
Review by Vern Crisler

Preface

Martin starts out with a quotation from a Hopi man: “Our land, our religion, and our life are one.” This reminds me of something a missionary once said of the Shoshone when he attempted to present the gospel to them. They thought Christianity was the white man’s religion, and since the white man did not take his own religion seriously, why should the Indian?

For the Hopi and many Indians, religion is holistic, affecting everything in life while all too many whites thought of religion as something done on Sundays and forgotten the rest of the week.

Martin might be wrong in thinking Indians “fused spirituality with place and practice to imbue everyday, local realities with the most profound significance.” Personally, I think the notion of “spirituality” is a western notion. The white man tends to interpret traditional Indian life and culture in terms of categories he is familiar with.

Even the notion of Indian “religion” is imposing a Western category of thought on the Indians. If we speak of Indian “religion,” we simply have to remember it may not be what we think religion is in the West.

The essence of Indian “religion” was animism, which resulted in an infusing of personality into the non-human creation. That’s why local realities had “profound significance.” These local realities were “sacred spaces” regarded as e.g., the place of meeting with gods, or of some other sacred event. Animals were also the vessels of gods or spirits.

Martin says that Christian Indians are sometimes dismissed as “inauthentic” but he will show that their story is more interesting that the simplistic view of “inauthenticity.” He also will discuss indigenous religions among Indians and the rise of Indian “prophets” and the rise of peyote religion.

Martin says that Christian Indians are sometimes dismissed as “inauthentic” but he will show that their story is more interesting that the simplistic view of “inauthenticity.” He also will discuss indigenous religions among Indians and the rise of Indian “prophets” and the rise of peyote religion.

It is claimed by Martin that all Americans are implicated in a history of “contact, conquest, resistance, and possible reconciliation.” In my opinion, this is nonsense. The notion of collective guilt could very well be used to indict the Romans and the Greeks as the cause of Indian troubles, or maybe even the Sumerians. Or it could just as well be used to implicate all Indians for the savagery of some Indians against whites.

Chapter 1

Martin starts out with a description of Indian “religion,” that it involved “a world filled with spiritual forces and shaped by them.” He is really describing what is known as animism. In this view, everything has a meaning. Martin says, “Dreams may matter. Mountains can harbor gods . . . Agriculture can be sacred; hunting holy.”

Many Indian stories (e.g., the Hopi) like to tell the origin of specific things, such as the origin of corn, the origin of land, the behavior of the sun and moon, etc. This is very familiar from the mythologies of the ancient world, which are also animistic and fond of etiology stories.

Indian creation stories usually have a starting point somewhere under the earth. The origin of the people is described in terms of childbirth, with the earth being the mother.
The Hopi were apparently asked what they wanted to do after they left the underworld and they chose a hard life as cultivators of blue corn.

The Koyukon people in Alaska believe that animals (including black bear, brown bear, wolverine, wolf, etc.), have spirits and these spirits are powerful. The code of the Koyukon people teach them the power of the spirits of different animals. These spirits had the power of altering creation.

The link between Indian religion and specific landscapes prevent these religions from being “portable.” This is also true of the White Mountain Apaches, whose “sacred stories link ethics to the landscape.” Martin says this means “morality comes from the earth” but what does this mean? Does morality gets its rationale or authority from the earth, or is the landscape simply used as a way to teach morality?

Martin clarifies by pointing out that by telling stories about specific locations, Apaches “invoke the memory of what took place at specific places” and “communicate important moral lessons to each other.” That is not quite the same as saying morality comes from the earth.

Some of the architectural achievements of various tribes are discussed, especially the mound builders. These structures undoubtedly had religious significance. The rise of agriculture during the “Woodland” archaeological phase prompted Indians to adopt more elaborate religious practices, including building thousands of immense burial mounds, some of them with animal forms. Large complexes were also built that functioned as cities of the dead.

One common aspect of origins stories among Indians is the widespread belief in a time when the “earth was overflowed with water.” The use of an Eagle and a Dove to seek out land has interesting overtones with the Judeo-Christian tradition.

It is sometimes hard to tell how much of an Indian creation story is native and how much is imported. It may be that some of the storytellers invoke elements of the Judeo-Christian tradition as a way of impressing their white listeners, that the Indians had it all first, knew all about it, so to speak.

