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from **New Worlds for All** [1997]

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When Europeans first encountered Indian peoples, they saw no churches and little they recognized as organized worship. They met shamans and witnessed dances but dismissed Native American belief systems as primitive superstition or devil worship; Indian ceremonies struck them as heathen rituals. In the eyes of the Christian invaders, Indians had no real religion; converting them to Christianity would be a simple matter of filling a dark void with the light of the Gospel. Indian people, for their part, must have been mystified by the odd behavior of European “holy men,” who came into their villages carrying Bibles and preaching about sin and damnation but who surely committed daily acts of sacrilege by failing to observe the rituals and proper behavior that maintained relationships between humans and spirits in the Indian world. Indian peoples responded to spirits and believed in the power of dreams to foretell the future and guide their lives. Father Jacques Frémin said the Senecas had “only one single divinity . . . the dream”; Jean de Brébeuf said dreams were “the principal God of the Hurons.” Christians, too, believed in visions, but missionaries insisted that Indian people follow the injunctions of the Bible, not the messages in their dreams. In the new religious climate created by European invasion, many Indian people read the Bible and attended church services, but many continued to dream as well.

The soldiers of Christ were entering a world of deeply held religious beliefs every bit as complex and sophisticated as their own, but one they would rarely fathom or even try to understand. Native religions did not possess a specific theology; nor did they require that “believers” give verbal confessions of faith and live in obedience to a set of religious tenets stipulated by the church. Nevertheless, religion and ritual permeated the everyday lives of Indian peoples. European missionaries, convinced that there was only one true religion and it was theirs, tended to see things as black or white, good or evil. Indians who converted to Christianity must demonstrate unquestioning faith; Indians who resisted were clinging to heathen ways. For Christian missionaries, conversion was a simple matter:

EXPLICIT RELIGIOUS
CONTEXT TO EURO

Indian people who had been living in darkness and sin would receive the light and accept salvation. It proved to be not that simple. . . .

Indian religions tended to be much less exclusive and intolerant than Christianity, and Indian people often explored, considered, and incorporated elements of its teaching. Sometimes, Indians converted to Christianity and abandoned old beliefs. Often, old and new beliefs continued to exist side by side. Sometimes, Christianity itself changed as Indian people adopted it. They reshaped it to fit their notions of the world, eventually making it into an Indian as well as a European religion. Some Indians even used Christianity, and the missionaries who taught it to them, as a way of resisting white culture, of remaining Indian. . . .

The historical reputation of Christian missionaries has declined considerably in recent years. There was a time when, relying primarily on records written by missionaries and sharing their assumption that Christianity was synonymous with civilization, historians portrayed them as many missionaries thought of themselves. Courageous and selfless servants of Christ dedicated their lives to doing God's work and saving heathen souls. Indians gave up pagan ways, found contentment in their new lives, and experienced the joy that comes with the promise of everlasting life. Indian converts lived in peace and harmony with their priest or padre in idyllic mission communities within the sound of church bells.

Today, we are more inclined to question the missionaries' assumptions, finding their arrogance repellent and despising them as agents of cultural genocide. Indian people were wrenched from their homes and concentrated into mission villages, where they died of new diseases or had their traditional beliefs beaten out of them. Missionaries exploited their labor, stole their lands, and subjected them to sexual abuse. Oppression and chaos, not peace and harmony, characterized life in the missions. Christianity was a weapon of conquest, not a path to salvation.

Depending on time and place, circumstance and individual experience, one could provide examples to support any or all views of missionaries and their work. Indians were deeply spiritual people, but Europeans in those times, whatever we think of their assumptions and actions, were also spiritual, the products of powerful religious movements that enjoined them to go out and convert others.

For some Indian people, the missionaries brought them a new religion that changed their lives on earth and gave them reason to believe in eternal life in the hereafter. These individuals renounced their old ways and embraced the new, worked hard to make their mission villages into model Christian communities, and found meaning and hope in the church. . . .

