

Native American Church... & 1978 Freedom of religion act

Type	Syncretic
Classification	Native American
Founder	Quanah Parker
Origin	19th century United States
Separations	Big moon peyotism
Members	250,000

Syncretism is a union or attempted fusion of different religions, cultures, or philosophies.

The **Native American Church (NAC)**, also known as **Peyotism** and **Peyote Religion**, is a [Native American religion](#) that teaches a combination of traditional [Native American](#) beliefs and [Christianity](#), with sacramental use of the [entheogen peyote](#). The religion originated in the [U.S. State](#) of [Oklahoma](#) in the late nineteenth century after peyote was introduced to the southern [Great Plains](#) from Mexico. Today it is the most widespread indigenous religion among Native Americans in the United States, Canada, and Mexico, with an estimated 250,000 adherents as of the late twentieth century.

Many denominations of mainstream Christianity made attempts to convert Native Americans to Christianity in Indian Country. These efforts were successful for many Native American tribes reflect Christian creed, including the Native American Church. Although conversion to Christianity was a slow process, the tenets of the Native American Church were readily accepted.

Originally formed in the state of Oklahoma, the Native American Church is monotheistic, believing in a supreme being, called the [Great Spirit](#). The tenets of the Native American Church regard "[peyote](#)" as a sacred and holy sacrament and use it as a means to communicate with the Great Spirit ([God](#)).

Followers of the Native American Church have differing ceremonies, celebrations, and ways of practicing their religion. For example, among the Teton, the Cross Fire group uses the Bible for sermons, which are rejected by the Half Moon followers, though they each teach a similar Christian morality. Ceremonies commonly last all night, beginning Saturday evening and ending early Sunday morning. Scripture

reading, prayer, singing, and drumming are included. In general, the Native American Church believes in one supreme God, the [Great Spirit](#).

Ceremonies are generally held in a [tipi](#) and require a priest, pastor, or elder to conduct the service.

Church services are not regular Sunday occurrences but are held in accordance with special requests by a family for celebrating a birthday, or for a memorial or funeral service. Services begin at sundown on either a Friday or Saturday evening and end at sunrise. Thus, a participant "sits up" all night, giving up a full night's rest as part of a small sacrifice to the Great and [Holy Spirit](#) and [his Son](#).

1978 Religious freedom act included:

1. access to **sacred sites** required in their religions, including cemeteries;
2. the use and possession of **sacred objects** necessary to the exercise of religious rites and ceremonies;

“sacred objects” (previously outlawed) include: Medicine men, witchcraft, ghost dances, feasts, pagan rituals (any superstitions), uncut and braided hair, smoking peyote, face paint, etc.

These were the main problems (objections) of Christians at the time.

Under the Peace Policy of President Grant, Indian reservations were to be administered by Christian denominations which were allowed to forcibly convert the Indians to Christianity. By 1872, 63 of the nation’s 75 Indian reservations were being administered by Christian religious denominations.

In 1883 - According to Secretary of the Interior Henry M. Teller, the heathen practices of the American Indians must be eliminated:

“they must be compelled to desist from the savage and barbarous practices that are calculated to continue them in savagery.”

Details as follows

Outlawing American Indian Religions

Posted on [January 14, 2016](#) by [Ojibwa](#)

For the past five centuries, American Indians have had their religions suppressed (sometimes brutally and violently) and denied. With the formation of the United States and the adoption of the Bill of Rights which speaks of freedom of religion, this freedom has been denied to American Indians based on the notion that they were not citizens and therefore this freedom did not apply to them. The period of time from 1870 to 1934 can be considered the Dark Ages for American Indian Religious Freedom. During this time, the active suppression of American Indian religions reached its peak.

Under the Peace Policy of President Grant, Indian reservations were to be administered by Christian denominations which were allowed to forcibly convert the Indians to Christianity. By 1872, 63 of the nation's 75 Indian reservations were being administered by Christian religious denominations.

