



Inspiration & Innovation



Religion in the American West

Todd M. Kerstetter

WILEY Blackwell

Inspiration and Innovation

The Western History Series

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Introduction

This book examines the religious history of the trans-Mississippi United States for its own sake and to supplement topics neglected or only briefly mentioned by most textbook histories of the American West. As I worked on this project, two discoveries surprised me and inspired me. First, many histories of the West say little about religion's roles in the region. This situation afflicts much of what has been written about US history. Two historians concluded in 2010 that, "Religion is everywhere in history, but nowhere in mainstream historiography." Second, many surveys of US religious history say next to nothing about what happened in the West. A reader who relied on only those books for knowledge of US religious history might conclude the United States extended from the Atlantic Ocean all the way to the Appalachian Mountains or, in expansive passages, to Chicago. People have lived west of the Appalachians (and west of Chicago) for thousands of years. Those people held religious beliefs and they participated in important events that touched the history of religion on regional, national, and transnational stages. This book delivers some of those stories and enriches our understanding of the American West by placing religion at center stage.

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Religion plays a major role in many people's lives. It defines who they are, how they fit into the world, and how they view the world. It can motivate or shape their behavior. The trans-Mississippi West, likewise, played, and plays, an important role in US and world history. Before the United States existed, numerous human groups settled in the region. Before the United States existed, trans-Mississippi North America drew diverse settlers from Europe and Africa who interacted with the indigenous population. Shortly after the United States came into existence, the nation set its eyes on the western two-thirds of North America and in short order conquered those lands and the people living there and incorporated both into the nation. People from around the world rushed in. The best-known versions of these stories focus on secular matters and in so doing exclude matters of vital concern. This book asks: What roles did religion and the West play in each other's histories?

"The West" is both an idea and a place. The idea has meant many things to many people. It has moved over time and even historians of the region disagree about precisely where to draw its boundaries. Before I became a western historian I encountered the region's ethereal nature on a cross-country bicycle trip from Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, to Vancouver, British Columbia. When my cycling buddy and I crossed the Mississippi River at St. Louis we visited the famous Arch and the Jefferson National Expansion Monument, landmarks that announced we had entered the West. Despite crossing a line on a map and a psychic threshold marked by the national monument, the landscape did not seem dramatically different and I did not sense I had moved into a new or different region. Later we pedaled across the Missouri River into Nebraska. Again we had crossed a boundary and had entered a state that I considered western. Things felt a little different, but not particularly western. Within days, though, somewhere not too far west of Norfolk, Nebraska, the landscape, the vegetation, the sky, the very air seemed different and at last I thought to myself, "Now we're in the West." Near Valentine, Nebraska, I saw a tumbleweed (and made an ill-advised attempt to catch it while riding) and that banished any lingering doubt that we had reached *The West*. The landscape shifted time and again from there to the conclusion of our ride in Vancouver, but we remained within the West as far as I was concerned. My professional colleagues have a similarly murky idea of where the West begins and ends. A survey of western historians that

asked them to define the region's boundaries showed widespread disagreement. A map of the territory they all agreed upon as "the West," which the survey called "the unambiguous West," depicted a surprisingly narrow swath of land between the Mississippi River and the Pacific Ocean. Only Idaho, Utah, Arizona, and Nevada among current states had their boundaries entirely within this unambiguous West. Every other state west of the Mississippi was open for debate as far as its "Western-ness" was concerned. This does not fit well with many narratives or popular conceptions about the region, which often include everything from St. Louis to San Francisco.

This book focuses on the United States west of the Mississippi River. That region, ethereal as it might be, holds an iconic place in the nation's history and mythology. It has also stirred the imaginations of people around the world. For historian Frederick Jackson Turner, these western states represent a region where a line of settlement, the frontier, progressed westward and explained American development. For historian Patricia Nelson Limerick, western states represent a place of conquest that yields a different understanding of American history. In that vein, I argue that the region's acquisition by the United States and the nature and timing of its incorporation into the United States distinguish it from regions east of the Mississippi. People's religious impulses motivated as well as aided and abetted conquest. Many of the conquered turned to religion for solace and strength to face the disruption and turmoil of conquest. This book argues a two-pronged thesis. First, religion inspired people who lived in and who came to the West. Second, the region's historical development shaped religious innovations.

