



Re-viewing the Meaning of America's West: Five Images in Low and High Resolution

GAIL MCGREW EIFRIG

FIRST IMAGE, LOW RES: FATHER KINO'S FAILURES

We're standing on a hillside in northern Mexico, about sixty miles south of what is now the border, and we're looking at a ruin of a church. It's propped up with scaffolding and with a few rough beams, but if there has been some restoration going on, it has been halted for many years. The hillside is open and breezy, the prospect pleasantly welcoming in the October sunshine. When Father Kino founded the mission at Cocóspera in 1687, its location was not picturesque but defensive, not only for the church itself, but for the settlement of local native populations who farmed along the river on the valley floor and suffered as much as did the Spanish from the raids of Apaches who swept in periodically from the mountains to the east and north.

Nothing much around us marks the present century as we construe it: no power lines, no jet trails, no air pollution or development. So it is not hard to imagine the tireless Italian Jesuit—as though he might at any minute just trot up the little trail from the river below, his favorite mule kicking up the dust—ready to inspect the doings here in this one of the dozens of churches he founded. His leg-

In low resolution, we view the West in sometimes quaint, sometimes moving images. In higher resolution, we consider the not always benign meaning of the images. Undoing some of our western myth might show us just how limited is our vision and how great our need.

end is large here, in what was the northern edge of New Spain. We are making a trip ourselves to visit just eight or nine of the mission churches he founded, and the extent of the territory is daunting, even with our air-conditioned bus and our ice chests well stocked with food and drink. He came here on horseback, or mule back, never with more than a few companions, for the sake of Christ.

In his account of the early days at Cocóspera he wrote that he managed “almost all the year to go nearly every week through the three pueblos [Cocóspera, Remedios, and San Xavier del Bac] looking after both spiritual and temporal things, and the rebuilding of the two above-mentioned new churches.” This was in 1702. In 2003, only crumbled adobe walls remain here, and his much-loved “good and pleasing arches” are dust.

At Cocóspera we see ruins, but at other stops we visit his sites that are now flourishing parish churches. The most famous of these is the northernmost, Tucson’s White Dove of the Desert, San Xavier del Bac. So, I ask myself as I walk around these ruins, did he succeed, up here on the northern frontier, more than fifteen hundred miles from the capital city, in establishing Christ’s kingdom? Is his life a witness to success, or is the lack of a big flourishing building a sign of another of the failures in the long history of the church on earth?

SECOND IMAGE, LOW RES: WE’RE ALL FRIENDS HERE

We’re at the annual meeting of the Pimeria Alta Historical Society, gathering for cocktails and lunch at the newest golf resort banquet room, maybe fifteen miles north of the border. There are about eighty people here, mostly elderly and mostly Anglo, though there are some youngsters, including the manager of the resort, a brisk and cheerful subcontinental Indian. We have a jolly lunch, followed by a quick business meeting, during which the chair introduces a distinguished guest, the Honorable Justice William Rehnquist, who is doing his annual stint at the law school of the University of Arizona and is down in our county for his recreation. We hear a program—with slides—on the history of the Gadsden Treaty, given by a pleasant fellow from Tucson who has worked up this talk on his hobby, researching local history and talking about it with interested folks. The following evening we will see him interviewed on local TV, giving some highlights about the treaty documents briefly on display in Tucson.

We find the talk absorbing, and there is animated buzz around the room when questions or comments are called for. One man stands up to comment and says pleasantly that he’s never been very happy about the treaty: “My name is Elias, and my family lost all our property here because of this treaty.” He is not at all nasty about it, and there is good-natured laughter as he takes his seat. Those losses were a long time ago, after all, and he seems to be doing all right now. The meeting continues with the usual call for more volunteers to help at the museum.

THIRD IMAGE, LOW RES: THE TOWN TOO TOUGH TO DIE

You are strolling the sidewalks of Tombstone, Arizona. Around you are crowds of tourists, most of them in the standard American touring costume of chinos, T-shirt, and athletic shoes, fanny pack and phone at the waist, carrier bag in hand. You look pretty much like this yourself. But there are others in the crowd whose look is strikingly different. There's a fellow wearing a complete gunfighter outfit: black pants, fancy vest, full-sleeved shirt with string tie, a black Stetson, boots, and—can it be?—two six-shooters on his tooled leather belt. His mustaches droop in long parentheses, a look that is vaguely familiar from the poster you've just seen of Wyatt Earp, the town's famous sheriff. And here's a saloon girl, sashaying skirt and all, her hair upswept and bouffant with ringlets and ribbons, a red garter on one of her black-stockinged legs. There's the sheriff himself, with a badge on his leather vest, and there's his sweetheart, the schoolmarm, neatly dressed in a gray plaid with a bustle, her high-buttoned shoes somewhat dusty from the unpaved street.