Many more Indians kept the missionaries at arm's length, weighing their words but evading their evangelism by various strategies of passive resistance. "However much they are preached at," wrote a French officer in the Seven Years' War, "they listen very calmly & without ill-will, but they always return to their usual refrain, that they are not sufficiently intelligent to believe and follow what they are told, that their forefathers lived like them & that they adopt their way of life." The Indian custom of lis-

tening politely while missionaries regaled them with the word of God led many priests to misinterpret silence as tacit agreement and to see conversions where none occurred.

Other people did not listen quietly. They fought tooth and nail against the alien religion that threatened their world, resisting every effort to separate them from their cultural and spiritual roots, and saw missionaries as malevolent forces. The Reverend Samuel Kirkland encountered one Seneca in the 1760s who was of the "fixed opinion that my continuance there would be destructive to the nation, & finally over throw all the traditions & usages of their Forefathers & that there would not be a warrior remaining in their nation in the course of a few years." Another Seneca took a shot at the persistent missionary. . . .

Thousands of Indian people, however, selected a middle path of their own making. They heard the missionaries' message, asked questions, and found areas of common ground between old and new beliefs. According to David Weber, many of the Indians whom Spain claimed as converts "simply added Jesus, Mary, and Christian saints to their rich pantheons and welcomed the Franciscans into their communities as additional shamans." In a new world of suffering and uncertainty, people listened to preachers who assured them that terrestrial pain was temporary, life in paradise an eternity. Why not pray to the Christians' God? They had nothing to lose, so long as they did not abandon their own prayers, rituals, and beliefs. . . .

The collision and confluence of religious beliefs in North America did not occur in a vacuum. Indian people were dying of new diseases, succumbing to the inroads of alcohol, losing their economic independence, fighting new wars with deadly new weapons, struggling to hold on to their lands, and watching the physical world change around them. Converts most commonly came from communities that were falling apart. Christianity promised relief from the pain and suffering, but religious change also added to the turmoil.

Indian people and Christian missionaries shared areas of understanding. Both, for instance, attributed "natural" events to "supernatural" phenomena, although most Indian peoples saw no such arbitrary distinction between the two. At the same time, however, they saw their place in the world in radically different ways. For Christians, man was at the top of the hierarchy of creation and Europe at the pinnacle of civilization. Indian people shared their world with animals, plants, and their spirits. Where Europeans saw a religious void, Indian people had daily rituals and cycles of ceremonies that sustained life, propitiated spirits, and offered thanks, which helped maintain balance and order in the universe and gave meaning to the world. Missionaries who insisted that Indian people stop practicing such ceremonies were asking them to invite disaster.

Indian hunters often relied on the power of their dreams to help them locate their prey and foretell the kill. Hunting was a ceremonial activity as much as an economic necessity, since only if the proper rituals were observed would the animals consent to let themselves be taken, or agree

EXPERIENTIAL
CONTEXT
NATIVE

to return. Traveling in the Carolina backcountry in 1701, John Lawson reported how the Indians he met carefully preserved and then burned the bones of the animals they killed, believing "that if they omitted that Custom, the Game would leave their Country, and they should not be able to maintain themselves by their Hunting." At a time when Indian people were becoming increasingly dependent on European trade goods, and commercial hunting to satisfy the demands of the European fur and deerskin trades threatened to undermine such ritual observances, European missionaries tried to sever Indians' ties to the animal world and to separate them from the world of dreams. . . .

As Carolyn Merchant points out, Christianity was altering the symbolic superstructure of the Indians' economy. "An ethic of moral obligation between human and God replaced the ethic of reciprocity between human and animal." God was above nature; the new religious teachings required no respect for animals and the natural world. Old hunting rituals continued, "but they ceased to function as a restraining environmental ethic." The way was open for Indian peoples to become commercial hunters, responding to the lure of the marketplace rather than listening to the spirits of the animals.

