In this chapter, we learn about religious encounters between peoples of the Americas, Africa, and Europe as they established new relationships in an increasingly complex world of social, political, economic, and cultural connections and interdependence. In this emerging Atlantic world, people relied on religious orientations and understandings to guide their encounter of, and often violent conflict with, people, cultures, landscapes, and traditions very different from their own. The new worlds that the indigenous Americans, Africans, and Europeans made in their first encounters served as the foundation for the religious history of America.

America astonished Christopher Columbus (1451–1506). The legendary Admiral of the Ocean Sea, whose voyages initiated permanent European settlement in the Americas, encountered wonders beyond his imagination. He reported seeing mermaids with “something masculine in the countenance,” armored with copper plates and brandishing bows and arrows.¹ He reveled in the astounding variety of plant life as well as an abundant array of strangely unfamiliar animals. Resorting to the imagery of his Christian faith, Columbus described one place he explored as the Garden of Eden, stating, “I believe the earthly paradise lies here, which no one can enter except by God’s leave.”²

Although few details are known concerning his personal life, the surviving record of his voyages reveals that Christopher Columbus stood at the crossroads of the medieval and Renaissance periods of European cultural history.³ Historians recognize his capabilities as a superb seaman, a skillful navigator, and a sensitive observer of the places he encountered. His observations reveal an educated curiosity typical of the European Renaissance, reflecting a mind well informed of the...
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scientific understandings of his era. On the other hand, Columbus retained a deep Christian piety that reflected centuries of medieval concern for the human place in the cosmos. His scientific observations were tempered by a pious struggle to fit new findings into a medieval Christian view of divine order.

This struggle becomes apparent in Columbus’ ambivalence toward native peoples who inhabited the islands and other lands that he explored in the western hemisphere. His widely divergent views of indigenous Americans reflect his circumstance in a changing European world; in particular, they draw attention to a dramatic tension between the medieval world of the old and a newly emerging modern perspective. On the one hand, Columbus often expresses genuine admiration of the indigenous people he encountered in the Americas. “They are affectionate people,” he wrote of the natives who came to his aid in December 1492, when his ship had run aground, “free from avarice and agreeable to everything.” In fact, he concludes, “in all the world I do not believe there is a better people or a better country. They love their neighbors as themselves, and they have the softest and gentlest voices in the world and are always smiling.” He commends their propensity for Christian values; indeed, calling them people who “love their neighbors as themselves.” But elsewhere, he condemns people who violate his deepest human convictions. For instance, Columbus learned of a people called Caribes,

Figure 1.1 The European entry into the contact zones of America was later imagined as a pious act of bringing Christianity to the “pagan” peoples of America, as illustrated in this nineteenth-century engraving of Columbus’ first landing in the New World. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-DIG-pga-01974.)
who, he surmised, “must be a very daring people since they go to all the islands and eat the people they are able to capture.” When one of his exploring parties came under attack, he concluded that “the people here are evil, and I believe they are from the island of Caribe, and that they eat men.”

**Box 1.1** Zones of contact

As he landed on the island beaches of the Americas, Christopher Columbus entered an ambiguous space between worlds. His Atlantic crossing had removed him from the familiar places of Europe, and as he stepped from his boat onto the sand the captain passed into a borderland of worlds altogether unknown to him. Columbus carried with him into this borderland his own universe of European tradition, worldview, and especially his Christian ethos, and he found there indigenous people with their own sense of tradition, worldview, and ethos.

The ambiguous space where very different people first encounter each other has been described by literary historian Mary Louise Pratt as a “contact zone.” Pratt uses this term “to refer to the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.” This idea of a contact zone draws attention to the momentous encounters between individuals and groups of people who had no previous familiarity or even knowledge of each other. These encounters most often resulted in the establishment of colonial relationships where one group dominated and controlled the other group, usually for economic advantage. But, in nearly all cases, subjugated peoples did not accept colonial domination with passive submissiveness. Even when they found themselves in traumatic circumstances of forced submission that involved relinquishment of lands, separation from families and communities, and prohibitions against religious traditions that had sustained their communities for centuries, colonized people found creative ways to engage the dominant cultures that kept them in submission. Pratt emphasizes a process of “transculturation” to describe “how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture.” In this way, dominated and colonized people continuously engaged with the dominant culture and made it their own through incorporating the ideas, practices, and material objects of the foreign culture into their own worldviews and ways of living, sometimes creating altogether new cultural forms that in turn found their way back into the dominant culture.
Contact zones, then, are the circumstances in which unfamiliar people encounter each other and initiate colonial relationships. But the term can have more broad applications; in particular, we can think of a contact zone as the space and time of encounter with otherness and difference. In other words, contact zones are historical moments and places where people are confronted by new and unanticipated modes of living and manners of social interaction, by moral codes that contradict their own moral understandings and commitments, and by religious traditions that involve alien conceptions of reality and peculiar devotional practices. Many times the encounters of difference that occur in these contact zones devolve into violent conflict as each side perceives threats to its own ways of living and understandings of the world. But the circumstances of encounter can also generate opportunities for creative and productive engagements with otherness. Throughout human history people have forged altogether new and unforeseen modes of social organization and ways of living from their mutual engagement with others who were complete strangers before their initial encounter. The results have nearly always involved one group benefiting at the expense of others, but at the same time dominated groups have shown remarkable resourcefulness in finding ways to resist and subvert domination, and to adapt and survive by creatively using the resources of the dominating people for their own gain.

The profound strangeness of peoples and places that he encountered in the Americas amazed Columbus, yet he never relented in his commitment to the triumph of the Christian gospel in ushering in a new world order. In fact, he reveals in the log of his first voyage that his true purpose for sailing to the Indies was to gain the wealth necessary to launch an assault to recapture Jerusalem from the Muslims who controlled the holy city; he relates, “I have already petitioned Your Highness to see that all the profits of this, my enterprise, should be spent on the conquest of Jerusalem.” In other words, Columbus sailed the ocean sea not to prove that the world was round or even to expand Spanish claims in new lands, but to reclaim the Holy Land for Christian pilgrims.

The importance of pilgrimage in the piety of Christopher Columbus became evident on the return trip across the Atlantic from his initial voyage to the Indies. Columbus appealed to his Christian faith when faced with disaster on the high seas. On the morning of February 14, 1493, with fierce winds driving huge waves that broke over the sides of his ship, Columbus “ordered that a pilgrimage to Santa María de Guadalupe be pledged.” He himself drew the lot, and he thereby “considered [himself] obliged to fulfill the vow and make the pilgrimage.” In the same storm, he ordered that two more pilgrimages be pledged. Upon his safe return to
Spain, Columbus endeavored to fulfill these vows; his Christian faith brought him to the Spanish shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe following his first voyage to the Americas.

As both Christian pilgrim and accomplished mariner, Columbus straddled a world suffused with the scientific and philosophical thinking of the Renaissance period while remaining deeply implicated in the medieval world of Christian religiosity. His superb skill as a navigator and his excellent seamanship enabled his bold crossing of the Atlantic Ocean into lands previously unknown to Europeans, but in his mind it was only by God’s providence that the strange and marvelous lands of what he thought were the far eastern reaches of Asia were delivered to him and the Spanish sovereigns Isabella (1451–1504) and Ferdinand (1452–1516). The riches encountered there, he thought, were God’s provision to return Jerusalem to faithful Christians, and the people he met in these new lands were potential converts to the Christian faith who also would serve as laborers to harvest the riches of the land. What Columbus discovered was not so much a new world but an expanded vision of what he regarded as God’s providence for bringing Christian redemption to a fallen world. He set out as a devout Christian who, like other European Christians seeking routes to India, understood his voyage as a means to defeat the Muslim enemy. The strangely unfamiliar lands and people he found, however, shook the very foundations of the medieval world of Christian Europe; at the same time, his arrival in America changed forever the lives of people who encountered these Christians entering their homelands.

As we consider the many ways that people encountered others who seemed to them altogether strange and unfamiliar, it becomes apparent that such encounters lie at the center of the historical processes that gave rise to what scholars have called the Atlantic world, the early modern colonial world of Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Our studies of religions in America, beginning with Christopher Columbus, highlight the enormity of these encounters, some would say collisions, of people and their cultures, heritages, institutions, and cosmological perspectives in a rapidly expanding Atlantic world that would come to define America. However, the historical Columbus, who represents the initiation of these global encounters, is not the heroic Admiral of the Ocean Sea celebrated in the spellbinding tales often repeated as a staple of primary education in the United States; instead, he represents the late medieval Christian obsession with recapturing Jerusalem from Muslims and the conquistador ethos of conquest, both material and cultural. Christopher Columbus marks a starting point for us to contemplate the complex and diverse histories of religious encounters in America.

