

The Study of Algonkian Religious Life

The Methodological Impasse

The essays in this volume explore the well-known and still controversial ground of seventeenth-century French missions to several Eastern Algonkian peoples. These missions have drawn more scholarly attention than any other in North America simply because the French left a remarkable record of their contact with Native Americans. As might be expected, anthropologists, historians, ethnohistorians, and church historians have attempted to formulate viable ways of understanding the meaning of the seventeenth-century encounter.¹ Accordingly, this chapter surveys some of these interpretive stances, and seeks to understand their conflicting views of Algonkian religious life and history.

I focus on a controversy that has developed in the past twenty years between so-called romantic or idealist and rationalist interpretations of contact history. Calvin Martin describes the apparent impasse: “Regarding the Indian side of the Indian-white couplet, one finds platitudes still expressed and condolences extended—expressions of concern and benevolence. But then what? From there on the Indian is usually shoehorned into the dominant culture’s paradigm of reason and logic, its calculus of viewing the world and manipulating its parts. The traditional historian colonizes the Indian’s mind.”² Martin stresses the intellectual roots of the enduring problem: the complex, dazzling interpretive machine that derives from “Aristotelian, Augustinian, Calvinist, Baconian, Cartesian, Newtonian, Marxist and many other” perspectives.³ I address a similar concern. I ask whether scholars have achieved views of Native American religious life that might facilitate an understanding of Native American history from Native American points-of-view.⁴ I find, in short, that scholars have not engaged the Algonkian-speaking peoples. Scholars have applied uncritically non-Indian religious categories and have not examined the ostensible fit of those categories with those of Algonkian peoples. Such an imposition of non-Indian ways of thinking constitutes what I mean by intellectual ethnocentrism and, as I will show, the bias is linked to false assumptions about the comparative nature of religion.⁵

THE INTERPRETIVE BASELINE

For much of the twentieth century, historians recognized the problem of intellectual ethnocentrism and attempted to circumvent it. Self-consciously seeking a balanced view of contact, Alfred Goldsworthy Bailey pioneered a social-scientific interpretation of French-Algonkian history in his 1934 doctoral thesis.⁶ Quoting William Christie MacLeod at the opening of his preface, Bailey reveals that his interpretation (Bailey gives his study the subtitle, "A Study in Canadian Civilization") substituted a secularized, progressive explanation for partisan religious and nationalist interpretations. "Every frontier has two sides," MacLeod declares. "Its movement forward or backward is the consequence of two sets of forces. To understand fully why one side advances, we must know something of why the other side retreats."⁷ MacLeod speaks, it should be observed, a language of victimization. For Bailey, the encounter developed in the ways in which Algonkian peoples discovered and grappled with overwhelming difference: "They were gradually to become more aware of a civilization that had little or nothing in common with their own; a more complex material culture; a specialized European conception of property of which they had at first no notion; a society which was in general more various, but in some respects less rigid than theirs; and a religion which, in its metaphysical and especially in its social aspects, was completely alien to their comprehension."⁸ For Bailey, as for many since, Native Americans played a passive, victimized role in post-contact North American history. In his farseeing but imperfectly achieved view, religious orientations shaped the French advance and the Algonkian retreat.

Bailey was very aware of the problem of intellectual ethnocentrism. He began his study declaring that he could not go beyond the reality assumptions of his own view of reality:

It is difficult, if not impossible, to form an idea of what the Indians thought of the European during the first period of encounter. It is difficult because, as we cannot transcend our own traditional processes, we are bound to read into the actual Indian view one that has been especially conditioned by our peculiar cultural background. That is, the subjective standpoint cannot be eliminated.⁹

Given his attention to evidence from Algonkian ethnography, however, Bailey was not quite so pessimistic in practice. He thought that Algonkian perspectives could be reconstructed. Scholars have, in fact, belatedly acknowledged Bailey's foundational theoretical contributions to what would become the interdisciplinary field now called ethnohistory. A good deal of that recognition singles out his concern for comparative religious life.¹⁰ He recognized, for example, that the French themselves created a major impediment to achieving their aim of culturally and religiously transforming the Algonkian peoples. "Scarcely less important as an obstacle to conversion," Bailey wrote, "was the failure of the French

to acquaint themselves with the fact that there was a religion of any kind among the Eastern Algonkians.”¹¹ In actuality, Bailey distinguished himself because he appreciated that Algonkian economics, politics, diplomacy, technology, social/sexual life, mythology, and oral tradition cannot be understood “without some consideration of the religious factor, however brief it may be.”¹²

Bailey’s characterization of the Algonkian world is significant, not only because his interpretation reveals scholars’ early-twentieth-century understanding of comparative religious interpretation, but also for what his description discloses about the long-range interpretive challenge. Bailey writes:

That is, there were in the primitive cosmogony what we would call a set of extra-physical forces which exerted a continuous and comprehensive influence over the furniture of this world, and the relative potencies of these mystical forces were equated with the relative superiority of the materials which they controlled or with which they were interpenetrated.¹³

Bailey’s terminology is both innovative and limiting. The notion that a cosmogony constitutes a coherent worldview has had enduring potential for the study of Native American religious life.¹⁴ Similarly, the idea that physical substance (Bailey’s “natural”—“the world,” and cultural—“furniture”) participates in some otherworldly significance identifies enduring interpretive problems.¹⁵ As we will see, the ground of meaning in Algonkian life has a profoundly interpersonal character that Bailey’s terms “extra-physical forces,” “potencies,” “mystical forces,” and “interpenetrated” do not capture.

