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“THE PROMISES THEY HEARD HE HAD MADE”:
THE GHOST DANCE, WOUNDED KNEE,
AND ASSIMILATION THROUGH
CHRISTIAN ORTHODOXY

Justin Estreicher

The connection between the Ghost Dance movement of 1889–90 and the Wounded Knee Massacre has been explored by seemingly countless writers since the time of the massacre itself. A standard account of the tragedy might begin with the Paiute prophet Wovoka, also known as Jack Wilson, who initiated the Ghost Dance as a messianic religion promising Native Americans the departure of the United States Army and the return of the buffalo and the spirits of the dead. The dance ultimately spread to the Lakota Sioux living on the Pine Ridge Agency, inspiring fears of an uprising among local agents, who called in the soldiers responsible for the massacre of December 29, 1890.

This concise narrative illustrates a clear link between Wovoka’s movement and the violence of Wounded Knee, but it fails to capture the nuances present even in the work of the ethnographer James Mooney, who examined the Ghost Dance in the 1890s. According to Mooney, white observers initially raised the alarm over the dangerous potential of the Ghost Dance in May 1890, though veteran agent James McLaughlin of Standing Rock dismissed the notion of hostile intent on the part of the Lakota. Still, McLaughlin was always wary of the influence of the legendary Hunkpapa Lakota leader Sitting Bull, and when the new Pine Ridge agent D.F. Royer—who Mooney noted was known to be “destitute of any of those qualities by which he could justly lay claim to the position”¹—suggested that a military response to the Ghost Dance would be necessary, McLaughlin

personally visited Sitting Bull to ascertain the motives behind the dance. Sitting Bull defiantly proposed that he and McLaughlin consult the “messiah” Wovoka himself, and it was not long before the agents determined the situation to be beyond their control. The first troops arrived at Pine Ridge in late November, among them eight troops of the Seventh Cavalry.² Soon after the death of Sitting Bull at the hands of the army in mid-December, tension would lead to massacre at Pine Ridge.

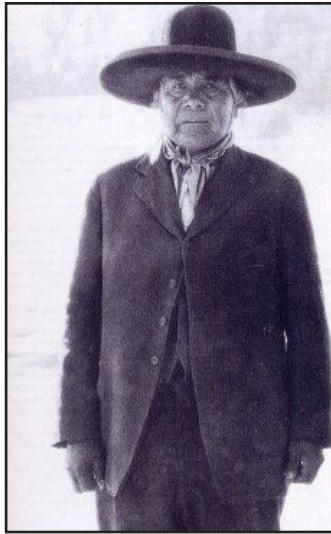
It has often been suggested that the Wounded Knee Massacre can be attributed, in part, to the desire of the Seventh Cavalry to avenge the death of their former commander, Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer, fourteen years earlier at the Little Bighorn,³ but this explanation addresses only the nature of the violence at Pine Ridge, not the government agents’ sense of the necessity of a military response to the Ghost Dance. Many authors, deferring to the accounts of Mooney and the Indian agents, have portrayed the United States government’s intentions as suppressing the perceived stirrings of insurrection in the dance or dismantling the practice of native religion.⁴ These approaches, however, fail to take into account the genuinely Christian nature of the Ghost Dance and contemporary observers’ awareness of it. In light of these facts, the possible connection of Wounded Knee to a broader enforcement of Christian orthodoxy in the name of assimilation is worth exploring.

This investigation will present the evidence for such a connection, demonstrating that a desire on the part of government agents on reservations to ensure Indians’ orthodox Christian worship as a means of facilitating the adoption of a “mainstream American” lifestyle provides the clearest explanation of the military response at Wounded Knee, spuriously attributed to the fear of an armed uprising. The suppression of the Ghost Dance, then, may be situated within a war waged by Euro-Americans on religious practices that reflected the acculturation of Native Americans but differed from “mainstream” Christian practice in the United States. It was this cultural war that allowed

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the religious persecution of Indian peoples to persist well beyond a point at which the United States government would have felt the “conquest” to be complete.

