“A New Form of Government”: Religious-Secular Distinctions in Pueblo Indian History

Tisa Wenger

Native American leaders, as well as historians and anthropologists, have often observed that the indigenous cultures of the Americas did not traditionally conceive of “religion” as a separate sphere of life, and that their languages had no direct translation for this concept. Almost as frequently noted is the necessary corollary that without the religious these traditions also had nothing marked as non-religious, no specified domain of the secular. These observations, though important, do not adequately describe the contemporary situation. The legacies of settler colonialism have made Native Americans entirely familiar with religious-secular distinctions, and Indian people have often applied such distinctions within their own societies. To be content with the claim that traditional Native cultures had no concepts of religion and the secular—particularly when that claim is made in the anthropological present, suggesting an unchanging cultural form—is therefore to elide the historical processes, impositions, and accommodations through which these concepts have entered into Native traditions. Religious-secular distinctions were not simply imposed in any consistent or pre-formed way by colonial authorities. In the early stages of encounter, they had not yet emerged in their modern forms even in Europe; and as the rest of this volume demonstrates they have never been stable or uncontested anywhere in the world. Our attempts to historicize the categories of religion and the secular must therefore account for the uneven emergence and contested quality of these distinctions as they emerged in and through the colonial encounter, among colonial elites and colonized subjects alike.

The emergence (or imposition) of a division between tribal governments and tribal religions is only one possible site for such an investigation. Ongoing pressures to separate religion and medicine within Native traditions, for example, would be equally pertinent. But the persistent attacks on so-called Indian “theocracies” by Christian missionaries and US government authorities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suggest the importance to settler-colonial authorities of undermining tribal systems of governance. Demands that Indians implement the “separation of church and state” within tribal governments presumed the superiority of modern Western
models, worked to delegitimize indigenous patterns of social and political organization, and justified direct assaults on the sovereignty of indigenous nations. Native American accommodation as well as resistance to these distinctions—a resistance still maintained in the Native insistence that “religion” permeates all of tribal life—must therefore be understood as part of a much broader struggle for the survival of indigenous societies.

This essay analyzes the history of religious-secular distinctions among the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico, especially as they emerged in the early twentieth century and the “Indian New Deal” of the 1930s. The Pueblos offer an especially illuminating case for this investigation because their distinctive histories under Spanish, Mexican, and US rule left them with unusual resources for maintaining traditional forms of political organization, and with an unusual degree of tribal sovereignty. Precisely because of these resources they became the targets of particular concern from government agents in the early twentieth century who sought to “modernize” Pueblo governments. And within many Pueblo communities, growing minorities of people found the new models attractive. Liberal principles of individual rights and freedoms understandably appealed to self-identified Pueblo progressives, who chafed at what they had come to see as the restrictions of traditional life and advocated for a greater degree of assimilation into the larger society. These progressives need to be understood not as dupes of Western hegemony, but as participants in intense and ongoing indigenous debates about how best to reformulate tradition in order to survive in very difficult circumstances. In other words, some Pueblo people concluded that separating their “religion” from their “government” would best enable their communities to persist and even maintain tribal identities in the modern world.1

The progressives’ interlocutors were Pueblo leaders who prioritized the protection of tribal sovereignty and a more conservative sense of tradition. From their perspective the progressive demands for individual liberties often appeared as serious challenges to the communal norms of tribal life. This was so not only because federal agents were inevitably called upon to “protect” individual freedoms against tribal governments, but also because the very premise of the Indian individual as employed by assimilationist policymakers represented a direct and deliberate assault on the existence of the tribe. When government officials urged the Pueblo Indians to guarantee “religious liberty” for their people and to “separate church and state”—or, in the New Deal, to develop Western-style constitutions—many conservative Pueblo leaders saw a fundamental threat to their way of life and to their survival as distinct peoples.

1 This essay builds on my first book (Wenger 2009), which explores the implications of the category “religion” for Pueblo Indians in the early twentieth century.