Nevertheless, even leaving out the Judeo-Christian elements, the Indian creation stories are quite interesting as examples of hunter-gatherer tales combined with a universal judgment by flood waters.

Some creation stories involve animal heroes, such as the water-beetle, the muskrat, the duck, or the turtle. According to Martin the “Earth-Diver” story appears as a fairly universal tale among Indian creation stories. The idea is that the Earth-Diver emerges from the water and brings up some dirt. This dirt became the source of the land, or had powers of protection when combined with water and rubbed on the dead.

The Fairgrounds Circle in Ohio was based on this, the circular wave caused by the Earth-Diver’s emergence from the water, and this served as a model for the Circle. The dead could be placed at the center of the water where they could emerge and go into the next world.

The last moundbuilders were the Mississippian, who built their civilization on the basis of a new type of corn. The resulting need for large-scale food storage and protection of
foodstuffs necessitated the building of “distribution centers”—mounds that served as ceremonial, trading, and administrative centers. A whole series of taboos and rules guided the harvests and priests were very important in administrating the sacred rites.

We must remember that Indians were farmers in pre-Columbian times. Romantic scenes with Indians wearing feathered headdresses, riding swift horses, and with bows and arrows, is due to European influence. Before the Europeans arrived with horses, the Indians were farmers and no doubt much of the monumental architecture was made possible because of the wealth created by farming communities, not by romantic bands of horse-riding warriors.

The Anasazi also built permanent stone structures for living and storage, the most interesting being in cliff dwellings. Special underground “kivas” were also built for ceremonies and discussion. The Anasazi abandoned these structures though no one is sure why. Their descendants are the modern Pueblo Indians.

Martin discusses the Aztecs and their achievements. He does not fail to mention their practice of ritual murder or human sacrifice. These bloody people sacrificed thousands of men, women, and children per year, some of the sacrifices winding up in cooking pots. Martin makes a ridiculous comment when he says, “What may seem bizarre to us made sense to them.” That’s about like saying that Nazism seems bizarre to us but made sense to Nazis.

The Indians died in “staggering numbers” from smallpox and other European diseases. This is according to Martin. Indeed, it has become a part of liberal mythology about Indians as far back as I can remember to say that millions of Indians died from white diseases.

However, there is no way of knowing how many Indians died of disease when Europeans arrived. If the history of smallpox or the Black Death is taken into account, perhaps thirty percent of Indians died of smallpox or other diseases. However, since we don’t have a census of Indians living in the Americas at that time, we don’t know how many died in absolute terms.

It is nice that according to Martin “everyone agrees” about the number of people who lived in Mexico but without concrete evidence, it is easy to spin numbers out of one’s head. Those who want to blame the “white man” for genocide will estimate those numbers into the millions upon millions, so as to derive large-scale Indian deaths for propaganda purposes. It is doubtful, however, that the total number of Indians living in the Americas at the time was very high.

Still, the spread of disease from Europeans to Indians to more Indians was a tragedy, and there is no need to inflate the numbers in order to appreciate the magnitude of that tragedy.

Martin’s book does not really discuss at length why Indians who had built such great structures in the Americas abandoned them. He discusses war as a possibility, or a changing environment, but that still leaves unanswered the question as to why there was so much stagnation in Indian culture over the years.

Indians were capable of building large architectural structures but not only did
they abandon them long before the white man arrived, they hardly progressed beyond a farming or hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Why did the old world rise out of a Mesolithic and Neolithic culture and develop great cities, develop writing from Sumerian and Egyptian times, develop philosophy and law in Greek and Roman times, develop mathematical and scientific disciplines during Enlightenment times, and develop industry and complex commerce, while Indians did not get much beyond the bow and arrow? Why was Indian life characterized so much by the sheer need for survival?

Did this stagnation have something to do with Indian religious beliefs or practices, cultural values, or constant inter-tribal warfare and disease? Was it due to the absence of Christianity? These are all important questions, and a study that would provide answers to these questions would be something well worth pursuing.

**Chapter 2**

Martin starts out with a discussion of an incident involving the killing of a bear by a Delaware Indian. After shooting the bear with a musket ball, the Indian stood next to the crying animal and lectured it for its “cowardly” racket. The missionary who had observed this asked the Indian if he truly thought the bear understood him, and the Indian replied yes since the bear looked ashamed when it was being upbraided. The missionary concluded that Delaware Indians had “strange notions.”