This book emphasizes the period during which the United States acquired and asserted control over the area west of the Mississippi, but it also discusses the time before the United States conquered the region. The region's story and the United States' story cannot be appreciated fully without understanding the people who lived there before US conquest, how that process unfolded, and how it influenced both conquerors and conquered. Several central questions shape this book. How have diverse societies and empires shaped and reshaped the region over the centuries? In the US era, has the West been more of a colony or a region and when and how did it change? Does it today act as a national and international center of power in its own right? Most important and most pervasive, what did religion

have to do with the West? This book puts religion at the center of a familiar narrative that usually ignores it.

What exactly do I mean by religion? I was surprised to find that many of the religious history books I consulted for this project jumped right into the subject without defining terms. Having written this book, I know why: it's very difficult. One scholar offered this definition: "Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flow that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries."¹ That's blessedly short and to the point, but it calls for some unpacking. Religions might intensify joy in the process of being grateful or giving thanks or in the act of welcoming a newborn infant or recognizing a marriage. Religions help people confront sorrow in the face of tragedy or death. Humans, of course, occupy center stage in those events and as they intensify joy or confront suffering they engage in some kind of relationship, prayer perhaps, with one or more suprahuman forces, God for example. That action helps the people be at peace or at home and it might also help them cross some type of boundary be it geographic or spiritual, such as a soul moving to an afterlife. The beginning of that definition, "confluences of organic-cultural flow," might be the toughest part to understand. I read that as arguing that religions emerge from the interplay of environment and intellect. This robust and relatively abstract definition might be particularly useful for students interested in religious studies.

Other students might prefer this more grounded definition, which combines insights from various sources: Religion is a set of practices and beliefs through which people find meaning, order their lives, and understand their place and purpose in the universe, especially when they view the universe and themselves as the creation of a supernatural agency or agencies. More importantly, religion is about the human relationship with the divine, or spirits. People express this relationship in many ways including worship, expressing awe about God or spirits, in thanks for their existence and the world that is their home, and in supplication for their needs. Worship usually involves devotional practices and rituals, sometimes personal, often communal. Finally, religion typically contains a moral code governing the

¹ Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 54.

conduct of human affairs. This is important stuff. It applies to just about everybody who dwells in the pages that follow. Some people paid very close attention to religion and recognized that it played through every aspect of their lives. Others paid less attention and probably lost sight of religion in their daily lives at least on occasion. Still others paid no attention to religion, yet even for them it would be almost impossible to live a life not touched in some way or ways by the religious beliefs of others.

In this book I try to portray all religious traditions and the people who practiced them with respect and impartiality. The book does not offer an exhaustive treatment of religion in the West, but I have attempted to be as inclusive and thorough as possible given the confines of this series. I focus on people, places, and events where religion played a particularly important role. I include organized religion, unorganized religion, spirituality, easily recognized denominations, and groups some would label cults. Writing about religion presents challenges because of its supernatural character and because it can be very difficult to discern people's motives, especially when one motive among many might involve religion. Further complicating this task, mainstream American culture tends to isolate religion as distinct from economics, politics, and personal relationships even though religious beliefs might influence people's thoughts and actions in one or more of those realms. The separation of church and state provides an excellent example and in several chapters I probe the issue of whether religion and state really can be separated. For some groups discussed in this book, religion *cannot* be separated from *any* aspect of their lives because it informs and is intimately involved in *every* aspect of their lives and the day-to-day working of the world. As if that didn't complicate matters enough, even mainstream histories of the United States that would celebrate the separation of church and state include and acknowledge the significance of Manifest Destiny, which identifies the United States, its people, and its institutions as God's chosen instruments. Of course, Manifest Destiny's role in history and the American mind has for many citizens of the United States explained and justified expansion across North America, which makes it central to the history of the American West.

With few exceptions this book moves chronologically through the human history of the trans-Mississippi West. Chapter 1 samples indigenous religions in the region that came to be known as the

