

The varieties of Sioux Christianity, 1860–1980, in international perspective

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Abstract

The paper analyses the multiple ways in which the Sioux have dealt with missionary Christianity between roughly 1860 and 1980, placing this in an international perspective. It addresses the question of how and why Christianity became pervasive among the Sioux despite the avowed purpose of missionaries to extirpate Native culture. It contends that the churches willy-nilly preserved many elements of that culture and provided leadership opportunities for Natives that were not available through other institutions. It examines this process in the light of several interpretations of missionary encounters drawn from other cases, both in North America and Africa. While the Sioux exhibited a variety of ways of adapting to Christianity and combining it with their native religion, the most prominent strategy was dual participation, the simultaneous separate practice of the two.

‘Most Sioux people maintain membership in, and belief in the efficacy of, some Christian denomination.’

Raymond J. De Mallie and Douglas R. Parks, 1987¹

‘A very small percentage of Native Americans are practicing Christians.’

William Baldrige, 1993²

Introduction

In a recent survey and analysis of the field of world history, Patrick Manning has noted, ‘It is remarkable ... how little discussion of religion appears in world history literature for recent centuries.’³ In view of the importance of religion in cross-cultural interactions in

1 ‘Introduction’, De Mallie and Parks, eds., *Sioux Indian religion*, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987, p. 14. I want to thank Catherine Wessinger, Katie Benton-Cohen, Philip J. Deloria and the reviewers for the *Journal of Global History* for their perceptive and helpful readings of earlier versions of this paper.

2 ‘Reclaiming our histories’, in James Treat, ed., *Native and Christian*, New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 86.

3 Patrick Manning, *Navigating world history*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 248.

recent years, this is a conspicuous omission. Manning offers two reasons for this gap: first, a general tendency of scholars to interpret religious phenomena in secular terms, e.g. as part of political or social history, or as an aspect of imperialism; second, a preoccupation with local studies of religion rather than studying their global dimensions. One can point to a third reason which perhaps underlies these two: a relative paucity of theoretical models to help scholars make sense of large and disparate bodies of data concerning religious interaction – at least in comparison to other divisions of global history that deal with economic, political, or ecological phenomena. While there does exist a body of literature on conversion, that term is often used in such a variety of ways as to lose any precision. Conversion can mean at times a sudden break with earlier religious practices, at others a gradual process of change. For some it suggests a change in sensibility that occurs within an individual, for others a social change. The same looseness can be attributed to the term ‘syncretism’ which, while pointing to the fact that cross-religious encounters generally result in a combination of new and old beliefs and practices, leaves unspecified just how such combinations occur.⁴ Part of the attempt to close the theoretical gap, then, will be to develop a more differentiated vocabulary to encompass the varieties of acceptances, resistances, and combinations that take place when different religions encounter each other. While no one would argue that the history of such encounters can or should be divorced from politics, colonialism, or other secular forces, it should be equally obvious that religious beliefs, practices, and motives cannot always be reduced to such forces and deserve theoretical treatment on their own terms.

The purpose of the present essay is to make a small contribution in this direction by analysing the multiple ways in which the Native American tribes that comprise the Sioux have dealt with missionary Christianity between roughly 1860 and 1980 and placing this in an international perspective. I will do so by examining the evidence in the light of several interpretations of missionary encounters drawn from other cases, primarily in Africa.

The tribes that comprise the Sioux have been the subject of more study than any other group of Native North Americans. The western Sioux in particular have formed the basis for the stereotypes that most Euro-Americans and Europeans have of Indians in general – whether as the warriors who defeated Custer at Little Big Horn, or as the spiritual peoples who cherish the earth, as popularized in the film *Dances with wolves*.⁵ Neither of these stereotypes takes into account, or seems at first glance compatible with, the fact that most Sioux accepted Christianity, as conveyed to them by missionaries, at some time between 1860 and 1930. Statistical documentation for this process is fragmentary and dubious at best, but the numbers that exist indicate a general trend that was well under way by the First World War. An article in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in 1893 estimated the number of Catholics at 4,740 and the number of Protestants to be between 10,500 and 11,000 (out of

4 On conversion, see the discussion surrounding the work of Robin Horton (below, n. 56). On syncretism, see Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart, ‘Introduction: problematizing syncretism’, in Stewart and Shaw, eds., *Syncretism/anti-syncretism: the politics of religious synthesis*, London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 1–25.

5 Guy Gibbon, *The Sioux. The Dakota and Lakota nations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2003, p. 1; Shari M. Huhndorf, *Going Native. Indians in the American cultural imagination*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001, p. 2.

some 26,000 total population).⁶ A study conducted on the Pine Ridge Reservation in the 1940s claimed that ‘all the Pine Ridge Indians profess belief in Christianity and nominal membership in some church’.⁷ A 1997 study claims that almost half of the Indians at Pine Ridge are baptized Catholics.⁸ As the opening epigraphs suggest, these figures stand in marked contrast to those of Native Americans as a whole. An interdenominational survey conducted in 1921 revealed that slightly fewer than half of the 400,000 Native people were nominal Christians.⁹ A 1998 article states that ‘today, only between 10 and 25 percent (depending on what set of statistics one chooses to believe) of Natives consider themselves Christians’.¹⁰

Such numbers, of course, beg the question of what it means to be a Native or Sioux Christian, and how one combines it with one’s previous religious beliefs and practices. As with any other culture, the answer will vary tremendously from one individual or group to another within the society. One might imagine a spectrum of responses, from outright resistance to wholesale assimilation, with a variety of combinations of ‘conversions’ and ‘syncretisms’ in between. I will want to suggest, however, that distinctive patterns of *distribution* within such a range characterize particular societies or cultures, and that such a pattern emerges for the Sioux.

If there are varieties of Sioux Christianity, there are also varieties of Sioux. The term itself is not a Native label, but a foreign one, a French corruption of an Ojibwa word meaning ‘enemy’ or ‘people of an alien tribe’. The Indians themselves referred to a group of seven tribes (the ‘Seven Fireplaces’), grouped into three divisions which are known either by generic name (Santee, Yankton, Teton) by their dialect (Dakota, Nakota, Lakota, all of which meant ‘friends’ or ‘allies’). The Lakota or Teton, the largest group, came to be further subdivided into seven tribes, the best known being the Oglala, the Brulé, and the Hunkpapa (Sitting Bull’s tribe).¹¹ The three major divisions were spread geographically roughly from east to west, from Minnesota and Nebraska to the Dakotas. The three dialects were, however, sufficiently similar to be mutually intelligible – a fact of obvious importance for the missionaries, who could rely on translations in one area to be understood in another. Thus the existence of these differences did not seriously impede the spread of Christianity from one group to another.