Bailey’s characterization of Algonkian religious life works against itself because he never attempts to overcome the limiting notion of the “primitive,” while his effort to ground contact history in Native American worldview was simply ahead of his time. He notes, for one example, that Algonkian theories of disease and curing were more advanced than those of either the English or the French. Bailey also recognizes that Algonkian medicine proceeded in different terms, terms that he cannot quite encompass: “The Montagnais and the Abenaki [Wabanaki] measured up favourably with the English and the French in their knowledge of what, to the contemporary scientific mind, may be termed natural causes, but the category of natural causes was one that could not have been recognized by the native mind which perceived supernatural inter-penetration, or perhaps identity, with the physical environment.”¹⁶ To his mind, that supernatural character had to do with an Algonkian misunderstanding of objectivity and subjectivity: “no sharp division separated the habit of mind which led to the use of medicinal herbs from that which had recourse to incantation and exorcism, these two being necessarily involved in the same process.”¹⁷ In his gloss of Algonkian cosmology, Bailey identified the significant actors as “supernatural beings,”¹⁸ who were addressed by “sympathetic magic.”¹⁹ Although Bailey expresses the terminology of choice in the 1930s, his conceptual strategy is both

tentative and imprecise. In comparing Algonkian and French religious orientations, for example, Bailey undercuts the very terms he uses to describe the Algonkian worldview:

The Indians were, of course, unaware of the idea of natural causation which was the product of the nineteenth century sciences. The distinction between natural and supernatural, between flesh and spirit, which was implicit in the doctrines of the medieval church, and of the Jesuits in New France, was not recognized by such primitive peoples as the eastern Algonkians. Indeed, the terms 'natural' and 'supernatural' tend to become meaningless since the natural and the super nature [sic] were so closely inter-related.²⁰

In this way, Bailey identified what would become an enduring ethnographic problem in the study of Algonkian religious life. How can scholars grasp a world organized by terms that depart from those—the natural, cultural, and supernatural terms—of their own cosmology? What is the status of a world in which natural and supernatural distinctions are not made? What alternative distinctions do Algonkians make? What kind of reality does such a world have? Bailey does not explore these questions, but he quotes the anthropologist Diamond Jenness, who suggests that Algonkian reality consisted of nothing more, nor less, than a subjective projection of religious imagination upon the world. The Indian

peopled his world with numerous "powers," some great, mysterious, and awe-inspiring, some small and of little or no account . . . he . . . gave them such anthropomorphic traits as speech and knowledge, even ascribed to them human or partly human forms. So the "power" of the cataract became its "spirit." . . . The "power" of the cataract was only an attribute, but the "spirit" was a separate existence. It carried the same name as the cataract, and the name heightened its individuality, giving it the status of a definite supernatural being. . . . Some spirits were vague and nameless, others as definitive as the deities of ancient Greece and Rome. But *ultimately* they were *no more than personifications of the mysterious forces* which the Indians saw *working* in nature around them.²¹

In effect, Jenness identifies the religious terminology and associated assumptions that non-Indians have utilized uncritically. He contends that Native American religious systems derive from a supernatural ultimacy, and that the beings of the Algonkian cosmos were nothing more than projected personifications upon nature's mysteries. Jenness uses, moreover, contradictory language in reducing personal beings to impersonal "mysterious forces" that work mechanistically. Such terminological confusions have continued to trouble Algonkian religious ethnography.

RELIGIOUS ETHNOGRAPHY

Although many scholars have acknowledged Alfred Goldsworthy Bailey's pioneering effort to engage Native American points-of-view in contact situations, few followed his lead. That lag between Bailey's innovative effort in 1937 and the emergence of other interdisciplinary work helps explain the excitement and controversy that Calvin Martin's study, *Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships in the Fur Trade*²² ignited. One measure of Martin's success emerged when *Keepers of the Game* received the 1979 Albert J. Beveridge Award of the American Historical Association. Another more revealing measure appeared three years later, as prominent members of the anthropological and ethnohistorical communities assessed Martin's book and found it wanting.

Two of these responses are exemplary for understanding the difficulty ethnohistorians have had in making sense of Algonkian religious ethnography. This difficulty won Martin dismissal as an "idealist" or "romantic" scholar who overestimates religious influences on Algonkians' historical behavior. Charles A. Bishop declares that Martin "is one of the few historians who has attempted to deal with the issue of the role of ideology in Indian culture change. Through his focus upon Indian cognition and how this was related to behavior both in prehistoric times and during the fur trade era, he has made a number of us rethink our positions." In addition, Bishop makes two observations that describe the positive and negative assessments of Martin's position. First, he thinks that "much of what Martin says about aboriginal Algonkian religion appears to be correct." Second, Bishop concludes that Martin has neither the historical data to support his thesis, nor an appropriate methodology by which to make sense of the data he does present.²³ Bruce Trigger agrees with Bishop's basic argument: "I do not deny the importance of trying to understand the fur trade in terms of how it was perceived by the Indians. Nor do I deny that in some instances idealist explanations of historical phenomena may be valid." This is an important caveat, and one that many scholars have acknowledged since the publication of *Keepers of the Game*. Arguably, Native Americans have distinctive religious points-of-view. But Trigger also defines an ideological issue that has troubled ethnohistory since 1979. He writes: "It appears, however, that materialist explanations, which view human behavior primarily as a response to the problems of mortal existence, account for such activities more often than do idealist ones."²⁴ Stated in another way, Calvin Martin is controversial for both Bishop and Trigger because he stresses the study of irrelevant religious motives, rather than the compelling causalities of economic, political, and technological culture. Such remains the impasse between religious and materialistic understandings of Indian history.

Upon close examination, Calvin Martin's religious ethnography turns out to be as problematic as his much maligned reading of Indian history. As his

many critics have detailed, Martin imagines, with little evidence for his claims, that the European fur trade, Christianity, and unprecedented epidemics converged to convince Algonkian peoples that wildlife in general, and the beaver in particular, had declared war upon them. He also argues that they, in turn, retaliated against the animals. Thus, Martin argues that both Native Americans and the animals repudiated the cardinal principles of their common cosmos and of their interdependence. Since virtually everyone agrees that Martin's is a far-fetched theory about the effects of the fur trade, it is all the more important to review the character of his religious ethnography. Ironically, his interpretation of the religious nature of Algonkian life is understood as his core contribution to American Indian ethnohistory, although that achievement is also the least examined aspect of his study.