We must keep in mind too that, far from representing an anomalous figure in the European confrontation of new territories, the enigmatic character of Christopher Columbus represents just one moment in this complex story of first contacts, exchanges, and conflicts that changed familiar worlds and ushered in new relationships based on an increasingly global perspective. This rapidly changing world not only involved Columbus and the Europeans who followed him to the
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western hemisphere; it also included the diverse peoples of Africa, the islands of the Caribbean Sea, North America, Mesoamerica, and South America, and eventually the many cultures of the Pacific Ocean regions as well as Asia. In virtually every case, the religious orientations of the people involved in these encounters were key determining factors in how they responded to the dynamics of contact and made sense of their changing world. Nearly everyone who experienced sudden disruptions of familiar ways turned to their gods and other supernatural powers,

Map 1.1  The Leardo Map of the World, produced by the Italian mapmaker Giovanni Leardo in the 1450s, shows how Europeans understood the world in the middle of the fifteenth century. The map is oriented with east at the top and has Jerusalem at the center, marked by the large edifice at the top of (i.e., east of) the Mediterranean Sea. (From the American Geographical Society Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries.)
The two largest religious traditions in the world today both emerged from a common monotheistic orientation originating in the Middle East. Both Christianity, the largest worldwide religion in numbers of adherents, and Islam, with the second-largest number of followers, share a common beginning in the monotheism of the Judaic religion; all three religions trace their roots to the patriarch Abraham, and this triumvirate of monotheistic orientations are thus known as the Abrahamic religions.

According to the Torah, the sacred text of Judaism, Abraham worshiped the god Yahweh (although this name for the god was not revealed until later), and Abraham received a covenant from Yahweh giving him children in his old age. First, a son was born to Hagar, the servant of Abraham’s wife Sarah; the son was named Ishmael. Then the elderly Sarah herself bore a son, named Isaac. The Torah traces the ancestry of the Jewish people to Isaac. Moses, a descendant of Isaac, was born under Egyptian enslavement of the Jews; auspicious circumstances saved the child from orders to kill all male Hebrew infants. Subsequently, the Jewish god Yahweh called on Moses to lead his people out of captivity in Egypt to a promised land in Palestine; the Torah tells of Moses’ death just before the Hebrews’ arrival in their promised land. The Tanakh, or Jewish Bible, consists of the Torah together with the prophetic works of the Nevi’im and the other collected canonical writings of the Ketuvim. Together they tell the story of the Jewish people and document the wisdom, poetry, and ethical requirements of Judaism.

In the first century CE in the region of Palestine, a Jewish prophet by the name of Jesus of Nazareth sought to renew and transform Jewish traditions. His followers regarded him as the Messiah (or Christ in Greek), from the Jewish tradition of an “anointed one,” originally referring to Jewish kings as anointed to lead Yahweh’s people but later referring to the hope that Yahweh would send a new king to restore the greatness of the Jewish kingdom. According to the Christian sacred narrative, Jesus suffered martyrdom at the hands of the ruling Romans around 30 CE. In subsequent centuries the various Jewish sects devoted to Jesus Christ established separate identities and were eventually recognized as a non-Jewish religion in the Roman empire; by the fourth century a dominant Christian establishment had supplanted the Roman state religion as the official religion of the empire.
In the seventh century CE, a religious community emerged on the Arabian Peninsula that also traced its roots to the Jewish patriarch Abraham. According to Islamic tradition, Abraham took his first son Ishmael and Ishmael’s mother Hagar to the city of Mecca, where they established the Ka’bah, the house of Al-Lah (the God), as a refuge and place of pilgrimage. This holy site, however, had become a desecrated shelter for various religious cults of the region over the centuries, until Al-Lah called on the last of the prophets, Muhammad (570–632 CE), who subsequently reclaimed the Ka’bah as the shrine of Al-Lah in 629 CE. Muhammad’s career as holy prophet began when the angel Gabriel appeared to him in a vision as he meditated alone in a cave in the nearby mountains. After this first vision, when the angel commanded Muhammad “Recite!,” Muhammad received numerous divine communications that were subsequently collected in the Muslim holy book of the Qur’an. News of the prophet’s visions quickly spread, and Muhammad and his followers were eventually banned from Mecca. Their migration to the city of Medina, known as the Hijra, marks the beginning of the Ummah, or worldwide community of Muslims; it also denotes the start of the Islamic calendar. After several years in Medina, Muhammad returned to Mecca, capturing it without bloodshed and resanctifying the Ka’bah. By the time of Muhammad’s death, much of the Arabian world had submitted to the religion of Islam (the term in Arabic means “submission”), and within a century it had spread throughout the Middle East and into parts of Asia, Africa, and Europe.

engaged in rituals of purification or propitiation, consulted their mythic traditions, and otherwise relied on religious resources for understanding, solace, and assistance.

African Encounters

Christopher Columbus was not the first European to attempt to reach Asia by sea. In fact, the history of explorations that brought him to American shores had begun decades earlier, when Europeans started seeking sea routes that would allow them to dominate European–Asian trade, which had been going on for centuries. European desire for silks, spices, metal and ceramic products, medicinal herbs, and a variety of technologies from Asia, along with Asian demand for European goods, generated trade networks that spanned differences of culture, religion, and ethnicity on a global scale. What became known as the Silk Road, a series of trade routes connecting Europe and Asia, had been in use
since before the time of Jesus of Nazareth in the first century of the Common Era (CE). By the late medieval period, Europeans sought alternative routes to Asia in order to gain control of this lucrative trade from the Muslims who oversaw much of it. Nearly a century before Columbus first sailed west across the Atlantic Ocean, other explorers had begun exploring sea routes to the east with incursions into Africa that would have profound consequences for Europeans, Africans, and Asians and would eventually bring the Americas into a new global order.

Early in the fifteenth century, the European nation of Portugal sought to expand the kingdom’s wealth with a plan to control trade with Asia by circumventing Muslim-dominated routes. It devised a scheme to invade northern Africa with the goal of reaching the legendary Christian kingdom of Prester John in the heart of the African continent. According to the proposed strategy of the Portuguese, the two Christian nations then could establish a new trade route from the Red Sea directly across Africa to Portugal. But, after capturing the Mediterranean port of Ceuta on the African side of the Strait of Gibraltar in 1415, the plan proved impossible; the Portuguese quickly discovered that there was no easy way across the formidable African continent. They turned their attention instead to finding a sea route around Africa.9

Box 1.3 Prester John

The legendary figure of Prester John, a mysterious Christian king and priest who, according to tales circulated in Europe, ruled over a vast empire of the Orient, entered the Christian imagination of medieval Europe in the twelfth century. In 1145 stories first reached Europe of a great Christian king of the Orient, Prester John, who had come to the aid of the Christian Crusaders. He was said to be a descendant of the Magi of the Christian Gospels and to rule over a large and prosperous kingdom in India. For the next five centuries, European Christians sought this kingdom of the mysterious Prester John; his legend grew while the purported location of his kingdom shifted from southern Asia to the Steppes of central Asia and finally to Africa, where the Portuguese in the fifteenth century hoped for his aid in defeating the Muslims and establishing dominance over trade with Asia. Although predominantly fictional, the stories of Prester John that circulated in medieval Europe may have contained bits of historical fact. But their historicity became lost in fanciful tales that expressed a European desire to find a Christian ally in the threatening lands beyond the known borders of Christendom.10
Indigenous Africa

Finding a sea route around Africa involved establishing contact with coastal Africans and exploring the interior of the continent. As Europeans entered Africa, they found diverse religious traditions that paralleled an equally diverse range of cultural groups, although many of these groups, which inhabited broad regions of the continent, shared a number of common characteristic traits in their religious lives. For many African tribal groups, especially in central and western sub-Saharan Africa, powerful spiritual forces, whether gods or other supernatural powers, were largely localized; each tribe revered its own gods and ancestor spirits, which were located in specific sacred places and vested in particular objects that displayed magical powers. Familial and tribal affiliations joined with religious sentiment and tradition in rites honoring the ancestors, spiritual beings who watched over the living with powers that could bring either rewards or harm to individuals.

