

12 characteristics of Native American Religion

No one knows exactly how long the Native Indian inhabitants of the Americas had lived there before the settlers. Some estimations say for centuries, perhaps as early as the Pharaoh-era in Egypt (2000 B.C.). Some say 25,000 years ago. Whatever may be the fact behind these estimates, there were several characteristics of those inhabitants.

#1. They were an admixture of panentheism and polytheism Native Americans believed in God more imminent than transcendent, and that the Spirits were manifest mainly in nature. Not unlike mysticism, there was a focus on communing with nature to encounter the great Spirit. However, there are hardly enough volumes to contain a brief synopsis of all the gods and goddesses. The Greeks had a small number compared with the Native American tribes, whose number well exceeds 200. Some of the better known were Apotamkin, Raven, Coyote, Kwafee, Manabozho, Weadego, and Ahaayuta-Achi. However, it is clear that totem polls were never really part of the worship of deity. They were more commonly used to tell stories of the tribe, and to commemorate certain events.

#2. They had various gods/goddess based mainly on their tribe. There were more tribes than letters in the alphabet. Very sparsely populated, some of these people groups seldom came into contact with others. Its estimated that the total Indian population at this time was less than one million, and some say less than half of that number. There was no unifying culture as for instance Hellenism among the Greeks and Romans. If the barbaric invasions of 300-400s into the Roman Empire led to the “dumbing down” of civilization which coined the term “Dark Ages” for the Medieval Period, then certainly the culture of these peoples was well below “dark.”

#3. Legends passed on by oral tradition. More important than the stories of their ancestors was the art of telling stories. It was one thing to convey the message, but the medium was just as important. Often the chieftain had that responsibility of keeping alive the tradition behind the origin and success of the tribe. And beyond that, the chieftain was to communicate the religious beliefs of the tribe.

#4. Legends were at the center of their societies. The Cherokees believed that the earth was a “great island floating in a sea” created by the “Earth Magician.” Such legends were commonplace among all the tribes. They had

the intent of answering the most fundamental questions about the world, the tribe, and the individual.

#5. *Magic dominated their cosmology.* Nearly as powerful, and sometimes more powerful than the chieftain was the primary religious figure: the Witch Doctor. Shamanism was practiced as a synthesis of religion and medicine by the medicine-man, or witch doctor. Among the Cheyenne, it was believed that war paint should be used over everything because it magically prevented one from wounding in battle. The Navajo used items such as crystal rocks to diagnosis and treat ailments. Ghost- Dancing became common, with the intent of somehow resurrecting the deceased to help push the “white man” out.

#6. *Religion dominates at the crucial junctures of the individual’s life.* There were rituals for birth, puberty, weddings, deaths, and other significant achievements. Special events that inspired unique rituals were ordinations of leaders, achievements as a warrior. The warrior is at the center of nearly every tribe in that the chieftain nearly always comes from the number of the best warriors.

#7. *Human sacrifice was not uncommon.* The Aztecs in one ceremony during the 1500s sacrificed over 80,000 people in one ceremony to dedicate a new temple to their gods. This is the most egregious example of such practice that we have on record. Certainly even the “barbaric” invaders that collapsed the Roman Empire had no such comparable events. Child sacrifice of the first born was quite common among many tribes in the area that later comprised the United States

#8. *An aboriginal Adam and Eve were believed.* As is common in nearly every society in antiquity, there is a belief in an original male and female. This is also true among the native Americans.

#9. *Some tribal religion and practice were much more violent than others.* The most important individual trait to the native American was Bravery. One might not have any other noble characteristic, but if you were brave, you were respected. In addition, wisdom was exalted. Violence was a regular part of life for the tribes. One must be good at killing to stay alive. He must be brave to hunt for food, and face danger from wildlife. One must be brave to fight off intruders, stand up for yourself and family, and battle

other tribes. So bravery was most important when savagery is part of everyday life.