“here's a saloon girl, sashaying skirt and all, her hair upswept and bouffant with ringlets and ribbons, a red garter on one of her black-stockinged legs”

A loudspeaker buzzes with the announcement: hurry on down to the showplace across Allen Street, because the 2 PM gunfight is about to begin. And the crowd does begin to move in that direction, just as a wedding party emerges onto the boardwalk from the office of the justice of the peace. They look exactly like the sepia portraits you can see in the courthouse museum, and they'll have their own portrait made—in appropriate sepia—in just a few minutes, after they've cruised the town in the horse-drawn surrey they've hired from the livery stable.

It's all here, and anyone can be a part of it—the Old West. You can come and buy (or rent) all the parts of the costume, stroll the town and imagine yourself into a role straight out of the movies, and then take the duds off and drive back to Tucson, stopping at the Indian casino on the way to your motel.

FOURTH IMAGE, LOW RES: BE OUR GUEST

It is about eleven o'clock on an October night in the town of Caborca, Sonora, Mexico. About a dozen of us sit around the pool at our motel, talking a little, while we listen to the musicians. Their guitars and voices are soft at this hour, combining with the breeze in the palm trees overhead to lull hearts into a gentle 3/4 beat of that slow Mexican waltz. The trio was paid until nine o'clock, but it's long past that, and still they're playing, almost as though they love the music. After the good dinner—now several hours past—and dancing and talking and laughing, we are mellow and quiet in the warm evening air, tired after our day of sightseeing, but

deeply satisfied and content. The motel manager has brought out bottles of very good brandy, and he pours glasses all around. He has apparently not learned from the hospitality industry to curb his natively generous and hospitable instincts. The bottom line seems far from his thoughts. I feel like I am truly his guest, and experience a level of gratitude that doesn't even figure on the "guest satisfaction feedback cards" I've filled out on many travels. The musicians and the manager have a talent for hospitality that is the most foreign thing about this foreign country.

FIFTH IMAGE, LOW RES: A GIFT FOR AMERICA

It's Christmas Eve at St. Theresa Roman Catholic Church in Patagonia, Arizona, and the church is full, like most churches on this night. The decorations are beautiful, and the children are buzzing with excitement, their spirits kept just barely under control. There are candles and carols and family hugs, and everything takes longer because there are so many people, because there is special music, and because some things will be read in both English and Spanish, since there is only this one service. St. Theresa's usually has two Sunday services—one in English and one in Spanish, and her mission group in Sonoita has another, in English, but to-

“Father Dominic is a very tiny, very black priest from Kenya, a missionary to us North Americans from our brothers and sisters in the church in Africa”

night everyone is here together for one service because we are without our own priest. The bishop has patiently explained that he has too few priests to fill the positions in his diocese, and so we will be cared for from the large church in Nogales, Sacred Heart, which has three priests. Father Marcos speaks both English and Spanish, Father Eduardo speaks Spanish but no English, and Father Dominic speaks English but no Spanish. We often have Father Dominic, and that is the case tonight. Father Dominic is a very tiny, very black priest from Kenya, a missionary to us North Americans from our brothers and sisters in the church in Africa. His English is perfectly grammatical, but hard for us to understand because it is heavily inflected with the rhythm and accent of his African language. He speaks to us tonight though with a joy that transcends language: “Tell me, my brothers and sisters, aren't you happy? We are all going to heaven because of the love God has for us! Aren't you happy?” We are happy, we who are gathered here to celebrate the Nativity in English and Spanish. We are happy to be cared for by our brothers and sisters in an African church that has nourished and educated a priest for us, and sent him thousands of miles from his home for our sakes. To the southern edge of Arizona, in the county of Santa Cruz.

FIRST IMAGE, HIGH RES: FATHER KINO'S FAILURES

First, we should try to remember that this is only the “West” for one group of people who came here, and those fairly recently. Earlier inhabitants had many names for it, some of which now appear on casinos. From 1597 onward, it was the North, or El Norte, for the persons who settled on the continent from Spain. By Father Kino’s time, the administration was a hundred years old, with an efficient system of regional rulers. Kino had good relations with specific administrators of the civil system, but didn’t hesitate to criticize others. Today of course this huge area is the “East” for hundreds of thousands of immigrants from China, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia.