Martin says this would not have been strange to other Indians who also had (animistic) beliefs about the personality of animals, plants, and geological phenomena (rivers, rocks). He mentions that hunting animals, such as a bear, required careful rituals such as singing songs, divination and the reading of signs, carrying talismans for luck, and the observance of taboos, especially staying away from women in their periods.

In addition, after the kill, the hunter had to defend his behavior to the spirit of the dead animal, which included either apologizing to the animal, or blaming the animal for belonging to another “tribe.”

While men did the hunting, women did not hunt, but they still participated in the religious ceremonies accompanying the hunt. They processed the meat obtained from the hunt and cooked the food, some of which was given back to the spirits who helped in the hunt in the form of a food offering.

Indians conducted many sacred dances, which were a part of their “worship” life. These dances were performed in order to insure a bountiful harvest, for example of corn, and many dances were named after animals. Tobacco was also offered to the god who controlled the waters of Canadian lakes. Indians placed tobacco on the rocks at Lake George, New York to appease the wind god. However, a Dutchman named Van Curler scoffed and turned his bottom to the rocks.

“Swift consequences followed,” says Martin. “The wind turned ferocious, capsizing his boat, and Van Curler drowned.” Undoubtedly, the wind god was miffed.

Martin describes the importance of storytellers in Indian tradition. Practical lessons and folk wisdom were handed down through oral traditions.
It is noteworthy that European colonists rarely adopted the religion of the natives. Even so, many were greatly influenced by Indians in terms of clothing, the use of canoes, various crops and foods (such as potatoes, tomatoes, corn, squash, beans, pumpkins, etc.). These influences extended beyond the Atlantic to the European continent as well.

Despite the Iroquois “Great League of Peace and Power” it did not stop the Iroquois from pursuing war against non-Iroquois. Martin says these wars were fought for “spiritual” reasons rather than for acquiring territory. The fate of captives taken in these raids was uncertain. The Indians might adopt the captives. “Or,” as Martin says, “they might determine that the captives should be tortured, killed, butchered, and cooked for ritual consumption by the villagers.”

Many whites who look upon the red man as “noble savages” or innocent babes of the forest are shocked to learn that Indians could be capable of such brutality. Martin, always ready with a rationalization, says: “Torture and ritual cannibalism allowed grieving Iroquois to vent their rage against enemies and assimilate the orenda, or spiritual power, of captives.” We are not told what the captives thought of such things; they were no longer around for interviews.

When the Europeans came, Indians became involved in the fur trade, and war was transformed from small-scale raids to large scale “beaver wars.” Those Indians who obtained guns from the Europeans dominated other tribes. However, tired of the bloodshed, the Iroquois tribes agreed to allow the French to settle their differences, and this allowed the Iroquois population to grow and become a strong political force.

The resulting trade networks involving East coast Indians and European settlers became a regular part of Indian life. By the second or third generation, Indians were using European techniques for farming and husbandry, as well as architectural styles. Instead of living in communal homes, Indians began to live in single-family dwellings.

Martin points out that because of European contact, American Indians began to change their religious traditions. They invented new stories, new myths in order to explain the presence of the newcomers. Some said the Creator tried various times to create the Indian but had a couple of failures, which included white men and black men as well, and this necessitated more than one creation. European goods were used by the Indian as among other things enhancements to ceremonial objects. In turn Indians became dependent on European goods.

One result of this was the collapse of the ecosystems of the beaver and deer. “Everywhere,” says Martin, “they took too many animals.” He means Indians overhunted. This is ironic, in that whites would later do the same thing to the buffalo. In fact, overhunting in the north east became an economic threat, and broke down traditional views of the relation of man and non-human nature.

According to Martin, this was the “triumph of market values over spiritual ones.” Or perhaps it was due to the short-sighteditness of both Europeans and Indians, who did not realize they were destroying their own future markets.

In reaction to the spread of Europeans, Martin says that new “prophets” arose
among the Indians. Some of them advised the Indians to reject Christianity.