Over four decades ago, Robert M. Utley provided an interpretation of the religious character of the Ghost Dance that was firmly grounded in white Americans’ observations from the late nineteenth century.⁵ In Utley’s view, the Ghost Dance, as practiced by the Lakota at Pine Ridge, marked a violent perversion of Wovoka’s original peaceful blend of Christianity and “the old native religion.”⁶ Raymond J. DeMallie has offered valid critiques of Utley’s assumptions of native religious uniformity and political and doctrinaire dimensions of the Ghost Dance, noting that Utley’s analysis overlooks vast differences among tribes in both traditional religious belief and in practices traceable to the revelations of Wovoka. While DeMallie is correct in asserting that treating the Ghost Dance as “an isolated phenomenon, as though it were divorced from the rest of Lakota culture,” reflects



Wovoka (Jack Wilson), Paiute prophet
and originator of the Ghost Dance movement

too narrow a view, his own assessment of the movement is limited by a commitment to the idea of the dance as “part of the integral, ongoing whole of Lakota culture and its suppression as part of the historical process of religious persecution led by Indian agents and missionaries against the Lakotas living on the Great Sioux Reservation.”⁷ Indeed, the centrality of Christianity in the Ghost Dance religion and the nature of the reaction to the movement suggest that this phenomenon, though far from “isolated,” was a unique development in the history of Plains Indian culture and the government’s repressive response to it.

While the powerful element of enduring indigenous tradition in the Ghost Dance cannot be denied, the rhetoric of the movement’s leaders embodied not only the essential nonviolence DeMallie recognizes,⁸ but also the fundamentally Christian character of the beliefs behind the dance. The preaching of the Paiute prophet Wovoka, recorded in the so-called “Messiah Letters,” provides a description of the dance and its purpose characterized not simply by a superficial appropriation of Christian imagery, but by a thorough embracement of a variety of Christian theological concepts. The Arapaho and Cheyenne versions of Wovoka’s message were quite similar, but for minor differences in spelling and wording, with both clearly articulating a vision of the biblical Day of Judgment. References were made to Jesus’ presence on Earth (though his name was misspelled in both texts—as “Jueses” in the Arapaho and “Juses” in the Cheyenne—reflecting a recent learning of Christianity and English), the resurrection of the dead in the coming fall or spring, and the renewal of health and youth.⁹ This vision only logically would have resonated with diverse native peoples who had all seen their lifestyles and lives destroyed in the face of the encroachment of white Euro-American society onto the Great Plains. The warlike Oglala Lakota leader Red Cloud would later explain the appeal of Christian premillennialism to peoples who felt as though divine forces had turned against them: “Someone had again been talking of the Son of God, and said He had come. The people

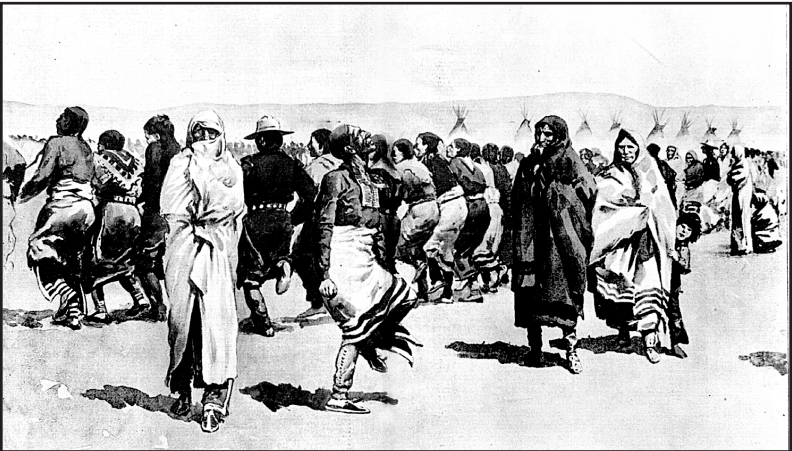
did not know; they did not care. They snatched at the hope. They screamed like crazy men to Him for mercy. They caught at the promises they heard He had made.”¹⁰ Thus, Wovoka’s message, with its many theological references, was not merely an esoteric exploration of a new faith, but rather a reflection of and impetus for the inroads Christianity made among the Sioux and other Plains peoples in the final decades of the nineteenth century.

Slight but noteworthy differences between the two renderings of Wovoka’s preaching include the fact that the “messiah” was only mentioned by name (“Jackson Wilson”) in the Cheyenne version¹¹ and a slight shift in the choice of pronouns near a reference to the “grandfather,” specified in James Mooney’s grammatically corrected “Free Rendering” (which can be regarded as reasonably trustworthy, given its faithfulness to the native texts) to be a universal title of reverence among Indians used to refer to the “messiah.”¹² Whereas the Cheyenne version related that “grandfather said, when they were die never cry,”¹³ the Arapaho text reads, “Grandfather said that when he die never (no) cry.”¹⁴ The use of the singular pronoun “he” more clearly evokes the sacrifice of the life of the “messiah,” as opposed to fallen Indians generally, linking the Arapaho letter more precisely to the story of Jesus Christ, who died for the redemption of humankind. The notion of the “messiah” in Wovoka’s formulation of the Ghost Dance moved beyond indigenous prophetic archetypes to embrace a specifically Christian model.