Figure 1.2 Medieval and early modern Europeans imagined Prester John as a powerful Christian monarch in Africa who would join with European Christians to conquer Muslims in Africa and the Christian Holy Land. (Image © Mary Evans Picture Library / Alamy.)
or to the tribe as a whole. Many of these tribal groups, including the Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, and Ibo, turned to their particular local spirits for help with the practical concerns of human life, especially regarding health, fertility, prosperity, and conflict with others. At the same time, above these local deities was a distant, inaccessible supreme god who ruled over a highly structured cosmos for many of the tribal peoples of western and central Africa.12

Living in a universe suffused with the powers of spiritual beings, whose presence was felt at every level of human life, including the individual, tribal, environmental, and cosmic levels, local people interacted with tribal deities in a variety of ways. These supernatural beings had powers that could bring either harm or reward, not only at the personal level of the individual but also between individuals and even groups of people in social relationships. Consequently, humans were careful to please their ancestors and the gods with regular ritual offerings. Common throughout western and central Africa were propitiatory rituals of sacrifice to appease gods and ancestral spirits.13

Humans relied on their relationship with supernatural powers for protection, healing, and divining the future. In many areas, Africans carried amulets on their bodies or displayed them conspicuously nearby to guard against misfortune and evil. Many of these magical objects contained spiritual beings that interacted with and often assisted humans. These powerful spirits could be found in fabricated materials, such as bags or sculpted containers or figurines, or in unusual natural objects of sacred significance, such as twisted, misshapen roots or stones.14

Among the most direct interaction between humans and their tutelary deities was spirit possession. A specially selected and trained class of priests served as mediators in many African tribal societies. Among the Yoruba, for instance, certain devotees would undergo rigorous training that included the novice’s “death,” a lengthy period of training in the rites of the gods and the secret language of sacred communication, and then the novice’s “resurrection” as a cultic initiate. These ritual specialists were then capable of being possessed by the spirits of supernatural beings. During ritual ceremonies involving prolonged periods of rhythmic music and dance, they would enter ecstatic trances and become the character and voice of the god, who became present to the tribe through possession of the priest in the ceremonial dance.15

In addition to direct possession by spirits, various forms of divination were common throughout western and central Africa.16 Ritual specialists who communicated with spirits played key roles in determining courses of action in times of conflict, in dealing with illness or misfortune, or in deciding one’s prospects for marriage, even in the naming of children. Believing that ancestors commonly returned to earthly life through rebirth in descendants, parents often relied on the divination specialists to determine which ancestor had returned in their child, and would name the child accordingly.

Along with their practices of spirit possession, divination, and propitiatory sacrifices to the gods, the ritual life of tribal peoples of western and central Africa was
characterized by vibrant musical traditions. Sacred drumming, ritual dancing, and stylized singing accompanied nearly every facet of religious life. Ceremonies of spirit possession, as an example, required specific drumming and dancing to the particular songs of the gods being called. When devotees were “mounted,” or possessed, in such ceremonies, the identity of the god could be determined by the distinctive dance steps of the possessed priest. In fact, rhythmic music was so essential to these religious traditions that they are sometimes referred to as “danced religions.”

In addition to the vast diversity of local tribal religions throughout western and central Africa, the people of these areas were not immune to outside influences, especially monotheistic religions that found their way into the region from the north. Principally Islam, and to a lesser extent Christianity, had penetrated into sub-Saharan Africa by the time that Europeans began entering the African continent. Indeed, Muslims had controlled most of northern Africa since the eighth century CE, and they had traded extensively throughout the continent, bringing not only material goods but also the teachings of Muhammad’s revelations.

Religious conflicts in Africa

As they first encountered the cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity of Africa, Europeans harbored more than economic ambitions for controlling trade with Asia. They also sought religious conquest, especially in northern Africa, which was predominantly Muslim; European Christians had long sought to defeat and eventually eradicate what they understood to be the heretical followers of Muhammad. In addition, they also intended to proselytize among non-Muslim Africans. Indeed, the Portuguese entered the contact zones of Africa as zealous Christian evangelists and soldiers of the faith.

Besides their religious intentions to bring the European variety of Christianity to Africa, the Portuguese also carried less noble causes into the zones of contact. Specifically, they hoped to conquer and enslave the Africans. However, their early expectations of easy victory faltered when they met effective resistance from African forces well equipped to protect the coast. The Portuguese soon realized that diplomacy and peacefully regulated trade based on treaties with powerful African nations was a more reliable and profitable approach. These arrangements brought great wealth for Portuguese merchants trading in African agricultural products such as pepper and sugar; traders also became rich by acquiring African gold, and many built their fortunes in the slave trade.

Economic wealth, however, did not displace religion entirely as an important objective of the Portuguese’s encounter with the peoples of Africa, an encounter that supported the needs of traders as well as those of the Portuguese monarchy. The intertwining of religious, political, and economic goals in the contact zones of Africa is clearly evident, for instance, in Portugal’s colonization of the Congo, beginning in 1483. Portuguese officials realized that friendly relations with the
Manicongo, ruler of the Congo people, whose vast kingdom covered much of the continent’s interior, would allow not only the benefits of trade but also the possibility of establishing contact with the legendary Christian king Prester John, whom the Portuguese believed was in Ethiopia. Key to securing this alliance was gaining the Manicongo’s spiritual allegiance, for he was not only a political ruler but also embodied devotion to the tutelary deities of the region. Consequently, the
Portuguese sent colonists to the Congo in 1490 to strengthen their alliance and to evangelize among the people of the region. The Manicongo, his eldest son and eventual successor Afonso, and other high-ranking members of the ruling class all were baptized as Christians. But efforts to Christianize the Congo met resistance, most powerfully from adversaries who had benefited from the slave trade. Despite their success among the native ruling class, Christian missionaries were no match for the powerful economic and political forces involved in the capture and sale of slaves that came to dominate the Congo.  

As the Portuguese continued to explore and colonize Africa, they eventually succeeded in rounding the southern tip of the continent, allowing them to dominate European trade with Asia by controlling sea routes around Africa and across the Indian Ocean. Moreover, they also found Prester John. In 1493 an emissary representing the king of Portugal presented himself at the court of the Ethiopian Christian ruler King Eskender (1471–1494), whom the Portuguese regarded as the legendary Prester John. Indeed, finding the elusive Christian king in Africa had remained a key goal in Portugal’s plans not only to dominate trade with Asia but also to defeat the
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Muslims and regain Christian control of the Holy Land. But finding Prester John did not yield a strategic advantage as the Portuguese had hoped it would. Ultimately the isolated kingdom in Ethiopia proved of little use in Portugal’s colonial ambitions.

Portuguese ambitions did, however, initiate an era of European expansion and colonization that encompassed not only the African continent but also Asia, the Americas, and much of the Pacific region. The Portuguese eventually came to America and established the colony of Brazil in South America. And, although Portugal itself had no significant direct involvement in colonizing North America, we can see that its early exploits on the African continent continue to have an impact on the peoples and cultures of North American society. In particular, their engagement with the indigenous peoples of Africa initiated European involvement in the trading of slaves, which would transport Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to American shores, bringing with them religious traditions and practices that would alter the religious landscapes of the Americas. The long and troubled history between European and African nations that began with Portuguese attempts to dominate trade with Asia would have profound consequences for all of the Americas, drawing the people of all three continents into the complex Atlantic world that emerged from their mutual encounters. Indeed, the many zones of contact where European Christians met indigenous African religions, Arabian Muslim traditions, Indian Hindu civilizations, and even the unfamiliar Christian world of Ethiopia precipitated changes on all sides of these encounters that would become the foundations of an enduring world order built on European colonial domination.

European Conquests in America

Christopher Columbus certainly was not the first outsider to enter the Americas. Evidence of Asian artifacts in present-day Ecuador suggests some sort of transpacific contact in the early centuries of the Christian Era, and Norse explorers attempted unsuccessfully to establish settlements along the northern Atlantic coast of North America in the eleventh century. Columbus’ significance is not as “discoverer” of America but as colonizer. His voyages to the Americas in the late fifteenth century initiated permanent European settlement in the western hemisphere. Consequently, Columbus’ ambitions as a zealous crusader for the Christian cause also opened the way for Christianity to enter the cultural worlds of the Americas.

The Spanish come to America

While Portuguese explorers, traders, and missionaries were establishing themselves in Africa during the fifteenth century, their Spanish neighbors were engaged in a religious war at home to recapture areas under Muslim rule. Arab and Berber Muslims had entered the Iberian Peninsula, the area of present-day Spain and
Portugal, early in the eighth century from northern Africa and remained until nearly the end of the fifteenth century. Under the rule of Islamic law, Muslims had devised a social order in the Iberian Peninsula that on the one hand allowed Jews and Christians to flourish as subordinated groups but on the other limited their social mobility and economic opportunities. Some of the Christian leaders, however, were not content to remain under Muslim rule. They engaged in reconquista, a series of holy wars to reconquer formerly Christian regions and oust their Muslim overlords. Joining a tradition of medieval crusades that began in the last decade of the eleventh century with Pope Urban II’s call to defend Christian lands against Muslim invaders, Iberian Christians took up arms against their Muslim rulers and pursued a military conquest that eventuated in one of the few successful Christian crusades. They recaptured the city of Toledo in the eleventh century, and other major cities in the thirteenth century. But the Muslims held on in the southern areas of the Iberian Peninsula until 1492, when the Christian monarchs Isabella of the Spanish province of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon finally recaptured Granada and drove out the Muslim rulers for good.