Ostensibly grounded in a close reading of the ethnographic record, Martin's claim to have achieved an accurate reconstruction of the religious principles of Algonkian worldview rings false. As I will demonstrate, Martin has read the ethnographic record in ways that reveal the religious ethnocentrism that has colored most interpretations from the seventeenth century to the present. It may or may not be that Martin is the idealist that Trigger claims. Before Trigger's stand can be assessed, it is crucial to deconstruct the manner in which Martin misinterprets post-contact Algonkian religious life because his view is taken as an accurate portrayal of those religious traditions. We should acknowledge, as do many of his critics, the complexity of the ethnographic and historic issues that Martin has forced us to confront.

It is telling that Martin does not present a systematic argument about the nature of Algonkian religious life or the ways in which it ought to be studied. While a primary concern for Algonkian worldview defines his methodology, Martin does not reflect on the task of achieving an accurate religious ethnography per se. In both the Mi'kmaq (Micmac) and Ojibwa (Anishnaabe)²⁵ sections of his book, Martin contends that Algonkian peoples have been interpreted in ethnocentric ways. Paradoxically, however, while Martin realizes that his readers, scholars and general public alike, will find his ethnographic argument about Algonkian religious thought and practice difficult to accept, he does little to help them to do so.

Martin declares, for example, that many readers will find his reading of Algonkian ways of thinking "a fantasy," not realizing that, by characterizing the Algonkian religious outlook as a system of "spiritual beliefs,"²⁶ he sustains the very dismissal of Algonkian worldviews as the "fantasy" he wishes to disclaim. For complex reasons that Martin does not recognize, neither the term "spiritual" nor the term "belief" can be characterized as cross-cultural.²⁷ For non-Indians, these terms encapsulate the most fundamental and unexamined of suppositions about the nature of reality. These terms are, in other words, at the heart of interpretive ethnocentrism. The term "spiritual," for example, can refer variously (and unsystematically, since most people are neither metaphysicians nor theolo-

gians) to a variety of reality assumptions. Spiritual often refers, in the first place, to non-physical beings, that is, the spirits,²⁸ and frequently to the other-world dimension in which they are supposed to exist, that is, the supernatural.²⁹ In the second place, spiritual commonly refers to subjective religious “belief,” and thus to refined religious piety, sentiment, and/or religious achievement, that is, a deeply/highly spiritual person. In a related way, belief sometimes points to some posited aspect of reality that is construed variously as non-empirical and imaginative objects of fantasy, or of faith. Both spiritual and belief thus tend to encompass broad entailments that lie at the dualistic heart of Western cosmology, meanings that are particularly rehearsed in the pervasive assumption that reality has both objective and subjective, physical and spiritual, characteristics. Spiritual beliefs, secular materialists have always insisted, have merely a subjective, private, and individual relevance. Given his commitment to this terminology, the same remains true for Calvin Martin because he does not account for the distinctive reality assumptions of the Algonkian peoples.

In describing Algonkian religious views as “spiritual beliefs,” and as “fantasy,” Martin argues for a worldview approach to the study of Native American life and history, even while he seems to relegate such a methodology to trafficking with the unreal. Martin writes: “To neglect this ‘fantasy,’ then, would be to risk inappropriately fantastic, because Westernized, interpretations of baffling events in this early period of contact history.”³⁰ Martin thus declares the need to overcome, or at least to contain, Western bias. He insists on the need to understand that Western bias is itself fantastic, that is to say improbable when applied to other times and places. For Martin, and this may be why materialists judge his interpretation of Native American religious motivation romantic, social science assumes that economic, materialistic, and capitalistic factors defined Algonkian participation in the fur trade. Martin argues to the contrary that the Algonkian worldview simply does not proceed in terms of materialist causality. Unfortunately, Martin argues for a “spiritual” explanation as an alternative to a materialist one, not understanding that he himself continues to exercise the very theological and rationalistic principles of the Western worldview he otherwise criticizes.

Take, as one example, Martin’s purpose in quoting pioneer ethnohistorian, Alfred Goldsworthy Bailey. Reflecting on the eagerness with which some Mi’kmaq approached trade with Jacques Cartier in 1534, and on their reactions when the French fired two cannons in the air to dampen their enthusiasm, Bailey wrote: “Clearly the strangers who controlled the thunder were heavily endowed with manito [power], but even the displeasure of the gods could not keep the Micmac from the source of iron, for iron saved them from days of drudgery and enabled them to vanquish their enemies who were as yet armed only with stone, bone, and wood implements.”³¹ Bailey’s claim about the Mi’kmaq’s motivation is important to Martin for what it reveals about the “conventional wisdom” that has explained Native American responses to European

trade. Martin puts his case succinctly: "There, in poetically encapsulated form, is the usual explanation for the Indian's participation in the trade: European hardware and other trade items were immediately perceived by the Stone Age Indian as being far superior in their utility to his primitive technology and general material culture."³² Martin disagrees with such a depiction because he insists that Algonkians pursued their own religious understanding of contact events.

Martin does not discuss, however, two features of Bailey's ethnocentric characterization of Mi'kmaq religious life, features that he rehearses throughout his own interpretation. First, Bailey propounds the claim (theory would be too large a concept, because such a claim is seldom assessed by reading European sources against the grain of *their* own ethnocentrism) that Native Americans responded to Europeans with naive and religious awe. Second, Bailey characterized the nature of the traditional beings of Native American cosmology as "gods," but does not compare Native American and western European ontological assumptions about "being" in the world. In other places as well, Martin quotes both primary sources and secondary interpretations that exercise similar ethnocentric religious categories, yet he does not recognize that they do so.³³ Martin's ethnocentrism, like that of all Europeans, expresses itself in terms like "Nature," "supernatural," "beast," "sacred," "spiritual," "belief," and the like.

Martin's use of the term "magic" to describe the causal relations (that is to say power) shaping the Algonkians' world continues to exercise an ethnocentrism that belies his claim of reconstructing Native American points-of-view. "The Indian's was a world filled with superhuman and magical powers which controlled man's destiny and Nature's course of events."³⁴ Martin relies on Murray and Rosalie Wax to document his claim of Algonkians' cosmic subservience,³⁵ a claim A. Irving Hallowell had long since laid to rest.³⁶ In another study, Murray Wax notes that people who live in a "magical world" think and react to the world as a society, "not a mechanism, that is, it is composed of 'beings' rather than 'objects.' Plants, animals, rocks, and stars are thus seen not as 'objects' governed by laws of nature, but as 'fellows' with whom the individual or band may have a more or less advantageous relationship."³⁷ As I explore in the following chapter, Algonkian people focus on a relational causality in which humans interact reciprocally with other-than-human persons. Martin paraphrases the Waxes: "one is struck by the anthropomorphic nature of animals,"³⁸ again overlooking Hallowell's denial of Algonkian anthropomorphism.³⁹ More important, Martin does not seem to appreciate that the Waxes call for a descriptive causal language that appreciates the interpersonal character of the Algonkians' world.