Second, a significant motivator in the settlement of this vast area has been religious sentiment. The great Mormon trek into Utah is a well-known phenomenon (itself strangely unexplored, except by Mormons). Yet, though a phenomenon, it is not an isolated one, and is only different from much other western settlement in degree, not in kind. The force that moved people to leave their homes and to strike out in a westerly direction, claiming that the land they moved into was vacant territory, Godforsaken until their arrival, given by God for their property, and waiting for their efforts to achieve its God-ordained destiny is a force that has operated a million times over in this place. The English-bred Pilgrims gave it the most stirring language, using the biblical “city on a hill” talk, and even making reference to the Exodus and pillars of cloud and fire leading to a Promised Land. But it is in the West that such language has staying power and commands agreement from the most secular souls. I’ve heard it often enough on my own front patio: “Boy, this is really God’s country, isn’t it?” From Bethel and Paradise to Beulah, not only is this land our land, but God gave it to us, even those of us who don’t believe in God. End of discussion.

SECOND IMAGE, HIGH RES: WE’RE ALL FRIENDS HERE

The North Americans, or U.S. citizens who comprised the “westward migration,” did eventually dominate all the others who were there before them, and still do. The laws that mandate borders, that determine water rights, that constitute property settlements, that formulate trade agreements, that decide citizenship procedures and immigration policies are those of the United States of America. They may be treaties, but they are very unilateral. We have made these agreements in usually cordial diplomatic ways, but our military enforces them. When we can’t make them diplomatically, we have made them with an invasion. Our purchase of the territory known by the name of its negotiator James Gadsden was formally arranged with the Mexican government, and then rewritten by the U.S. Congress, after which the purchase price was mostly pocketed by the Mexican president, General Santa Ana. You can be sure he remembered the Alamo.

A good deal of the Anglo push into the formerly Mexican territory of the Southwest was made by families from the southern states, a trend that began earlier

but accelerated after the defeat of the Confederacy. Gadsden, for example, was not only a close friend of Jefferson Davis, but even before the Civil War was the leader of a group of South Carolina businessmen who were determined to build a railroad to the Pacific along a southern corridor. In this, as in many things, they were outmaneuvered by Yankees. But as they moved from plantation life to ranching in Texas, and eventually to New Mexico and Arizona, their view of the United States government did not change much. They tended to regard Washington as the seat of an alien power, and much of the energy of local antigovernment sentiment in the present day still has the flavor of defeated and resentful recipients of government benefits. People who could not live here a day without federal highways, dams, forest service, and the like, do not behave like grateful participants in a communally beneficial organism. Forgetting completely about the Mexicans whose claims to the land had been granted by the Spanish crown, they will boast of their own great-grandparents' struggles in what they call the "early days"; they resent newcomers and frequently comment proudly that their families "settled this land and made something out of nothing." Thus they are often very interested in history, but usually mean only what happened after about 1860.

THIRD IMAGE, HIGH RES: THE TOWN TOO TOUGH TO DIE

Sociologist Clifford Geertz defines religion this way: "Religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts (2) to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in people by (3) formulating a conception of the general order of existence and (4) clothing that conception with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (see bibliography). There is a religion of the Old West. It has shrines and sacred objects, rituals, pilgrimages, and taboos. It has unshakable beliefs, unspoken assumptions, and unquestionable faiths. Tombstone is definitely a pilgrimage site; it has a permanent population of 1,535, and a yearly tourist draw estimated at 350,000. Most of these visitors don't dress up in the costumes, but they've come to visit a shrine. Local people dress up and perform in the daily street pageants, much like the costumed docents at other re-created historical sites. But the number of costumed people who drive in for the day and do their own private reenactments is quite surprising and is a growing feature of the town's visitor profile.

The museum gives nearly an entire room to the famous gunfight at the OK Corral, including contemporary photos of the dead cowboys in their coffins, but you can also learn there about the Rev. Endicott Peabody. An Easterner who came to Tombstone in 1882 and was there for only a few months, he built what is the longest continuously used Protestant house of worship in Arizona. Peabody, a prototypical muscular Christian, also started a town baseball team and is reputed to have solicited funds for both church and team from every saloon and whorehouse in town. I have never seen anyone dressed as the Rev. Mr. Peabody.