Box 1.4 Convivencia

For nearly eight centuries, Muslims ruled significant parts of the Iberian Peninsula with a social system that historians have described as convivencia, a term literally meaning “living together” but usually translated as “coexistence,” connoting a mutual acceptance and creative influence between different social groups. Under this system of governance, Christian and Jewish people enjoyed official status as dhimmis, a special designation that recognized their close relatedness to Islam as people who shared significant religious narratives, scriptures, and histories with Muslims as descendants of the patriarch Abraham. This approach to governing subordinated groups by giving them special privileges allowed for centuries of peaceful coexistence between Muslims, Christians, and Jews, although there remained a degree of mutual friction, rivalry, and suspicion between groups. Yet, despite occasional tensions that sometimes erupted in violence, the Muslim rulers in the Iberian Peninsula managed to encourage a vibrant intellectual culture where the greatest of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian thinkers of the era came together in a fertile context of intellectual, philosophical, and artistic accomplishment. Great universities in the Iberian Peninsula became not only centers of study and learning but also sites of cultural transmission. For instance, the classical heritage of such monumental thinkers as Plato and Aristotle had been lost for the most part to Europeans for centuries, but their philosophical and literary works had been preserved and studied by Muslim scholars, who reintroduced them to western Europe through universities that were among the great achievements of the Muslim rulers in the Iberian Peninsula.
The end of Muslim rule in the Iberian Peninsula in 1492 had monumental consequences for the future of the world, and especially for the Americas. The newly triumphant Christian monarchs immediately ordered the expulsion of all Jews from lands they now controlled, bringing to an end centuries of *convivencia* and the legacies of peaceful coexistence among religious people of different traditions. Tens of thousands of Iberian Jews either left or became *conversos*, Jewish converts to Christianity. At the same time that shiploads of Jews were departing from Iberian ports, a small fleet of three ships under the command of Christopher Columbus was leaving in hopes of finding a new route to the Indies.

Columbus carried with him the confidence of a Christian nation triumphant in its crusades to conquer the non-Christian infidels and spread the gospel of Christianity to all lands. He initiated centuries of conflict emboldened by a conquistador vision of God’s providence. Success in driving the Muslims out of the Iberian Peninsula and back into Africa fueled the expansionist ambitions of the Spanish Christians and motivated them to extend their culture of conquest to the Americas. After centuries of battling Muslims, the Spanish Christians were accustomed to a society organized around military conflict with the heroic conquistador assuming a role of saintly proportions. But, with the final defeat of Muslim rule in Granada, the conquistadors needed a new adversary to conquer. The Spaniards were ripe for “discovering” new lands for conquest. They entered the contact zones of the Americas confident in their providential mission.

Their enthusiasm for conquest was based upon a profoundly religious hope of a Christian millennial age. As they recaptured areas that had been under Muslim control, the Spaniards set about to convert non-Christians to Christianity. This was accomplished less by force than by adaptation. Former mosques became Christian churches with remarkably little architectural renovation. When Fernando de Talavera (1428–1507) became the first archbishop of Granada after its return to Christian control in 1492, he studied Arabic language, music, and dance and he used these in his efforts to convert local Muslims to Christianity. His evangelizing enjoyed the support of a powerful and influential group of Franciscan friars, the Order of Friars Minor. They preached a millennial view of world history that recognized divine providence in Christian successes of conquering Muslims. According to their prognostications, the successful conversion of all peoples in the world to the Christian faith would herald the end days foretold in the Christian sacred texts. It was the divine duty of the Christian monarchs, the Friars Minor believed, to precipitate this promised age by conquering and converting non-Christian peoples.

These efforts to convert the infidel, in particular the Muslim residents of Granada after it fell back into Christian hands, bolstered millennial hopes of converting the newly “discovered” (by Europeans) peoples of the Americas in order to bring about the Christian apocalypse. From the beginning of the colonial enterprise in the Americas, religious conquest motivated and justified European activities. But bringing Christianity to America was no simple task. Christians met
native inhabitants in contact zones where both sides vied to incorporate the other into their own understanding of the world.

Conquistadors in Mexico

A particularly dramatic and consequential example of the Spanish encounter of native peoples occurred in Mexico. The Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés (1485–1547) arrived with his small band of soldiers in November 1519 at the outskirts of the magnificent city of Tenochtitlan, the seat of the ruling Mexicas (or Aztecs). The imposing splendor and overwhelming size of the Mexica capital astounded the Spaniards; Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1492–1585), who accompanied Cortés that day, recalled,

[W]e were amazed and said that it was like the enchantments they tell of in the legend of Amadis, on account of the great towers and cues and buildings rising from the water, and built of masonry. And some of our soldiers even asked whether the things that we saw were not a dream ... I do not know how to describe it, seeing things as we did that had never been heard of or seen before, not even dreamed about.27

With a population over two hundred thousand in the city and more than a million in the valley, Tenochtitlan was larger and more sophisticated than any city in Europe, nearly five times as large as London at the time. An advanced system of aqueducts brought water and sanitation to the city, and the complex network of *chinampas*, or floating gardens, produced food for the population. All males attended public schools, where they learned the history of the Mexicas and the intricate details of religious life, as well as their civic duties as citizens of the empire; some also became adept in their oral traditions and the system of writing that supported it, in the highly developed poetic tradition, in art and architecture, and other facets of Mexica culture. The Spaniards found in the grand city of Tenochtitlan extravagance rarely known in Europe; Díaz del Castillo was especially impressed by the royal aviary and its magnificent collection of native birds; at the zoo, however, he decried “the infernal noise when the lions and tigers roared and the jackals and foxes howled and the serpents hissed.”28

As much as the dazzling city of Tenochtitlan amazed Cortés and his companions, they were horrified by the religious practices of the Mexica people. At the center of the city was a sacred precinct of religious structures dominated by the Templo Mayor, the great pyramidal temple that the Mexica knew as Coatepec, or Serpent Mountain, with shrines to Tlaloc, god of rain and agriculture, and to Huitzilopochtli, the deity of war and tribute.29 Upon these shrines the Mexica performed human heart sacrifices on an unimaginable scale; during special festivals that marked auspicious times in their calendar system, thousands of sacrificial
victims were offered in large public rituals that encompassed virtually the entire city of Tenochtitlan. Moreover, this temple stood at the very center of the Mexica cosmos as well as at the heart of the extensive empire of the Mexica rulers. Causeways leading in the four cardinal directions connected the island city of Tenochtitlan to the shores of the expansive lake in which it stood and with the outlying areas under Mexica rule and influence. The temple of the built mountain of Coatepec also united the terrestrial world with the celestial realm where divine events took place, as well as with the underworld of the dead. At the very center of the city, of the empire, and of the cosmos, the Mexica performed their religious spectacles that nourished the divine powers of their universe and thereby sustained their civilization.

Figure 1.4 The Spaniards were horrified by Mexica rituals of human sacrifice. This drawing shows a ritual heart sacrifice atop one of the Mexica temple structures. (Courtesy of Richard Erdoes Papers, Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.)
Cortés entered into the contact zone of this Mexica world with brash confidence. In a scene that would be repeated innumerable times in various ways during the coming centuries, the Christian conquistador marched toward Tenochtitlan to confront the supreme ruler, Motecuçomo II (ca. 1466–1520; the Aztec king’s name is sometimes rendered as Motecuhzoma, Moctezuma, Mutezuma, or Montezuma). It was by all accounts a momentous occasion. Cortés’ report of their first meeting relates how the Mexica sovereign told of an ancient tradition regarding a great ancestor-god who had long ago departed across the sea who would someday return and, according to Motecuçomo, “conquer this land and take us as their vassals.”

We cannot know for certain exactly how Motecuçomo and other native peoples of central Mexico interpreted the sudden arrival of Spaniards on their shores; the eyewitness accounts are only from the Spanish perspective or from native accounts filtered through Spanish conventions and genres. But, despite the compromised nature of the sources, evidence suggests that at least initially Motecuçomo regarded Cortés as the Mexica hero-ancestor Quetzalcoatl, whose tradition was long established in their sacred texts and articulated in sacred architecture and ritual performances across central Mexico. Native writers working in the latter half of the sixteenth century tell of Motecuçomo’s consultations with “the elders and wise men of his kingdom,” who all agreed that “the one who had arrived was Quetzalcoatl. A long time ago he had gone by sea to join the Sun God, who had summoned him to the kingdom of Tlapalla, leaving word he would return, and that all their predecessors had expected him. It was impossible that he would be anyone else.” It seems that the Mexicas made sense of the impending cataclysm that would crumble their empire and the world as they knew it by appealing to their sacred traditions.