Quoting Martin at length reveals the ways in which he departs radically from the relational principles the Waxes identify, and the ways in which he in fact uses the substantive, objective, chemical, and mechanical tropes they criticize:

The essential ingredient in this peculiar relationship between man and animals, and indeed between man and all of Nature, is Power. Power—called *manitou* in Algonkian—is a phenomenon common among pre-industrial people the world over. Roughly defined, it is the spiritual potency associated with an object (such as a knife) or a phenomenon (such as thunder). To the Micmac, as well as to all the rest of these Eastern Canadian hunter-gatherers, *manitou* was the force which made everything in Nature alive and responsive to man. Only a fool would confront life without it, since it was only through the manipulation and interpretation of *manitou* that man was able to survive in this world. To cut oneself off from *manitou* was equivalent to repudiating the vital force in Nature; without *manitou* Nature would lose its meaning and potency, and man's activities in Nature would become secular and mechanical.

Ethnologists have frequently compared Power to static electricity in its properties, 'in the sense that it may be accumulated by proper ritual and then be employed in service or discharged by contact with improper objects.' Power, continue the Waxes, 'is never regarded as a permanent and unconditional possession, but may be lost by the same kinds of forces and circumstances as it was gained.' One handles Power according to the principles of ritual. Ritual thus becomes the means of harnessing, or conducting, Power.

It is important to understand this concept of Power if we are to appreciate fully the Indian hunter's role in the fur trade, something which will receive considerable attention in part 3. Suffice it to say, here, that the world of the Micmac was filled with super-human forces and beings—dwarves, giants, and magicians; animals that could talk to man and had spirits akin to his own; and the magic of mystical and medicinal herbs—a cosmos where even seemingly inanimate objects possessed spirits. Micmac subsistence pursuits were inextricably bound up within this spiritual matrix, which, I am proposing, acted as a kind of control mechanism on Micmac land use, maintaining the natural environment within an optimum range of conditions.⁴⁰

When Martin's terms are unpacked it is easier to understand his place in the terminological ethnocentrism I am documenting. Under the guise of presenting a new, ethnographically accurate portrayal of Algonkian religious life, Martin simply rehearses non-Indian religious assumptions. Characterizing the relationship between Algonkians and animals as "peculiar," Martin uses a culinary metaphor—"the essential ingredient"—in a way that draws attention away from the interactional character of Mi'kmaq cosmic life, and focuses, instead, on its abstract "essential" components. The primary ingredient is, Martin

declares, a “spiritual potency” associated with “an object” and “a phenomenon,” not an intentional being. All three of these impersonal terms depart from the relational character of religious life that the Waxes wish to highlight; unlike Martin, the Waxes stress that power is a matter of motivated behavior—the purposeful interaction—of human and other kinds of beings.

Instead of understanding how relationships emerge from a dialogical interaction between various kinds of beings, Martin abstracts discursive power (read “the ability to persuade”) into a “vital force in Nature” that humans must manipulate. Although Martin seems to contrast this interpretation of power with one that is both “secular and mechanical,” he cites approvingly a common view that power “is like static electricity in its properties,” and can be harnessed, stored, discharged, and conducted like electricity. Thus, when Martin describes the Mi’kmaq world as “filled with super-human forces and beings,” including “the magic of mystical and medicinal herbs,” one can see that he continues to rehearse an objectivist language in representing Mi’kmaq reality. The only exception to this objective representational strategy consists of Martin’s use of subjectivist terms—“spiritual,” “magic,” and “mystical”—which he does not explicate as relevant for understanding Algonkian worldview.

These subjectivist terms do nothing to help the reader to understand Martin’s claim that animals in the Mi’kmaq cosmos “could speak to man and had spirits akin to his own.”⁴¹ For Martin, the nub of the matter has to do with understanding that power/manitou is directly related to “the principles of ritual,” but he fails to identify these principles. Instead of reconstructing actual instances of Mi’kmaq-animal behavior—a behavioral emphasis any proper religious ethnography ought to stress—Martin is content to see ritual as a “spiritual matrix” that provided the Mi’kmaq some “kind of control mechanism” over “Nature.”⁴² All of these terms, I submit, rehearse precisely the conceptual confusion I identify as intellectual ethnocentrism.

In addition to the pervasive ethnocentric terms that establish themselves in the Mi’kmaq portion of his book, Martin’s reading of the Algonkian mythological tradition is highly selective, superficial, and uncritical. Chapter Three, which claims to survey the Ojibwa worldview, begins with an account of Algonkian cosmology based on two late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century texts. Martin uses these historical texts uncritically. He does not comment on their character or veracity, nor does he compare them to other extant myth texts. Nor does Martin seem to appreciate that both accounts are problematic.

His initial paragraph, based on Samuel Hearne’s late-eighteenth-century trading journal, recounts the experience of the first female human being. Martin’s account presents the story in inexplicable ways: the first woman, we are told, dreams that she sleeps with a handsome young man, “who was in reality her pet dog transformed.” Neither the reported dream nor the reality of her dog’s metamorphosis particularly supports the paragraph’s thesis that in the creation myth “beasts were once related to mankind.” In fact, Martin presents the

two sentences about the female and her transformed dog without explanation as he suddenly shifts to a giant who appears and begins to shape the land into lakes, rivers, and mountains. The giant then grabs the dog, tears it to pieces, transforms its various parts into fish, animals, and birds, and gives “the woman and her offspring full power to kill, eat and never spare, for that he had commanded [the beings he had created] to multiply for her use in abundance.” A textual note reveals that Martin is aware that the “‘never spare’ injunction” is unusual, and he relates it to the shame Hearne’s Indian companions felt at “their wasteful slaughter of game.”⁴³ He does not otherwise contextualize this story, assess the motivations of the storyteller, or explain what the account might mean for our understanding of Algonkian worldview. In effect, Martin overlooks the ways in which humans share being with animals, regardless of their differences in physical appearance. Nor does he explain that the giant is a culture hero, a transformer who establishes the ethical character of human-animal relations, a morality based on human-animal reciprocity, rather than, as the Hearne text suggests, human exploitation.