6 William H. Wassel, ‘The religion of the Sioux’, quoted in Thomas E. Mails, *Fools Crow*, New York: Doubleday, 1979, pp. 232–3.

7 Gordon Macgregor, *Warriors without weapons*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946, p. 93.

8 Christopher Vecsey, ‘A century of Lakota Sioux Catholicism at Pine Ridge’, in Walter H. Conser, Jr., and Sumner B. Twiss, eds., *Religious diversity and American religious history*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1997, p. 267.

9 Frederick E. Hoxie, ‘The Reservation period, 1880–1960’, in Bruce G. Trigger and Wilcomb E. Washburn, eds., *The Cambridge history of the Native peoples of the Americas*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, vol. 2, p. 227.

10 Jace Weaver, ‘From I-hermeneutics to we-hermeneutics. Native Americans and the post-colonial’, in Weaver, ed., *Native American religious identity. Unforgotten gods*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998, p. 6.

11 Gibbon, *The Sioux*, pp. 2–3; Paul B. Steinmetz, S.J., *Pipe, Bible and Peyote among the Oglala Lakota*, Dissertation, University of Stockholm, 1980, pp. 9–10; De Mallie and Parks, ‘Introduction’, pp. 6–7. The latter claim that there is no historical evidence for Nakota being a separate dialect, but that Santee and Yankton are both Dakota.

Another consideration in placing Sioux Christianity in a comparative perspective has to do with colonialism and the fact that not all colonialisms are alike. Philip Curtin has provided a helpful typology to begin to sort out the differences. He distinguishes between three general types of foreign domination: (1) settler colonialism, in which migrants establish a colony in a new place, numerically overwhelming the indigenous inhabitants, as in the US and Canada, Australia and New Zealand; (2) territorial empire, in which a minority of foreigners dominates a large indigenous population, as in British India or Nigeria; (3) plural societies, in which foreign settlers live alongside native peoples, as in South Africa, Israel, parts of the former Soviet Union, and some Latin American countries.¹² The history of European–Native American relations in North America generally moved from the third type to the first during the course of the nineteenth century. While all three types undoubtedly have profound and probably irreversible effects on the peoples who are dominated, one might well infer that these effects vary significantly from one type to another. In the case of settler society, the overwhelming and ongoing *presence* of the colonial power suggests a different set of interactions with indigenous peoples than is the case with distant colonies or plural societies. It is this presence which profoundly shapes the history of Sioux Christianity and its relationship to Native religious traditions.

While the basic facts of US settler expansion into Sioux lands are well known and need no recounting here, two events stand out as particularly significant. One was an uprising in Minnesota in 1862, when a minority of Dakotas made war on white settlements, killing some 500, thereby unleashing among whites a groundswell of calls for vengeance. The attackers fled westward or into Canada, as did many Dakotas who had opposed the war but feared persecution. Most of those who remained, whether friendly or hostile, were interned while preparations were made for their removal from the state (thirty-eight were executed). The second was the Ghost Dance movement in 1890, a time when the Western Sioux were suffering from extreme poverty and disease, and which led to the tragic massacre at Wounded Knee Creek in South Dakota, the last violent episode of the Indian wars. It is estimated that about half the Sioux population participated in the Ghost Dance.¹³ The appearance of a millennial religion in such circumstances should come as no surprise. The fact that many Sioux were also turning to the missionary churches around the same time, however, is all the more remarkable and in need of explanation.

This was especially so in the face of the express intent of the missionaries to ‘civilize’ the Indians, i.e. take away their own culture and religion. Such intent was by no means unusual for missionaries in other parts of the world, but rarely, it seems to me, were they in a position to put it so thoroughly into practice as on the American Great Plains in the mid-to late nineteenth century. While missionaries often found themselves at odds with imperial governments on how to implement the ‘civilizing mission’, churches and the US government frequently co-operated during this period. This co-operation reached its peak under President Ulysses S. Grant’s Peace Plan of 1869, which called for the involvement of the

12 Philip D. Curtin, *The world and the West. The European challenge and the overseas response in the age of empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 1.

13 James Mooney, *The Ghost-Dance religion and the Sioux outbreak of 1890*, reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965, p. 200. For a more recent view, see Alice Beck Kehoe, *The Ghost Dance: ethnohistory and revitalization*, Belmont, CA: The Wadsworth Group, 2002.

Protestant and Catholic churches in running the reservations and providing the tools for Indian assimilation into white society. The plan was in effect for a decade; afterward, good feeling between church and state began to decline.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the extreme language which missionaries and government officials alike used to describe this civilizing mission is a good indication of their radical intent. One of the first missionaries to the Dakota, Stephen R. Riggs, for all his years of devotion to the tribe, proposed in 1850 to ‘disintegrate them as far as possible’.¹⁵ His plan called for setting up boarding schools to separate children from their parents, so as eventually to eradicate the evils of large villages and tribal government. Such schools became the pattern on the major reservations by the turn of the century. The founder of the Carlisle, Pennsylvania, Boarding School, Richard H. Pratt, echoed these sentiments when he said, ‘It is only the Indian in them that ought to be killed.’¹⁶ Native ceremonies such as the Sun Dance were banned as instruments of the devil. To Pratt and many others, this kind of cultural exorcism was a humane alternative to physical extermination, which many white settlers, particularly those exposed to Indian violence, were advocating. To be sure, one could find more moderate voices, but hardly any who opposed the basic goal of assimilation. Such statements form the basis for the widely accepted interpretation of missionaries as agents of cultural genocide.¹⁷

The study of Sioux Christianity carries with it certain methodological handicaps – particularly for non-Native non-specialists – which grow directly out of the settler presence. For although there is now a body of literature in English that purportedly reflects Sioux perspectives, much of it is written for white audiences and is often mediated by white interpreters. Often these works take the form of a Native’s oral expression ‘as told to’ a sympathetic white writer who is responding to a wide market for such confessions, itself a result of the Euro-American fascination with Indians, laced with feelings of guilt.¹⁸ This type of work is extremely problematic as a historical source. Not only are there questions of translation, but also of the additional filter of the white interpreter. Native historian Waziyatawin Angela Wilson has suggested that the bulk of the primary source material for Native history rests not in such accounts, but in the oral traditions themselves (not just oral history), which

14 The dissonance is emphasized by Andrew Porter, *Religion vs. empire? British Protestant missionaries and overseas expansion, 1700–1914*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004, pp. 12–13, 323. On Grant’s peace policy, see R. Pierce Beaver, *Church, State, and the American Indians*, St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1966, ch. 4.

