

# Indian Religion

The Englishmen who first explored the Albemarle and Pamlico Sound region in the 1580s, and attempted to establish a permanent colony on Roanoke Island, frequently referred to the native American inhabitants as "savages." Yet, by their own descriptions, Sir Walter Raleigh's emissaries found the Indians to be "*most gentle, loving and faithful, devoid of all guile treason, and such as live after the manner of the golden age.*"

This apparent contradiction might be explained by the fact that though the Indians were deeply religious, they worshipped idols and paid homage to more than one god, and thus were considered heathens by English standards.

Thomas Harriot, who wrote detailed descriptions of coastal North Carolina and the native Indians after a stay of nearly a year in the area, made a serious effort to convert them to Christianity. "*Some religion they have already,*", he admitted, "*which although it be far from the truth, there is hope it may be the easier and sooner reformed.*"

According to Harriot, the Indians believed that there was "*one only chief and great God, which has been from all eternity,*" but when he decided to create the world he started out by making petty gods, "*to be used in the creation and government to follow.*" One of these petty gods he made in the form of the sun, another the moon, and still others as stars. The water was created next, at which point the petty gods proceeded to make "*all diversity of creatures that are visible or invisible.*" As for mankind, "*they say a woman was made first, which by the working of one of the gods, conceived and brought forth children.*"

The Indians represented all of the gods "*by images in the form of men, which they call Kewasowok,*" with a single god called a Kewas. "*Then they place in houses appropriate or temples, which they call Machicomuck, where they worship, pray, sing, and make many times offering unto them.*" Harriot reported that he had seen some of the temples or Machicomuck in which there was only a single Kewas, and others with two or three. One of the temples, shown in an engraving of the John White drawing of the "*Towne of Pomeiooc,*" was a circular structure with a pagoda-like roof, "*covered with skinne mattes.*"

"*They believe also the immortality of the soul,*" Harriot said. "*After this life as soon as the soul is departed from the body, according to the work it has done, it is either carried to heaven the habitat of the gods, there to enjoy perpetual bliss and happiness, or else to a great pit or hole, which they think to be in the furthest parts of their part of the world toward the sunset, there to burn continually. The place they call Popogusso.*"

The Indians took special care in cultivating and then curing a plant called uppowoc, which they smoked in clay pipes, especially on festive occasions. This, of course, was tobacco, and Harriot reported that it was held in such "*precious estimation among them they think their gods are marvelously delighted therewith*" and accordingly offered it to the gods in special tribute. "*Sometimes they make hallowed fires, and cast some of the powder therein for a sacrifice. Being in a storm upon the waters, to pacify their gods, they cast some up into the air and into the water. So a weare (a net) for fish being newly set up, they cast some therein and into the air. Also after an escape from danger, they cast some into the air likewise, but all done with strange gestures, stamping, sometimes dancing, clapping of hands, holding up of hands, and staring up into the heavens, uttering therewithal, and chattering strange words and noises.*"

In an effort to convert these "savages" Harriot said "*In every towne where I cam...I made declaration of the contents of the Bible, that therein was set forth the true and only God.*" But there is no indication that Harriot's missionary work resulted in any of the native Americans giving up smoking their tobacco.