans is a sort of vigilantism seemingly justified (on the front end) by a demand for safety and certainty, and vindicated (on the back end) by constant appeals to “god’s plan” and “prayer.” From a critical perspective,
historically as much as today, on the American frontier dead black bodies (sadly) provide a canvas where race and religion collide, where any presumption that race and religion do distinct social work is called into question, exposed as a kind of white lie. But for many white Americans, black bodies – especially dead ones – do a different sort of work. Rather than expose white lies, these “sacrifices” allow lies to remain concealed, protected, and validated – evidenced in the backlash against Butler. Indeed, these white lies, as they are named here, provide the means for misrecognizing oneself as outside of twilight, outside of but tellingly deeply indebted to the “system,” outside of a kind of existential and epistemological opacity endemic to human social life and interaction.

White Lies seeks to answer a series of three constellations of questions yet to be fully explored in a single text, or from the intellectual premise that theological correctives may do more to reinforce the “miserable failure” noted in the above epigraph by W.E.B. DuBois than to resolve it: (1) What are the functional effects, the “strategic acts of identification” of race, racism, religion, and religiosity among, beneath, and within the American landscape? What might be the intellectual take-away from regarding these categories as more similar than different? African American religion (as field or data set) has never separated these terms, making possible a critical posture towards normative American religious studies and institutions. Here, I follow the lead of African American religious studies and take seriously the shared sensibilities of American whiteness and religiosity so as to expose the traditionally maintained categorical distinction between them as a white lie. (2) In what ways do the academic fields of theology and religious studies under-girded by anthropology and human interests, respectively, reinforce such a “miserable failure”? That is, how do the very ways we (as scholars of religion) seek to study such acts and functions unduly reinforce those functions? What categorical and analytical norms do these fields offer for charting or measuring such a “failure,” and how might the fields – as much as their functions – be limited in their ability to fully understand and correct for the simultaneous need for such measurements, understanding these analyses as always shaky, fluid, and frustratingly uncertain? (3) What would admitting to and naming the categories of both “white Christian” and “white religion” expose about the strategic and tacit identity-formation processes at work in scholarship and social life alike? Adding to a growing body of scholarship that is beginning to suggest or treat the category of religion as a kind of identity formation through processes of distinction-making and power legitimation, what will the postulation of a white religious identity amongst the American religious landscape suggest to scholars and others about the limits of identity construction and the social consequences imposed on many from a failure to recognize those limits and consequences?

In White Lies, answers to these questions begin with an embrace of twilight. Twilight refers to an interpretive and thematic conceptual rubric indicative of life found
in death, death in life, and the uncertainties and limitations incumbent upon sociality, identity construction, and what we can know as scholars of religion about these things. A fuller portrait of this twilight is developed over the course of the chapters, but in all of its expressions, twilight is meant to unsettle epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic foundations while also forcing recognition that the moments when such things as identity, group affiliation, safety, etc., appear to us as settled, as certain, as secure – they are not: our security with those things, with all things, is predicated on the maintenance of white lies that insulate our senses from awareness that the world and our places in it are shaky at best. Jacques Derrida’s inability to “learn-to-die,” expressed in the epigraph above, is emblematic of this twilight in one of its most fundamental, embodied expressions, that which teeters between physical life and death. There is, as a twilight perspective would have it, something peculiar about the distinction posed between life and death. In the back-and-forth, a relationship is foregrounded, one that Derrida does well to play with and manipulate for pedagogical and existentially constructive reflexive censure. Indeed, Derrida tells us here that he is lying – to us, to himself, to the universe. And he doesn’t know how to stop telling these white lies.

Stepping beyond physical life and death, another of the first, and one of the most severe, of these white lies is the suggestion seen in the verbal assault on Butler, that race and religion are somehow of different sorts, *sui generis* in their own right, distinct in themselves and thereby available for distinguishing one person or group from another. Of course, Butler, whose professional work extends far beyond one single blog posting, is censured socially – an attempted shaming and disgracing takes place with the not-so-tact effect of reinforcing and assuming that race and religion are somehow distinct. The distinction is projected onto a black body, concealing white lies that are anything but “little” as their namesake implies.

What if a *distinction* could be posed where these categories of race and religion collided, instead, in a decidedly white religious practice or identity, focused on white bodies, made visible by Butler’s reference to a white, racist, American god and inversely embodied (in part) through the murders of young black men? In light of the ongoing assault on black bodies in the U.S., these “sacrifices” necessitate a shift in focus towards (something which is rarely identified as) “white religion.” This naming of white religion is the principal rationale of this book, and a hermeneutical shift towards twilight allows for the sighting, citing, and siting of white religion in some of its varied dimensions. Such a shift in explicit naming exposes a number of understudied and often denied shared sensibilities of race and religion in the American landscape explored throughout the pages of *White Lies*. Most significant here, embracing twilight (as a hermeneutical posture) illustrates “white religion” as various kinds of denial – white lies – involving social, individual, ideological, and material attempts at identity formation and supported through the threat or use of violence at the expense of brown
and black others.