15 Quoted in Gary Clayton Anderson, *Kinsmen of another kind. Dakota–white relations in the Upper Mississippi Valley, 1650–1862*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1984, p. 178. On Riggs and the other early missionaries, see Robert Stahl, ‘Carrying the word to the Sioux. The Williamson and Riggs families’, in Herbert T. Hoover and Larry J. Zimmerman, eds., *South Dakota leaders*, Vermillion, SD: University of South Dakota Press, 1989, pp. 65–79.

16 Quoted in James V. Fenelon, *Culturicide, resistance, and survival of the Lakota* (‘Sioux Nation’), New York: Garland Publishing, 1998, p. 46.

17 See George E. Tinker, *Missionary conquest. The Gospel and Native American cultural genocide*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993; Robert Craig, ‘Christianity and empire: a case study of American Protestant colonialism and Native Americans’, *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 21, 2, 1999, pp. 1–41.

18 Examples include Mails, *Fools Crow*; Mary Crow Dog and Richard Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990; John Fire/Lame Deer and Richard Erdoes, *Lame Deer: seeker of visions*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972. The best-known example, John G. Neihardt’s *Black Elk speaks*, will be discussed below.

require not only linguistic training but also long hours of listening to acquire the proper context. One can no more acquire a grasp of Native sources without this than one could study French or German history without reading archival materials in those languages.¹⁹ Yet Wilson's own published work, a bilingual transcription of her grandfather's recollections, helps to make that point of view accessible – and presumably understandable – to a wider audience. Moreover, contemporary Native writers are rediscovering a Native written tradition, going back to the early nineteenth century, whose works often deal with the same issues that are facing Indians today.²⁰ The present essay is based on the belief that a sufficient body of published literature now exists, both primary and secondary, which bypasses the 'as told to' material and provides a sufficient degree of context whereby the varieties of Sioux Christianity can be accurately understood.

Theories of missionary interaction and their applicability to the Sioux

Studies of Native Americans

A widely cited interpretation of relations between colonizers and colonized is Richard White's notion of a 'middle ground', based on a study of another Native American case, the Algonquians around the Great Lakes between 1650 and 1815. White is concerned with presenting the story from the Indian perspective and emphasizes the fluidity of boundaries, both territorial and cultural, between Indians and whites. He claims that French and Algonquians, out of necessity, accommodated each other by creating a new realm of cultural meanings that were equivalent to neither of the prior two sides, but enabled communication to go forward. This was true of religious views as well as political and economic arrangements.²¹ Yet the very specificity of White's study underscores its limitations when applied to the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. For White demonstrates that this process of accommodation was the product of a balance of power, which clearly did not exist between the US and the Native Americans in the late nineteenth century. His study is more applicable to a plural society in Curtin's sense, rather than the settler colony that developed as the economy shifted from one based on hunting and trade to agriculture.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the Sioux participated in trading networks which promoted such mutual accommodation. Despite their deserved reputation as warriors, the Sioux also had built-in mechanisms for opening their society to outsiders. In addition to a kinship system based on blood relations, there was a 'social kinship' system by which others could be formally adopted into the clan.²² Fur traders soon realized that

19 Waziyatawin Angela Wilson, *Remember this! Dakota decolonization and the Eli Taylor narratives*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005, pp. 24–25, 47–48. Wilson's text is bilingual.

20 Robert Warrior, *The people and the word. Reading Native nonfiction*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005, esp. pp. xiii–xxxi.

21 Richard White, *The middle ground*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. ix–x, 330–2. For an application of this theory to two Sioux missionaries in Canada, see Darcee McLaren, 'Living the middle ground: two Dakota missionaries, 1887–1912', *Ethnohistory* 43, 1996, pp. 277–305.

22 Even Sitting Bull adopted a lost Euro-American mail carrier as his brother. See Alexander B. Adams, *Sitting Bull. An epic of the Plains*, New York: Putnam, 1976, pp. 200–1.

such adoptions could be useful for business purposes, and in many cases this led to actual intermarriage.²³ Thus arose a highly developed sense of ‘mixed-bloods’ and ‘pure-bloods’, terms that are common in Native discourse in general. Such ties often brought with them a receptivity to the white man’s religion. When the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (representing the Presbyterians and Congregationalists) established a mission among the Dakotas in 1834, the French mixed-blood fur trader Joseph Renville became one of the first converts, bringing his Dakota relatives with him. Later, the Lakota chief Red Cloud was attracted to the Catholic missionary Pierre Jean de Smet through his French in-laws.²⁴ As the number of settlers increased, however, the emphasis shifted from accommodation to assimilation, with government officials and missionaries alike demanding that the Sioux become farmers themselves. It was the relative suddenness of this shift, and the very different social interactions that it entailed, that caught the Dakota unprepared and created a sense of betrayal, which led to the violence of 1862.²⁵

Another interpretation of Native receptivity to missionary Christianity is proffered by the Native scholar George Tinker, who forcefully makes the case for cultural genocide. In so doing, he focuses mainly on the missionaries; but when addressing the question of why Natives accepted Christianity, he speculates that

the process of Christianization has involved some internalization of the larger illusion of Indian inferiority and the idealization of white culture and religion ... [which] surely results in a praxis of self-hatred. ... Just as an abused child slowly but inevitably internalizes a parent’s abuse as a consistent demonstration of the child’s own shortcomings and may even regard the life of the abusive parent as exemplary, so communities of oppressed peoples internalize their own oppression and come to believe too many of the stereotypes, explicit and implicit, spoken by the oppressor.²⁶

Tinker’s picture is reinforced by other observers, particularly in the 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s, who confirm the cumulative debilitating effects of governmental paternalism and boarding-school education over several generations.²⁷

This view finds support in the fact that many initial conversions occurred at moments of trauma in defeat. For example, the missionaries’ attempts to convert the Dakota were not particularly successful until the dramatic aftermath of the uprising of 1862. The missionaries intensified their efforts with those who were interned, affecting several hundred conversions. Many of the thirty-eight who were executed went to their deaths singing a Christian hymn.²⁸ In the years immediately thereafter, the Dakota were forced to move

23 Anderson, *Kinsmen of another kind*, p. xi. On the same arrangements among the Algonquins, see White, *Middle ground*, p. 15.