#10. Variant religious views between tribes promoted pluralism. Since there was no one established religious authority such as creeds, scriptures or hierarchical rulers, native Americans tended to be more open about religious questions. For this reason, the early settlers and missionaries had considerable success in some areas with evangelization. Apparently, their native religious answers to existential questions for these tribesmen had not neither been adequately answered, nor fulfilling.

#11. The Belief in an “Afterlife in the Happy Hunting Grounds” was common among nearly all of the tribes.

There was a constant thread of belief in an after life which involved both rewards and punishments. The tribes varied in their description of this life beyond, some thinking of it as a “happy hunting grounds.”

#12. Battles between Tribes often pitted one god against another.

The contrasting of the power of one god over another worshipped by another tribe often became an element in tribal warfare.

Conclusions:

While “reconstructionist” native American history is on the rise, seeking to rewrite the history books based on scant evidence, there is no doubt that the religion of early native Americans was quite primitive and frequently violent before any “white men” arrived.

Contemporary statements of “forced conversions” to Christianity was certainly not the norm and hardly provable. The journals of early missionaries clearly reveal that there were no forced conversions, but in fact, just the opposite. Missionaries were often put to death seeking to evangelize. Even natives who decided for themselves to convert became targets of the violent tribesmen, and the subject of curses by witch-doctors.

Another example of reconstructionist history is the attempt to use Papal Bulls published during the Medieval Period, rejected by the Protestants, as typical of all missionary work in the new world.

Right after the amazing voyage of Christopher Columbus discovering the new world in 1492, Pope Romanus Pontifex issued a Papal Bull in 1455:

[W]e bestow suitable favors and special graces on those Catholic kings and princes, ... athletes and intrepid champions of the Christian faith ... to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and ... to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate ... possessions, and goods, and to convert them to ... their use and profit

Unfortunately, reconstructionists seek to rewrite history when the facts do not bode in their favor for their particular cause. As a result, they seek to reinterpret the facts, ignore facts, and use pseudo-evidence to promote their cause.

John Winthrop (1588-1649) made the seismic point that the Indian population was much too sparse to need millions of miles of square acres. In fact, there appeared to be less than 1 million in what we call the continental United States, where currently over 300 million reside with millions of miles still sparsely populated. In fact, the tribes roamed around from place to place, and fought each other for land long before the Europeans arrived. Estimates that place the number of Native Americans at 18 million are clearly reconstructionist numbers. The colonization of America and its growth could never have happened with that many resistant inhabitants.

The fact that there was relative peace and tranquility that resulted in the first Thanksgiving clearly indicates that the “forced conversions,” “invading our lands,” “enslaving our peoples,” and other ungrounded accusations were not the norm. Some of these things may have been more true of the successors of Columbus and more typical of the Roman Catholics, especially of the Spanish.

In addition, the conversion of Pocahontas, and her subsequent visits to England are a perfect example of just the opposite of “forced conversions.” There were dynamic missionaries such as the Puritan

Alexander Whitaker, who led Pocahontas to Christ, and John Rolfe, who married her. Despite a peace accord between the Puritans and the Indians, the Indians suddenly swept down upon the Puritan town and wiped out all of its inhabitants without provocation. Among the number was the husband of Pocahontas. She had an opportunity to return to her tribe, but refused to do so, choosing to remain with John Rolfe in the Jamestown settlement. She made a well-publicized trip to England to meet the King and other dignitaries in which she was very impressive. Unfortunately, on the way back to the new world, she suddenly died at 22. John Rolfe was a very pious Puritan, and dearly loved her. She died in his arms. They had one son as a result of their marriage: Thomas Rolfe. John would eventually remarry, and died as a result of an Indian invasion that destroyed his tobacco farm.

Finally, many of the non-conformist, such as the Baptist founder Roger Williams, had a strong missionary passion for the natives. Williams spent many years learning their culture and language so that he might be a more effective witness for Christ.