Both historically and today, religion shapes the economic, civic, political, social, and cultural options and avenues with which American identities and lifestyles carve out spaces of interaction and competition. Indeed, for many Americans, religion serves in an ordering, distinction-making capacity, where the uncertainties of life lived with others are mitigated through specific beliefs and practices, and through various social sanctions arising from such religious activity. Exemplified as much by historic precedents such as Jim Crow laws as by contemporary events and discourses surrounding the murders of young black men (and women), the concept of race (compounded by other forms of difference) similarly orders, sanctions, and orients social possibilities and human value in/for American society and identities. In America, race and religion appear to be up to similar identity-making functions but rarely is whiteness sited in such processes. Given this long-denied but longer still relied upon synergy, such a categorical shift towards naming “white religion” as a product of and reliant on race and religion might be in order. But what would “white religion” look like? What might it seek to accomplish? And where would analytic attention to it begin?

**TWILIGHT TAKING FOCUS**

My first glimpse through twilight came from a conversation once overheard between a number of individuals at one of my former institutions. One in particular, a white male scholar of Modern European History, inadvertently brought into blurry relief the ominous weight of twilight, my recognition of it, and my perception of what import such recognition of it might hold for others if only they might learn to see from within its dimly lit horizon.

The conversation involved two groups of folk with starkly antagonistic thinking: those who had seemingly internalized the importance of contextual studies (e.g., African American, African, Feminist, Queer discourses) to such an extent that there was no question that context shapes discourse, ideation, and action. And another group lamenting that context – personal stories, postmodernism, and narratives – was now, as one of them put it, “more important than fact.” As one after another entered into the debate, their energy was a vivid contrast to the dismal emotional response from the professor of Modern European History who grimaced with discomfort as the conversation unfolded (or unraveled depending on one’s perspective). As one person would argue for the virtues of Afrocentrism, or the brilliance of Judith Butler, another would quickly retort that much Afrocentric thought has been discounted as fallacious myth-making, and that Butler may be smart, but she’s too far “out there” and her erudite writing style and tone deconstruct her concern for those in precarious situations. As yet another scholar would speak on the need for feminist correctives to racist-sexist
scholarship, the next would point out the supposed biological differences between men and women.

While the debate raged on, I couldn’t help but notice the one professor’s pale white face, looking more like my own than those who had my head nodding in agreement. He was sad and a look of weary consternation focused attention to eyes that were fighting back tears. As the discussion subsided, Modern European History finally spoke: “I’m sad. I’m heartbroken. Because the culture I’ve worked my whole life to learn and understand is dying. It may already be dead. I feel like a caretaker, a mortician for something that has died.”

In face of his sadness, I realized that if something about the West, or about the certainty of reason, ethics, and aesthetics sought in Modernity, had unraveled, had “died” – even if only in the minds of those who cherish such things most – then my task as a (white) scholar of the humanities and developing thinker within the academic study of religion was to learn about this death; ultimately, learning how to accept the limits and uncertainty that such a fate, perforce, requires from all its victims. At that moment I found myself caught up in what I would come to call twilight, the sense of an encroaching darkness all around me. Darkness here signifies multiple things. Twilight is made of the existential angst and sullen dispositions of an affective darkness. It is an expression of uncertainty and the darkness of death that none of us escape. It marks loss, uncertain resolve, awareness of an impending end – of what sort is only decided in this twilight. The darkness of twilight is the encroaching clarity of a certain physical death marching towards us, and the uncertainties evoked from such recognition.

But where learned philosophy, the space where Modern European thought and history meet the social world – in America, at least – twilight is also colored by black bodies, black culture, black ways of knowing, being, thinking, black people enveloping – whether alive or dead – white bodies, white culture, white reason, all of these “white” things just now being made aware of their own whiteness as it is increasingly confronted, questioned, disrupted by others. These marching bodies that are encircling white bodies, encircling whiteness, are not the color of white and are increasingly confrontational – or so it is suggested by many like Modern European History who are just now being exposed to twilight but have not the eyes to see its significance, the hermeneutic it offers, focusing instead only on the fear evoked by these ever-marching black bodies. The twilight these black bodies evoke for white bodies is the result of increasing encounters not simply with black bodies, but black bodies that tell white bodies, “NO!” Whether framed in terms of the death of Modernity debated by scholars in ivory towers, or more viscerally, corporally, and violently in the “no” that one can imagine Trayvon Martin must have extolled when he refused to be surveilled (without consequence) by Zimmerman. This twilight is emblematic of black subjectivity measured not simply by “yes!” to life but “no!” to the very parameters imposed onto and
truncating black life, historically. In twilight, darkness, perhaps in all of its agency, is encroaching on whiteness – exposing whiteness anew to itself, and to many for the first time. Whether celebrated or lamented, twilight is instructive, pedagogical, able to expose white Americans to a side of themselves often concealed, the “white” in white American, “white” identities that far too often go without naming.

What did Modern European History think had died? And how could I use this feeling of loss for instrumental scholarly ends? More to the point, has whiteness died? Or, more troubling for some, is something beginning to die that till now has gone unnamed – a kind of white religious expression rooted in the procuring of a certain identity now seemingly ceasing to do a particular sort of work for white people? I was unsettled. The other whites were shaken. All of us a little scared.