American West. The concept of “the West” as we know it meant nothing to these people or their religions, but place meant everything and because of that place had remarkable significance. The region’s first occupants had religions, but those who subsequently conquered the region usually considered those religions inferior to Christianity. Indigenous religions endured and changed in the face of conquest despite attempts to eradicate them. These interactions surface regularly through the rest of the book. Chapter 2 discusses expansion into the West by colonial powers from outside North America and the religious component of that expansion through 1867 when Russia sold Alaska to the United States. Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, and Protestantism all rode in the van of conquest and this chapter examines their roles in the colonial development of the West by Spain, France, and Russia. The United States enters the book in Chapter 3, which covers religion’s influence and religious developments from the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 through 1860 when the United States stood at the brink of the Civil War. Chapter 4 explores the roles religion played in the West during the tumultuous years of the Civil War and Reconstruction and carries its discussion and analysis through the Wounded Knee tragedy of 1890. After 1890 Frederick Jackson Turner and others would argue the West entered a post-frontier period. The years 1890 through 1945 hold together as the “Modern West.” Chapter 5 maps religion’s role during those years when the West still functioned, more or less, as a colony of the rest of the nation even as World War II spurred the nation into a total war footing that transformed the West into a more developed or mature region. The nation and the West boomed after World War II, and Chapter 6 explores relationships between religion and region from 1945 through 1965, which I’ve labeled the “Cold War West.” Chapter 7 examines the West’s religious life in the years since 1965, when changes to US immigration law dramatically shifted immigration from Europe to Latin America and Asia. The period also witnessed a boom in new religious movements with significant consequences for the nation and the region.

What role did religion play in the West’s history? What role did the West play in religious history? The answers are as complicated as the people who made this history and pursuing them enriches our understanding of ideas and places dear to many of us.

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Indigenous Religions in the West

All the earth was covered with water, and everything was dark in the beginning. There was no sun, no moon, no stars. Then one day a raft appeared, floating on the water. In it was Turtle. Down from the sky a rope of feathers came and dangled near the bow of the raft, and then a being, who shone like the sun, descended. He was Earth Initiate. When he reached the end of the rope he tied it to the bow of the raft, and stepped in. His face was covered, so that Turtle was not able to see it. In fact, no one has ever seen his face uncovered. Earth Initiate sat down and for a long time said nothing.

“Where do you come from?” Turtle asked at last.

“I come from above,” Earth Initiate said.

Then Turtle asked: “Brother, can you not make for me some good dry land, so that I may sometimes come up out of the water?”

Earth Initiate did not answer at once, and Turtle asked, “Are there going to be any people in the world?”

After thinking for a while, Earth Initiate said, “Yes.”

“How long before you are going to make people?” Turtle asked.

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“I don’t know,” Earth Initiate answered. “You want to have some dry land: well, how am I going to get any earth to make it of?”
“If you will tie a stone about my left arm I will dive for some,” Turtle answered.

Turtle was gone for six years, and when he came up he was covered with green slime, he had been down so long. He returned with only a very little earth under his nails. The rest had all washed away.

Earth Initiate scraped the earth out from under Turtle’s nails, and put it in the palm of his hand and rolled it about until it was round and about the size of a small pebble. This he laid on the stern of the raft, and went away and left it. Three times he returned to look at it, and the third time found that it had grown very large. The fourth time he looked at it, it was as big as the world, the raft was on ground, and all around were mountains.

When Turtle knew the raft was on ground he said: “I cannot stay in the dark all the time. Can’t you make a light so that I can see?”

As they got out of the raft, Earth Initiate said: “Look that way, to the east! I am going to tell my sister to come up.”

Then it began to grow light, and day began to break, and the sun came up.

“Which way is the sun going to travel?” Turtle asked.

“I will tell her to go this way, and go down there,” Earth Initiate answered.

After the sun went down it grew very dark.

“I will tell my brother to come up,” said Earth Initiate.

Then the moon rose.

“How do you like it?” Earth Initiate asked Turtle.

“It is very good,” Turtle answered. “Is that all you are going to do for us?”

“No, I am going to do more yet.”

Then he called the stars each by name and they came out.

Some time after this he said: “I am going to make people.”

So he took dark red earth and mixed it with water, and made two figures, one a man and one a woman.

This account of the origins of the world and human beings comes from the Maidu people of what is now California. It is one example from a countless number of ways the first human inhabitants of North America organized and made sense of their lives through what this chapter calls indigenous religions.

Each tribe that lives in North America has its own rich history explaining its origins and how it came to reside in its particular location. Many tribes continue to maintain those accounts. Europeans have long held tribal accounts in low esteem for reasons that have a lot to do with this book and the history of the American West. For one thing, Europeans considered Indians pagans and, therefore, unreliable. Tribal accounts of creation and migration frequently did not correspond with anything that could be found in Christianity and the Bible. That led Europeans to label Indian creation stories as myths, folk tales, and legends, which demeaned them in comparison to European Christian accounts of human origins. For their part, the Maidu recognized the similarities between their creation story and that in the Bible (the step-by-step creation of heavenly bodies, day and night, and eventually human beings), which they considered evidence of *their* story's accuracy. Later, many Europeans and Americans rejected tribal accounts as being unscientific. Some Indian intellectuals questioned this science, arguing that it reflected an ethnocentrism not unlike Christian views of tribal "paganism."