24 Anderson, *Kinsmen of another kind*, pp. 168–9; Craig, ‘Christianity and empire’, p. 10; Vecsey, ‘Century of Lakota Sioux Catholicism’, pp. 265, 268.

25 Anderson, *Kinsmen of another kind*, pp. 203, 256. White paints a similar picture of sudden change for the Western Sioux in his article, ‘The winning of the West: the expansion of the Western Sioux in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’, *Journal of American History*, 65, 1978, pp. 319–43.

26 Tinker, *Missionary conquest*, p. 3.

27 Warrior, *People and the word*, pp. 119, 121; Macgregor, *Warriors without weapons*, chs. 8–14.

28 Weaver, ‘I-hermeneutics to we-hermeneutics’, p. 2.

several times before finding permanent settlements. Under conditions of overcrowding, extreme deprivation, and death that accompanied these removals, not to mention the Indians' uncertainty about their fate, the wave of conversions continued. At the time the missionaries were the only group of whites who showed them any compassion.²⁹ One may of course question, as Tinker has done, whether the meaning of such initial conversions for the Sioux was the same as for the missionaries. Accepting baptism may well have been more a sign of gratitude or a means to survival than an acceptance of a new saviour.³⁰ Obviously we cannot know the impact that such an encounter had on each individual. For the majority, it seems that becoming a Christian did not mean giving up one's traditional religion, but a simultaneous practice of the two, however antithetical this was to the missionaries' aims.

Perhaps the more important question is why the Sioux remained Christians after the initial trauma had worn off. Certainly there were many cases where acceptance of Christianity continued to be associated with acceptance of defeat. According to the anthropologist Marla Powers, at Pine Ridge one had to belong to a church to receive government rations; not joining was to put one's family at risk. Joining meant that one could turn to the church for charitable assistance in hard times, and sometimes a meal after the service.³¹ Just as many parents consented to send their children to a distant boarding school 'to learn the ways of the white man' as a matter of survival, so the argument can be extended to acceptance of the white man's religion.

Nevertheless, Tinker has been criticized for failing to credit the Natives with active agency in the Christianization process, and the evidence shows that there were aspects of the encounter which his argument fails to account for. Contemporary observers pointed to cases in which the new Christians sang and prayed with fervour.³² In some important respects, moreover, Christianity served to empower the Native Americans in their new situation. At the very least, one can point to the active and enthusiastic role which many Natives played in the churches – as worshippers, but also as catechists and priests, as missionaries to other tribes to the west, both Sioux and non-Sioux, and sometimes as communicators to the surrounding white population. By 1870, the Presbyterian/Congregationalist mission to the Dakota under Riggs was able to turn pastoral work entirely over to Native clergy. The Episcopalians, who had been assigned to five reservations by Grant's peace plan, also vigorously promoted a native clergy under the leadership of Bishop William H. Hare. One of the Sioux leaders of the American Indian movement of the 1960s and '70s, Vine Deloria, Jr., writes of the 'Big Four' Episcopal priests who 'were regarded by the Sioux Episcopalians

29 William K. Powers, *Beyond the vision. Essays on American Indian culture*, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987, p. 102. See also Stephen R. Riggs, *Tab-koo Wab-kan; or, the Gospel among the Dakotas* (1869), reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1972, chs. xx–xxi; Roy W. Meyer, *History of the Santee Sioux*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1967, chs. 6–7. Cf. William G. McLoughlin, *The Cherokees and Christianity, 1794–1870*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1994, p. 101 for a comparable case.

30 Tinker, *Missionary conquest*, p. 14; Stahl, 'Carrying the word', pp. 70–1.

31 Marla N. Powers, *Oglala women. Myth, ritual, and reality*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, p. 192; Jeffrey Ostler, *The Plains Sioux and U.S. colonialism from Lewis and Clark to Wounded Knee*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 188.

32 Wassel, 'Religion of the Sioux', p. 233; Riggs, *Mary and I. Forty years with the Sioux*, 1880, reprint, Williamstown, MA: Corner House, 1971, p. 254; Ella Deloria, *Speaking of Indians*, 1944, reprint, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998, p. 99.

as their most important spiritual leaders'.³³ This was in marked contrast to the attitude of Pratt and other educators in the boarding schools, which was to train Natives in manual and technical skills rather than for leadership.³⁴ Catholics constituted an exception to this, in that no Sioux became a priest in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, catechists performed many of the duties of priests, including giving sermons, visiting the sick, and administering funeral rites; perhaps a dozen Native women became nuns.³⁵ Over time, Catholic missionaries learned to appreciate certain aspects of Lakota religion and incorporate them into Christian worship.³⁶

Then there is the matter of a written vernacular language. This played an important role in the prison conversions of 1862–63. By this time, the missionaries had fashioned a written language for the Dakota, and the few Indians who had learned it taught it to the other male prisoners, who eagerly wrote letters to their families.³⁷ The commitment to preserving the vernacular extended to the early missionary schools among the Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Episcopalians, until the federal government banned the practice in 1889, requiring English instead.³⁸ The Dakota language persisted, however, in hymnals and prayer books, and not least the Bible itself, which was translated in full by 1879, and extended as well to several bilingual newspapers published by the denominations. The Presbyterian/Congregationalist journal, *Iapi Oaye/The Word Carrier*, began in 1871 and continued to 1939. In 1878 it had achieved a circulation of nearly 1,600.³⁹ The Episcopalian paper *Anpao Kin/Daybreak* began publication in 1876. The Catholic embrace of the vernacular came later, and the Lakota *Sinsapa Wocekiye Taeyanpah (Catholic Herald)* was published from 1890 to 1936.⁴⁰

The significance of a new written vernacular as a means of empowering an ethnic minority in the face of colonialism is well documented in China and Africa.⁴¹ One needs to be careful, however, about identifying it exclusively with the preservation of native culture. For example, the masthead of the *Iapi Oaye/Word Carrier* (published by the missionaries) read as follows: /OUR PLATFORM For Indians we want American Education! We want American Homes! We want American Rights! The result of which is American citizenship!

33 Vine Deloria, Jr., *Singing for a spirit. A portrait of the Dakota Sioux*, Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishers, 2000, p. 70.

34 Warrior, *People and the word*, p. 101.

35 Vecsey, 'Century of Lakota Sioux Catholicism', pp. 276–80; Ross Alexander Enochs, *The Jesuit mission to the Lakota Sioux. Pastoral theology and ministry, 1886–1945*, Kansas City, KS: Sheed and Ward, 1996, p. 125.