FOURTH IMAGE, HIGH RES: BE OUR GUEST

Mexican codes of hospitality may seem an odd way to try to understand religion and the western United States. But since we in this country are experiencing what many call an “invasion” by “foreigners,” it strikes me that looking at this political hot potato in religious terms might help us to understand the roots of our national fears. Since the spread of Anglo culture and law throughout this part of the world is more recent than some other conquests in world history, its historical record is very evident, and we are able to look at some of its dynamics very closely. The documents, land grants, law cases, and other materials that allow us to examine the overtaking of one set of residents by another set are all available, yet we still do not see them very well. Rhetoric about freedom and manifest destiny tends to drown out a clear story: our nation grew because of a demand for personal space and property that overwhelmed any other values or claims. This demand has been so extensively diffused throughout the culture that we have a hard time recognizing it, but that is its root. More and more people simply claimed land for their own, then claimed what was in and on that land, demanding military protection for their claims, and this demand the U.S. government consistently agreed to. Now, as a people, we claim everything from shore to shore, and border to border, and it is “ours.” The role of religion in this has been to mitigate the most egregious effects of these demands, but essentially to agree that conquest is not “against our religion.”

“rhetoric about freedom and manifest destiny tends to drown out a clear story: our nation grew because of a demand for personal space and property that overwhelmed any other values or claims”

And, in fact, we can see evidences that the myth of the Old West, with its component parts of taking, claiming, defending, and maintaining with violence, constitutes a parallel secular religion, one which is practiced widely. Dissent from this belief system is regarded as heresy. Try maintaining in Tombstone that the “cowboy way” is a destructive and even ungodly way of life, and see how far you get. If such values were restricted to one town, or even to one region, we could see them as quaint, even picturesque. However, this view of national virtue is glorified over and over in our popular and serious culture. How might we become able to have a different vision of the virtues of what we like to call “our” country? Maybe by experiencing hospitality as we have never had to do, by being a guest. Not a tourist or a conqueror or a corporate enterprise zone creator or a military presence. Not a demander or a claimer, but an object of hospitality. Perhaps only in this way can we get outside our characteristic worldview and come to value sharing more than taking. I have yet to see even the most rudimentary definition of hospitality

applied to the problems of immigration, for example, much less a thorough, serious theological one.

FIFTH IMAGE, HIGH RES: A GIFT FOR AMERICA

American Christians are part of a very large world. And though our usual view tends to show us in the expanded part of the map, we are not even a big part of it. Undoing some of our western myth might show us just how limited is our vision, and how needy we truly are. As St. Theresa's needs a priest from the Kenyan church, American Christians need what a fresh look at our West might show us: we need new definitions of success and failure, we need a belief in hospitality, we need cooperation and partnership more than we need violence and power. We need to explore, restore, elevate, and emphasize those parts of our faith tradition that value sharing rather than taking, and bearing burdens rather than justifying and protecting our possessions in the face of others' needs.

The American West is a paradigm of much that we, as a nation, have got wrong. It displays the values of the kingdoms of this world in bold form. Is the modern American church capable of presenting the culture with an alternative kingdom? Can Americans receive with gratitude and humility what others might have to offer? Or are we in the churches content to see our nation endlessly playing out the old myths of self-sufficiency and self-righteousness defended at gunpoint, reliving the dangerous images of the past, like tourist gunfighters on the streets of a dusty town that brags it is too tough to die? ⊕

GAIL MCGREW EIFRIG taught English and Humanities at Valparaiso University for thirty-five years and edited its journal, The Cresset, from 1989 to 2002. She and her husband live thirty miles north of Arizona's Mexican border.

FOR FURTHER READING:

Jane Eppinga. *Tombstone*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2003.

Clifford Geertz. "Religion as Cultural System." In *The Religious Situation*, edited by Donald Cutler. Boston: Beacon, 1968.

Patricia Nelson Limerick. *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1987.

_____. *Something in the Soil*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2000. (Note especially chapter IV-D, "Believing in the American West.")

Walter Nugent. *Into the West: The Story of its People*. New York: Vintage, 1999.

Charles Polzer. *Kino: A Legacy*. Tucson: Jesuit Fathers of Southern Arizona, 1998.

Wallace Stegner. *Beyond the 100th Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West*. Penguin, 1992. (Originally published by University of Nebraska Press, 1982.)

Alan Riding. *Distant Neighbors: A Portrait of the Mexicans*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985.

Richard Rodriguez. *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*. New York: Viking, 2002.

Stewart L. Udall. *The Forgotten Founders: Rethinking the History of the Old West*. Washington, DC: Island (Center for Resource Economics), 2002.

Jay J. Wagoner. *Early Arizona*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1975.

Elliott West. *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers and the Rush to Colorado*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2000.