On the other side of that first meeting between Motecuçomo and Cortés in the outskirts of the city that the Spaniards would rename Mexico City, we know with greater certainty how the Christian conquerors understood their mission in the land they would colonize as New Spain. Cortés arrived on the Mexican mainland with the authority to act in “the service of God and their highnesses,” the royal monarchs of Spain. God, as confirmed by the Pope in Rome, had entrusted the Spanish king with bringing the native peoples of the Indies (the region first claimed by Columbus, which would later be known as the Americas) into the Christian realm, making them faithful servants of God and loyal subjects of the monarch in Spain as God’s earthly representative. Cortés arrived in Mexico with the crusader’s zeal for Christian conquest. Indeed, both Motecuçomo and Cortés understood their initial encounter as a religious event of epic proportions.

The great Mexica dynasty, however, could not withstand the invasion of Europeans. Already overextended politically, economically, and militarily, the Mexicas were vulnerable to a sudden shift in the balance of power. Like indigenous groups throughout the Americas, the Mexicas were in perpetual conflict and war with rival groups. Consequently, with a small band of Spanish soldiers supported by a vast army of native allies, and aided by diseases that the Spaniards unwittingly
introduced to vulnerable native populations, Cortés prevailed over Motecuñomo in a protracted war that ended with the fall of Tenochtitlan in 1521. After defeating the Mexicas and taking control of their empire, the conquistadors began to dismantle the splendid Native American city and to build upon its ruins the colonial capital of Mexico City. As they did with hundreds of other native shrines throughout the Americas, the Spanish conquerors razed the great Templo Mayor; leveled the revered mountain, Coatepec, that marked the sacred center of the Mexica world; and erected on the site their own holy place, a Christian church, where they could perform the rituals of the European religion. The sacred precinct of indigenous ritual sacrifices became the place of the Christian Mass, another sort of sacrificial performance, heralding the dominance of Christianity at the heart of the Spanish colonial empire.

Box 1.5  The divine arrival of Europeans

The notion that European explorers came as gods into the indigenous worlds of the Americas is a surprisingly common theme in accounts of their first encounters. Motecuñomo’s initial assumption that Cortés was Quetzalcoatl echoes similar stories of native reactions to Europeans throughout the Americas. The Delaware people of the mid-Atlantic coast, for instance, regarded their first sighting of a Dutch ship in the early seventeenth century as the coming of “Mannitto,” their Supreme Being. They prepared for meeting this great deity with meat for sacrifices, by arranging their religious effigies in proper order, and by staging a dance for his benefit. 34

The frequency of these stories, however, about native peoples regarding European newcomers as deities raises doubts concerning their trustworthiness. Virtually all such reports come through the filter of European interpretations of Indian reactions, sometimes decades after the purported incidents. Since there is no contemporary native documentation of their first encounters, we will never know for certain how natives regarded the first Europeans to come into their world. Certainly many of them must have resorted to their religious worldviews to interpret the sudden appearance of strangers. But native religions display great diversity, invoking skepticism about the similarity of such stories, and often their religious understandings include far greater complexity about supernatural beings than the European terms “gods” or “demons” encompass. Very likely, the notion of Indians regarding the Europeans as “gods” has more to do with how Europeans interpreted native responses and behaviors than it does with actual indigenous interpretations of their first encounters. Indeed, such stories actually may have more to say about the Europeans’ self-regard, bestowing divine status upon themselves, than about the Indians’ understandings of otherness.
Africans in New Spain

Into this colonial world of Europeans and Native Americans the Spaniards also introduced Africans. Shortly following their conquest of central Mexico, they began importing slaves from Africa to provide labor for the colony of New Spain. As diseases, famine, wars, and displacement killed millions of native peoples of Mexico, the Europeans relied on Africans to fill their need for additional laborers in the mines and on the ranches of their newly conquered territories. Stripped of their native religious traditions and separated from the sacred places and intimate communities of their African homelands, many of the newly arrived slaves underwent a process of acculturation to European ways in New Spain. Spanish colonial policy encouraged evangelization among slaves and facilitated their religious conversion to Catholicism. Colonial administrators regarded the integration of African slaves into Christian society as a useful strategy for stabilizing and developing the colony through shared culture and religion between Europeans and Africans. This approach enjoyed some degree of success as the rituals of Catholic worship and the many festivals celebrating the Catholic saints and other religious holidays helped relieve the inherent tensions of the slave system while offering momentary respite from the hardships of bondage. Moreover, the ethical logic underlying the Christian narrative urged slaves to remain obedient in deferring to the demands of their masters in order to achieve spiritual equality in the paradise of the afterlife.

Official policy in New Spain promoted the humane treatment of slaves as citizens and Christians, with opportunities for liberation through purchase of their freedom or through policies that encouraged manumission. Few slaves, however, actually gained their liberty through these policies; more successful means to freedom were through intermarriage and miscegenation. The Catholic Church urged slaveowners involved in illicit sexual unions with their slaves to consecrate those relationships through marriage, and a number of slave women gained freedom this way. Other slaves found freedom by marrying free native peoples and integrating into the native population; even when Spain later decreed that such marriages would not liberate enslaved spouses, such unions with free Indians continued so that their children would not be born into slavery. In addition, many of the children born of illicit unions between slaves and non-slaves were freed, contributing to a substantial free mulatto population in the colony of New Spain.

Yet, despite the efforts of the Church and the colonial government to enforce humane circumstances for enslaved peoples, pervasive mistreatment and systematic cruelty characterized much of slave life in Spain’s American colonies. Slave rebellions became common, even where efforts to Christianize the slaves had enjoyed success. In fact, the first uprising in the colonies in 1523 involved Christian slaves who celebrated their freedom by erecting crosses to demonstrate their gratitude to God for their liberty.

A significant number of African slaves fled bondage and took up life among native peoples of Mexico. These fugitive communities, known as “maroons,” with their mixing of racial groups and commingling of cultural traditions, including religion,
became sites of resistance to the colonial policies of conquest, subjugation, and enslavement. They were also fertile ground for the processes of transculturation as Native American and African traditions, influenced by the introduction of European Christianity, developed distinctive cultural forms, including novel religious beliefs and practices. In fact, by the seventeenth century the commingling of African and indigenous American populations had become so pervasive that the Inquisition in New Spain devised a complex system of racial categories to distinguish between the various mixtures of Native Americans, Africans, and Europeans; the most numerous of the mulatto groups was *mulato pardo*, the “dark mulatto” of Native American and African parentage. As sources of innovative religious practices, the mulatto populations often came to the attention of the Inquisitors.

### Box 1.6 The Inquisition

Christian concerns regarding the sincerity of recent converts to Christianity in the Iberian Peninsula led the monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella in 1480 to authorize the establishment of the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, commonly known as the Spanish Inquisition, for the investigation and punishment of religious heresies and other deviations from Christian orthodoxy. The Inquisition’s immediate concern had to do with former Jews, known as *conversos*, who had converted to Christianity, in many instances under coercive conditions. The Inquisition sought to ensure orthodoxy among the *converso* Spaniards, who were often accused of maintaining only a pretense of Christian faith while continuing to practice their Jewish traditions. The Inquisition’s role shifted, however, with new challenges posed by the Protestant **reformations** of the sixteenth century; in addition, Spanish colonization of peoples practicing unfamiliar Native American and African religions introduced a wide range of heretical unorthodoxies to the Inquisitorial tribunal. With the Spanish conquest of Mexico, the Holy Office established itself in New Spain, where it undertook investigations of Native Americans, Africans imported as slaves, free mulattos, errant Spanish colonists, and former Jewish *conversos*. In its earliest years in the new colony, the Inquisition contributed to the persecution of native peoples; in fact, the first Inquisition trial in Mexico, in 1522, was of an Indian accused of concubinage. But, by the middle of the sixteenth century, Indian populations were for the most part exempt from the Inquisition in colonial Mexico as Church and colonial officials shifted from a strategy of persecution and punishment to one that concentrated on securing a sincere and lasting conversion to the Catholic faith. African slaves, however, continued to suffer under the Inquisition; their most common crime was blasphemy, often committed by denouncing God and his saints while enduring severe punishments for running away or other misdeeds.
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Reluctant conquerors