As well-constructed as Wovoka’s Christian theology was, speeches by Lakota leaders of the movement made the millenarian implications of the Ghost Dance even more explicit and immediate. Both Kicking Bear and Short Bull stated that the restoration of Indian lifeways would imply the disappearance of white men (who were thus judged to be sinful) from the Plains, and Short Bull heightened the sense of urgency with his assurance that the Day of Judgment would arrive even sooner than previously foretold.¹⁵ Beyond these key innovations in content, however, the Lakota speeches reiterated much of Wovoka’s

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original Christian rhetoric and promise of the return of ancestral spirits, with Short Bull’s invoking the name of “God.”¹⁶ The Lakota leaders arguably struck a more hostile tone than had Wovoka, especially in light of Kicking Bear’s asserting twice that it was white men who crucified Christ and Short Bull’s urging his followers, “Whatever white men may tell you, do not listen to them,” in sharp contrast to Wovoka’s instruction not to refuse to work for white men.¹⁷ This hostility, however, does not imply violent intent on the part of the Lakota Ghost Dancers, as many contemporaneous observers and later scholars would suggest. The two Lakota leaders did speak of the death of white soldiers, but their descriptions point to predictions of divine retribution, rather than prescriptions of Indian aggression: Short Bull foretold soldiers dropping dead around the dancers and sinking into the earth,¹⁸ while Kicking Bear envisioned soldiers dying by the “powder” of the “red men,” used only in self-defense and in accordance with the same divine intervention that would render white men’s gunpowder useless.¹⁹ Thus, the Lakota messages were not incompatible with Wovoka’s original directive, in the



December 4, 1890, *Harper's Weekly* print of an image of Oglala Lakota Ghost Dancers at Pine Ridge, drawn by Frederic Remington

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Christian spirit of turning the other cheek, to be well-behaved and not to fight or harm anyone.²⁰

Further support for the interpretation of the Ghost Dance as a vehicle for the transmission of genuine Christianity among Indian peoples may be found beyond the Lakota and the immediate context of the 1890s. Benjamin R. Kracht’s research on the Kiowa, for example, highlights the Christianization of native people through the Ghost Dance, in spite of his seemingly incongruous claim that the dance was Christianity’s “major competition” in the first quarter of the twentieth century, by noting the expansion of that faith in the same period during which the Ghost Dance was practiced, as perhaps one third of the Kiowa had converted to Christianity by 1922.²¹ Even more compelling is Tisa Wenger’s work on rhetoric employed by native groups in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to defend their religious practices. Wenger highlights such examples as that of a group of forty Pawnee leaders who, in 1914, credited the Ghost Dance with providing the means by which they “found the white man’s Christ.”²²

As a strategy for convincing government agents to allow them “to worship in our own good way,” such appeals to the Christian content and “moral benefits” of the Ghost Dance as Wenger describes were often unsuccessful.²³ When evaluated in the context of white Americans’ responses to Native American forms of Christian religious practice at least as far back as the 1880s, this failure is unsurprising. The United States government had no interest in allowing indigenous peoples to invent their own forms of worship. Rather, agents would tolerate only orthodox Christian practice, to which they encountered a significant challenge in the form of the theologically sound Ghost Dance. White American authorities’ demands for Christian orthodoxy both led to and were solidified by the shocking violence at Wounded Knee.

Indeed, there is ample evidence to suggest that white Euro-American observers were as aware of the Christian character

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of the Ghost Dance as were the leaders of the movement of 1889–90, indicating discomfort with Indian religious activities rather than beliefs. The Protestant missionary Mary Collins recorded her observations of the dance, as practiced at Sitting Bull’s camp, in *The Word Carrier*, a newspaper published at Nebraska’s Santee Agency, in November 1890:

I watched all the performance, and I came to the conclusion that the “ghost dance” is nothing more than the sun dance revived. [...] They have not yet cut themselves, as in the old sun dance, but yesterday I heard this talk: Some said, “If one cuts himself, he is more ‘wakan,’ and can see and talk with the Messiah.”²⁴