*White Lies* begins to address the fear, dread, and recognition of death seen in this professor’s face and understands him as emblematic of much larger, more fundamental trends and shifts taking place where race and religion are concerned in the United States, for citizen and scholar of religion, alike. Some celebrate this death, others lament and fear it – leaving out the question of whether such a death has occurred or not, or what a death of certainty would even mean. Inspired by Modern European History’s fear and loathing, and in hopes of cultivating a hermeneutic designed to appreciate and anticipate the death of certainty as a positive, *White Lies* begins in twilight, embracing it, and sets about in these pages to weaponize it for its ability to bring scholars of religion to greater awareness of some of the many religious dimensions of white life in America. Twilight offers an affirmatively shaky foundation for hosting discussions much needed today within and outside academic venues about how to embrace a shifting social significance, an impending “death,” in a way that tries to not reinforce problematic insider/outsider social arrangements. Twilight only begins the discursive journey; other concepts emerge from this standpoint and are outlined in the sections that follow.

**LITTLE WHITE LIES: IDENTITY-BASED EXAGGERATIONS**

Why have so many white Christians in the United States been (and remain today) racist? Why does the academic field of American religion largely still ignore this ongoing legacy? However we choose to carefully define all of the terms of such methodologically “bad” questions, many would likely agree that the loose, untidy questions posed here are instructive of a certain sort of religious orientation or at least social disposition affecting a huge swath of American religious folk historically and today, both inside and outside the academic study of religion. The question can be posed differently: Borrowing the words of the great sociologist DuBois, why has white Christianity been such a “miserable failure?” And, how would success or failure even be determined and measured?
One of the goals of *White Lies* is to answer these questions by demarcating and charting just what “white Christianity” and “white religion” are. The constitution of “white religion” as a category unto itself is made possible by a one-to-one parallel between its “miserable failure” and a failure to learn how to die. Indeed, white religion is the failure described by Derrida (in the very year he succumbed to his mortality) that cuts across, but also at times creates, social difference. And, as it turns out, the very ability to site white religion (as DuBois sees it) requires a kind of hermeneutical death, a death of one’s discursively constructed existential and social orientations filtered through the denial of death, uncertainty, and limitation. Twilight begins an attempt to learn how to let go of certain ideas and patterns of social meaning-making that have given some of us a false sense of security and a very real political power, and the academic field of religious studies the option to ignore and misrecognize what is perhaps the central feature of American religion so categorized to this point – that it is *white* American religion. Some of the ideas and practices held most dear and sacred by the demographic of white people in the United States have come at a great cost to the humanity of self and those othered by a social arrangement grounded in denial, lies, and empty promises of security. Echoing the arguments of thinkers like philosopher, cultural critic, and public intellectual Cornel West and religionist, theologian, and social theorist James Perkinson, among others, the white religious failure to learn how to die has been death-dealing for us all (though for some much more than others). In this regard, twilight conceptually aids in such reflection and recognition. It allows for recognition of things not typically seen, regarded – such as white religion.

So how, exactly, are we to see “white religion?” *White Lies* suggests that white religion involves the denial of human limitation and a subsequent demand for social and personal certainty procured through a denied identity – creating a presumed distance between groups and ideas based on denial of an uncertain human reality. This reality is a condition of *radical contingency*, here defined as a situation of forced reliance on others in the wake of physical death’s demands. Perkinson rightly notes that “one of the very meanings of whiteness as supremacy has been an attempt to escape the terrors of contingency [that is, radical contingency] by, in effect, forcing other populations to know that particular experience of creatureliness intimately.” For instance, if we put such thinking to work around the murder of Trayvon Martin, someone like Zimmerman ended up a murderer precisely because of his unwillingness to face the *uncertain* trappings arising from fear of his own mortality and desire for protection of self (e.g., the “black” hoodie, the object that spawned such tragedy, posed/triggered this threat). What Perkinson suggests is that out of a denial or unwillingness to face squarely the uncertainties and limitations posed by human life, the idea of whiteness has functioned to localize those fears more acutely on certain populations, offering a sense of distance between those “terrors” and the community
employing the idea of whiteness. While whiteness is specifically addressed in the first and last chapters of this book, Perkinson’s words here help to ground a more fundamental white religious sensibility operative historically. Pushing this further, White Lies suggests that what is typically understood as the sacred/profane distinction lies at the heart of these social and existential distances posed between various groups. Just as “white” and “colored” drinking fountains reinforced a social binary of black and white, traditional theism offers a cosmic projection of a similar system, not necessarily based on white skin, but based on the same presumption of difference meant to secure certainty and ignore, fight, or deny human limitations such as our inability to overcome death, our lack of full social knowing, and our considerations of what we “ought” to do or appreciate. Such theistic offerings mark Zimmerman’s appeal to “god’s plan” not as a perverse rendering of divine support, but as an honest obligation to the god of white religion concealing the relation between and shared sensibilities of race, religion, violence, and white America.