Farther west, on the northern shores of the Great Lakes in Ontario, Huron people also found ways to accommodate Christianity. The Hurons were trading partners of the French, and Jesuit priests were eager to carry the word of God to the Huron villages and establish a base for future missions. The Hurons were a people in crisis in the 1630s. Recurrent epidemics of disease cut Huron population in half between 1634 and 1640, but the mortality rate among children was much higher. Many Hurons blamed the Jesuits for the disaster: "With the Faith, the scourge of God came into the country," wrote Jesuit Father François Joseph Bressani, "and, in proportion as the one increased, the other smote them more severely." The Hurons believed that the Jesuits were sorcerers who, like shamans, could use their power for good or evil. But the need to maintain trading alliances with the French prevented them from exacting vengeance on the missionaries; indeed, the French would not sell guns to non-Christians in the first half of the seventeenth century, and many Hurons accepted baptism to secure firearms. Meanwhile, as traditional curing practices and ceremonies proved ineffective against the new killer diseases, Huron villages filled with the sick and dying. People looked in desperation for new answers or at least for some source of hope, and parents brought their children to the Jesuit fathers for baptism. The Jesuits recorded only twenty-two Huron baptisms in 1635, but baptisms increased dramatically as the Huron population plummeted. . . .

Only the Tahontaenrat Hurons survived as a group; the rest of the people scattered throughout the Great Lakes region. Many of them became incorporated into the villages of their Iroquois enemies; some survived at the mission town of Lorette on the St. Lawrence.

In New England, meanwhile, Indian peoples encountered a different brand of Christianity as English missionaries introduced them to the

tenets of Puritanism. Puritan missionaries demanded what amounted to cultural suicide from their Indian converts, insisting that they live like their English neighbors if they intended to practice the Christian religion. Nevertheless, many Indian people accepted conversion as they sought spiritual meaning in an increasingly chaotic world. Thomas Mayhew Jr. began preaching to the Wampanoag Indians on Martha's Vineyard in the 1640s but with relatively little success. Then, epidemic diseases swept the island in 1643 and 1645. The shamans, the traditional spiritual leaders and healers, were unable to cure the sick. Scores of Indian people looked to Christianity to provide new explanations, if not new cures, and to fill a void left by the decline of traditional communal rituals. The Indians built their own church community and passed the Gospel from generation to generation.

But the Indian converts on Martha's Vineyard did not become English or cease being Indian. Some Indians who worshiped in Christian churches continued to live in wigwams. They made Christianity an Indian religion. Indian men served as preachers, pastors, and deacons; Indian women found that Christianity honored their traditional roles, offered them the opportunity to learn to read and write, and provided solace and support as their island society threatened to unravel amid alcoholism and violence. Christian Indians took Christian names, but they continued to be called by their Indian ones. A deacon named Paul, for instance, kept his Wampanoag name, Mashquattuhkooit. In time, some Christian Indian families began to use given names and surnames, in the European style. But the surnames were based on traditional names — the descendants of Hiacoomes, the first Indian convert on Martha's Vineyard, became known by the surname Coomes. . . .

On the mainland, John Eliot hoped to prevent any such "compromises." Eliot came to America in 1631, began to learn the Massachusett Indian language in 1643, and started preaching three years later. He compiled a dictionary and grammar of Massachusett and by 1663, with the assistance of Indian translators, had translated the entire Bible into Massachusett. For Eliot, enabling Indians to read the Bible was a vital first step on the road to "civilization." Eliot also established a total of fourteen "praying towns," model Christian communities where Indian converts lived quarantined from the negative influences of unconverted relatives or unsavory English characters. He laid down harsh penalties for Indians who disobeyed his rules. Men must work hard; women must learn to spin and weave. They must wear their hair English-style, stop using bear's grease as protection against mosquitoes, and give up plural wives. Discarded wives and children presumably suffered misery and poverty so that their now-monogamous ex-husbands and fathers could live Christian lives. Eliot's program promoted social revolution and cultural disintegration.

Not surprisingly, many Indian people refused to accept such an assault on their way of life. Indian communities that had not yet experienced devastation proved more resistant to Puritan teachings. At their height, Eliot's praying towns held only about eleven hundred people, and the

NEW ENGLAND
PURITANISM
CONTENT

extent of individual conversions among these people, and how many accepted Eliot's complete program of social change, remains uncertain. At Natick, Eliot's showpiece praying-town, some Indian converts were given a Christian funeral service, but were interred in traditional fashion with wampum, beads, and other earthly items. As Daniel Mandell notes, "The desire to maintain an Indian community in an English/Christian world extended even to the grave." . . .

For those who did accept Christianity, conversion may have meant something different from what it meant to Eliot. Massachusetts Indians believed in a creator, but their world was inhabited by countless *manitowuk*, spirits who directed the course of their daily lives. Adding God or Christ did not necessarily disrupt their worldview. . . .