As records of the Inquisition clearly indicate, encounters between indigenous Americans and European invaders brought significant conflicts, more commonly away from the field of battle than in actual armed confrontation. In places where Europeans prevailed, their subsequent treatment of native peoples raised difficult moral questions for at least a few of the more reflective Christian thinkers. The precipitous decline of native populations in the first decades of European presence in the Americas caused great alarm for a number of Spanish theologians and others, including the Dominican missionary Bartolomé de las Casas (ca. 1484–1566), who spent most of his life working among Indians in the Americas and who articulated the profound moral issues for Christian efforts there. Las Casas came to the Americas as one of the earliest priests serving in the Spanish colonies, gaining prominence among his fellow colonists and even himself acquiring Indian slaves. But he experienced a profound conversion in 1514 that brought painful awareness of the Indians’ plight, of their extreme suffering and cruel treatment at the hands of the Spanish colonizers. For the rest of his long life, he remained an indefatigable defender of Indians’ rights and a formidable opponent to colonial administrators, jurists, and theologians who justified enslavement and maltreatment of native peoples according to long-established Christian principles. Las Casas engaged in a famous debate in 1550–1551 with Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (1489–1573), an articulate defender of the colonists’ right to wage war on Indians and enslave them based on the presumed inferior status of indigenous peoples as barbarians. In their exchange, las Casas laid out legal and theological arguments demonstrating native peoples’ humanity and innocence. For him, wholesale slaughter and enslavement of Indians was not only unjustified but also anathema to the Christian principles that were the foundation of the European presence in the Americas.

At the same time that las Casas was debating the appropriate Christian treatment of native peoples based on his many years of experience as a missionary working in the contact zones of the American colonies, another Spaniard’s experience likewise brought him to a more profound sympathy for the humane treatment of Indians. The account of Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca (ca. 1490–1559) chronicles his experience on an ill-fated expedition that left him and three comrades, including an African slave by the name of Estebanico (ca. 1500–1539), as the first foreigners from across the Atlantic Ocean to spend significant time in the interior of North America. During their ordeal, the four survivors of the expedition not only relied on their own religious traditions but also incorporated elements of the indigenous religions they encountered. Their willingness to conform to native practices allowed them not merely to survive but also to flourish as venerated religious healers among the tribes of what would become the southwestern United States.
Map 1.3 Route of Cabeza de Vaca. The highlighted areas show the general route traversed by Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and his companions between 1528 and 1536 from the Florida peninsula by raft to what is today the Gulf Coast area of Texas, and eventually to the Pacific Ocean in what is now Mexico. Some of the major Native American groups are listed. The triangles show the locations of Spanish colonial settlements.
Cabeza de Vaca served as royal treasurer on an expedition led by the Spanish conquistador Pánfilo de Narváez (1478–1528). Narváez had been among the earliest Europeans in the Americas, gaining fame and fortune as a conquistador of Cuba. He was also a vocal opponent of Bartolomé de las Casas, arguing that enslavement of Indians was in the best interests of the Spanish crown. Hoping to extend his influence and add to his fortunes, Narváez received in December 1526 a grant to settle the region along the Gulf of Mexico from the central coast of Mexico all the way to the Florida peninsula.

After a series of setbacks and misfortunes, including severe storms that blew the expedition far off course, Narváez landed on the Florida peninsula in April 1528. But his quest for fortune there soon encountered disaster from illness, Indian attacks, shortages of food and water, and desertion by a number of the expeditionary force. Having lost their boats, the survivors built rafts that carried them westward to what is now the Gulf coast of Texas. The native peoples they encountered there captured the hapless explorers as slaves, and eventually only four members of the original expedition remained.

During his captivity, Cabeza de Vaca learned the languages and cultural ways of the indigenous peoples of the region. He eventually was reunited with the other three remaining members of the Narváez expedition, and together they moved from village to village attempting to find their way back to the Spanish-held territories of New Spain. Along the way, they earned a reputation as powerful healers.

**Figure 1.5** Cabeza de Vaca and his companions spent eight years among the indigenous people of North America, where they earned reputations as healers with supernatural powers. (Courtesy of New York Public Library, #814629.)
According to Cabeza de Vaca’s account, they enjoyed great success in making the ill and crippled healthy again, and he even claims to have brought back to life a man who had died. In his report, Cabeza de Vaca is careful to attribute their healing powers to the Christian god, but his descriptions of their healing practices also include native medicinal traditions he learned while living with various tribes. His successful combination of Christian faith and native healing brought him and his companions great fame among the indigenous tribes they encountered.

Cabeza de Vaca came to North America as a conquistador, an officer of an expedition to conquer new lands and extract wealth from the people there. His years among native peoples, first as a slave and later as a religious healer, changed him profoundly, especially in regard to his attitudes about the indigenous groups he encountered. For the rest of his life, Cabeza de Vaca remained a defender of the Indians, which put him in conflict with European conquerors and settlers. Unlike those who sought only wealth and personal glory, Cabeza de Vaca emerged from the contact zone with an enlarged understanding of the human community.

We must keep in mind, however, that the noble efforts and sympathetic attitudes of Europeans such as Bartolomé de las Casas and Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca were rare exceptions, and even the most compassionate Europeans never regarded non-Christian societies as being as equally advanced as their own. The Spanish experience of *reconquista*, their successful crusade against Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula, strengthened their confidence that a Christian triumph was imminent and would encompass all peoples of the world in a millennial age. As the Spanish conquistadors successfully subjugated the native peoples of the Caribbean islands, Mexico and Central America, and Peru and eventually extended their empire into North America, they were certain that they were fulfilling God’s plan. We now know that, although religion, technology, and culture all contributed to their success, the single most important element was biological. New diseases that the Europeans introduced to vulnerable indigenous populations in America gave the conquistadors a crucial advantage that Native Americans could not overcome. A new Christian culture of European colonial domination arose on the ruins of traditional native cultures.

**Native Encounters**

As European conquerors and colonists entered into the diverse regions of the Americas, they found many different native peoples with distinct cultures, languages, and religious practices, many of which seemed bizarre and even frightening to Christian sensibilities. In central Mexico the conquistadors marveled at grand urban centers but they were horrified to witness (and in some cases to become victims of) the elaborate spectacles of human sacrifice. Further north, Europeans met sedentary peoples who inhabited permanent villages sustained by agriculture, and elsewhere they confronted a range of native cultures that relied
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on the natural environment for sustenance through various combinations of hunting animals, harvesting wild plant foods, and growing crops. Just as the Europeans discovered them, all of these indigenous groups likewise discovered the European newcomers who entered their homelands, often accompanied by slaves from Africa and many of them with other Native Americans brought from elsewhere to serve the Christian conquerors. Time and again Europeans and Native Americans met directly in contact zones throughout the Americas, but often their first contacts were indirect, through rumor, trade, and the spread of diseases that often preceded the arrival of the invaders. In virtually every case, the delicate balances of native societies suffered extraordinary disruptions with the arrival of foreigners into their sacred geographies.

Places of emergence

Across a broad region that today encompasses New Mexico, Arizona, and parts of Texas, Colorado, and Utah, the Pueblo peoples built permanent villages that include the oldest continuously inhabited communities in North America. Perhaps the oldest of these is Oraibi (now called Old Oraibi), which dates from around 900 CE and continues today as a Hopi village in northeast Arizona. According to Hopi traditions, their forebears emerged into this world from an underworld realm and then wandered the earth before settling on three adjacent mesas in the harsh desert country. They settled as sedentary agriculturists to grow blue corn on the mesas, where they built villages that included, besides domestic living spaces, the sacred spaces of their Kachina religion. In fact, the villages themselves reflect Hopi religious sensibilities. As a contemporary Hopi scholar relates,

During the time of our migrations and when we were building our first Hopi communities, we settled on the mesas as Cloud People. One group migrating from the south was designated as the Water People, my people. We were blessed as Cloud Children by the great Water Serpent, our Father. And so, like clouds, we settled on the high mesas, and as Cloud People we designed our buildings after the cumulus clouds. Our homes are multi-storied structures, made of native sandstone and plastered with mud. Our multi-storied Hopi architecture is a reflection of the high-climbing cumulus clouds.

With rain as the sacred gift that allows their crops to grow and their villages to thrive, Hopi architecture displays their devotion to the powers that bring life-giving waters.