White religion then functions to procure and perpetuate a demand for universal cohesion and stability in light of a human situation of radically contingent dependence necessitating humans interacting with other humans in response to their limits. Humans, more generally, are in a peculiar predicament in that their contingency is only realized through its negation. Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre famously contended that existence precedes essence, meaning that in any quest to endow existence with essence (or any failure to do so) personal concerns and interests are evaluated based on material experiences common to all humans, such as death, work, hunger, and the inevitability of interacting with other humans (in the same predicament). Based on conditioning factors such as these, in Sartrean terms, every being necessitates non-being, meaning that what it means to be human is to simultaneously desire to not be human (to not be the thing wanting to be) precisely because to exist is to exist in the shadow of not existing. Humans attempt to be more than they are, attempting the impossible through science, war, art, and so on. Stated differently, humans ultimately deny their limitations and in that denial, arrive back at what they are – still limited and yet capable. And it is in this attempt to be that which is not, where humans achieve a sense of that which they are. Race and religion are not (and cannot be) removed from such an existential assessment.

Radical contingency, that being in/as non-being, is always the counterpoint to and the product of a prospect of “nothingness.” Thought about in light of George Zimmerman’s justification that the murder of Trayvon Martin was all part of “god’s plan,” where white religion is concerned, it is often in the process of death and destruction – what might be characterized as the exerting of power over another – that one’s being is validated through distance from recognition of limits. Contingency, to this end, is radical, in that it is addressed and activated through necessary interactions with others.
whether or not those interactions are normatively regarded as morally good or bad. Though not all responses occur through murder, *White Lies* takes the position that these interactions, these responses to radical contingency, are *always* violent in that they involve physical, ideological, and/or discursive instances of (at least the attempt to) exerting power over another person, group, or idea (held by a person or group). At stake and up for change are the beneficiaries and victims of such violent, inevitable idolatrous responses to radical contingency, but, in twilight, we’re never dealing with the prospect of “if” violence, but rather, “whose.”

This radically contingent portrait of the human condition suggests that the abstract, ideal notion of human freedom is ultimately bound by responsibility to others. In order to make sense of their being, humans must necessarily act, responding to the situations emerging from radical contingency. Thus, twilight is not an ethical posture, but a statement about the necessary relation between being and ethics. To exist (as white) is to seemingly find oneself in relation to others for whom one’s own existence is defined and oriented. There are simply no other means of definition or identity formation. In this light, the idea of self-definition is oxymoronic in that definition and awareness of being are only possible through interaction with other social actors engaged in similar circumstances. In the wake of the inability to find innate life meaning (i.e., human ability and value) on one’s own terms and in isolation, it must be produced from the available contingent components – interaction with others. One of the major aims of this book is to ground these frustratingly paradoxical (and for some, out of date) existential ruminations as ethnographic and theoretical guideposts for charting and making sense of past and contemporary racial–religious–social interactions and encounters in the United States.

Such a demand for cohesion and certainty is only ever adequately – albeit paradoxically – addressed through various denials of uncertainty and chaos. White religion offers adherents the perception that life has intrinsic meaning, that the social world is as it should be, and that the *bricolage* offered by human reality fits together in a manner that makes “logical” sense. At times acknowledged while at other times unquestioned and unstated, the white lies born from and sustaining white religion address the messiness of human reality by helping adherents pretend human life is neater and tidier than the available data suggest. Stated differently, white religion comes to be formed from the lies that many humans present (to themselves and others) as truth in response to any number of concerns evoking uncertainty emerging from social life, including but not limited to race, class, gender, sexuality and the like. They operate through and function as inevitable denials of reality where the “real” and what is possible is only adequately framed in terms of limit, uncertainty, and what is not possible. These denials of limit and impossibility, of radical contingency, are a kind of idolatrous “denial structure” supported by constellations of white lies.
Due to such bleak options, this radical contingency produces the desire to ignore, deny, or fight directly against such a reality. In light of this condition of human contingency, Sartre indicates that this need to deny is inevitable. Navigating this radically contingent reality thus requires lying (e.g., justification for violence or social collateral damage), suggesting that the lies are “white” not only for the sake of who historically is telling the tales, but because their purported necessity supports their proliferation.

“Little” white lies involve processes which suggest that human uncertainty, limitation, and contingency can be overcome. Examples include Zimmerman’s appeal to god, as well as his defenders who suggest that Butler’s words are fallacious. They are lies meant to “conceal” other lies about human worth and ability. “Little,” here, is not a judgment of impact, but a thematic means of analytically distinguishing them from their operation and function as assemblaged constellations, discussed below. These little white lies can be as seemingly innocuous as a belief in the human ability to travel to the stars, or as socially pregnant as the belief that some humans are more worthy or able to set about on such travel. Little white lies can be as mundane as they can be pervasive and powerful in shaping the social realities and existential appraisals of those within the social environment. Further, such idolatry is paradoxical in that the structure of the denial appears to be as much a product of the human situation as is the fact that no a priori essence presents itself. For many, “Truth” exists in the lies humans create to support these denials – little white lies.