Many tribal creation and migration stories have another important link to this book. Most say the people in question migrated from the "land of the setting sun." Some tribal accounts reference other compass points, but many indicate the west as the point of origin. On the one hand, that places great importance on "the West," although it is not "the West" in the sense it is used in US history and in most of this book. On the other hand, such a western origin story followed by a human migration to the *east*, turns the best-known story of westward expansion (that told from the European or Atlantic perspective) on its head and demonstrates that from the time of first human occupation, the history of the American West is much more complicated and nuanced than is typically thought.

The ancestors of American Indians lived in the Americas for thousands of years before Christopher Columbus arrived and initiated sustained contact with the rest of the world. Accounts of how the first human residents of the Americas arrived vary. Archeologists and anthropologists cite evidence that indicates people migrated into North America from Asia. Many tribal histories such as the Maidu story above say their ancestors were created there and have occupied their homelands since time immemorial.



Figure 1.1 This map shows the geographical location of the major cultural groups who inhabited the West in pre-Columbian North America.

The area west of the Mississippi River, which is the focus of most of this book, contains a variety of culture areas (see Figure 1.1). Culture areas are zones defined by geography in which climate and resources

have influenced the development of distinctive human cultures. The Great Plains, for example, with its vast treeless expanses, massive herds of bison, and relatively sparse precipitation shaped the development of particular human economies and societies. Within each culture area, one can find many tribes and some variation in how people lived. This chapter does not offer an exhaustive list. It samples the religious beliefs of one tribe from each of eight North American culture areas west of the Mississippi to give a sense of the diversity of religious beliefs that existed among American Indians in the region that came to be known as the American West. While similarities exist among American Indian religions, it would be misleading to try to generalize any one tribe's religious system to American Indians as a group.

Timing and transmission also complicate the discussion of indigenous religions here. The chapter aims to give a sense of what indigenous religions were like before non-Indians showed up. This is extremely difficult to accomplish. For one thing, dynamic indigenous religions changed over time both before non-Indians showed up and after. For another, much of what we know about indigenous religions as they existed hundreds of years ago comes to us in words recorded by European Christians. Whatever their intentions might have been (much more on this later), those European Christians left a written record from an outsider's perspective clouded by their own religiously influenced perspectives. Furthermore, much of this discussion uses the past tense as it refers to events or people in the past. It should be noted that Indian people are still very much with us as are some of the religions and beliefs discussed here. So, this chapter provides both a limited sample of the variety of American Indian religions of the West and a particularly vivid lesson in the messiness of writing history across vast distances of time and culture. It shows some areas of overlap, but it also shows how widely American Indian religions could differ. Spirits roamed everywhere and people lived religiously to maintain harmony with them.

Arctic

The Inuit, culturally similar peoples who inhabit the Arctic coastal regions of what is now the United States (Alaska), Canada, Russia, and Greenland, lived in a world populated by an indeterminate number of spirits that lived in animals, objects, and places, and that the Inuit

sought to manipulate through rituals and the aid of shamans. The Inuit identified three different kinds of human souls. The immortal spirit left the body at death to dwell in a spiritual world. Another, a person's breath and bodily warmth, died with the body. A third, the name soul, lived in a spirit world before inhabiting a human form. Typically this soul entered a baby, but an ill adult might change names with the hope that a new name soul might bring restored health. The Inuit believed most disease resulted from breaking a taboo, which offended spirits, or from the loss of part of their soul. They enlisted shamans to help them rectify the taboo violation or to recover the lost part of their soul. In a variation on shamanic belief, the Inuit believed a soul or spirit would enter a shaman's body and take control of it. The Inuit also believed in "soul flight," that a shaman could send his soul to the spirit world where it could recover another person's lost soul or consult other spirits regarding an issue that had arisen on earth.

In addition to rank and file spirits, the Inuit believed in several more powerful spirit figures known to all. Sedna, a goddess who lived in the sea and controlled marine mammals, ranked as the most important. The Inuit believed Sedna had run away from her husband to live with another man. This angered her father, who captured her and set out to return her to her husband, which involved a boat trip. While at sea, a storm arose and threatened their boat. Sedna's father figured the storm resulted from spirits angered by his daughter abandoning her husband. He threw Sedna overboard to calm the spirits, but she clutched the side of the boat. He chopped at her fingers joint by joint until Sedna lost her grip and drowned. Sedna's finger joints transformed into sea mammals, which is why the Inuit seek to appease her before hunting sea mammals. The story of Sedna demonstrates the interconnectedness of the natural and the supernatural worlds that exists in many American Indian religions and how spirits play important roles in everyday tasks and events. The story, which depends on the sea and reflects the importance of hunting marine mammals, also shows the critical importance of place to the religion of the Inuit.

