This statement by the Council of all the New Mexico Pueblos responds most immediately to the U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs' refusal to grant permission for Taos Pueblo to withdraw several children from school for tribal initiation activities that would last up to 18 months. Over the previous few years, as the council mentions, the commissioner had ordered his superintendents on all Indian reservations to do whatever they could to "discourage" most Indian dances, and asked Native Americans to give up such dances "of their own free will" or else more forceful measures would be taken.

The council's statement illustrates how Pueblo Indian leaders in the early twentieth century began to make their case for religious freedom by insisting that their ceremonies should be considered "a true religion." With the help of sympathetic white reformers, they successfully defended their ceremonies against Christian missionaries and assimilationists who condemned Indian dances as uncivilized relics of "savagery" that would have to be abandoned if Indians were to succeed in the modern world. By defining their ceremonies as religion, Pueblo leaders discursively placed these practices under constitutional protection and—at least theoretically—on equal footing with Christianity.

--Tisa Wenger, Yale Divinity School

Council of All the New Mexico Pueblos, "Declaration to all Indians and to the People of the United States," May 5, 1924, Reel 40, Indian Rights Association Papers, Pennsylvania Historical Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

To all Pueblo Indians, all Indians, and all the people of the U.S.:

We have met because our most fundamental right of religious liberty is threatened and is actually at this time being nullified. And we make as our first declaration the statement that our religion to us is sacred and is more important to us than anything else in our life. The religious beliefs and ceremonies and forms of prayer of each of our Pueblos are as old as the world, and they are holy. Our happiness, our moral behavior, our unity as a people and the peace and joyfulness of our homes, are all a part of our religion and are dependent on its continuation. To pass this religion, with its hidden sacred knowledge and its many forms of prayer, on to our children, is our supreme duty to our ancestors and to our own hearts and to the God whom we know. Our religion is a true religion and it is our way of life.

We must now tell how our religious freedom is threatened and is denied to us. We specify first the order issued by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to Superintendents, dated Apr. 26, 1921... And one of our present Superintendents states his attitude in a printed Government report: "Until the old customs and Indian practices are broken up among this people we can not hope for a great amount of progress. The secret dance is perhaps one of the greatest evils. What goes on I will not attempt to say but I firmly believe that it is little less than a ribald system of debauchery." We denounce as untrue, shamefully untrue and without any basis of fact or appearance, and contrary to the abundant testimony of white scholars who have recorded our religious customs, this statement, and we point out that the Commr's order, quoted here, to be interpreted and enforced by the local Supers, is an instrument of religious persecution. We next
refer to the circular addressed "To All Indians," February 24, 1923... and February 14, 1923, from the Commissioner to Superintendents...

We Pueblo Indians of course have not consented to abandon our religion. And now the Commissioner of Indian Affairs has just visited the Pueblos, and he went to Taos Pueblo and there he gave an order which will destroy the ancient good Indian religion of Taos if the order is enforced. He ordered that from this time on the boys could no longer be withdrawn temporarily from the government school to be given their religious instruction. These boys would stay longer in school to make up for the time lost, and there is no issue about the Indians not wanting their children to be educated in the Government schools. But if the right to withdraw the children for religious instruction be withdrawn, then the Indian religion will die. The two or three boys taken out of school each year are the boys who will learn all the religious system of the tribe, and they in turn will pass on this knowledge to the generation to come. When issuing this order to the Taos Pueblo, the Commissioner denounced the old customs and religions and he used harsh words about us who are faithful to the religious life of our race. He called us "half-animal."

And now we will call attention to the fact that when our children go to school, as they all must do and we want them to do, they are compelled to receive the teachings of the Christian religion no matter what the parents or the clan may desire. And the parents, the clans and the tribes are not even given the privilege of saying which branch or denomination of the Christian religion their children shall be taught. Thus a division is made between the parents and the children. And now if we are to be, according to the Commissioner's new order, forbidden to instruct our own children in the religion of their fathers, the Indian religions will quickly die and we shall be robbed of that which is most sacred and dear in our life.

We address the Indians and the people of the US, and we ask them to read the guarantees of religious liberty which we have received. [the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, New Mexico statehood, and the U.S. constitution]. We conclude this statement by asking the citizens of the U.S.: shall the Commissioner of Indian Affairs be permitted to revoke these guarantees which the Congress of the U.S. itself could not revoke under the Constitution? We are but a few people, in the pueblos. We have inherited and kept pure from many ages ago a religion which, we are told, is full of beauty even to white persons. To ourselves at least, our religion is more precious than even our lives. The fair-play and generosity of the American people came to the rescue of the Pueblos when it was proposed to take away their lands. Will the American people not come to our rescue now, when it is proposed to take away our very souls?

We request and authorize the various organizations friendly to the Indians' cause, to act with and for us in this crisis. This appeal has been written with the help of representatives of these organizations though what it says is our own thought and our own plea.

Most of all we say to all the Pueblos whom we represent--to all of the ten thousand Pueblo Indians, and likewise to the Hopi and Navajo Indians: This is the time of the great question. Shall we peacefully but strongly and deathlessly hold to the religion of our fathers, to our own religion, which binds us together and makes us the brothers and children of God? There is no future for the Race of the Indians if its religion is killed. We must be faithful to each other now.