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'Acts of Faith: Religion and the American West' Review: The Borders of Belief

A wide-ranging show at the New-York Historical Society explores the ways different faiths and communities both shaped and were shaped by the nation's westward expansion.

By [Edward Rothstein](#) [Follow](#)

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Installation view of 'Acts of Faith' PHOTO: GLENN CASTELLANO/NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM AND LIBRARY

New York

There is something a bit dizzying about much of the New-York Historical Society's exhibition "Acts of Faith: Religion and the American West." And that turns out to be a good thing.

When we first hear the title, we think we are going to be on well-trod ground, exploring how a 19th-century religious view of the American future inspired the nation's westward expansion. We feel confident too that we are also going to be

led down a parallel path demonstrating the delusions of Manifest Destiny, examining its costs, the resulting disposessions, and tarnished ideals.

And these themes, which characterize the contemporary interpretation of the West, certainly make an appearance. In fact, a companion book for the exhibition—which was independently edited by Jessica Lauren Nelson, director of religion and cultural initiatives at the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art in Indianapolis (where the show is scheduled to travel after it closes in New York)—is largely focused on the consequences of “settler colonialism.”



The Rev. Solomon Davis's 'A Prayer Book in the Language of the Six Nations of Indians' (1837)
PHOTO: NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM AND LIBRARY

But something more unusual takes place in the exhibition, which was developed by the Historical Society's redoubtable Marci Reaven along with associate curator Lily Wong. It gathers some 60 artifacts, creating a series of explorations that show how religious views have shaped communities, determined identities, and altered public and private life. We encounter the history of Mormonism, the development of a united Cherokee culture, the missionary efforts of Protestantism and Catholicism, the beliefs of Chinese immigrants, the establishment of Jewish communities, and conflicts over religious practices and school curricula. Some examples may be familiar to many, some may be fresh

to most, and all place familiar ideas in new contexts.

Even when the theme is “Confronting Colonialism”—as the first gallery is called—the material startles. This is because its focus is on the building of the Erie Canal and its impact on Native Americans—a subject that has only recently become the subject of scholarly examination.

For its creators, the canal was an immense project that opened the West to trade and remade the geography and economic power of the Northeast; we are shown surveying tools and maps and medals awarded for the enterprise. But the canal, completed in 1825, also required cutting through “the heart of Haudenosaunee lands” in upper New York state, which led to a series of religious revivals among the Native American tribes.



'Sagoyewatha, or "Red Jacket"' (1828), by Robert Walter Weir PHOTO: NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM AND LIBRARY

Protestant missionaries had long been active among them, and in this case an Episcopalian missionary of Mohawk descent, Eleazer Williams (1788-1858), reinterpreted the catastrophe as an opportunity to shape a new “Indian empire” in the West. Williams contributed hymns to a prayer book on display here, written for speakers of Mohawk and Oneida; he led about half the Oneida to an area in present day Wisconsin. Another religious leader, Leopold Pokagon (c. 1775-1841), who guided Potawatomi life in the western Great Lakes region, converted his followers to Catholicism, which he believed would help protect their status in Michigan—a strategy that was only temporarily successful. We see less about how native religious beliefs

altered, but we know from Western history how often religious practice is transformed by catastrophe and exile. Belief inspires action and experience transforms belief.

We also see these forces at work in a gallery that recounts the westward migrations that led to the establishment of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in Utah, a narrative outlined in epic paintings by C.C.A. Christensen (1831-1912) seen in reproduction. Persecution and migration led to a vision of a new Zion.



'Crossing the Mississippi on the Ice' (c. 1878), by C.C.A. Christensen PHOTO: NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM AND LIBRARY

And in yet another vignette, we encounter the Tract House, which opened near New York's City Hall in 1825, housing missionary societies proselytizing for Protestantism, creating a religious foundation for Western settlement. In four years, followers distributed 265,000 Bibles and 3,954,000 religious tracts, dispatched 330 ministers, and established 1,200 Sunday schools.

In other sections, we are asked to think about American constraints on religious practice—as in the Supreme Court's 1879 decision forbidding Mormon polygamy, or the U.S. banning the annual Sun Dance of the Lakota Nation beginning in the 1880s. And we get a sampling of controversies about the separation of church and state as played out in late 19th-century schools.



'Progress' (1935), by Ernest Smith PHOTO: NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM AND LIBRARY

There are also less compelling episodes. Jewish settlement is illustrated with a somewhat kitschy scene showing a symbol-laden Rosh Hashana service above a grocery store in St. Louis—a display that misses the larger story of how Judaism evolved in response to the American experience. And a gallery devoted to Cherokee religious beliefs when segments of the tribe—forcibly relocated—were reunified in 1839 in present-day Oklahoma falls prey to anodyne platitudes that don't really reveal much: "Community values" included "Visit one another with love" and "Think of one another in spiritual prayer."

There is more here than can be deeply explored by any single exhibition and some coherence is lost. But however dizzying, the result is effective. In how many national histories would such varied beliefs and convictions vie with one another and transform one another? And in how many other nations' experiences are there so many expectations that, despite injustices and flaws,

something of importance was coming into being? In retrospect, we glimpse the evolution of one aspect of American exceptionalism.

—*Mr. Rothstein is the Journal's Critic at Large.*

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