Collins included in her account many distinctly indigenous elements of the old Sun Dance, not practiced since it was suppressed among the Kiowa by the army in the summer of that year,²⁵ including the center pole of the Lakota and the circle dance (in which men and women danced together and held hands) of the Paiute, Wovoka’s people.²⁶ While these recognizable practices may have reminded Collins of the old association of the Sun Dance with preparations for warfare, she was also aware of the differences between the Ghost Dance and earlier traditions—the absence of corporal mutilation and, more importantly, references to “the Messiah.” Clearly, Collins had observed that the Ghost Dancers framed their activities in terms of (nonviolent) Christian language, as opposed to warlike goals, yet she presented the dance as an undeniable threat. The following month, shortly before Wounded Knee, *The Word Carrier* published another article exhibiting a similar logical disjunction:

Their war dances have been suppressed simply as a political measure. The sun dance was forbidden in the name of humanity, as cruel and degrading.

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[...] But all of these alike, as well as all other of their heathen dances, should be prevented as far and as fast as possible until utterly eradicated, because they are potentially dangerous. We ought not to touch them as religious ceremonials, but as breeders of riot and rebellion, we must.²⁷

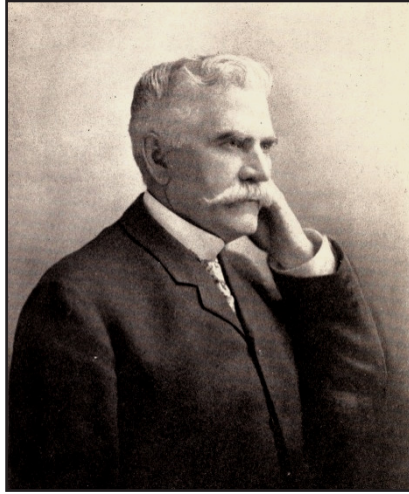
The missionary paper had observed only the religious content of the Ghost Dance firsthand; the connection to “riot and rebellion” was pure speculation, proffered without justification.

Far more consequential than the missionaries’ awareness of the Christian nature of the Ghost Dance, for the sake of policy, was Pine Ridge Agent James McLaughlin’s recognition of the same. In spite of the Ghost Dancers’ rhetoric advocating nonviolence (or violence to be wrought only by God’s judgment), McLaughlin asserted in a November 6, 1890, memorandum on the causes of the “Ghost Dance Uprising” that the movement was

inaugurated by these leaders for the purpose of exciting the Indians, and as a cover for their meetings to arrange an outbreak. Sitting Bull has said that at a point not indicated, near Fort Stephenson, some 1,500 stands of arms are concealed for use by Indians in case of outbreak.²⁸

Though McLaughlin noted legitimate causes for “ill feeling” and for the Lakota to have “lost faith in the Government”—such as reductions in promised rations at Pine Ridge and lengthy wait times to claim them, a recognized failure of the Indians to have “derived any benefit from treaty, though cows, &c., were guaranteed,” and delays in supply trains in the wake of crop failures that left the reservation Indians in “half starved condition”²⁹—the lack of evidence supporting his lie about Sitting Bull’s claim calls his concern over the possibility of an “outbreak” into serious

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Veteran agent James McLaughlin,
photographed in 1910

doubt. The only concrete fact of the Ghost Dance McLaughlin recognized in his memorandum, through his labeling the movement “the ‘Messiah’ craze,”³⁰ was the apparent Christian theology constituting the foundation of the dancers’ professed belief system. McLaughlin easily could have justified the suppression of the Ghost Dance by deferring to existing laws prohibiting Indian religious practice. In 1883, Secretary of the Interior Henry Teller had introduced sweeping restrictions on native religious freedom in the form of the Indian Religious Crimes Code, banning “Native American ceremonial activity under pain of imprisonment.”³¹ While the missionaries may have been ignorant of such restrictions (though this is unlikely), McLaughlin’s failure to refer to the laws while acknowledging the religious content of the dance and the Christian message attached to it seems to indicate that he knew his assertions of native militant intent to be baseless. In McLaughlin’s account, what looms large is not a legalistic appeal, but a recognition of the Ghost Dance as a form of Christian worship—not a purely “Indian” religion, but

not orthodox, either. Thus, for McLaughlin, as well as for missionaries with an interest in securing converts for their respective denominations, the danger to be stamped out by military intervention was not truly armed insurrection, but unorthodox Christian praxis.