Martin’s second paragraph proceeds as oddly as his first. Here Martin’s account, based on David Thompson’s turn-of-the-nineteenth-century narrative, purports to describe Cree and Ojibwa cosmogony, although the creation itself (unless Martin means the transformations recounted in the first paragraph) is not conveyed. Instead, Martin introduces the culture hero *Wisekejak*, as the subordinate of the Great Spirit, called *kitchi manitou*, who gives the hero “his solemn commission” “to teach man and beast how to live properly together.” Martin’s account of Algonkian worldview thus stresses both hierarchy and authority, not the consensual ethics of tribal life. Ignoring the Great Spirit’s repeated enjoiners, *Wisekejak* acts like a trickster, creating havoc in human-animal relations. Exasperated, the Great Spirit destroys all of creation with a flood, but a beaver, an otter, and a muskrat survive and take “refuge with the now distraught *Wisekejak*.” Then, the water subsides, and “man and all other life-forms were remade” by some unspecified creator. In a final move, another unidentified actor “stripped” *Wisekejak* of “his great authority.” “From then on he was to be a deceiver only: a trickster-transformer.”⁴⁴ As we have seen, Martin’s critics do not quarrel with this description of Algonkian cosmology, but we should do so.

Martin characterizes “those days of heroes and powerful magic” as a “supernaturalistic world view” even though he seems to understand that such a category does not apply. “I use the world ‘supernaturalistic,’” Martin writes in a textual note, “as a convenience for the reader. To the Indian the spirit world was not distinguished from the natural world; for him there was nothing supernatural.”⁴⁵ How such a category is convenient for the reader goes unexplained. Martin certainly ignores A. Irving Hallowell’s argument that Western categories, including nature as well as supernatural, distort the Algonkian actuality.⁴⁶ Martin also seems oblivious to his own ethnocentrism: he insists on supernaturalism regardless of Algonkian categories. Take, for example, his

understanding of *kitchi manitou*, the Great Spirit. This figure, whom Hallowell characterizes as remote, conceptual, and abstract, rather than as a behavioral presence in Ojibwa life,⁴⁷ Martin deifies: “*Kitchi Manitou*, the Great Spirit, was the creator and sustainer of all things.” Martin overlooks details he himself provides that suggest that *kitchi manitou* was hardly sovereign. In the first place, “he was too physically distant and omnipotent to influence affairs directly.”⁴⁸ Here Martin seems not to notice that the Great Spirit’s inability to influence worldly affairs amounts to a significant compromise of his posited omnipotence. Similarly, Martin distorts the history of this figure, claiming that the Jesuit missionaries “equated” *kitchi manitou* “with the sun,” when, in fact, the missionaries reported that Algonkians themselves made the analogy between the Sun and the Jesuits’ significant other.⁴⁹ Martin is confident that a primacy of being constitutes the Algonkian worldview. He contends that *kitchi manitou* exercises his will through “a descending hierarchy of subordinate manitous.” Martin contradicts immediately this claim of cosmic political hierarchy: he quotes Ruth Landes to the effect that “among the manitos the mighty ones, like the great birds and beasts, were solitary Characters (a respectful appellation for them) who met in smoke-filled councils to discuss cosmic affairs.”⁵⁰ As a political institution, furthermore, the council among the Algonkians (and other Native Americans as well) articulated a principle of political equality, rather than the hierarchy Martin posits.⁵¹

Simply put, Martin presents a garbled reading of Algonkian religious life. As he knows, the Algonkian cosmos derives its coherence, system, and regularity in the behavioral actions of persons—humans, animals, plants, and others. To this insight, Martin adds a Western cosmology composed of nature, culture, and supernatural, but does not recognize that this scheme holds that different kinds of increasingly superior beings exist at each level. Consider the following quotation, reminiscent of Diamond Jenness, which reveals the ways in which Martin describes the Algonkian cosmos in contradictory terms:

Just as everything had a purpose, so everything had its manitou, or spirit, whose power and influence depended on its significance to the Indian. Spectacles of Nature—waterfalls, rivers and lakes, large or peculiarly formed rocks, aged trees—had especially strong manitous. So, too, did the elements, which in the Indian mind were personified: northwind, thunder, lightning, cold, and so forth. All things animate and inanimate had spirit, and hence being.⁵²

These sentences are particularly confused. If everything is manitou rather than has manitou, that is to say, if everything is a personal being, then such beings are able to exert intentional power and influence; given such personal autonomy, these beings could not, therefore, owe their “significance to the Indian.” It is also apparent that Martin reifies this personal and interpersonal world as “Nature” (which he always capitalizes) in a way that obscures the Algonkian

view of the world as an intentional, interactional system. Algonkians do not “personify” because their recognition of persons in the world is a behavioral phenomenon.⁵³ Indeed, meaning in the Algonkian cosmos emerges in the intersection of the purposeful actions of all persons, human and otherwise. Meaning derives from an interspecies sociality that Martin seems to identify, but which he undercuts with his phrase “in the Indian mind.” If spirit, animacy, and being are synonymous for the Algonkians, and they would seem to be, then surely inanimate things cannot have being. Further, Martin reduces the behavioral, interactional, and intersubjective character of the Algonkian cosmos to the “spiritual”: “Every activity, whether it be hostile, sociable, subsistence, or whatever, had spiritual overtones; all of his relations and functions were above all else spiritual. . . . On the practical level, this meant that the Indian would approach every situation fortified with spiritual power. Life was, by definition, a spiritual enterprise.”⁵⁴ Rather than understand that the “spiritual” has relational, and thus behavioral, significance for the Algonkian peoples, Martin draws an analogy between “spiritual” causality and “magical power,” “magical charms,” and “imitative and contagious” magic. I argue, in short, that to describe Algonkian religious life in other than everyday, real, interactional terms, particularly by recourse to the language of spiritual supernaturalism, theism, and magic, is to fail to make sense of Algonkians in the cognitive terms Martin claims to establish.⁵⁵