36 *Ibid.*, pp. vii–x, ch. 6.

37 Riggs, *Tah-koo Wah-kan*, p. 343.

38 Stahl, 'Carrying the word', p. 77.

39 Todd Kerstetter, 'Spin doctors at Santee: missionaries and the Dakota-language reporting of the Ghost Dance at Wounded Knee', *Western Historical Quarterly*, 28, 1997, pp. 46–8. The paper split into separate English and Dakota papers, substantially different in content, in 1884.

40 On the Episcopalian paper, see Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, *That they may have life. The Episcopal Church in South Dakota, 1859–1976*, New York: Seabury Press, 1977, p. 63. On the Catholic, see Enochs, *Jesuit mission*, pp. 89–90.

41 On China, see Norma Diamond, 'Christianity and the Hua Miao: writing and power', in Daniel H. Bays, ed., *Christianity in China*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996, pp. 138–57. On Africa, Adrian Hastings, *The construction of nationhood: ethnicity, religion, and nationalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, ch. 6.

And the Gospel is the power of God for their Salvation!’⁴² In 1890 the paper strongly condemned the Ghost Dance.⁴³ Conversely, one cannot conclude that because the vernacular in the schools was the choice of the missionaries it was also necessarily the choice of the Indians. In 1877, the Lakota chiefs Red Cloud, Little Wound, and Spotted Tail specifically requested Catholic missions rather than Protestant because the Catholics used English in the schools, thereby granting easier access to the white man’s ways.⁴⁴ And, over time, as Indian children learned English, the enthusiasm of their parents to use Dakota as a written language began to wear thin.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, in the view of Lakota anthropologist Beatrice Medicine, the use of the vernacular in church did help to preserve the language, in both spoken and written forms, into the period of revival in the late twentieth century.⁴⁶

Language, however, was not the only way in which missionary Christianity empowered the Sioux. It also enabled them to preserve certain structures and forms of Indian communal life in the face of white pressure to give them up. Foremost among these were the annual convocations of each denomination, which brought Indians from different reservations together to share stories and experiences. It was clear from the earliest ones that the Natives themselves took charge of the organization and ritual.⁴⁷ This was particularly important during the years in which the traditional Sun Dance was banned (1883–1934). The Catholic congresses consciously borrowed some of the elements of the Sun Dance which they found unobjectionable, namely a tall pole at the centre which now served as an altar for mass and was topped with an American flag.⁴⁸ Estimates of attendance at the Episcopal Niobrara convocations varied between 3,000 and 10,000, with people travelling hundreds of miles to attend.⁴⁹ In addition, the churches provided social organizations, such as the Catholic St. Joseph and St. Mary societies, that served as replacements for social gatherings of earlier times. Kinship groups within the tribes tended to join the churches as a whole. Because Lakota tradition sanctioned exogamy, members of a family often belonged to different denominations as a result.⁵⁰

42 Stahl, ‘Carrying the word’, p. 75.

43 Kerstetter, ‘Spin doctors at Santee’, p. 51.

44 Enochs, *Jesuit mission*, pp. 22–3; William Powers, *Beyond the vision*, pp. 113–14. Cf. Robert Eric Frykenberg, ‘Christian missions and the Raj’, in Norman Etherington, ed., *Missions and empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 127, for a similar situation in India.

45 Ella Deloria, *Speaking of Indians*, pp. 112–13.

46 Beatrice Medicine, *Learning to be an anthropologist and remaining ‘Native’*, ed. with Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001, p. 22.

47 Riggs, *Mary and I*, pp. 251–7. See also Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in unexpected places*, Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2004, pp. 113–14.

48 Enochs, *Jesuit mission*, p. 59. For a description of the Sun Dance as practised prior to the ban, see Clyde Holler, *Black Elk’s religion. The Sun Dance and Lakota Catholicism*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995, ch. 2. For a description of a Catholic congress, initiated in 1891, see Sister Mary Claudia Duratschek, *Crusading along Sioux trails*, Yankton, SD: Benedictine Convent of the Sacred Heart, 1947, pp. 99–104.

49 Gerald W. Wolff, ‘First Protestant Episcopal Bishop of South Dakota: William Hobart Hare’, in Hoover and Zimmerman, eds., *South Dakota leaders*, p. 87; Mary E. Cochran, *Dakota Cross-Bearer. The life and world of a Native American bishop*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000, p. 18.

50 William Powers, *Beyond the vision*, pp. 109–12; DeMallie, ed., *The sixth grandfather. Black Elk’s teachings given to John G. Neihardt*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1984, p. 15. On Sioux societies, see Sarah Olden, ‘The people of Tipi Sapa’, in Vine Deloria, Jr., *Singing for a spirit*, pp. 153–72.

Thus, for all its pronouncements about quashing Native culture, missionary Christianity allowed for the conservation of certain aspects of it. Natives were active participants in this complex process, drawing on their own cultural and spiritual resources to adapt to the new situation. Over time, however, the efficacy of this empowerment and adaptation tended to diminish; by the 1930s and '40s, the long-term effects of being in a position of dependency, coupled with harsher economic times, led to the kind of self-abnegation that Tinker alluded to.⁵¹ Missionary sources from this period likewise reveal a sense of failure.⁵² Moreover, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, by creating new organs of political expression for Native Americans, led to the diminution of the church's role in providing indigenous leadership.

Africa-based models

A more general theory of conversion comes from anthropologist Robin Horton. A West African specialist, Horton noted that many traditional African religions operated on a 'two-tiered' system: a multitude of 'lesser spirits' which were concerned with more or less local affairs, and a 'supreme being' or creator god whose sphere was the world as a whole. The creator god was often not the object of direct worship, because it had little relevance to the day-to-day affairs of the community. But with trade, improvements in communications, and (one might add) colonialism, the local community came increasingly to confront forces outside it, which increased the relevance of spirits whose powers had a broader geographical range. Hence the tendency to embrace the universal gods of Islam and Christianity. Horton emphasized that these world religions acted as mere catalysts for reconfigurations within the existing beliefs of the African religions.⁵³ He further claimed that the shift to a more cosmopolitan belief system in Africa would have occurred regardless of whether Islam or Christianity had been on the scene.⁵⁴ Throughout his writings, Horton emphasized the importance and rationality of indigenous beliefs as means for 'explanation, prediction, and control' of their world, rather than explaining them away – as Western anthropologists tended to do – as mere symbolic expressions for adaptations which could better be explained by Western 'functionalist' approaches.⁵⁵

Horton's theory has been acclaimed for drawing attention to indigenous perspectives on conversion as distinct from those of the missionaries; nevertheless, it has elicited criticism on a number of points. One of the most common is that the 'two tiered' scheme is an overly schematic and frequently inadequate model for portraying the variety of relationships that can exist between high gods and lesser gods, or between local and non-local religions, both in

51 Macgregor, *Warriors without weapons*, pp. 40, 44, chs. 12, 13.

52 Harvey Markowitz, 'The Catholic mission and the Sioux. A crisis in the early paradigm', in DeMallie and Parks, eds., *Sioux Indian religion*, pp. 125–7; Joseph H. Cash and Herbert T. Hoover, eds., *To be an Indian. An oral history*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971, pp. 108–9.