Various examples of Indian agents beyond Pine Ridge who tolerated native forms of worship only up to a certain threshold of orthodoxy demonstrate that, while Wounded Knee may have been unique for its violence, the suppression of the Ghost Dance was a reflection of a general policy of enforcing orthodox Christianity. In the 1880s, Agent Edwin Eells “felt he had no right to interfere” with native religion on the state of Washington’s Skokomish Reservation so long as his Indian “wards” were engaged in Catholic worship. Eells’s toleration, however, reached its limit with the coming of the Indian Shaker movement, blending Catholicism with Protestant and indigenous practices. As Wenger aptly states, “[r]eligious liberty, for all practical purposes, meant that Indians had the freedom to choose which denomination they wished to join.”³² A similar denominational standard for religious toleration was applied in the aforementioned case of the Pawnee chiefs who argued for the Christian content of the Ghost Dance in 1914. The following year, the Pawnee were granted permission to hold the dance once more, albeit on the condition that Methodist and Baptist ministers would be present at the two-day religious gathering and given opportunities “to address the assembled tribe,” thus transforming the Ghost Dance from a vehicle for the transmission of Indian Christianity into an occasion for sectarian missionary activity.³³

The policies of agents who enforced Christian orthodoxy in these ways appear to have been informed by such pervasive views of religion in late nineteenth-century America as those expressed by the church historian Philip Schaff in his 1888 work *Church and State in the United States*,³⁴ presenting the U.S. Constitution fundamentally as a defense of the Christian faith. According

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to Schaff,

the Constitution not only contains nothing which is irreligious or unchristian, but is Christian in substance, though not in form. It is pervaded by the spirit of justice and humanity, which are Christian. The First Amendment could not have originated in any pagan or Mohammedan country, but presupposes Christian civilization and culture. Christianity alone has taught men to respect the sacredness of the human personality as made in the image of God and redeemed by Christ, and to protect its rights and privileges, including the freedom of worship, against the encroachments of the temporal power and the absolutism of the state.³⁵

Schaff viewed Christianity as fundamental to the civilizational and constitutional framework of the United States. Key American values, chief among them religious liberty, could only be understood within a Christian frame of reference. It was for this reason, and not in the spirit of religious pluralism and equality, that Schaff opposed proposed constitutional amendments to enshrine Christianity in the preamble, allow penalties for “the public exercise of non-Christian religions,” and limit the free-exercise protections of the First Amendment to “the various forms of Christianity.”³⁶ Given Schaff’s assumptions about the nature of the Constitution in its unamended form, such changes would have been redundant, stating that which was already implicitly established. Schaff’s reference to “the various *forms* of Christianity” is of particular interest, as it implies that permissible forms of worship were restricted not only to Christianity, but to existing orthodoxies.

While the parallel practices of agents who would have been familiar with such works as Schaff’s *Church and State in*

the United States suggest a general policy of enforcing Christian orthodoxy, measures taken by other arms of the government shortly after Wounded Knee demonstrate more clearly that this policy was central to Washington’s agenda for the country’s indigenous population in the late nineteenth century. For example, a May 1891 report on schools on the Pine Ridge Agency suggests that the same Christian orthodoxy ensured among Indian adults by the threat and exercise of military force was deliberately inculcated in Indian children by the educational program on reservations. The superintendent of Indian schools, Daniel Dorchester, emphasized the “religious effort” put forth in the process of education, with Indian students sent on Sundays to churches of various denominations (though instruction at the school itself was “undenominational and broad”), thus ensuring orthodox Christian practice by preventing children from observing the Sabbath through “Indian” forms of worship.³⁷ Meanwhile, authorities appear to have attempted to minimize the risk of corruption of the young due to exposure to unorthodox religious ideas by removing “about sixty of the more advanced [older] students” to industrial schools “after the close of the period of hostilities.” Their places were to be “filled by ‘freshmen’ from the tepes,” whose religious instruction and worship could better be monitored in the government schools.³⁸ The fact that Dorchester’s report described an intensification of policies to promote orthodox Christian practice in the months following Wounded Knee indicates that the violence of the massacre simply deepened the conviction of white authorities that unorthodox forms of worship could not be tolerated. Such a commitment to stricter controls designed to root out distinctly “Indian” forms of Christianity helps to explain the language selected for the 1892 “Rules for Indian Courts,” Commissioner of Indian Affairs Thomas J. Morgan’s codification of “[religious] offenses on the reservations.” The new post-Wounded Knee law called for imprisonment for any participant in dances “similar” to older native dances—including the Sun Dance, which, such

white observers as Mary Collins argued, bore a resemblance to the Christian Ghost Dance—and for “so-called medicine men” impeding the adoption of “civilized habits and pursuits.”³⁹ These regulations were sufficiently vague to broaden the scope of official religious scrutiny even to Christian worship that incorporated Indian traditions.