Sub-Arctic

A more detailed example of how American Indians view religion comes from the Koyukon Indians. The Koyukon people, Athapascan-speakers who live in the interior part of what is now known as Alaska, can stand

in for many other American Indian peoples in the broad outlines of their spirituality and how it permeates every facet of life. The particulars vary from tribe to tribe because American Indian spirituality depends heavily upon the land, plants, animals, and spirits of a tribe's homeland.

For the Koyukon people, in Distant Time it is said animals were human. They had human form, lived in human society, and spoke with humans. Raven created this ancient world and controlled it. When Raven first created the earth, rivers flowed both ways – upstream along one bank and downstream along the other. Raven decided this made things too easy for humans, though, as their boats could drift in either direction without paddling. So, Raven changed rivers so they flowed in only one direction and that is how they are today. Distant Time ended when a catastrophic flood covered the earth. Raven arranged for a pair of each species to board a raft. These plants and animals survived, but after the flood they could no longer behave as humans. All the humans from Distant Time died, so Raven recreated people in their present form.

This much-abbreviated story gives a sense of how one group of American Indians considered the origins of the world and the interconnectedness of people with plants, animals, and spirits. The Koyukon people knew well the biblical parallels (once they learned of the Bible). They did not consider this story a reinterpretation of Christianity. In fact, they saw it as evidence supporting the accuracy of their traditions.

The Koyukon people have hundreds of Distant Time stories, which collectively explain the behavior and appearance of living things, the cosmos, even the weather, and they suggest proper relationships in the world. Some stories are short and can be told by children. Others are long and might take weeks of evening-time tellings to complete. Usually older people who have memorized the epics and have expertise in interpreting their meanings tell them.

Distant Time stories served (and serve) many functions for the Koyukon people. They help pass the long, dark winter months as a form of entertainment. They explain the world and how it functions. They provide a code of behavior toward nature and natural resources. Most important in that code is a set of taboos. A person who violates a taboo might suffer any number of consequences ranging from bad luck on a hunt to clumsiness, illness, or even death.

Distant Time stories shape the Koyukon people's outlook on life and help explain certain animal and human behaviors and how they relate.

A Koyukon wanting to know about someone's character might ask, "What kind of animal is he?" For example, in Distant Time the sucker fish was a thief and the Koyukon people hold them in disdain to this day. One Koyukon man told an anthropologist he could not bring himself to eat a sucker fish because he feared it would turn *him* into a thief. A known thief might be described as "just like a sucker fish."

Ravens provide a more complex example. On one hand, the Koyukon people recognize Raven as creator and have great respect for the bird's spirit power. On the other hand, Distant Time stories often portray Raven as a lazy trickster who bedevils people and often finds a way to get ahead through the work of others. A boastful person who makes big promises but delivers small results or who gets ahead by trickery might be described as "just like a raven." In other words, ravens have awesome power, but annoying personalities.

Humans and animals enjoy close relationships in other ways explained by Distant Time stories. The Koyukon people believe animals have many human characteristics. Animals have emotions and personalities and communicate with each other. They understand human language and behavior. They constantly monitor human actions and their spirits are offended by disrespectful behavior such as breaking of taboos. In fact, animals behave in ways that can be interpreted as religious, following their own sets of taboos. A brown bear that killed and ate a ground squirrel, except for the heart, lungs, and windpipe, which it left on a rock, was believed to be observing a dietary taboo. To avoid offending animals, the Koyukon people avoid pointing at them and they speak carefully about them. They avoid boasting about their hunting or trapping skills, for example, for fear of offending their prey. They consider bears so spiritually powerful that they carefully choose every word when speaking of them. They rarely keep wild animals as pets, except those whose personality traits they value. A child who keeps a hawk owl, for instance, might do so with the hope of acquiring the owl's hunting skill. Overall, the Koyukon people aim to treat all animals with respect. They will end the suffering of animals they find injured or starving, and the animals they kill to eat they hunt and butcher according to rules meant to demonstrate respect and gratitude.

The Koyukon people see themselves living in a world where natural and supernatural are unified in ways most of us would not recognize. *Everything* has power and awareness and the Koyukon people live with great sensitivity to and consideration of that. Animals, plants,