In 1877, the United States sent America's Christian General, O.O. Howard to the Pacific Northwest to put down the Dreamer Religion. With regard to the Nez Perce, Howard feels that it is his duty as an American officer and a Christian to force the Dreamer bands, such as Chief Joseph's, into becoming Christian. The result of this was the Nez Perce War.

In 1883, the Secretary of the Interior reported that the heathen practices of American Indians had to be eliminated. According to Secretary of the Interior Henry M. Teller, the heathen practices of the American Indians must be eliminated:

“they must be compelled to desist from the savage and barbarous practices that are calculated to continue them in savagery.”

He instructed the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to compel the discontinuance of dances and feasts. He asked Congress for greater power to deal with the Indian spiritual leaders (often called “medicine men”). He asked that steps be taken to compel “these impostors to abandon this deception and discontinue their practices.”

Following the recommendations of the Secretary of the Interior, missionaries, and other influential “friends of the Indian,” the United States formally outlawed “pagan” ceremonies in 1884. Indians who were found guilty of participating in traditional religious ceremonies were to be imprisoned for 30 days. This was seen as an important step in the destruction of the Indian way of life.

In 1890, the United States government used military force to suppress the so-called “Ghost Dance” religion among the Sioux on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The War Department issued a list of Indians who were to be arrested on sight. Their “crime” was simple: they had embraced a new religion, one which had not been approved by the United States government. Using Hotchkiss machine guns, American soldiers managed to kill 40 Sioux men and 200 women and children at Wounded Knee.

In 1892, Congress strengthened the law against Indian religions. Under the new regulations, Indians who openly advocated Indian beliefs, those who performed religious dances, and those involved in religious ceremonies were to be imprisoned.

On a regular basis, the Secretary of the Interior and the Commissioner of Indian Affairs reminded the Indian agents of the need to suppress Indian religions. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in 1902 told reservation agents: “You are therefore directed to induce your male Indians to cut their hair.” According to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs:

“The wearing of short hair by the males will be a great step in advance, and will certainly hasten their progress toward civilization.”

Under the new guidelines, Indian men with long hair were to be denied rations. If they still refused to cut their hair, “short confinement in the guardhouse at hard labor with shorn locks, should furnish a cure.”

On the Hopi Reservation, the Indian agent forced a number of men to cut their hair. The agent disregarded the ceremonial purpose of long hair. Hopi men traditionally grew their hair long in the back as a symbol of the falling rain for which they prayed. For the Hopi, for a man to have his hair cut during the growing season was tantamount to asking that the corn stop growing.

Indian agents were also instructed to stop Indians from using face paint. According to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs:

“The use of this paint leads to many disease of the eyes among those Indians who paint. Persons who have given considerable thought and investigation to the subject are satisfied that this custom causes the majority of cases of blindness among the Indians of the United States.”

In addition, Indian dances and feasts were to be prohibited. According to the BIA:

“Feasts are simply subterfuges to cover degrading acts and to disguise immoral purposes.”

In 1934, policy regarding freedom of religion for American Indians began to change when John Collier, the Commissioner for Indian Affairs, issued Circular No. 2970 (“Indian Religious Freedom and Indian Culture”) to superintendents of Indian agencies. According to Collier:

“no interference with Indian religious life or ceremonial expression will hereafter be tolerated.”

Not all of the employees, however, followed the new rule. According to JoAllyn Archambault, in her chapter on the Sun Dance in the *Handbook of North American Indians*:

“However, many federal employees and Christian missionaries on reservations resisted the policy and discouraged sweatbaths, the Sun Dance, and other religious practices.”

Historian Angie Debo, in her book *A History of the Indians of the United States*, reports:

“Superpatriots even detected the hidden hand of Red Russia behind the policy, and Collier had to defend himself before the House Indian Affairs Committee against charges of atheism, Communism, and sedition.”