Such blatant infringements of the First Amendment’s protections of the free exercise of religion cannot simply be explained by vague appeals to the somewhat esoteric interpretations of Schaff and likeminded scholars that the Constitution granted religious liberty only within the limits of orthodox Christianity. Rather, a political motive must have underlain a multifaceted governmental effort to regulate the ways in which Native Americans worshipped the Christian God. Crucially, both Morgan’s “Rules for Indian Courts,” leaving room for punishment of Christian rituals drawing on practices from Indian traditions, and the abundant documentation of a white Euro-American focus on the Ghost Dance and similar syncretic movements as unorthodox Christian practice point to an awareness on the part of the United States government that various native peoples, by the final decades of the nineteenth century, had acculturated to Christianity without adopting the practices of one of several mainstream denominations. Therefore, such episodes as the 1890 crackdown on the Lakota Ghost Dance could not simply have been the product of the familiar assimilationist logic of dismantling indigenous culture in order to facilitate integration into the mainstream. The progress of Christianity necessary as a precondition for the emergence of the Ghost Dance—with its messianic language, invocation of the character of Jesus Christ, and premillennialist interpretation of the Second Coming—indicates that a purely indigenous religious culture could no longer have been intact among participants in the movement by the late 1880s.

After completing the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, doubling the territory of the nation and laying the foundation for

migrations of white settlers that would ignite the Plains Indian Wars later in the century, President Thomas Jefferson shared with Congress his vision for the indigenous peoples of the western frontier: “Two measures are deemed expedient. First to encourage them to abandon hunting. [...] Secondly, to multiply trading houses among them [...] leading them thus to agriculture, to manufactures, and civilization.”⁴⁰ Jefferson imagined that the assimilation of Native Americans would be wrought by a two-stage process. While his message to Congress may have placed an emphasis on economic matters, the prescription may be generalized. A systematic assault on the traditional lifeways of the indigenous population would only be the beginning, to be followed by a concerted effort to coerce Native Americans to adopt the practices of their white neighbors. In the decades to come, Jefferson’s basic framework would constitute the basis of an overarching Indian policy.

The late nineteenth-century imposition of Christian orthodoxy, then, is best understood as an element of the second stage in the United States government’s approach to Indian peoples. The movement of native groups onto reservations and the destruction of their old lifeways was the formal “conquest,” paving the way for a cultural war that would leave Euro-American lifeways as the only option. In this sense, the enforcement of orthodox Christian practice was the cultural complement to the severalty provisions of the 1887 Dawes Act, crafted to break up the reservations and encourage farming among Native Americans by granting 160-acre tracts of land to male heads of families. In fact, the Dawes Act, the initial implementation of which coincided almost perfectly with the emergence and suppression of the Ghost Dance movement, may have lent urgency to the policy of discouraging unorthodox forms of Christian worship and establishing by federal regulations the extent of acceptable religious exercise. Because the Dawes Act provided citizenship to the recipients of land grants, the law theoretically enabled Native Americans to appeal to their rights as United States citizens

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in defending their religious practices. Perhaps due to a realization of the long-term untenability of the violation of citizens’ First Amendment freedoms constituted by a policy of enforcing Christian orthodoxy, Congress amended the Dawes Act, through the Burke Act of 1906, to postpone grantees’ citizenship for twenty-five years or until they had “adopted the habits of civilized life.”⁴¹

Given the pervasive and self-reinforcing nature of the United States government’s policy of forced assimilation of Native Americans to Euro-American lifeways, with the promotion of orthodox Christianity by all means necessary as one of its central tenets, one is compelled to conclude that, while allegations of insurrection may have provided the *justification* for the use of military force at Wounded Knee, the imposition of religious orthodoxy was the true *motivation*. An explanation for the extent of the massacre, with native women and children representing the majority of the victims, is the subject of contentious debate and beyond the scope of this analysis. What can be stated with certainty, however, is that the Ghost Dance was



Senator Henry L. Dawes of Massachusetts,
author of the 1887 Dawes Act

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theologically Christian—both in its original form, as preached by the “messiah” Wovoka, and among the Lakota at Pine Ridge—and white observers of the day, from female Protestant missionaries to veteran agents with years of experience in the company of Plains Indians, were well aware of this fact. The claims of James McLaughlin and others that the Ghost Dancers were preparing for an armed uprising were baseless; the only concrete facts of which these observers took note, beyond the suffering associated with reservation life in the aftermath of a brutal “conquest,” was the dancers’ belief in the coming of the messiah and the approach of the Day of Judgment. Especially in light of government Indian school policies, federal reservation laws, and scholarly and popular views in white society that stressed normative, denominational Christianity, the Pine Ridge authorities’ call for a military response was a logical reaction to the expansion of the Ghost Dance. As officers of the United States government, Indian agents subscribed to an assimilationist logic that emphasized orthodox Christianity as a key to civilization.

