

American Religions, Native

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Those who romanticize the religious traditions of the natives of North America (often called American Indian or Amerind) identify them as ecological, involving a profound reverence for nature. Although true, it is overly simplistic. Certainly, the theme of appreciation — even reverence — for nature was an important aspect of the religious ideas of the natives of North America, but other than that there are considerable variations in their beliefs. And the religions of the natives of Central and South America — especially of the highly developed Olmec, Mixtec, Toltec, Mayan, Aztec, and Inca civilizations — differ significantly from them. Most of the religions of the Americas existed only in oral traditions, since very few of the tribes had a written language. There may have been as many as 600 different languages in North America, 300 more in Central America, and 1400 in South America, of which more than two-thirds have become extinct since the arrival of the Europeans. Even those which had a literature, such as the Mixtecs, Mayas, and Aztecs, lost much of it when it was destroyed by Spanish conquerors.