At the center of the traditional Hopi village is a plaza where religious dances are performed, and in the plaza are kivas, the underground chambers of sacred activities. Much of what goes on inside the kivas has remained a closely guarded secret over the centuries, available only to properly initiated members of the Hopi community. What is apparent, however, is the religious significance of the kiva
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Structures themselves. Most have an opening in the roof with a ladder descending into the interior of the chamber; inside, a small hole in the floor of the kiva is the sipapu, representing the mythical place where the ancestors first emerged from the three previous worlds into the present “fourth world.” In the Hopi vision of life, all beings and forms on the terrestrial Earth came forth from the original sipapu, and deceased beings return to the nonmaterial world through the sipapu. The six directions of the Hopi world (the four cardinal directions, plus up into the celestial realm and down into the underworld) all emanate from this sacred place of emergence, represented in the ritual architecture of the kiva. Moreover, ceremonial exiting from the kiva into the village plaza ritually reenacts the original emergence of the first ancestors into the fourth world. The sacred precinct at the center of the village is the nexus of the Hopi universe.

Box 1.7  The Anasazi, or Ancient Pueblo peoples

Archaeologists have identified thousands of ancient village sites of people commonly known as the Anasazi, or Ancient Pueblo peoples. Covering a large area in what is now Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Utah, and Colorado, these earliest Pueblo communities probably began around 1200 BCE. The earliest groups lived in partially subterranean dwellings known as pit houses, but by the eighth century CE they were building stone or adobe dwellings in above-ground clusters. At the height of their civilization, from roughly the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries CE, they inhabited very complex and sophisticated villages that also included numerous kivas, large ceremonial chambers of circular or rectangular shape that lay entirely, or sometimes only partially, below the surface. The inhabitants of these sites, however, suddenly abandoned their villages sometime around the end of the thirteenth century. Their disappearance remains a mystery, although archaeological evidence suggests that internal or intertribal conflicts precipitated by climate change and possible environmental degradation may have contributed to their migrations to the south.

No one knows for certain what the inhabitants of these ancient settlements called themselves. The name “Anasazi” has become popular among many archaeologists as well as the general public, but it is a term with derogatory overtones from the Navajo language, traditional enemies of the Pueblo peoples. Many of the Hopi and other Pueblo peoples, who regard the ancient inhabitants of these sites as their ancestors, find the term “Anasazi” offensive. As an alternative, some scholars prefer the terms “Ancient Pueblo” or “Ancestral Pueblo.” Others have suggested using native Pueblo terms, such as the Hopi word “Hisatsinom” or the Zuni word “Enote.”
Europeans first entered this Hopi universe in 1540 when members of a Spanish expedition led by Francisco Vásquez de Coronado (1510–1554), which included a Franciscan missionary, invaded the Hopi mesas. They forced the Hopis to surrender, but their search for riches soon led them elsewhere. It was not until the next century, in 1629, that the Spanish left a more permanent mark by establishing the first Christian mission among the Hopi. Their efforts to Christianize Pueblo peoples, however, met with little success in the furthest outlying areas where the Hopi resided. Consequently, the Hopi have been able to continue their ancient ways of life and to practice their native religious traditions with only minimal interference from Christian outsiders. 

The harvest of sacred animals

The relative freedom from colonial interference that the Hopis experienced was an exceptionally unusual circumstance among the indigenous peoples of the Americas. More often than not, Native American societies experienced severe disruptions of their familiar worlds and traditions, with many native groups becoming entirely extinct. The European newcomers devastated indigenous people with newly introduced diseases; with military conquest and subservience under colonial rule, often involving enslavement of native peoples; and with forced conversions to European
cultural ways, including the eradication of indigenous religious traditions in favor of Christianity. One major point of contention between Native Americans and the Europeans who arrived to colonize the Americas was their respective views of the land and the natural world. Europeans tended to view the land as a wilderness adversary to be tamed and made economically productive, usually through extractive activities such as mining and trapping, or through agricultural improvements. In contrast, many Native American societies understood the natural world as an integrated whole that included humans as a part of the natural balance. Consequently, European goods and ways of life, including Christianity, threw the native worlds out of balance and in many cases plunged them into a tragic downward spiral from which they were unable to recover; those groups that survived often did so by adapting their native ways to the

Box 1.8  Animism

A common form of religion among relatively small hunter and gatherer societies has been identified as “animism.” The animistic worldview regards non-human animals and plants, a variety of nonliving objects, and other natural phenomena as being animated by an invisible force or power that transcends its material being; put more simply, it regards these things as having spirits. Among Native Americans, the Algonquian people called this power *manitou*, and in the Iroquois language it was *orenda*. For many animistic orientations, this possession of a spiritual essence is true not only for living beings, such as plants and animals, but also for features of the land such as mountains, rivers, streams, and lakes; for unusual climatological phenomena such as thunder, lightning, and tornadoes; and even for such inanimate objects as rocks, soil, and minerals. Most of these animistic religious systems rely on shamans, specially designated individuals who are able to “travel” to spiritual realms, usually in a trance induced by special rituals and practices. These shamans, who are common in many indigenous cultures throughout the Americas and around the world, lead communal rituals and celebrations as they communicate with spirits of the natural world for powers in healing, fertility, food-gathering and hunting, war, and other vital concerns of human well-being.

Animistic religious orientations were common among Native American groups of North America before the arrival of Europeans, and many continue even to the present day in some form or another. In virtually all cases, the animistic religious orientation mediates the relationship between humans and the natural environment, as well as the social relationships among individuals and between tribal groups. Thus, animism provided much of the logic and structure of indigenous life for many groups throughout the Americas, including their social systems, economics, aesthetics, food acquisition and preparation, migration, and virtually every other aspect of their native ways of life.
demands of European culture, sometimes abandoning their indigenous traditions and assimilating themselves entirely to European traditions.

One of the earliest North American groups to encounter Europeans was the Mi’kmaqs (or Micmacs), the easternmost tribe of the Algonquian federation, situated along the far northern Atlantic coast, occupying what are now the maritime provinces of Canada and northern portions of New England. They had first encountered Europeans as early as the eleventh century CE when Vikings first landed on the island of Newfoundland, and may have met Basque fishermen from Europe who occasionally fished the Grand Banks off Newfoundland in the late fifteenth century. Prior to significant influence from Europeans, the Mi’kmaqs understood the relationship between their society and the natural, nonhuman world in religious terms. A spiritual link formed a sacred bond between humans and the natural world, including the land and all that it contained (animals, plants, minerals, rivers and lakes, even the ocean and coastline), and shamans served as intermediaries in a complex web of relationships between human society and the environment. These relationships made such life-sustaining pursuits as hunting into religious activities. The killing of animals was an important economic resource for indigenous Mi’kmaq people, for food, clothing, and a variety of everyday needs, but they did not take the abundance of wildlife for granted. They regarded their prey as sacred, and they killed only to fulfill their basic needs. For the Mi’kmaqs, the entire hunting process was regulated by spiritual concerns, with shamans communicating between humans and the spirits of animals. The “holy occupation” of hunting, as one historian has characterized it, involved a set of religious guidelines and ritual practices that limited the killing of sacred animals and maintained the intimate spiritual link between human hunters and animal prey.

The Mi’kmaqs’ reverence for the entirety of the natural environment began to change with regular exposure to Europeans, starting early in the sixteenth century when fishing fleets from Europe made annual voyages to the Grand Banks fishery and the Gulf of St. Lawrence. These fishermen initiated trade with the native peoples of the region, exchanging such European goods as beads, kettles, and knives for animal furs. They also introduced diseases that would decimate the native population and weaken or destroy much of traditional Mi’kmaq culture, including religion. As thousands of native people fell ill to ailments previously unknown in the region, with entire communities dying, the ineffectiveness of the shamans and their healing practices undermined confidence in their spiritual capabilities. Without an effective response to disease, the authority of the shamans eroded quickly as competing claims entered into Mi’kmaq society, including both economic and spiritual alternatives to their traditional ways. The usefulness and desirability of European material goods created demand to supply more animal furs for trading purposes, and the deterioration of the shamans’ spiritual authority removed the limitations on killing animals. At the same time, an alternative spiritual system arrived from Europe to displace the Mi’kmaqs’ traditional religion. Jesuit missionaries from France, beginning in the first decade of the seventeenth century, brought a different
religious outlook; the European religion of Jesus provided an explanation for the misfortune that the Mi’kmaqs suffered by painting their native religion as the work of the devil. At the same time, Christianity offered a justification for abandoning the Mi’kmaqs’ traditional ways in favor of accepting the material benefits of European goods and technology. The Jesuits came, as one of the early missionaries reported, “to domesticate and civilize them” and “to make them susceptible of receiving the doctrines of the faith and of the Christian and Catholic religion, and later, to penetrate further into the regions beyond.” Intent on spreading the Christian message and “civilizing” the native peoples, these missionaries sought to conquer the land by converting its people; in the process they displaced the indigenous understanding of an intimate and holy relationship to the natural world. The sacred geography of the Mi’kmaq world was little more than an untamed “region” to be “penetrated” in the eyes of the European people carrying their Christian message.