Throughout this text, I refer to these lies as exaggerations of radical contingency which, taken together, amount to lies about human worth and ability, told or enacted, that reinforce various insider/outside arrangements. Indeed, exaggerations of radical contingency are efforts at identity-based distinctions rooted in the attempt to place distance between one’s self or community and the reality of death, and its subsequent expression in a radically contingent social arrangement. In short, they are lies about humans meant to reinforce the “gods” humans worship. For instance, Zimmerman’s claim that the murder of Martin was “all part of god’s plan” helps to keep a particular understanding and function of “god” intact. These white lies are about certain individuals or groups of humans that create a situation wherein another group (telling the lie) validates itself or its “god” as superior to another. Philosophically speaking, these exaggerations are attempts to place distance between freedom and responsibility and across various insider/outside arrangements which skew the abilities and values of both insider and outsider groups in positive and negative ways. Whereas human radical contingency exposes a necessary relation between being and ethics, exaggerations of radical contingency hide or abuse this necessary relation, presuming a disconnect between different individuals’ and groups’ attempts to address what is possible and valuable.
To situate these ideas in terms specific to white religious practice, justification for lynching or murder of black bodies occurs through various agreed-upon exaggerations of radical contingency, such as the concept of a black body as socially valueless, as not fully human, or some other version of suggestion that some lives are expendable. At the same time, lynchings and other murders work ritualistically, through their operation within the social environment, to reinforce and help construct a devalued and dehumanized portrait of a radically contingent person, the victim. Structuring and structured by these exaggerations, such murders materially reinforce this devalued portrait through corporeal discipline, intensifying and exposing the physical, bodily limitations of the victim, thereby exaggerating the radical contingency of the person, exaggerating the already present existential connection between that person and death by bringing it about prematurely. This very real physical death, however, continues to ideologically exaggerate the radical contingency of other African Americans through fear shaping perceptions of choice and ability – as reminded by novelist Richard Wright’s claim that his identity (as black) had been so shaped by these practices that he may as well have been lynched a thousand times over. Thus, exaggerations/white lies play out in both material and ideological ways.

This process of exaggeration involves misrecognition, as well, in that in the constructing of black identity, white identity is as equally crafted and yet hidden and the lynching or other sort of murder is misrecognized as only substantively affecting black identity. For those whites who agree to (i.e., adhere to, worship – overtly or unknowingly) the decreased value of the black body, such a focus on the dehumanized black body diverts attention away from the “proper” object motivating the construction of the categories – white bodies and the white lies told by and about them in an unending demand for certainty. That is, the spectacle of violent assaults on black bodies amounts in this instance to a diversion tactic, the severity serving a function of misrecognizing the identitarian effects of the event on white social actors. The murders of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Renisha McBride, etc., etc., more than simply reinforcing the actual perpetrators who all agreed upon – again, worshipped – the premise that black life is valueless and unable to be preserved (one type of exaggeration), reinforce the inverse as well: white bodies characterized by immanent absolute value and ability (another type of exaggeration). Where lynching and other racialized rituals are concerned, a relationship exists between the exaggeration of the radical contingency of African Americans and the existential concerns motivating the white perpetrators as well as those whites who might deny any explicit or even tacit compensatory involvement in such murders.

These exaggerations, white lies, misdirect attention towards the victim of them and away from the construction of something like whiteness taking shape as a kind of god marked by supreme value and ability – remaining as elusive to spot as a theistic
god and becoming as “real” as a perceived theistic god through misrecognition of the process unfolding through the exaggerations. Like the inability to immediately “see” how an object such as a book is agreed upon as a book, an identity comes to form as whiteness is created, though it cannot be “seen” outside the hermeneutical aid of twilight. This misrecognition contributes to the creation of what I next refer to as “god-idols.”

BIG WHITE LIES: FROM GODS AND IDOLS TO GOD-IDOLS

“Little” white lies are about the business of offering incremental distances between groups, and those groups’ relative proximity to death and uncertainty. As structuring mechanisms, however, they also come to be structured by larger constellations of ideas and practices. These distances stem from this religious orientation towards certainty referred to as white religion, made in the image of exaggerations of a person or group’s proximity to death, limitation, and uncertainty based on presumptions about that person or group’s abilities and value, Imago Superlata as it were. This system produces social consequences and masks those consequences by maintaining a belief in some idea of certainty and value, be it whiteness, god, or another social centering concept. Beliefs about different (greater or lesser) abilities and values amongst different groups end up inevitably mapped onto social reality while the distance one places between this belief and human reality hides this process of social mapping. This demand for certainty produces social consequences like racism and sexism, while the greater the presumed distance between human uncertainty and the beliefs used to address such uncertainty, the greater the extent to which the impact of such beliefs on that uncertain social world is concealed. In other words, this denial system is most effective when it denies its role as such a denial system. God-idols serve this function.

In an effort to uncover and make visible this denial system, the concept of a god-idol captures the functional nuances of ideas like whiteness, theism, patriarchy, and others. Appearing in countless iterations and quantities, “little” white lies come to take on a collective “believability” transmuting into an overarching functional utility, wherein various sorts of related exaggerations come to be most adequately analytically handled by recognizing them as part of larger constellations. God-idol serves in this analytic as well as social capacity, such that something like “whiteness” as a central feature of white religion, takes on the quality of a god, equal in social weight to more traditional expressions of god, yet only the sum total of the worth given to the concept by those in the social world. In like manner, traditional categories like “god” (e.g., YHWH, etc.) take on intensely social features, whereby they present themselves as little more than a storing house for the exaggerations humans make when telling lies meant to distinguish themselves from others, their life from death.