53 Robin Horton, 'African conversion', *Africa*, 41, 1971, pp. 85–108, esp. 101–5; 'The rationality of conversion', *Africa*, 45, 1975, pp. 219–35, 373–99.

54 *Ibid.*, pp. 222, 234.

55 Horton, *Patterns of thought in Africa and the West. Essays on magic, religion and science*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, esp. pp. 161–93.

Africa and elsewhere.⁵⁶ As applied to the Sioux, the question has been raised whether the Sioux ever postulated a single supreme being before the missionaries came on the scene. Since there is no written testimony which antedates that time, the question is a vexed one. Several points are fairly clear, however: the term *Wakan Tanka*, which the missionaries used to translate as ‘God’, referred not to a single being but a mysterious power or force of holiness (*wakan*) that was diffused throughout all things. Certain manifestations of *wakan* were particularly great, however (*tanka* = great); sometimes one sees these grouped symmetrically. Thus one finds references to sixteen aspects of *Wakan Tanka* in groups of four: A. the gods Sun, Sky, Earth and Rock; B. their associates moon, wind, the feminine, and thunder; C. their subordinates the buffalo, bear, the four winds, and the whirlwind; D. four spiritual components of the human soul: the godlike, the spirit, the ghost, and the spirit-like.⁵⁷ This was by no means a universally held classification, however, and different holy men had different conceptions of *Wakan Tanka* without finding a particular need for agreement.⁵⁸ There seems to be general consensus that the name *Wakan Tanka* expressed the totality of these forces and hence was an expression of oneness, a characteristic common to many Native religions.⁵⁹ But this was quite different from the notion of a deity that was above and beyond these manifestations. In other words, the two-tiered model cannot neatly be applied to the Sioux case.

Nevertheless, I think Horton’s basic theory can be applied to the Sioux – with one crucial proviso. Horton tends to interpret religions in terms of their *beliefs and doctrines* more than by their publicly observable *rituals and practices*. This creates a split which is artificial when applied to Native American religions – and many others. From this point of view, religion is primarily a means for affecting the world rather than merely for understanding or explaining it; hence its language is performative rather than descriptive. Thus, to quote one scholar of Native American religions, Kenneth Morrison, ‘God, prayer, worship, piety, hierophany and the sacred and the profane . . . are religious terms that might not easily be applied to Native American religions.’⁶⁰

56 E.g. Robert W. Hefner, ‘World building and the rationality of conversion’, in Hefner, ed., *Conversion to Christianity*, p. 21; Deryck Schreuder and Geoffrey Oddie, ‘What is conversion? history, Christianity and religious change in colonial Africa and South Asia’, *Journal of Religious History*, 15, 1989, pp. 496–518, esp. 514–15; Elizabeth Isichei, *A history of Christianity in Africa*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995. p. 7; Birgit Meyer, *Translating the devil: religion and modernity among the Ewe in Ghana*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999, pp. 109–10.

57 Julian Rice, *Before the Great Spirit. The many faces of Sioux spirituality*, Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1998, p. 153. Ch. 10 gives an overview of the controversy.

58 Steinmetz, *Pipe, Bible, and Peyote*, p. 42; Scott J. Howard, ‘Incommensurability and Nicholas Black Elk: an exploration’, *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 23, 1999, p. 116. See also DeMallie, ‘Lakota belief and ritual in the nineteenth century’, in DeMallie and Parks, eds., *Sioux Indian religion*, pp. 28–32. Contrast these with the ‘as told to’ version of Thomas E. Mails, *Fools Crow*, where *Wakan Tanka* speaks to Fool’s Crow (p. 110) and is manifest as a trinity (p. 120). For a critical demolition of this view, see Tinker, *Spirit and resistance. Political theology and American Indian liberation*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004, ch. 5.

59 James L. West, ‘Indian spirituality. Another vision’, in Treat, ed., *Native and Christian*, p. 32; for a comparative study of European notions that resemble these, see Viola F. Cordova, ‘The European concept of *Usen*’, in Weaver, ed., *Native American religious identity*, pp. 26–32.

60 Kenneth M. Morrison, ‘Beyond the supernatural: language and religious action’, *Religion*, 22, 1992, p. 204. See also Lee Irwin, ‘Introduction’, in Irwin, ed., *Native American spirituality. A critical reader*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000, p. 3; Andrea Smith, ‘Walking in balance. The spirituality-liberation praxis of Native women’, in Weaver, ed., *Native American religious identity*, p. 181.

Provided we take this practical orientation into account, the Sioux case may be said to conform loosely to Horton's broader argument. The very diffuseness of the manifestations of *Wakan Tanka* meant that incorporating an outsider's God into Sioux cosmology posed no great problems of conscience or belief. As with many other religions worldwide, divinity was viewed in terms of power or force, such that the superior technological powers of the whites could be seen as manifesting a certain spiritual superiority as well. As one such convert, George Sword, explained:

When I believed the . . . *Wakan Tanka* (Great Spirit) was right I served him with all my Powers. . . . In war with the white people I found their *Wakan Tanka* the Superior. I then took the name of Sword and have served *Wakan Tanka* according to the white people's manner with all my power. . . . I joined the church and am a deacon in it and shall be until I die. I have done all I was able to do to persuade my people to live according to the teachings of the Christian ministers.⁶¹

Admittedly, Sword was an extreme case in that he advocated acculturation and the suppression of Lakota religious practice.⁶² But other leaders used similar pragmatic arguments to opt for a more selective acceptance of Christianity. This flexibility could also work the other way: at the time of the Ghost Dance, many new Christians suddenly forsook their Christianity and briefly found a greater power in the millennial movement.⁶³ Whatever the direction, it seems clear that the Sioux were consciously integrating the new religion into their own system of explanation, prediction, and control.