It is evident from our twenty-first-century vantage that, despite their best intentions, European missionaries introduced more than Christianity to native peoples.

Figure 1.7  French Jesuits brought Christianity and European civilization to Native Americans. This nineteenth-century drawing titled “The Jesuit Teacher” depicts the missionary as benevolent teacher instructing a rapt Indian in the powers of literacy. (Courtesy of New York Public Library, #807998.)
Encounters of the Americas. Their inability to comprehend indigenous views of the land, their ignorance of native relationships between natural and human worlds, and their refusal to acknowledge the role of local religious figures in maintaining social and economic balances brought disaster to many native societies. Intent on imposing European civilization, and especially its religious understandings and practices,

**Box 1.9  French Jesuit missionaries in North America**

Missionaries of the Society of Jesus (widely known as the Jesuits) began their work among the Mi’kmaq people in the first decade of the seventeenth century; eventually, they expanded their missionary activities in North America along the St. Lawrence River in what is now Canada, as well as in the Great Lakes region and the upper Mississippi River valley. They also served French possessions in Louisiana.

The primary goal of the Jesuits in New France was the conversion of indigenous peoples to Christianity. Their unrelenting dedication to this effort relied to a large extent on the teachings of Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), the founder of the Society of Jesus. His book of *Spiritual Exercises*, a collection of meditations, prayers, and mental exercises for Christian life, teaches his followers to subordinate their own will to the will of Christ. According to Ignatius, Christ’s will includes conquest of “all the lands of the infidel.” This conquest, at least as the Jesuit missionaries understood it, involved the eradication of indigenous religions and the introduction of Christianity to the conquered people. Nevertheless, Ignatius advocated a tolerant strategy of accommodating native beliefs and customs that did not contradict the Christian teachings of the Catholic Church. He instructed missionaries to learn from the ways of Satan, who, he noted, “goes in by the other’s door to come out by his own.” Tolerance, according to Ignatius, would help the Jesuits to gain “sympathy and further our good purpose.” In New France this meant learning indigenous languages and seeking the trust of native peoples by living among them for extended periods. In many cases, they introduced Christianity by relating it to the Indians’ more familiar religious understandings, attempting to demonstrate parallels between the beliefs and practices of Catholicism and native religious systems. On the other hand, the early Jesuit missionaries in New France also needed the support and cooperation of French traders, and they helped facilitate native transitions from an indigenous subsistence economy to an economy intimately tied to Europe through fur trading and an increasing dependence on European goods and technologies. Moreover, Jesuit schools were built in New France for educating Indian youth according to western traditions. Despite their appreciation for native cultures, the Jesuits were powerful colonial agents who sought to instill the values of European culture among the indigenous peoples of New France.

of the Americas.
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upon the native peoples inhabiting the wild regions that they were penetrating, Christian missionaries successfully disrupted and in most cases eventually displaced indigenous ways of life throughout the Americas.

New Worlds of Contact

Although Europeans would eventually dominate virtually all of North America, it was a group of Africans who likely were the first non-native peoples to settle in what is now the United States, beginning with an abortive Spanish colony along the coast of present-day South Carolina in 1526. Following an uprising by slaves, who burned much of the settlement and then fled to join the local Guale people, the Spaniards withdrew from the area, leaving behind the rebellious Africans. These first newcomers to North America began a long tradition of outsiders joining forces with sympathetic others and adapting to unfamiliar ways of life in the contact zones of America. This process of adaptation and integration includes innovative mergings of religious practices, beliefs, and perspectives. Those first Africans who fled the Spaniards certainly brought something of their own religious traditions to the Guale people even as they entered a native world built upon Guale religious traditions.

The tale of Europeans bringing to North America Africans who then joined local native peoples illustrates for us the dynamic complexities of the Atlantic world, which generated new relationships among the diverse groups who constituted Europe, Africa, and America. We can see how Portuguese efforts to gain control of Asian trade, motivated in part by their Christian imperative to defeat Muslims, initiated an age of exploration, conquest, and new trading relationships in Africa that in turn established deep interdependencies between Europeans and Africans. Consequently, when the Spanish succeeded in ending Muslim rule on the Iberian Peninsula and then took their millennial vision of conquest to America, they also brought Africans with them as slaves. The conquistadors, along with the missionaries and colonial settlers who followed them, imposed European cultural standards and a Christian worldview, including its moral precepts and system of religious practices, on the indigenous people they conquered. To a lesser degree, the slaves they brought with them across the Atlantic Ocean introduced the traditional perspectives and religious practices of Africa into the transcultural milieu of colonial America. As we sort through the complex relationships between cultures, religious orientations, environments, economic concerns, and political arrangements and take into account the sheer drama of encounter and conflict, we can see how quickly the world changed for a great number of people.

By the end of the sixteenth century, Europeans for the most part had forgotten the initial religious impulse that had brought Columbus to America and that had figured in Portuguese interests in Africa. No longer consumed by the medieval Christian imperative to liberate the Palestinian Holy Land from the Muslims, Europeans in the century following Columbus’ voyages took their Christian
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faith to American shores as justification for extracting wealth from and extend-
ing their influence over the people and resources of colonized territories. The
Spaniards in the Caribbean and on the American continents, as well as the
Portuguese in Brazil, would be followed by other European nations: the Dutch,
the French, the English, the Germans, the Russians, and others all would estab-
lish colonies in the Americas that brought varying degrees of wealth and power
to their nations.

These European colonizing efforts exacted a heavy toll on the indigenous peo-
oples of the Americas. Diseases, the disruption of social and economic networks,
and the introduction of foreign cultural practices, including religion, radically
transformed native societies. Moreover, the European settlement of the Americas
became a global enterprise involving a cross-Atlantic slave trade and increased
commerce with Asian peoples. In time, colonial ambitions transformed virtually
every corner of the globe as Europeans left the confines of familiar lands and took
their Christian orientations to Africa, Asia, and America. Their encounters in these
foreign places transformed them and irrevocably changed the worlds of the people
they met.

Questions for Discussion

(1) How was the religious rivalry between Muslims and Christians relevant to the
European discovery and conquest of America?

(2) In what ways did indigenous African religions and Native American religions differ
from western European Christianity? In what ways were they similar?

(3) How did diseases that Europeans introduced to Native American populations affect
the colonization of the Americas, specifically in regard to the Europeans’ efforts to
displace native religions?

(4) In what ways do the concepts of “contact zone” and “transculturation” help us to
make sense of religions in the Atlantic world?

Suggested Primary-Source Readings

the first chapter of volume one cover the period of Portuguese conquest and the
beginnings of the slave trade between Africans and Europeans.

from Spain’s colonies in America includes primary sources on the indigenous peoples
prior to contact with Europeans in addition to numerous sources on the first contacts
between Europeans and Native Americans as well as the colonial aftermath, with much
emphasis on religion. It also includes several documents from the period of *convivencia*
in Spain.
Miguel León Portilla, ed., *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, expanded and updated edn (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992): Taken from a variety of sources, this volume presents native perspectives on the Spanish conquest of Mexico.

Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, *The Narrative of Cabeza de Vaca* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003): The dramatic narrative of the first Europeans to enter the interior of the North American continent, Cabeza de Vaca’s account tells of his experience as a failed conquistador, his time as a slave of his Indian captors followed by a period as an itinerant merchant among the native tribes of the Texas region, and finally a period as a revered healer and religious figure among the Native Americans. It includes detailed descriptions of native cultures, including references to indigenous religious practices.

**Notes**

4. Ibid., 153, 72, and 73.
6. Ibid., 7.
8. Ibid., 185.
10. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 10–11.
20 Silverberg, The Realm of Prester John, 204.
28 Ibid., 171.
30 For instance, see Díaz del Castillo, The History of the Conquest of New Spain, 159.
33 Cortés, Letters from Mexico.
37 Ibid., 239.
38 Ibid., 242.


43 Anthony Pagden, European Encounters with the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 72.

44 Details about Cabeza de Vaca and the Narváez expedition can be found in Rolena Adorno and Patrick Charles Pautz, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca: His Account, His Life, and the Expedition of Pánfilo De Narváez, 3 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).


46 Ibid., 46.


50 Frazier, People of Chaco, 19.


54 From the Jesuit Relations, quoted in ibid., 18.

55 Quoted in Peter A. Dorsey, “Going to School with Savages: Authorship and Authority among the Jesuits of New France,” William and Mary Quarterly 55, no. 3 (1998), 399.