Much of this book is about letting go of the power to distinguish between
certain traditionally bifurcated constellations of concepts: between white and black, between theist and atheist, between life and death, between theology and social theory, between certainty and uncertainty, between freedom and responsibility – and, most pressingly, the distinction between god and idol. Gods are ideological constructions that rely on presumed social difference for postulation of social homogeneity, and they never fully achieve what they mean to accomplish for their adherents: provide the foundation to know, to be certain, and to live without fear. Thus, gods (western ones, at least) always already have the character of idols. And “idols,” like the idea of whiteness, are often much more powerful than the moniker “idol” suggests. There are no “idols” or “gods,” only god-idols. The category “god-idol” is an attempt to hold in tension the limited possibilities of gods and the unlimited consequences of idolatrous white lies. Gods and idols, then, are here fashioned as one in the same, and distinguishing between the two simply reinforces what social theorist Pierre Bourdieu poignantly refers to as a “principle of structuration,” the “(hidden) imposition” of “a system of practices and representations whose structure, objectively founded on a principle of political division, presents itself as the natural-supernatural structure of the cosmos.” But White Lies is also about charting careful, critical manipulation of distinctions so that a distinction might be posed capturing white religion in both sociological and analytical registers. The power of these god-idols is not found in any otherworldly or creator “god,” but rather, in this principle of structuration that undergirds much of human social life, allowing for the transformation of a desire for certainty into the material attempt to secure it in society. “God-idol” is meant to focus attention to the structure of the relation, so that the relation between beneficiary and victim might more adequately come into focus, be made more legible and, finally, equitable. Posing, then, the relation as a category unto itself, white religion appears as a flight from death, which, as it turns out, is as much a flight away from life lived equitably with others.

LEARNING TO DIE & LEARNING TO DIE WITH OTHERS

Nearly one hundred years have passed since DuBois gave us his diagnosis of whiteness and white religion; that “A nation's religion is its life, and as such white Christianity is a miserable failure.” In these words, DuBois essentially marked a white religious sensibility as a thing-onto-itself and noted that thing as having been a catastrophe. What if DuBois's suggestion was read, understood, and remembered in light of his having been the social scientist he very much was (rather than the “religio-theological race” critic he is sometimes treated as), not concerned with finding a theological “Truth,” but exposing certain truths about human social interaction? White Lies regards DuBois's words as a sociological and anthropological analysis – better still, as a critique of the possibilities and limits of sociality itself. In other words, this book takes the failure described by DuBois as the starting point for analysis as well as response, and works to
not reinforce this failure through unwarranted theological appeal. In so doing, this work is an attempt to add greater clarity to the weight of his words, our understanding of the weight of white religion (as an entity and a social force), and the possibilities for measuring this failure not as a theological failure but as a failure of theism (and other identity-making mechanisms, other god-idols) to allow white Americans to do the one thing incumbent upon all of us in light of our limited, finite bodies: to learn how to live with others by learning how to die with others.

The “miserable failure” described by DuBois can be understood as this failure in learning to die, a thematic entrée for one of the major aims of this book: outlining the limits of identity formation via the category of religion in guarding against recognition of individual, embodied, and social limits, as well as the consequences of such misrecognition, and the uncertainties hanging ominously above social possibilities and marking a kind of twilight of American religion in the contemporary moment. To the extent that “American religion” has for many been a proxy and code word concealing a more focused assessment of “white religion,” and to the extent that white religion seems to be growing increasingly functionally inept at fashioning a “white identity” in the way it once did with ease and certitude, then twilight is not simply a conceptual entry point for this project, but additionally, offers an existential shift in orientation for those whose awareness of whiteness and white religion continues to expand. Another aim of White Lies is to suggest that this failure in learning to die is reinforced by a series of white lies forming white religion, where lies are indicative of the tendency to misrecognize the relationship between one person or group’s means of identity formation and the social consequences imposed on other social groups and actors by that identity formation. Twilight provides the uncertain (pragmatically and philosophically oriented methodological) lens to see; exaggerations, god-idols, and white lies are what will be seen.

THE BOOK YOU HOLD: THE UNFOLDING AND STRUCTURE OF WHITE LIES

Twilight matters. White Lies journeys through this twilight, stopping to define and (re)define it at times, while in other instances pausing over the uncertainties, limitations, and shaky assemblaged identities provided by such an interpretive shift. Entering into twilight is not a jaunt into the macabre or grotesque, but towards a renewed sense for religious studies scholars of the possibilities and perils of upholding Plato’s injunction, the admonition programmatized by Michel de Montaigne, lamented by Derrida, and seemingly ignored, denied, or fought against by most: that to philosophize, to critically engage, to live, to learn – about ourselves as much as others – is to learn how to die.