In fairness, Calvin Martin reproduces uncritically an ethnographic tradition that has failed to recognize its own religious ethnocentrism. A few ethnographic examples from his Chapter Five will suffice to reveal the pervasive problem. Martin begins with Frank G. Speck’s argument that for the Montagnais-Naskapi hunting is a “holy occupation,” a characterization that Martin finds “stunning” with no explanation why. From Speck, Martin also derives his notion that hunting is a “magico-religious activity,” which is otherwise undefined except as a “spiritual activity.”⁵⁶ Similarly, Martin relies on the early work of A. Irving Hallowell to describe Ojibwa hunting practices, seeming not to recognize that the mature Hallowell backed away from the categories to which he initially gave prominence. Martin quotes Hallowell’s doctoral dissertation on bear ceremonialism: “The animal world often represents creatures with magical or superhuman potencies, and the problem of securing them . . . involves the satisfaction of powers or beings of a supernatural order. Consequently, . . . [s]uccess or failure in the hunt is more likely to be interpreted in magico-religious terms than in those of a mechanical order.”⁵⁷ As we shall see in the following chapter, when Hallowell came to realize that his first representational strategy, which here stresses magic and supernatural terms, misinterpreted Algonkian religious life, he rejected such a description. Martin also cites John Witthoft, who claims that “animals were gifts of the Creator and of lesser supernaturals,” and Adrian Tanner, who says that the Cree treat the bodies of slain animals as “sacred substance,” and that the Cree recognize “the mystical power of animals.”⁵⁸

By and large, Martin's critics do not provide ethnographic arguments that parallel my own about his misconstruction of the Algonkian worldview.⁵⁹ The critics intend merely to test whether Martin's core thesis—hostility between humans and animals resulted in war and over-exploitation of game in the fur trade—fits the Algonkian and other Native American cases. But, for all of that, several critics simply argue that Martin seeks an explanation in the wrong places. For these critics, materialist explanations convey adequately Native American motivations in the fur trade; they also explain their response to epidemic illness and Christianity.⁶⁰ The critics claim, moreover, that such "ideological" motivations as Martin seeks probably have little importance. Dean Snow reasons—rightly, I think—that historical causality is systematically complex and that, in this sense alone, Martin oversimplifies the Algonkians' situation. Snow is less correct, I also think, to relegate all that he captures by the term "ideology" to some irrelevant edge of human history. "It seems clear to me," Snow writes, "that in most cultural systems most of the time, ideology has been largely a product of other factors and not itself a factor that significantly influenced other factors either positively or negatively."⁶¹ While Martin is not unique in misinterpreting Algonkian history, a significant group of his critics relegate his very attempt to some largely pointless scholarly activity. Such is the current impasse in the scholarship on the study of Algonkian religious life and history.

THE APPARENT PROBLEM: CULTURAL RELATIVISM

A recent study by anthropologist, archaeologist, and ethnohistorian, Bruce Trigger, refocuses attention on scholars' reconstructions of Native American worldviews, and reveals yet again the enduring impasse. Trigger's essay—"Early North American Responses to European Contact: Romantic versus Rationalistic Interpretations"—rejects out of hand Martin's religious explanation of contact events. I would argue that Trigger makes achieving an accurate religious ethnography central to understanding not only northeastern Indian history in the colonial period, but Indian history throughout the continent.⁶² Trigger adopts a tolerant attitude to what he calls relativist, idealist, or romantic interpretations of contact events.⁶³ Since Trigger contends that relativistic explanations of Native American traditions are now unfortunately dominant,⁶⁴ and since he espouses an alternative, rationalist explanation, his argument that idealism and rationalism might be complementary approaches to contact history seems disingenuous, or at least confused. Trigger's proposed mediation between romanticism and rationalism is worthy of careful consideration. He writes: "The problem that confronts historians and anthropologists is not simply to agree that relativistic and rational factors both play roles in human behavior but to determine what roles and how those factors fit together in the larger totality of behavior."⁶⁵ The problem actually is, I would argue, that scholars have not

appreciated that Native American religious life has a relational, pragmatic character all its own and attends to relational modes of causality in ways whose depths have yet to be plumbed.

Trigger desires to dichotomize culture into rational and irrational spheres, a division that no more describes Native American worldviews than Martin's magical supernaturalism. To Trigger's mind, and contradicting his earlier claim for the value of methodological balance, the middle view which attempts to mediate between material and non-material cultural domains is too general: "Many argue that, especially in spheres of human activity relating to ecology, technology, and the economy, rational calculations involving universal considerations of efficiency and practicality play a more important role than do culturally constrained perceptions of reality, while cultural traditions may play a more important role in determining the content of religious beliefs."⁶⁶ In effect, Trigger holds that "religious beliefs" have little to do with the efficiency and practicality of everyday life. Although this middle position is his own formulation, Trigger dismisses it and does not comment on his rejection. Trigger does not notice that as stated this position does not mediate between a subjective idealism and objective rationalism because it constrains religious life to the unreality of posited beliefs, the inefficient, and the impractical. Trigger does not appreciate the ecological, the technical, and the economic as the very contexts that call for motivated religious action.