If one considers the struggle against mainline Protestant hostility whereby such groups as Catholics and Mormons were gradually accepted as part of the “quasi-official American religion” of nonsectarian Christianity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,⁴² it should be unsurprising that the federal government and white Euro-American society as a whole would have been uncomfortable with the idea of accepting practitioners of “Indian Christianity” as full citizens. While such attitudes may have been most relevant and become entrenched in the final decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, with the violence of the Plains Indian Wars in recent memory, they had long-lasting legal consequences that, in turn, considerably impacted the individual liberties of Native Americans for years to come. Though there were exceptional cases in which such syncretic Christian practices as the Ghost Dance continued to be practiced, these forms of worship were technically illegal until the 1978 passage of the American Indian

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Religious Freedom Act, proclaiming that

it shall be the policy of the United States to protect and preserve for American Indians their inherent right of freedom to believe, express, and exercise the traditional religions of the American Indian, Eskimo, Aleut, and Native Hawaiians, including but not limited to access to sites, use and possession of sacred objects, and the freedom to worship through ceremonials and traditional rites.⁴³

The very wording of this piece of legislation underscores the critical importance of understanding the motivation behind the United States government’s prohibition of the Ghost Dance and similar religious practices. What began as a politically charged insistence upon orthodox Christian practice in the name of uncompromising assimilation had evolved into a decades-long denial of the basic First Amendment right to exercise one’s religion as one chose (to say nothing of religious belief), disguised at its origin as a protection against a national security risk that never existed.

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NOTES

¹ James Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890*, Bureau of American Ethnology Annual Report 14, pt. 2 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1896), 848.

² *Ibid.*, 843–850.

³ Heather Cox Richardson, *Wounded Knee: Party Politics and the Road to an American Massacre* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 8–9. Such recent sources indicate the enduring appeal of the interpretation that the Seventh Cavalry’s desire for vengeance at least partially explains the violence of the Wounded Knee Massacre.

⁴ Though the latter interpretation, characterizing the suppression of the Ghost Dance as part of a broader assault on indigenous culture, is now most common in the literature, scholars perpetuated the narrative of preemptive action against a native revolt well into the twentieth century. For example, Robert H. Lowie, *Indians of the Plains* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1954), 181, describes “rebellion against the government” as “a cardinal point of [Wovoka’s] doctrine.”

⁵ See James McLaughlin, “Memorandum Regarding the Reasons for the Ghost Dance Uprising, November 6, 1890” (memorandum, Pine Ridge Agency, 1890). McLaughlin’s false assertions regarding Sitting Bull’s involvement with the Ghost Dance were echoed in Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890*, 787.

⁶ Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866–1891* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), 402–403.

⁷ Raymond J. DeMallie, “The Lakota Ghost Dance: An Ethnohistorical Account,” *Pacific Historical Review* 51, no. 4 (1982): 387–388.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 404.

⁹ Wovoka (Jack Wilson), “The Messiah Letter: Arapaho Version,” as reproduced in Rani-Henrik Andersson, *The Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 306; Wovoka (Jack Wilson), “The Messiah Letter: Cheyenne Version,” as reproduced in Andersson, *The Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890*, 306–307.

¹⁰ Quoted in DeMallie, “The Lakota Ghost Dance: An Ethnohistorical Account,” 393.

¹¹ Wovoka, “The Messiah Letter: Cheyenne Version,” 307.

¹² James Mooney, “The Messiah Letter: Free Rendering,” as reproduced in Andersson, *The Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890*, 307.

¹³ Wovoka, “The Messiah Letter: Cheyenne Version,” 307.

¹⁴ Wovoka, “The Messiah Letter: Arapaho Version,” 306.

¹⁵ Kicking Bear, “Kicking Bear’s Speech, October 9, 1890,” as reproduced in

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Andersson, *The Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890*, 309–310; Short Bull, “Short Bull’s Speech, October 31, 1890,” as reproduced in Andersson, *The Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890*, 312.

¹⁶ Short Bull, “Short Bull’s Speech, October 31, 1890,” 312.