Part I of White Lies is titled “Learning to Die” and considers the work of existential and functional theorists like Émile Durkheim, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Niklas
Luhmann by treating and exploring their work as ethnographically as much as theoretically instructive. I argue that these thinkers help to chart out the ideological and material expressions (respectively) of a white religious orientation – both in an affirmative and problematic/cautious sense. Handling these ethnographic examples with other contemporary social theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu, Mary Douglas, Jean-François Bayart, and James D. Faubion, Part I charts out the analytical look and function of “white lies” – how they work and function in the social arena, and how they seemingly resist awareness of their operation as well as their dismantling. Using theism as expressed in what Civil Rights era poetry collective The Last Poets refers to as “The White Man’s God Complex,” in the fields of theology and anthropology, in the historic practices of lynching and segregation, in the prison industrial complex, and in contemporary vigilante murders of non-white bodies in the U.S. and abroad, Part I offers an expansive interpretive apparatus designed to make social theoretical sense of white religion in the United States historically and today.

Part II of this book continues in outlining white religion by looking to possible responses to it, considering what a shift from “Learning to Die” towards “Learning to Die With Others” might mean in terms of how religious studies scholars understand their efforts, their craft. I chart out uncertain possibilities for responding to these white lies. I argue that a blurring of distinctions – that is, the production of uncertainty – between intellectual fields, between “gods” and “devils,” between sacred and profane, between heaven and hell, and between life and death, begins to respond to this death-dealing demand for certainty rooted in these white lies. I look to literary and religious studies theorists such as Harold Bloom and Anthony B. Pinn, deconstructionist Jacques Derrida, and cultural theorists James Baldwin and bell hooks to frame my exploration of three figures emblematic of early (white) responses to some of these lies: anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff, and novelists Carson McCullers and Lillian Smith. Myerhoff returns to her cultural inheritance after recalibrating the significance of such inheritances through recognition of her approaching physical death. McCullers’s fiction offers theoretical guidance for understanding humans and gods as homologous. Smith’s racialized and economic privileges were offset by a queer identity and an early death, and complicated by her prophetic recognition of white religion as an outgrowth of fear. Such figures and their work and lives provide windows into, and offer productive possibilities for, wrestling with the manner in which they treat identity in the wake of recognition of their own death and the deaths of others and thus, the deaths their identities as “white” have seemingly caused others. To these ends, though Part II seeks to discuss possible critical rejoinders to these white lies, such a response (rhetorically) is meant to send home that these white lies are ultimately an outgrowth of an inability to accept human limits and the uncertainty posed by death. Death and uncertainty, then, stand as the final words and markers of white religion, its origins and its posterity.
connected to this miserable failure – here posed as a failure to "learn how to die," a failure to accept the uncertain dimensions of and limited possibilities for recognizing the relationships between seemingly different identities.

The first chapter, "In the Shadows of Whiteness: Giving Life (through Death) to a White Lie," begins the book by arguing that racialized lynchings come to do a very specific sort of ideological and social work in identity formation in the U.S., both currently and historically. That is to say, they produce whiteness as a racialized expression of a fundamental inability to accept human limitations and uncertainty. I turn to existentialist and functionalist theories to suggest that this whiteness reinforces a purported distance from embodied limits and uncertainties by imposing more acutely those uncertainties onto black bodies with the functional effect of creating a "white" identity marked principally by the perception of distance from these limits. I explore the multivalent rituals and practices sustaining such an identity in the wake of decreasing numbers of literal lynchings, while suggesting that this feature of identity – whiteness – might no longer be as functionally effective (as it once was) at procuring distance from uncertainty for white people. I conclude the chapter by situating whiteness within twilight, calling into question its continued functional utility.

Building from this, the second chapter, "The White Man's God Complex: Most Americans, the (White) Power of Theism, and Beginning to Believe in Twilight," looks to another identity-forming mechanism in theism, recast not as belief in "god," but belief in the functional utility of belief itself, with roots in the social and economic anxiety predating but "Americanized" by evangelist Jonathan Edwards and others. Whereas Chapter 1 begins with material practices and foregrounds their ability to shape identity and ideation more generally, Chapter 2 attempts the opposite, beginning with idea and belief in the power of ideas, demonstrating that such theism helps to materially manifest what The Last Poets referred to as the "White Man's God Complex." Moreover, this chapter suggests that for "Most [White] Americans," their purported belief in "god" works to secure the material conditions for them to act as if they were gods, undergirded by theological sleight-of-hand and the threat and use of violence.

The third chapter, "Battling White Lies: Exaggerated Identity and the Twilight of American Religion," takes a step back from whiteness and theism to look more expansively at the multiplicity of mechanisms that work to constitute a white religious sensibility. Looking to the fields of theology and anthropology as data indicative of an academic as well as social preoccupation with maintaining a sacred/profane distinction, I suggest that such a distinction might best be understood as social/existential – that is, an attempt to make use of and reinforce the "principle of structuration" sustaining this brand of identity formation. I suggest that this initial distinction is the principal "white lie" structuring and structured by various ancillary lies about the worth and abilities of various identities. I conclude by suggesting that such
awareness of how these white lies function casts the very category of "identity" into uncertainty, into twilight. Here, I also note that contemporary identity politics remain so central to so many Americans’ frames of reference that we find ourselves now in what Jean-François Bayart refers to as a "battle for identity" waged within this ever-present, looming twilight.