Some people may have embraced Christianity as a way of fending off annihilation as the world crumbled about them. Missions offered Indian people a haven from some of the turmoil and provided them knowledge and skills to deal with the strange new world that was being created. Learning to read was a way of acquiring knowledge about the English as well as about God; it could be used to understand treaties, laws, and deeds in addition to the Bible. It may also have carried status and involved ritual and spiritual qualities of which Eliot would not have been aware. Some women may have been attracted to Christianity because it redefined gender roles or simply because they wanted to learn to spin. For all these people, conversion to Christianity had meaning; but that was not necessarily the same meaning that it had for Eliot.

However complete their conversion, the inhabitants of the praying-towns could not find shelter from the storms around them. During King Philip's War (1675–76), Indians from Natick supported the English, but the colonists viewed all Indians with fear and suspicion. Praying-town residents were rounded up and incarcerated on Deer Island in Boston Harbor. Eliot's mission program fell to pieces. . . .

Like Eliot in New England, Spanish missionaries in the South labored to save Indian souls with an assault on Indian culture that severed kinship relations, restricted sexual practices, altered settlement patterns, and promoted new divisions of labor. Jesuit Father Juan Rogel declared in 1570: "If we are to gather fruit, the Indians must join in and live in settlements and cultivate the soil." Spanish missionaries regarded resettling Indian people as peasants living in sedentary communities as a prerequisite to Christianity. Under the Spanish mission system, Indian people built the missions, raised and tended the crops and stock that fed the mission community, and performed the routine services that sustained the mission. But the reality the missions achieved rarely matched the goal they pursued. The Spanish missions also produced massive population decline, food shortages, increased demands for labor, and violence.

At its height in the mid-seventeenth century, the Spanish mission system in the colony of La Florida included seventy friars in forty missions stretching from St. Augustine to the coast of South Carolina in the north and the Apalachicola River near present-day Tallahassee in the west. . . .

But Indians resented and resisted Franciscan efforts. Guale Indians rebelled against their missionaries in 1597; Christian Apalachees revolted in 1638 and 1647; Timucuans, in 1656. British and Indian raids from the north at the beginning of the eighteenth century effectively brought the mission system to an end. The net result of Spanish missionary efforts in the area was abandoned missions, fragmented communities, and refugee converts huddled around St. Augustine.

Following Juan de Oñate's colonizing expedition into New Mexico in 1598, Spanish Franciscan missionaries established themselves in almost every pueblo along the Rio Grande. The Spanish Crown saw missions as a line of defense, protecting the colony from Indian enemies and European rivals. The Pueblos may have seen them in somewhat similar terms: the missions could stand against Apache enemies and against potentially aggressive Spanish soldiers and colonists. But Spanish priests not only invaded kivas (underground ceremonial chambers), they desecrated kachina masks and tried to suppress Native rituals and sexual practices. Many Pueblos refused to accept a new faith that threatened their social and spiritual order; others continued to practice their ancestral ways behind closed doors or, more accurately, in underground kivas. Some fled west to the Hopis and other more distant Pueblos; others retaliated in periodic outbreaks of violence. Drought, falling populations, and increasing Navajo and Apache raids indicated that the new religion was not a source of powerful spiritual protection, and that people should return to their ancient ways, if they ever had left them. In 1680, Popé, a Tewa medicine man from San Juan, synchronized an uprising of the different Pueblos that drove out the Spaniards for a dozen years. The Indians killed and mutilated many of the friars who had been trying to stamp out their religion and desecrated the alien paraphernalia of Catholicism.

The Spaniards returned, but they had learned from the experience. Where their predecessors had tried to eradicate all Native rituals, friars now more often turned a blind eye to such practices — a shift, as historian John Kessel describes it, “from crusading intolerance to pragmatic accommodation.” Indian people meanwhile became resigned to the Spaniards and adopted more subtle tactics of resistance. When Diego de Vargas returned on his campaign of reconquest in 1692, Luis, a Picuri Pueblo leader, appeared before him dressed in animal skins and wearing a band of palm shell around his head; but he also wore a rosary round his neck and carried a silver cross, an Agnus Dei, and a cloth printed with the image of Our Lady of Guadeloupe. A century of contact with Spanish missionaries had left its imprint. Many Pueblos accepted the outward forms of Hispanic Christianity while keeping the friars away from clan, kiva, and kachina, the things that constituted the core of their religion and their Pueblo identity. Many Pueblos became nominally Catholic, attending mass and observing Christian holidays, but they continued to practice traditional rituals and kept their worldview intact. . . .