Trigger himself prefers what he calls a rationalist approach rather than a religious understanding of contact events. With this emphasis, his essay works at cross-purposes. Trigger champions materialist over idealist interpretations. Trigger admits, for example, that, thin as the evidence is for the sixteenth and perhaps the early seventeenth centuries, the data still suggest that Native Americans responded to Europeans in the terms of their traditional worldviews.⁶⁷ Trigger even accepts that the evidence suggests that Native Americans' behavior in the early fur trade was, to an important degree, motivated by religious concerns: northeastern peoples were attracted to trade goods that resembled traditional objects of religious value, and they used such objects with traditional religious purposes in mind.⁶⁸ While Trigger recognizes that worldview shaped contact events in the sixteenth century, he also argues that a rational pragmatism provoked a cognitive reorientation of Native American worldviews almost from first encounter.⁶⁹

Trigger's argument suggests that utilitarian materialism soon replaced Native Americans' initial religious understanding of European technical culture. He also overlooks that religious understanding in the course of his argument. In contending that Native Americans embraced quickly a rational pragmatism, Trigger would seem to agree with Calvin Martin's view that contact produced a "despiritualization" of Algonkian peoples' worldview.⁷⁰ Trigger's conclusion warrants direct quotation: "While the importance of native beliefs should never be underestimated, in the long run a rationalist and

materialist analysis of cultural interaction seems to explain far more about what happened to native people following European contact than does an analysis that assigns primary explanatory power to their traditional beliefs.”⁷¹ The terms of this conclusion, I would argue, are conceptually ethnocentric: it is problematic to gloss Native American religious orientations to the world as “beliefs,” and thereby to dismiss the obvious worldly success of their long-established, and religiously informed, economies. In addition, Trigger seems to argue that the interaction was one-sided, rather than the interpersonal engagement that his term “interaction” would seem to require. Trigger conceives the encounter as shaped by “what happened to” Native American peoples, rather than as mediated by their ability to discern contact events in terms meaningful to themselves.

Certainly, Trigger’s argument stresses that Native Americans turned away—reoriented—from tradition in order to participate “efficiently” in the post-contact, utilitarian world. Trigger does not assess with any compelling detail, however, those studies which he claims examine Native American religious systems. In brief, Trigger seems to have set up “romantic,” “idealist,” and “relativist” scholars as straw men easily knocked down by an effective European pragmatism that Native Americans, in his view, lacked until they reoriented to European social norms.⁷² Trigger thus dismisses the old and common claim that Native Americans do not distinguish between “religion,” and the social, economic, political, and technical domains of culture.⁷³ Although he does not identify explicitly the argument as “romantic,” he summarizes idealist interpretations of Native American responses to the fur trade: “In modern times historians and economists have concluded that in traditional Indian cultures economic behavior was so embedded in social and political activities that it precluded ‘economic rationality’ after contact with Europeans.”⁷⁴ He certainly assumes, to the extent that he can recognize that Native Americans’ worldviews did shape their discernment of contact, that a religious view of reality is non-utilitarian and non-rationalistic.

For Trigger, “human behavior is shaped mainly by calculations of individual self-interest, that are uniform from one culture to another.”⁷⁵ At this level of his argument, Trigger makes an undocumented claim that flies in the face of the ethnographic evidence. As A. Irving Hallowell has long since established on the basis of a careful reading of the *Jesuit Relations*, the “modal personality” of the Algonkian peoples did not conform to the individualism typical of Europeans. Instead, as members of small-scale kin groups, Algonkian peoples were other-oriented and pragmatically concerned for the ill-effects that attend to those individuals who did not take the well-being of others into consideration.⁷⁶ I would be inclined to meet Trigger halfway: sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Native Americans were capable of pragmatic self-interest, although I would argue that they tended to orient practically to the well-being of the primary group. I would

also argue that they operated within worldviews that combined ethical and practical objectives. While I would argue that Native Americans stressed ethical practice in the early contact period, Trigger emphasizes asocial self-interest.⁷⁷

Trigger's argument rehearses a deep-seated European confusion about the relationship between "religion" and the world, a tension Trigger defines as an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conflict between rationalism and romanticism. From the materialist end of the spectrum, this view polarizes religious and scientific views of the world. Rationalists think of "religion" as pertaining to the irrational, imaginary, and non-empirical dimensions of human life, and they hold that as "revelation" religion describes truths otherwise not apparent in the world itself, which are, therefore, subjectivized as belief and faith in a non-empirical order of reality.

Thus, when Trigger characterizes Native American "religions" as both supernaturalistic⁷⁸ and belief systems,⁷⁹ he extends those terms to include elements of worldview that rationalist scholars think of as non-functional aspects of human life. Since Trigger does not recognize that, in making sense of "religion" in western European settings, both belief and supernaturalism are contested categories, he does not consider whether their application to Native American peoples is appropriate. In Trigger's usage, both belief and supernaturalism become catchwords for Native American worldviews, and both suggest that Native Americans have non-functional relationships with the actual, and "natural" world.⁸⁰ To be fair, Trigger recognizes that the thinness of the historical and ethnographic sources understandably requires interpretive caution.⁸¹ But he does not evaluate the ways in which scholars have interpreted those documents, or have supplemented them with others, to estimate Native American motives in contact situations. Instead, Trigger stresses factors that seem to prevent either tribal or comparative study: "The little that we know about these world views suggests that they varied from one region or ethnic group to another and that even adjacent, highly similar world views could, depending on historically contingent situations, structure native interpretations of contact in different ways. From the beginning some interpretations of Europeans were probably more 'rational' than others."⁸² Since his essay does not document these variables in contact situations, Trigger's supposition should be noted.

Several observations come to mind about Trigger's views of a very real interpretive problem in accounting for the religious character of Native Americans' pre-contact life, and, therefore, their historical encounter with non-Indians. Without establishing a rigorous understanding of Native American worldviews, his argument—these peoples' utilitarian post-contact behavior provides ample reasons to argue for a universal, meta-cultural, and pragmatic mode of historical explanation—is built in mid-air. Certainly, Trigger's understanding of religious life is ethnocentric. He locates "religion" in a natural, cultural, and supernatural cosmology; he thinks of "religion" as a system of beliefs that cul-

ture shields from critical scrutiny. For Trigger, all cultures are opposed to, and constrain, practical reasoning.

Trigger's cosmological commitments must be noted. In his view, "religion" as supernatural and as a belief system refers to an otherwise non-empirical, non-rational world. Culture is equally problematic for Trigger because culture consists of social objectivations which, particularly when grounded in religious supposition, limit the possibility of exercising practical reason. Trigger also makes self-interest foundational, and thus gives the impersonal political and economic aspects of European social life both behavioral and analytical primacy. Unfortunately, his argument does not recognize this implicit perspective, in effect a cosmological bias, nor does he truly test the perspective against the moral and practical trajectories of American Indian life.