The fourth chapter, "Accepting the Hell of Death: Narrating Sources, Methods, and Norms of a Limited Religious Outlook," begins Part II of the book. There, I turn to an extended case study in the person of anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff, whose own ethnographic work with the dying was soon accompanied by her being diagnosed with terminal cancer. Looking to her as exemplar of the limited capacity to respond fully to the consequences of white lies, I put forth a limited religious outlook as an analytical means of beginning to handle these uncertain dimensions. In particular, I suggest an initial recognition that white religion is marked by an awareness of the Sartrean notion that "hell is other people." Through various analytical and heuristic registers such as the concept of uncertain humanism, I argue that acceptance of this "hell" begins with learning to tell stories without exaggerations, without white lies. Ownership of one's own cultural, social, individual, and collective stories of death and dying makes possible this unexaggerated storytelling.

In Chapter 5, "Rejecting the 'Gift of Death': White Social Responsibility in Twilight Times," I put to use another case study through the literary example offered by Carson McCullers's The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter (1940), for what her character John Singer suggests about the relationship between "gods" and humans at centers and margins of society. Responding to a long-standing philosophical and theological tradition (inherited by white religious Americans but predating its U.S. context) wherein "god" as wholly other finds substitution in the social other, I suggest that this "Gift of Death" must be rejected. Such rejection is made possible by dismissal of claims to personal salvation in the form of everlasting life, a life after death. The chapter is not a constructive theological response to white religion, but rather, looks to theological and philosophical discourse so as to pose an anthropological litmus test: Would a willingness to give up concern for personal salvation offer the means for white Americans to determine the degree to which they are held in sway by white lies?

The final chapter, "Requiem for Whiteness: Mourning, Freedom in Uncertainty, and the Final Embrace of Twilight," considers the work of another writer – white, Southern, lesbian novelist Lillian Smith – for help in concluding the project with a thought experiment: What if whiteness died, what would such a death look like, and what would this death mean for white religion in America and the identities posed historically by such arrangements? Smith helps to frame the "former" beneficiaries of whiteness as strange white fruit, wherein those whose identities have been formed through white lies, have ostensibly produced the "last" other in themselves, as they've
remained unable to do the one thing required – learn how to die – because they have not learned that to actually learn how to die is, in the end, to learn to die with others. The final chapter poses one exercise in such an uncertain process, and concludes with a final embrace of the uncertainties increasingly revealed behind, exposing, and confronting the white lies of white religion in America.

The final words of White Lies come in the form of a Postmortem. “A Warning” looks back to one of the volume’s principal thematic interlocutors, Friedrich Nietzsche, and his Madman who first uttered the words that “god is dead ... and we have killed him.” Understanding his statement as a homology for recognition of white lies in practice and increasingly called into question, the uncertainties posed by the (still uncertain) waning power of this white religious sensibility do not mark a time to celebrate but to remain vigilant. For a community just now (perhaps, if at all) learning to accept the uncertainties and limitations posed by a life lived in rejection of white lies that have insulated them from having to accept other sorts of uncertainties, the Madman’s diagnosis marks analytical clarity and understanding. However, Nietzsche’s prognosis that we now become gods remains an ominous warning for America as it comes to form a contemporary collective identity in the uncertainty posed by the twilight of white American religion.

A CATEGORICALLY UNCERTAIN APPROACH

White Lies tacks in a variety of directions and through numerous domains, impacting and impacted by a multiplicity of ideas, schools of thought, and intellectual disciplining mechanisms. The intensely interdisciplinary movement between critical social theory and poststructural theory, not to mention between the fields of theology, religion, philosophy, anthropology, and literature, may be frustrating to readers accustomed to traditional manipulations and explorations of data within an individual disciplinary housing. In one sense, I do not mean to suggest that Nietzsche, Durkheim, and Sartre (or their defenders) would agree with my characterizations of their projects, or that Luhmann or Derrida are up to the same or even similar tasks. In another sense, I cannot help but read them all as part of a long tradition of white thinkers motivated by epistemological, ethical, and skeptical demands for certainty arising from an inability to face squarely not only physical death and limitation, but the social responsibilities demanded by human dignity in light of physical death. To this extent, they work well together for painting a brief, incomplete, and certainly uncertain portrait of white American religion partially made possible by their critical theoretical distance from the U.S. I hope that my treatment of these figures in particular demonstrates my appreciation for the clarity their arguments afford for understanding white religion, while I work to refute the various demands for certainty and security each of their intellectual contributions espouses in its own way. Made clear through the epigraph that begins this chapter, even the deconstructionist Derrida could not learn how to die, leaving him unable to accept such an inevitable fate: “I have not learned to accept
death,” he says – no, “I remain impervious to learning when it comes to knowing-how-to-die. I have yet to learn anything about this particular subject.” I don’t presume that this project could do what Derrida could not, but I do hope it might at least help to explain why learning how to die – for white Americans in particular, but for all of us, maybe – is so terribly difficult.