¹⁷ Kicking Bear, “Kicking Bear’s Speech, October 9, 1890,” 309–310; Short Bull, “Short Bull’s Speech, October 31, 1890,” 313; Wovoka, “The Messiah Letter: Arapaho Version,” 306; Wovoka, “The Messiah Letter: Cheyenne Version,” 307; Mooney, “The Messiah Letter: Free Rendering,” 308.

¹⁸ Short Bull, “Short Bull’s Speech, October 31, 1890,” 312–313.

¹⁹ Kicking Bear, “Kicking Bear’s Speech, October 9, 1890,” 310–311.

²⁰ Wovoka, “The Messiah Letter: Arapaho Version,” 306; Wovoka, “The Messiah Letter: Cheyenne Version,” 307; Mooney, “The Messiah Letter: Free Rendering,” 307.

²¹ Benjamin R. Kracht, “The Kiowa Ghost Dance, 1894–1916: An Unheralded Revitalization Movement,” *Ethnohistory* 39, no. 4 (1992): 458.

²² Tisa Wenger, “Indian Dances and the Politics of Religious Freedom, 1870–1930,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79, no. 4 (2011): 851.

²³ *Ibid.*, 851.

²⁴ Quoted in DeMallie, “The Lakota Ghost Dance: An Ethnohistorical Account,” 397–398.

²⁵ James Mooney, *Calendar History of the Kiowa Indians*, Bureau of American Ethnology Annual Report 17, pt. 1 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1898), 358–359.

²⁶ DeMallie, “The Lakota Ghost Dance: An Ethnohistorical Account,” 398.

²⁷ Quoted in DeMallie, “The Lakota Ghost Dance: An Ethnohistorical Account,” 396.

²⁸ James McLaughlin, “Memorandum Regarding the Reasons for the Ghost Dance Uprising, November 6, 1890.”

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Lee Irwin, “Freedom, Law, and Prophecy: A Brief History of Native American Religious Resistance,” *American Indian Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (1997): 35.

³² Wenger, “Indian Dances and the Politics of Religious Freedom, 1870–1930,” 857.

³³ *Ibid.*, 851.

³⁴ The connection between Schaff’s work and the practices of Indian agents is an interpretation borrowed from Wenger, “Indian Dances and the Politics of Religious Freedom, 1870–1930,” 856. However, Wenger focuses only on the implications of Schaff’s work for the adoption of Christianity by Native American peoples, citing such examples as that of Agent William Forbes of North Dakota’s Devil’s Lake (Dakota Sioux) Reservation, who believed that

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“heathenism” held the natives in “superstitious slavery.” Wenger does not explore the denominational bent of Schaff’s writing, highlighted in this investigation as cause to believe that agents influenced by such authors as Schaff would not only advocate for the Christianization of Native Americans, but also insist upon orthodox praxis.

³⁵ Philip Schaff, *Church and State in the United States, or The American Idea of Religious Liberty and Its Practical Effects* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1888), 40.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 38–39.

³⁷ Daniel Dorchester, “Inspection of Government Schools by Superintendent of Indian Schools Daniel Dorchester” (report, Pine Ridge Agency, 1891), 3–4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁹ Irwin, “Freedom, Law, and Prophecy: A Brief History of Native American Religious Resistance,” 36.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1980), 126.

⁴¹ Wenger, “Indian Dances and the Politics of Religious Freedom, 1870–1930,” 858.

⁴² See Noah Feldman, *Divided by God: America’s Church-State Problem—And What We Should Do About It* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 57–110, for an excellent description of the development and gradual expansion of the nonsectarian Christian mainstream in the United States.

⁴³ *Joint Resolution: American Indian Religious Freedom*, Public Law 95–341, U.S. Statutes at Large 92 (1978): 469.

Images

Page 12: “Wovoka Paiute Shaman,” via Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wovoka_Paiute_Shaman.jpg (accessed December 30, 2017).

Page 15: “The Ghost Dance by the Oglala Lakota at Pine Ridge Agency,” drawn by Frederic Remington, illustrated in *Harper’s Weekly*, December 6, 1890, via Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ghost_Dance_at_Pine_Ridge.png (accessed December 30, 2017).

Page 19: “Photo of James McLaughlin (1842-1923), US Indian Inspector,” 1910, via Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jamesmclaughlin.png> (accessed December 30, 2017).

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Page 25: “Henry L. Dawes,” c. 1860–1875, via Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:HenryLDawes.jpg> (accessed December 30, 2017).