Although one can find examples of reinterpretations of *Wakan Tanka* that appear to be new, rather than configurations of older beliefs as Horton maintains, his theory does point to a tendency of converts to seek out compatibilities and convergences between the old and the new. Many Sioux could identify, for example, with the Christian emphasis on charity and generosity as part of their own culture.⁶⁴ The crucifixion as an act of sacrifice resembled the piercing of flesh which some males performed as part of the Sun Dance ritual, also as an act of sacrifice. Furthermore, there is a central myth of the Sioux which posits a single intercessor figure who appears on the human scene to bring well-being to the nation. This was the White Buffalo Calf Woman, who appeared to two hunters in search of game in time of drought. After destroying one hunter who lusted after her, she returned with a sacred pipe which was to be the direct link between the Sioux and *Wakan Tanka*. Upon leaving, she turned into a white buffalo calf, showing that the

61 Quoted in Robert M. Utley, *The last days of the Sioux Nation*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963, p. 34. Cf. Holler, *Black Elk's religion*, p. 213. On the notion of spirituality as power in West Africa, see David Lindenfeld, 'Indigenous encounters with Christian missionaries in China and West Africa, 1800–1920: a comparative study', *Journal of World History*, 16, 2005, pp. 356–7. On the case of the Pacific Islands, see John Barker, 'Where the missionary frontier ran ahead of empire', in Etherington, ed., *Missions and empire*, p. 96.

62 Ostler, *Plains Sioux*, pp. 230–1.

63 William Powers, *Beyond the vision*, p. 120.

64 Ella Deloria, *Speaking of Indians*, p. 101; Macgregor, *Warriors without weapons*, p. 92.

wakan buffalo would provide for the tribe.⁶⁵ The analogies to Jesus were noted by Sioux leaders such as Red Cloud, who stated in 1876 that ‘when God sent His Son, Jesus, to the Whites, He had sent his daughter, Buffalo Calf Woman, to the Lakotas’.⁶⁶ According to Red Cloud, she had prophesied that Indians would merge with whites within the next ten generations.

This is not to minimize the ongoing conflicts between missionaries and Natives over certain rituals. In addition to the banned Sun Dance, there was a widely used healing ceremony known as *Yuwipi*, which involved the summoning of a multitude of lesser spirits. This also conjured images of devilry in the minds of the missionaries, who were known to interrupt the work of the medicine men forcefully; physical scuffles sometimes ensued.⁶⁷

Another work on Africa which has generated much interest as an interpretive model is *Of revelation and revolution* by Jean and John Comaroff, a massive, still-to-be completed study of a single case, the Tswana people of South Africa. The Comaroffs detail the impact of missionaries not only as agents of Christianity, but of Western civilization, impacting the Tswana through such varied practices as money, Western dress, architecture, and medicine. Throughout, the authors take great pains to emphasize the importance of agency on both sides of the colonial divide; they prefer to talk of a ‘long conversation’ rather than ‘conversion’. Thus they reject a simple duality between ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized’; rather the interplay of diversities within each party in a colonial confrontation constitutes the real narrative. It follows that the portrayal cannot be reduced to a set of opposites such as ‘domination’ and ‘resistance’ – although the Comaroffs also stress that such inequalities and polarities did emerge over time and became an integral part of the conversation. The net result, to use the Comaroffs’ phrase, was a ‘colonization of consciousness’, in which the terms of the conversation were ultimately controlled by the colonizing power.⁶⁸

An example of this process which the Comaroffs discuss is the act of translation. Even as missionaries empowered the Natives by creating a written vernacular and translating the Bible into it, they introduced connotations which suited the purposes of the civilizing mission but were quite alien to indigenous usage (e.g. translating the Tswana term for ‘ancestors’ as ‘demons’). At the same time, however, such control was never complete, and the result was ‘a cultural register true to neither, a hybrid creation born of the colonial encounter itself’.⁶⁹

The initial Dakota translation of the New Testament, completed by 1865, was in fact a more complex and mediated undertaking than the Comaroffs might predict. The missionaries T. S. Williamson and Riggs, trained in Biblical scholarship, had as their ‘native’

65 Black Elk, *The sacred pipe*, ed. Joseph Epes Brown, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953, pp. 3–9, esp. n. 12. Also Steinmetz, *Pipe, Bible, and Peyote*, pp. 52–4; DeMallie, ‘Lakota belief and ritual’, p. 31.

66 Vecsey, ‘Century of Lakota Sioux Catholicism’, p. 266.

67 Michael F. Steltenkamp, *Black Elk. Holy man of the Oglala*, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993, pp. 37–8; Enochs, *Jesuit mission*, p. 103.

68 Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of revelation and revolution*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, 1997, vol. 1, pp. 24, 199, vol. 2, pp. 24–5.

69 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 218. The Tswana term was *badimo*. At the same time, the singular form of the same word, *modimo*, became the word for ‘God’. See Paul Landau, ‘Language’, in Etherington, ed., *Missions and empire*, p. 211.

interlocutor the mixed-blood Joseph Renville, who was fluent in French and Dakota. Williamson and Riggs would read a verse from the Bible in Hebrew or Greek, translate it into French, whereupon Renville would render it in Dakota, repeating it to Riggs, who would write it down in a previously devised orthography.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, Native scholars have detected examples of slanted or derogatory translations in Riggs's *Dakota-English dictionary*, first published in 1890. For example, the word *wapiya* is translated 'to conjure the sick, to powwow in the Indian way' rather than more straightforwardly 'to heal the sick'.⁷¹

On the whole, however, I find the Comaroffs' interpretation to be quite robust when applied to the Sioux. True, their work has been criticized by South African specialists as being overly schematic, despite the subtlety of much of their empirical work.⁷² Perhaps their insistence on the dialectic between colonizers and colonized is more applicable to settler colonialisms than to plural societies. The fact that in North America, colonizers and colonized occupied the same space only served to magnify the effects of domination. This applied to both sides. Thus the shortcomings of American Indian policy unavoidably triggered overt expressions of white guilt, particularly among Eastern liberals, over the injustices of the conquest; beyond that, one can also point to a broader layer of unacknowledged feelings, if not of guilt then at least of ambivalence, which found expression in the sharply contradictory images of the Indian that coexisted within white culture. As Robert Berkhofer and others have pointed out, Indians were simultaneously denigrated as lazy, dirty, violent and crude and idealized as courteous, brave, simple, modest, and in touch with nature.⁷³ Both sets of images could be seen juxtaposed at the Chicago exposition of 1893. Recent studies of popular culture have documented the whites' fascination with Indians at the turn of the century.⁷⁴

