In a nuanced and thought-provoking study, Tisa Wenger offers an important and timely history of “religion” as a concept and category in the 1920s Pueblo Indian dance controversy. She uses the controversy as a lens to trace “religion’s” deployment, evolution, and contestation in discussions of indigenous traditions among white missionaries and their modernist opponents, New Age spiritual seekers, and multiple native groups. Most importantly, *We Have a Religion* is a well-researched and sophisticated intellectual and cultural history of a Native American tradition and its relationship with the broader American society.

Methodology matters as much as periodization in this achievement, making Wenger’s volume a model in this regard. Wenger clearly outlines her goal: to examine how people understood Pueblo traditions as a religious practice (or not) and how these understandings shifted over time. She does not attempt to interrogate the nature of the Pueblo traditions themselves. This methodological approach allows Wenger to demonstrate her respect for Pueblo ceremonial secrecy. More valuably, the approach avoids the interpretive pitfalls of earlier ethnographic models that tended to essentialize or romanticize native traditions. While Wenger is sympathetic to native concerns and affirms efforts to maintain native cultural integrity, she focuses on the discourse of religion. Her rich analysis of the power dynamics attendant to that discourse renders all her historical subjects – native and non-native – as complex and compelling figures.

Wenger begins her analysis with a brief discussion of Pueblo society under Spanish Catholic rule in the seventeenth century. She explains that the Pueblos’ experiences as a colonized people intensified their sense of common identity and, over time, Catholicism became an important part of their shared identity and practice. Wenger argues that Pueblo Indians accepted Catholicism to “compensate” or “perhaps to create a public front for their own traditions” (25). Wenger demonstrates that its addition altered the Pueblos’ religious repertoire significantly. Not only did the Pueblos begin to orient their traditional ceremonies around
Catholic holidays, they also began to define their traditions as “customs” that did not conflict with the Catholic “religion” to prevent interference or suppression from Catholic authorities.

Next, Wenger turns to the late nineteenth century and describes the Protestant assault on both indigenous traditions and Catholic religion. Faced with stiff opposition from Protestant missionaries and U.S. government officials, the Pueblos initially attempted to maintain the distinctions between “customs” and “religion” that had helped preserve their traditions for centuries. However, as Wenger contends, the 1920s dancing controversy challenged these distinctions, forcing additional changes in the categories Pueblos used to explain themselves and to safeguard their practices.

In 1921, Charles Burke, Commissioner of Indian Affairs for the U.S. government, condemned Indian dancing as “degrading” and ordered federal agents under his jurisdiction to restrict and eventually to abolish such Indian ceremonials through either education or coercion. Burke’s policies on Indian dancing faced stiff opposition from Pueblo tribal leaders and their white supporters whom Wenger identifies as “cultural modernists.” These politically powerful artists, anthropologists, and activists allied with the Pueblo leaders to serve their own interests in undermining Victorian assumptions about Christian civilization and sexual mores and interpreted Pueblo dancing in terms of their own preoccupations and commitments. These influential white men and women celebrated the Pueblo people and their ceremonies as unchanging artifacts of authentic religion, models of primitive spirituality that they hoped could restore psychic wholeness and communal health to a fragmented modern world. As Wenger argues, these primitivist desires were deeply embedded in the discourse of religious freedom the cultural modernists devised and deployed to protect Pueblo ceremonials.

Religion and religious freedom never meant quite what the cultural modernists intended for the various Pueblo groups who came to adopt these concepts and to apply them to themselves. As Wenger explains, the Pueblos had long understood their dances and other ceremonies as forms of collective work – much like the maintenance of irrigation ditches and public spaces – that ensured their community’s economic, political, and spiritual health by balancing cosmic forces through ritual. This understanding of Pueblo dances and other rituals fit
comfortably under the definition of “custom” established under Spanish Catholic rule. However, the Pueblos’ distinction between “custom” and “religion” mattered little to the Protestant missionaries who ventured into Pueblo lands during the 1880s and 1890s. These men and women saw both indigenous dancing and Catholicism as impediments to civilization, which they defined in terms of Protestant religion. Within this context, cultural modernists and some “traditional” Pueblo leaders began to apply the concepts of “religion” and “religious freedom” to Pueblo dancing in the 1920s.

Wenger demonstrates how Pueblo leaders struggled to shape the definition of religion to their own ends and how the hegemonic Protestant discourse often proved resistant to those efforts during the dance controversy. Through compelling documentation and analysis, Wenger shows how “religion” was never a neutral term. A powerful ideology of the liberty of individual conscience remained embedded in both the concept of “religion” and the discourse surrounding it. Pueblo “progressives” eventually used this (re)conception to undermine Pueblo “traditionalists’” authority and to attempt to abolish indigenous dancing and other ceremonies they found distasteful. Wenger argues that defining Pueblo dancing as “religion” rather than “custom” and attempting to defend it as such exposed Pueblo “traditionalists” to critique from “progressives” and their missionary allies. Although traditional Pueblo tribal leaders never mandated community participation in the ways their opponents charged, they could not adequately defend their traditional communal practices within the discourse of individual religious freedom. As such, they found their traditional authority circumscribed through their appeal to “religion.”

The Pueblo Indian dance controversy was resolved in 1924 through a compromise grounded on these competing ideas about religious freedom. Federal officials ensured that the Pueblo dances and other traditional ceremonies would be protected from formal government restrictions so long as individual Pueblos were not compelled to participate in these rituals. However, as Wenger makes clear, questions about the definition of Native American traditions as “religion” and their protection under the democratic ideal of “freedom of individual conscience” remain as perplexing and contested today as they were in the 1920s. Wenger concludes with a survey of recent Native American attempts to secure legal protections for their
spiritual rituals, sacred lands, and ancestral remains, demonstrating yet again that the correspondence between Native American traditions and “religion” remains uneven at best.

For all its methodological sophistication, Wenger’s study is limited by her application of a functionalist understanding of religion to her subjects. This approach frames Pueblo conversion to Catholicism or Protestantism as convenient at best and unavoidable at worst, leaving little space for conversion as something other than cultural betrayal. This definition of religion also slights the narrative’s non-native subjects – especially the cultural modernists who often rejected organized religion but who sought to advance a utopian vision profoundly informed by Protestant ideals. Perhaps a less utilitarian view of religion might have allowed Wenger to emphasize how both the cultural modernists and their missionary opponents articulated religious visions for American society which were drawn from competing strands of the same Protestant heritage – whether or not these men and women realized it themselves. That “religion” drops from the cultural modernists’ vision and is replaced by a fascination with “myth” and confidence in “science” suggests that perhaps there was never as much difference between them and their Protestant forebears as they claimed.

Additionally, in eschewing ethnology, Wenger implicitly positions herself on one side of a long-running debate among scholars of Native American history about the utility and desirability of interrogating Native American cultures or religions through the use of anthropological methods. Some insist that histories must be tied to documentary evidence and are content with silence where documentary evidence cannot be found. Therefore, they have little to say about Native American cultures and religions. Although concerns about scant and contested documentary evidence should guide historical thinking and writing, historians who reject ethnology outright err in their absolutism. They dismiss the insights that can be gained from the judicious use of such sources and sacrifice something of the humanity of indigenous peoples in the narratives they construct as a result. Given the highly contentious debates regarding sources in Native American history, readers would have better served by a full explanation of Wenger’s thinking in this regard. Despite these criticisms, Wenger’s study is a model for other historians to emulate as they attempt to reconceptualize broader narratives of
American history in light of the histories of Native American religions – especially as they relate to questions of religious freedom and its limits.

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