Many Indians had succumbed to alcohol addiction while others succumbed to smallpox. Many of them became angry with the colonists, primed for violence. Listening to the siren song of the new prophets, Indians went on a rampage, killing many English settlers and destroying their homes. Others, such as Papouhan emphasized Christian virtue such as nonviolence, antislavery, and self-restraint. A Seneca prophet by the name of Handsome Lake counseled reform rather than violence, and advised his fellow Indians to put aside drinking and gambling, and to be kind to one another, and follow ancient traditions.

Other prophets, however, counseled revolt and a radical separation from all things European. These prophets influenced Pontiac, who led a rebellion against the British in 1762. Other movements influenced further Indian battles with whites, including the war with General St. Clair, a war that ended with the deaths of 630 U.S. soldiers.

Tecumseh heard the message of violence against the white man. Many Indians also heard the message and not only killed white men but also other Indians who were regarded as too friendly with the white population. Despite all of this, however, many Indians began converting to Christianity.

Chapter 3

Martin describes the conversion of the young Cherokee woman Catharine Brown to Christianity. She was almost taken away from the missionary school by her father who was immigrating out West, but she was allowed to stay because the father’s plans to go out West did not come to fruition. After that, she continued her education and became a teacher and missionary and founder of a school for Cherokee women. She died early because of tuberculosis but has survived in both American and Cherokee memory.

According to Martin, by the beginning of the twentieth century, “Christianity had become one of the main ways Native American people expressed themselves religiously.” Furthermore, “The religion’s popularity continued to grow throughout the century until in 1990, two out of three Native American high school seniors claimed Christianity as their religious preference in a poll.”

Why did Christianity spread so widely among American Indians? Martin doesn’t mention the grace of God or the Christian emphasis on universalism in salvation (neither Jew nor Greek), but if we confine ourselves to mundane considerations, he points out that conversions were a way for Indians to access the dominant culture. This meant expanded “career” or lifestyle options and the possibility of finding new friends and having opportunities for travel.

Many regarded Christianity and tribal traditions as complementary. The Creek Indians, for instance, have designed their churches to reflect “traditional ceremonial architecture” and in some churches worshipers uses the Creek’s own language rather than English.

Lakota Indians have also worked to integrate their traditional culture with Christianity, e.g., Nicholas Black being a strong promoter of Catholicism, or Alex Seowtewa, who combines
traditional Indian religious objects with
sacred scenes from the Catholic faith.

Still, a number of Indians wish to keep
their traditional “religions” separate
from Christianity. Instead of going to
church, many go to tribal dances and
ceremonial performances, and it is
thought by some that those who do the
one cannot do the other.

Many of these practices appear rather
superstitious to most outside
observes. Dressing up superstition by
calling it a “relational epistemology” or
a “rejection of Cartesian dualism,” or
“ecological ethics,” or perhaps a form of
“interconnectedness,” as some do, does
not hide the essential silliness of many
of these superstitions.

In my opinion, however, traditional
Indian superstitions appear to flow
directly and logically from their
animistic worldview and make sense
within that “religious” outlook. Whites,
on the other hand, have lived in an age
of science and universal education for
many years now, but still adopt
superstitions for no discernibly good
reason other than from ignorance and
stupidity.

Indians have adopted their traditions in
interesting ways. Hopis have adopted
the Judeo-Christian week and plan their
ceremonials for weekends just as
Christians do. Santa Claus has even
shown up at one of their
ceremonies. Many Hopis have also
adopted eschatological beliefs that see a
role for Christianity as a preparation for
a greater Hopi future.

Other Indians have rejected Christianity
altogether. Some, such as Tomo-chi-chi
as long ago as 1733 have done so
because they’ve witnessed “Christians”
engaging in what he perceived as
brutality and dishonesty. Others reject
Christianity by linking it to what they
regard as racism, colonialism, or
genocide. They see Christianity as
sanctioning the “invasion” of Indian
lands.

Still others reject the account of creation
as told in the Bible because of the
dominion mandate, whereas Indians
claim to believe in an earth-friendly
religion.

Admittedly, some of these criticism
echo modern leftwing and Marxist
attacks on America and Christianity, but
it cannot be denied that some Indians,
even aside from political interests, tend
to hold Christianity responsible for
much of the loss of their ancestral
homelands and ways of life.