The Hopis were more insulated than other Pueblos from Spanish crusading. Their villages sat atop isolated mesas in northern Arizona, and

they were better able to keep Spanish priests at arm's length. Hopi religious leaders not only resisted those Spanish missionaries who made the trek to their villages, they even on occasion debated and denounced the padres in public confrontations. . . .

The Franciscan friar Junípero Serra brought Catholicism to the Indians of California in 1769. Traveling north to the San Francisco Bay area, his expedition established the first Catholic mission at San Diego. Other missions followed until a chain of twenty-one missions stretched more than 650 miles. By 1800, Indian neophytes — as the converts were called — numbered some twenty thousand, testimony to the disintegration of Native societies under the hammerblows of new diseases as much as to the power of Christianity. But the fact that Indian neophytes adopted Christian symbols and stories did not necessarily mean they accepted conversion on Spanish terms. They may have seen in the pageantry and paraphernalia of Catholic services new sources of spiritual power which they could acquire without jeopardizing their old beliefs. Spanish missionaries congregated Indian peoples into new communities and used Indian labor to support the mission system while they themselves labored to save Indian souls. The friars segregated unmarried men and women into separate dormitories at night to enforce Catholic moral codes, imposed strict labor regimens, and resorted to whipping, branding, and solitary confinement to keep the Indians on the path to “civilization and salvation.” . . .

Indian populations plummeted. Many Indians ran away from the missions; others turned to violence: several hundred Indians launched an unsuccessful attack on the San Diego mission in 1775.

Missionary efforts elsewhere met with limited success, although not always for the same reasons. Moravian missionaries won many converts among the Delaware Indians in Pennsylvania and Ohio in the eighteenth century, and some Delawares clearly embraced the Christian way of life that missionaries such as John Heckewelder and David Zeisberger brought them. But the Moravians and their converts were building peaceful mission havens in what was fast becoming a war zone. The colonial and revolutionary wars that raged in the Ohio Valley in the second half of the century disrupted the missionaries' work, dislocating their communities, and brought disaster to the converts. In 1782, American militiamen butchered ninety-six pacifist and unarmed Moravian Indians in their village at Gnadenhütten. The Moravians and their converts migrated to Canada in the years after the American Revolution. . . .

Converted and unconverted Indians alike noted differences between Christianity as preached and as practiced. Indians commonly countered missionary arguments by declaring, “We are better Christians than you.” Those, like Occom, who converted during the Great Awakening found fault with the established church. Many Narragansetts converted to Christianity in the 1740s, embracing a religious movement that challenged the intellectual elitism of Puritanism. It more closely resembled their traditional religion, emphasizing visions, the spoken rather than the written word, and religious leadership based on a “calling” rather than on formal

education. The Narragansetts built their own church and had Narragansett ministers. Samuel Niles, the first Narragansett minister, said that his people regarded educated ministers as "Thieves, Robbers, Pirates, etc. . . . They steal the word. God told the Prophets the words they Spoke: and these Ministers Steal that Word." . . .

Indians spread Christianity in less direct ways than operating as missionaries. Iroquois Indians who converted to Catholicism in the seventeenth century formed new mission communities at places like Caughnawaga near Montreal. In the early years of the nineteenth century, Iroquois from Caughnawaga migrated to the Rocky Mountain region to work in the fur trade as trappers and guides. Some of them intermarried with local Indian women and brought their Indian Catholicism to the tribes there.