Other observations should be noted. Perhaps early contact events, in which Europeans claimed that they were apprehended as gods, and worshiped, were simply the expressions of European bias that Trigger himself warns against.⁸³ Perhaps Native American "religion" expressed itself in the world in practical ways and in sustenance, technical, economic, political, and social modalities. Finally, in arguing against so-called romantic, idealist, and cultural relativist positions, Trigger seems not to appreciate that they and he share precisely the same ethnocentric assumptions about the nature of Native American religious life. Like them, Trigger does not recognize his ethnocentric assumptions: nature, culture, supernature, belief, and religious irrationality.

The interpretive polarization Trigger posits between scholars who evaluate human life in religious terms, and those who do not, requires careful exploration before we can understand the interpretive limitations of American Indian history. Scholars pursuing qualitative research—to use a neutral term—may actually aim to reconstruct American Indian historical experience in terms that Native Americans themselves might recognize. Others may have less ethnographically precise purposes, aiming instead for a more balanced view of contact history. If Indian history is to be understood in the context of Native American life, then a qualitative perspective that Trigger does not explore, the history of Indian-Indian relations, must be reconstructed. In this sort of social history, scholars will have to engage indigenous meaning as played out among living persons who shape, maintain, and transform their own identity, memory, and history, and to understand those engaged social interactions as religious activities. In these ways, American Indians may have understood the utilitarian, technical, and rational variables as religious, religious meanings that Trigger dismisses as secondary in importance. They may have held that Trigger's variables were actually the means by which they pursued their foremost goal of solidarity between themselves, and between themselves and cosmic beings. In effect, Trigger's materialistic rationalism overlooks, and perhaps denigrates, solidarity as the religious goal of American Indian social life, and a goal native peoples have pursued from time immemorial.

BEYOND SUPERNATURALISM AND MATERIALISM

Given my main argument—that scholars have interpreted Algonkian worldviews in ethnocentric terms—Bruce Trigger’s polarization of so-called idealist and rationalist explanations of Indian history seems premature. An idealist explanation, which necessarily attends to the reconstruction of Native American worldviews, is simply impossible until such ethnocentric descriptive strategies are understood and overcome. Such an explanation must seek an understanding that takes Native American cosmologies seriously, must account for human beings’ cosmic position vis à vis other beings, and must reconstruct the connection between world-order and the relationships which transpire between human and other-than-human persons. Such an explanation must also account for the religious economy (giving, receiving, withholding) which regulates relations between humans and other persons, and it must construe the ways in which such transactions create, maintain, and transform the skill, knowledge, and power that make human and cosmic identity possible. Until such religious variables are reconstructed, and until their connections are understood, achieving an Indian history will be impossible, for otherwise ethnocentrism will continue to rule the day.

It is important to reflect on the character of ethnohistorians’ largely unconscious commitment to a non-Indian cosmology and their tendency to dismiss altogether religious lines of evidence about human meaning and experience. In effect, ethnohistorians tend to reduce religious life, and its historical trajectory as contextualized human meaning, to the unreal, fantastic, imaginary, irrational, and non-functional parts of culture abstractly considered. If my analysis is accurate, and I think that it is, everything remains to be done in understanding the real-world character of Native American religious thought and practice. Bruce Trigger expresses the range of assumptions that have hampered such an understanding in the guise of a rationalism that purports to escape ethnocentrism. Calvin Martin rehearses similar assumptions in ways equally oblivious to their ethnocentric cosmological entailments. At the center of both Trigger’s and Martin’s confusion rests a pervasive, commonsense notion that reality is constituted objectively, substantively, and subjectively in terms of physicality, emotion, value, and a predominant self-orientation. These assumptions play themselves out in the social sciences’ pervasive commitment to objectivity as both method and conclusion. To achieve objectivity, social science holds the subject of its inquiry at arm’s length, certain that within the subjective character of changing human meaning lies something that cannot be known but that is true for all times and places. As objective conclusion, social scientists tend to focus not on the human actors, but on second- and third-order abstractions about human behavior, and always disregard human motivation.

A. Irving Hallowell, to whom I turn in the following chapter, articulated the intellectual confusion of what has come to be recognized as the contingent

truths of objective ways of studying others' ways of life. In his essay, "Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View" (1960), Hallowell remarked on the new and fresh concerns of ethnographic inquiry. Hallowell articulated a number of innovations, among them the development of culture and personality studies, national character studies, and Robert Redfield's concept of worldview, "which emphasizes a perspective that is not equivalent to the study of religion in the conventional sense."⁸⁴ At the center of Hallowell's methodological exploration lay lessons learned from trying to make sense of Ojibwa persons and their reality system, a task that had occupied him from the 1920s.

Hallowell highlights an ontological issue: the Ojibwa recognize, and non-Indians do not, the existence of persons other-than-human. Hallowell stresses the implications for the social sciences, which focus not on persons and their freighted interactions, but on abstractions about them: "society," "social relations," "social organization." Hallowell was not opposed to human studies that proceed at such abstract levels; he insisted, rather, that the disjunction between human behavior and objectivist methods and results led to a misconstrual of Ojibwa reality. Hallowell writes: "Yet this obviously involves a radical abstraction if, from the standpoint of the people being studied, the concept of person is not, in fact, synonymous with human beings but transcends it." And again: "The study of social organization, defined as human relations of a certain kind, is perfectly intelligible as an objective approach to the study of this subject in any culture. But if, in the world view of a people, persons as a class include entities other than human beings, then our objective approach is not adequate for presenting an accurate description of 'the way a man, in a particular society, sees himself in relation to all else.'⁸⁵ Hallowell recognizes, as I have argued, that projecting Western categories on non-Western peoples is simply "a reflection of *our* subjectivity." Hallowell articulates, moreover, a methodological difference, one that he called a "higher order of objectivity." Such a method could proceed, Hallowell argues, "by adopting a perspective which includes an analysis of the outlook of the people themselves as a complementary procedure."⁸⁶ I take this complementary analysis to be the object of Religious Studies, and the interpretive methods that Religious Studies must pursue as its distinctive contribution to the human sciences.