Some of these Indians object to the story
of the Exodus and Conquest of Canaan
and settlement of the Israelites in the
Promised Land. Because many
Christians who settled in the New World
saw themselves as Israelites trying to
survive in the American wilderness, and
carving out homes for themselves
among the native “Canaanites,” they
used this narrative to justify hostilities
with Indians. This is ironic, since the
story of the Exodus has been used by
black Americans during the days of
slavery as a source of comfort rather
than conquest.

Some Indians also hold a bitterness
toward Christianity because of their
forced attendance at boarding
schools. For instance, the Indian school
in Carlisle, Pennsylvania was a favorite
destination for Indian children, who
were often lonely and afraid and far
from their parents—a condition not
unlike that experienced by white
children who were dumped by their
parents at boarding schools.
Martin says this experience “deeply scarred” generations of children, filling them with “despair, confusion, and self-hatred.” He does not offer any real proof of this, and has to cite what one Navajo Indian imagined it to be like! One could just as well argue that these boarding schools prepared Indian children to live and succeed in the predominantly white culture. If they were ever going to do anything for their tribe, a good modern education provided the best means of achieving that end.

Still, the idea of Indian schools was a part of a larger network of issues involving the promotion of the public school system. Just as Indians were to be immersed in non-Indian culture and religion, so public school students were to be immersed in Protestant culture and religion. The public school system, like the Indian schools, tended to be statist in conception, not to mention anti-Catholic. Nowadays, of course, nobody would argue for “total immersion” education as practiced by the “enlightened” educators of yesteryear with respect to Indian children.

Nevertheless, many Indians have adopted Christianity with enthusiasm, noting that Christianity does not teach that the earth should be despoiled. For these Christians, says Martin, “there is no insurmountable contradiction in being Native and Christian.”

Chapter 5

This fifth chapter is named “Homecoming” because modern Indians have “gone home” by rediscovering the animism of their ancestors. This involves giving offerings to the gods of the earth, respecting shrines, burial grounds, and the like. Indian “spirituality” involves a great emphasis on “sacred space.”

For Christians, with the Advent of Jesus, there is no longer any need for sacred space (the Temple), sacred time (the Sabbaths), sacred menus (dietary laws), sacred objects (the scrolls of the law), or sacred people (priesthood). Christians are told that they need to be grown-ups rather than children and they should put aside the Old Testament schoolmaster and its emphasis on the concrete, ritualistic, and the sacramental nature of the world. Rather, they should see the world as de-sacralized. For any Christian to continue to see it as a sacred thing it is simply an attempt to return to childhood.

American Indian religion, on the other hand, starts out with an animistic belief in the personal nature of the world. Sacral objects, spaces, times, etc., are integral to Indian religion, not preparations for a distant future, to be set aside when that future arrives. For an Indian to set aside ritual and the sacred would be to cut the heart out of his own religion, which is why even those who converted to Christianity found it hard to give up their native traditions.

Sometimes these beliefs stand in the way of progress, not only scientific progress but also economic progress for Indians. The controversy over the observatory on Mount Graham is a case in point. As against those who claimed the mountain was sacred, one Apache noted, “I’ve lived here all my life and I’ve never heard anyone say that Mt. Graham was sacred. . . .” Another pointed out that the observatory would not destroy Indian culture but would provide employment to a reservation with an 80 percent unemployment rate.

Additionally, “When Indians attack the university [of Arizona], it’s like saying that education itself is not an Indian value, that it’s un-Indian to learn. We
should be working on education, the economy, programs for the elderly.”

Martin, however, is not really interested in these realistic, forward-looking Indians. No, he’s more interested in the “sacralizing” Indians. He provides a lot of space describing the efforts of one somewhat addled Indian whoman who had visions of the mountain. She joined up with a left-wing environmentalist group and militant Indian group in an effort to stop construction of the observatory.

Thankfully, these groups were not successful and the observatory was built anyway. One should note that when the issue of tribal casinos comes up, there is not a similar attempt to stop these casinos from being built on “sacred ground.”

Nevertheless, the sacralizers have made a lot of news objecting to development and tourism, but were dealt a significant blow in 1988 when the Supreme Court ruled against religious objections to the building of a road in California. Martin laments that “Native religious practices” might not be protected in the future because many Indians suffer from poor health, diabetes, domestic violence, high murder rates, and high rates of suicide, and thus, there won’t be any one left to carry on the traditions.