Though many Indian people looked to Christianity for help in times of crisis, Christianity often generated additional crises and tensions in Indian communities. Rituals such as the Green Corn Ceremony united Indian communities, bringing people together in seasonal ceremonies of prayer, thanksgiving, and world renewal; Christian missionaries prohibited their converts from participating in such "pagan rituals," thereby severing ties of community and identity. Missionaries also attempted to set up new patterns of work and behavior between the sexes. In gender-egalitarian societies like the Hurons and the Montagnais, where women enjoyed an influence unknown in Europe, French missionaries tried to subordinate women, to reorder Indian society along more "civilized" lines.

Some communities split between traditional and Christian factions. The Hurons were bitterly factionalized by the time the Iroquois attacked them in 1648–49. Delawares who converted to the Moravian faith lived in separate villages from their unconverted relatives and sometimes experienced ridicule and resentment from them. Formerly viewed with respect by other Iroquois, Oneida headmen by 1772 felt "despised by our brethren, on account of our christian profession." Some opportunistic Indian leaders embraced Christianity to add spiritual sanction in their political challenge to established leaders. At Natick in the seventeenth century, Waban used Christianity as a core around which to organize a faction challenging the leadership of Cushmanekin, which rested on more traditional spiritual foundations. Men like Waban employed the missionaries as allies to serve their own political interests.

Some communities split even further as factions formed around different denominations. In about 1700, the Christian Wampanoag community at Gay Head on Martha's Vineyard split into Baptist and Congregational churches. Most Mohawks became nominal Anglicans in the early eighteenth century; their relatives who accepted the Catholic faith moved away to form new communities near the French at St. Regis (present-day Akwesasne) and Caughnawaga. The surface harmony Richard Smith witnessed at Oquaga in 1769 concealed widening divisions between Anglican and Presbyterian factions within the community.

All across America, Christian and Indian peoples and elements mingled. In Quebec and northern New England, Abenaki Indians took French

saints' names as surnames, wore crucifixes around their necks, spoke French, prayed to Catholic saints, and even hung wampum belts on Catholic statues. As did Spanish officers in the Southwest, French officers in the Northeast acted as godparents at baptisms of Abenaki children. Sebastian Rasles said the Abenakis' faith was "the bond that unites them to the French," and Abenakis themselves rejected English missionary efforts, asserting their loyalty to the French: "We have promised to be true to God in our Religion, and it is this we profess to stand by." But Abenakis also kept traditional rituals alive. When French priests frowned on dancing to drums, they danced to rattles instead.

The missionary experience also left an imprint on some missionaries, however. Men who went into Indian country to convert the "heathen" sometimes found themselves slowly being converted to an Indian way of life they were dedicated to destroy. . . .

As they did in China and Paraguay, Jesuit missionaries modified their practices to accommodate the culture of the native peoples whom they hoped to make into Catholics. They realized that their best strategy lay in first winning acceptance and support in the communities where they lived and preached, building on common ground and avoiding head-on confrontations with Native practices that did not clash openly with Christian teachings. They adapted their messages to suit Indian styles of oratory, looking for parallels in Indian belief systems and behaving as much as possible according to Native protocol. When Father Nau wanted to establish a mission among the Iroquois in 1735, he recognized that he would need to conform to Iroquois ways: he accepted adoption into the Bear clan, because, he explained, "a missionary would not be an acceptable person in the village were he not a member of the tribe."

Missionaries sought to discredit traditional spiritual leaders, yet took over many of their functions in Indian society — they dispensed advice, spoke in council, shared what they had, and ministered to the sick. Sebastian Rasles lived almost thirty years among the Abenaki Indians at Norridgewock in Maine. He dedicated himself to converting the Indians to Christianity and changing their way of life forever. It was, he wrote, "necessary to conform to their manners and customs, to the end that I might gain their confidence and win them to Jesus Christ." Yet, in a letter to his brother the year before he died, Rasles confided that the conversion process had been mutual: "As for what concerns me personally, I assure you that I see, that I hear, that I speak, only as a savage." The English hated Rasles, feared that he used his influence among the Indians to incite attacks on English settlements, and put a price on his head. In 1724, they raided Norridgewock, burned the village, killed Rasles, and mutilated his body.

David Brainerd, a young Presbyterian minister preaching to Indians along the Susquehanna River in the 1740s, found that their responses prompted him to question and reevaluate his mission. Munsee Indians rejected Christianity as a corrupting influence and told Brainerd they preferred to "live as their fathers lived and go where their fathers were when

they died." Delawares in western Pennsylvania seemed equally unreceptive. The blank stares of the Indians whose souls he had set out to save drove Brainerd into a critical period of soul searching, reassessing his goals and even wondering about his God. More receptive Indian audiences brought a renewed commitment before Brainerd's early death from tuberculosis, but the Indians he met clearly molded the young missionary's character and influenced "everything from his evangelistic method to his psychological health." . . .

As James Axtell explains, the direction of religious change in North America was "decidedly unilinear," largely because Indian religions, unlike Christianity, were tolerant of other faiths. Indian religions were always on the defensive, and any changes that occurred in colonial religion "were minor and self-generated," not in response to Native pressures to convert. Nevertheless, being on the defensive did not totally rob Indians of the initiative. Frequently, they used elements of Christianity for their own purposes: "By accepting the Christian priest as the functional equivalent of a native shaman and by giving traditional meanings to Christian rites, dogmas, and deities," writes Axtell, "the Indians ensured the survival of native culture by taking on the protective coloration of the invaders' culture."

Periodically, new religious movements developed in Indian country, and messiahs preached a return to traditional ways of life. By the second half of the eighteenth century, as Gregory Dowd has argued, Indian peoples in the eastern woodlands who fought to preserve their remaining lands from European and American expansion also struggled to recover their world by restoring and reviving traditional rituals. Some messiahs and prophets preached total rejection of the white man and his ways. Indian people could become whole again only if they denounced alcohol, trade goods, and Christianity. Others offered a more flexible approach. In 1799, a Seneca Indian named Handsome Lake, who had given in to alcoholism and despair as his world crumbled around him, experienced a vision. He renounced alcohol and began to preach a program of social reform and cultural rejuvenation, urging his people to abandon what was evil but take what was best from white culture. He also offered them a religion that blended elements of Christian teaching, possibly picked up from neighboring Quakers, with traditional rituals such as the Green Corn Ceremony and the Midwinter Ceremony. Handsome Lake revived and restructured traditional religion for a new world. The Longhouse religion, as it became known, thrived and spread and continues today.

Time and again in North America, Christian missionaries established a foothold in Indian communities during a crisis, reaped a harvest of converts, and then were pushed back or held at arm's length as Indian people kept or revived ancient beliefs. Indian people learned that the best way to preserve their religious beliefs was to hide them from evangelizing Europeans, a strategy that, ironically, often convinced outsiders that the Indians' religion had died out. The result often lay somewhere between total acceptance and total rejection. In southwestern pueblos, kivas still exist alongside Catholic churches, and Indian people often participate in

Christian as well as traditional ceremonies. At Gay Head and Mashpee, in Massachusetts, where Indians became Christians as early as the seventeenth century, Native folk beliefs about ghosts, witches, and spirits survived into the twentieth century. In such instances, Christianity did not eradicate old beliefs; rather, it supplemented and even strengthened them, providing a new, broader spiritual basis. The new world that emerged was one in which Christian and traditional beliefs alike, sometimes separately and sometimes together, guided and gave meaning to people's lives.

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from "Our Indians": European Empires and the History of the Native American South [2007]

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Atlantic World histories, like more familiar narratives of the rise of the nation-state, frequently seem to convey a sense of European omnipotence. Capitalism reaches across the Atlantic to engulf the Americas, Old World biota invade the New World and push out indigenous species, and historical narrative replaces oral traditions about the past. Searching the frayed edges of transatlantic empires, however, historians have located peripheral regions, variously described as frontiers, borderlands, or middle grounds, that lay just beyond the reach of imperial control. Once characterized as the proving grounds of empire, scholars now recognize that these regions were sites of negotiation and compromise, where Indians and colonists together forged new worlds.

In a 1999 article, Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron summed up recent literature on borderlands, the contested regions lying between empires. These regions, they observed, were characterized by "fluid and 'inclusive' intercultural frontiers." They were places of "mutual acculturation," "replete with ethnic mixing, syncretism, and cohabitation." Where borderlands existed, Adelman and Aron concluded, "Indian peoples deflected imperial powers from their original purposes and fashioned economic, diplomatic, and personal relations that rested, if not entirely