In an odd, reactionary, moralizing way, Martin laments that Indians are watching too much television, which “distracts Native people from age-old communal spiritual paths.” Instead of learning stories that are “thousands of years old” [how could Martin know how old they are?], young Indians are “learning the plots of popular television shows and films.” In addition, traditional Indian religion is threatened by dastardly video games and the Internet.

Indians are also alleged victims of racism, being “stereotyped” by non-Indians. This hurts their “self-image,” we are told. Martin alleges that the most common stereotype of the Indian is the “doomed, horse-mounted, buffalo-hunting nomads who wore long feathered headdresses,” etc.

Now, I don’t know any white person who has ever thought that Indians still live like that, so it’s hard to take Martin seriously on these points. Apparently, Indians have such a fragile self-image that they can’t survive team names such as “Cleveland Indians,” “Atlanta Braves,” or “Redskins.” The latter slang term for Indians has nothing to do with skin color, but is probably related to the red war paint Indians wore before going into battle. From earliest colonial times, Indians referred to themselves as “redskins” and did not take it amiss. How the mighty warriors have fallen.

Martin does make one good point, however. Many whites are entranced by Indian “spirituality” and want to partake of it, and have even created an industry of it. “It includes,” says Martin, “fake ‘shamans’ who provide weekend retreats to seekers in exchange for cash, a good deal of New Age music featuring Native American chanting and drums, and many books supposedly revealing Native American wisdom to readers.”

I agree with Martin. Too many stupid white men try to be like blacks or Hispanics or Indians. Unfortunately, Indians sometimes adopt New Age ideas, not realizing they are the product of doddering white men with too much time on their hands. It might be an interesting exercise to trace all of the “white” influence that is part of
“traditional” Indian art, music, “spirituality,” literature, or movies.

Some Indians bemoan the influence of “white” culture or stereotypes, but they are not above taking money from whites, whether in tourism, toxic dumps, or casinos. The fact that it might “disturb the balance of people with their land,” is not so great a concern to them after all, for we all know that green is everyone’s favorite color.

Casinos, in fact, have been described as “the new buffalo.” Nevertheless, not being satisfied with a huge cash cow like casinos, Indians want “sacred” artifacts returned from museums to Indians. The fact is, however, these artifacts had no value to the Indians when they were placed in museums. In my opinion, repatriation movements (much like reparation movements) are merely another way of soaking stupid white men.

Martin claims that “new songs and visions” will help Indians survive but I think it’s the old songs and visions that people are interested in, because it’s a part of American history. As long as the old stories are remembered, so too will the American Indian be remembered.

Some thoughts: The initiation rite into the Christian "tribe" is baptism, but it is not done because of superstition. The water is not magical (except in vampire fiction), and one is not attempting to appease spirits who inhabit plants, trees, and animals.

Superstition involves a fear component, which is proportional to how far one personalizes one's environment. In Christian tradition, the world does not have personality, but is subject to God's sovereign providence. So I cannot accept the relativist idea that "what one calls a superstition, another calls a religion."

Not all Indian traditions or ceremonies need have originated from superstition, so I'm only talking about the ones that presuppose an animist concept of the world and lead to rampant sacralizing.

Many other Indian traditions could then be like Christmas, which is associated historically with pagan traditions. Now, however, Christmas has been largely desacralized but still honored. So, too, Indian traditions can achieve the same status for Christian Indians, no longer regarded as sacred but still honored in historical memory.

With regard to dietary restrictions or food laws, I believe that for the Indians, dietary regimentation flowed from their animistic view of the world, a world filled with personality. Because of that, they had to be careful about whom they offended.

The laws of the Israelites, however, were not based on the personality of the world, but rather on the need to separate Jews from Gentiles. Israel was meant to be a priestly nation and therefore had many ceremonial and dietary restrictions that would provide a dividing line between Jew and Gentile.

As theologians like to say the sacral nature of Israel's religion was "redemptive-historical." It was a part of the history of redemption and therefore the sacral regime of Israel was ultimately teleological in focus, a shadow of the reality to come. Such a sacral regime was no longer relevant once that reality had arrived (the Advent of Christ).

Indian religion, however, or at least Indian religion not influenced by Judeo-Christian concepts, is not teleological in focus but is rather pragmatic in focus. The idea is to appease the spirits
of the forest, trees, animals, plants, stars or what have you. It is directed toward the present.