These mixed feelings and ambivalences were not lost on Natives themselves, who saw in them an opportunity to communicate to whites their own heritage and perspectives. This found expression in the willingness of some Indians to perform as Natives for white audiences (as in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Shows), an act of simultaneously disclosing and disguising oneself. In addition, the decades following the Indian wars gave rise to a generation of Native intellectuals, many of them products of the boarding schools, who directly addressed white consciences through writings and public speeches. This generation accepted the premise of assimilation, but believed that the humanistic ideals on which the United States was founded constituted a basis for trying to change white attitudes.⁷⁵ One result was the

70 Ella Deloria, *Speaking of Indians*, p. 103.

71 Wilson, *Remember this!*, p. 53.

72 Elizabeth Elbourne, 'Word made flesh: Christianity, modernity, and cultural colonialism in the work of Jean and John Comaroff', *American Historical Review*, 108, 2003, p. 451; *Blood ground. Colonialism, missions, and the contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799–1853*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002, pp. 18–20; Landau, *The realm of the word. Language, gender, and Christianity in a South African kingdom*, Portsmouth, NH: Heineman, 1995, pp. xxi–xxii.

73 Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The white man's Indian*, New York: Knopf, 1978, pp. 27–8.

74 For example, Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998; Huhndorf, *Going Native*, ch. 1.

75 They thus anticipated Edward Said's definition of the intellectual as a spokesperson for the less powerful. Edward W. Said, *Representations of the intellectual*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1994, pp. 11, 22.

founding in 1911 of a Pan-Indian advocacy group, the Society of American Indians, which flourished for about a decade. Sioux figures like Charles Eastman, Gertrude Bonnin, and Luther Standing Bear were prominently represented in this group. Many of them viewed Christianity as part of the common ground on which white consciences could be reached. To quote Standing Bear, ‘America can be revived, rejuvenated, by recognizing a native school of thought. The Indian can save America.’⁷⁶

At the same time, this very proximity of colonizers and colonized helps to explain, in my view, some differences between the ways in which the Sioux combined Christianity with their prior beliefs and practices when compared to the Tswana. In both cases, to be sure, one is dealing with a spectrum of combinations, not to any single response. But whereas the Comaroffs’ analysis tends to reinforce the general impression of a process of hybridization, i.e. of reshaping and fusing elements of the two cultures according to their own traditions (the customary meaning of syncretism), several observers of the Sioux point to something different taking place: dimorphism or ‘dual participation’, i.e. two sets of rituals practised separately.⁷⁷ This pattern developed as a direct result of white interdiction: during the years in which most of the traditional rituals were prohibited, from 1883 to 1934, the only way of preserving them was to carry them on in secret. But afterwards, this pattern held as well, even as the traditional religion was revived in the 1960s and ’70s. Thus, according to Marla Powers, writing in 1986, the Oglala Sioux observe christenings, marriages, and the Christian religious holidays, but may also visit a medicine man for help in curing an affliction.⁷⁸

Of course, there are many examples of such dual participation in Africa, as there are of syncretic combinations among the Sioux. The difference is one of degree. There are more examples of spontaneous African Christian churches which arose independently of those established by missionaries than one finds among the Native Americans. Among the latter, the largest is the so-called peyote cult, more properly known as the Native American Church, which originated in the Southwest. The head of this church in South Dakota, writing in 1987, described himself as a born-again Christian, centred on Christ and the Bible; but he rejected the idea that Christians and his forefathers worshipped the same God. According to a 1986 study, the Native American Church probably embraced less than 5% of the Oglala Lakota.⁷⁹ Other ‘syncretic’ efforts could be found in the Catholic Church, especially after Vatican II. The Jesuit priest and anthropologist Paul Steinmetz not only

76 Quoted in Ruth J. Heflin, *I remain alive: The Sioux literary renaissance*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000, p. 36. This generation has received much attention in recent scholarship, e.g. Warrior, *Tribal secrets. Recovering American Indian intellectual traditions*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995, pp. 5–14; Lucy Maddox, *Citizen Indians. Native American intellectuals, race and reform*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005.

77 Comaroff and Comaroff, *Revelation and revolution*, vol. 2, pp. 85–6, 108–15; William Powers, *Beyond the vision*, ch. 5; DeMallie and Parks, ‘Introduction’, p. 14; Vecsey, ‘Century of Lakota Sioux Catholicism’, pp. 273, 285. Steinmetz, *Pipe, Bible, and Peyote*, p. 163, calls this ‘ecumenism 1’, to be distinguished from a simultaneous practice that is part of a coherent belief system (‘ecumenism 2’). He maintains that a majority of Lakota subscribe to ecumenism 1.

78 Marla Powers, *Oglala women*, pp. 185–8.

79 *Ibid.*, p. 189. See also Emerson Spider, Sr. ‘The Native American Church of Jesus Christ’, in DeMallie and Parks, eds., *Sioux Indian Religion*, pp. 189–209; Steinmetz, *Pipe, Bible, and Peyote*, ch. 2.

introduced the Sioux sacred pipe into the mass, but also obtained a papal blessing for the Native American Church in 1975.⁸⁰ In general, however, the dimorphic strategy seemed to predominate.

The case of Black Elk (1863–1950)

This pattern, as well as many of the varieties of adaptation discussed above, is illustrated in the case of the Oglala Lakota religious leader Black Elk, about whom a great deal has been written. The twists and turns of his spiritual biography have generated a voluminous literature, much of it focused on who was the ‘authentic’ Black Elk.⁸¹ It is also clear that the answer does not lie in the exclusive allegiance to any one religion. Moreover, Black Elk’s life and work exemplifies the difficulties of cross-cultural communication: his pronouncements were mediated by white interpreters to such a degree that it is difficult to distinguish the man from the myth.⁸² He was literate in Lakota but spoke little English. His views first became known outside his tribe because of his meeting with John G. Neihardt in 1930. Neihardt, the poet laureate of Nebraska, was working on an epic poem about the American West, and sought out Black Elk for material on the Ghost Dance and the massacre at Wounded Knee. Black Elk felt a strong affinity for the visitor and, in a series of interviews, poured out his early life story and knowledge of the Lakota religion he had once practised. The interviews became the raw material for Neihardt’s *Black Elk speaks*, which was eventually translated into eight languages. The book was not a literal rendering of the transcripts, but a poet’s attempt to capture their spirit. Although it did not sell well when first published, it became a key text in the revival of Native traditions in the 1960s and ’70s and in the appreciation of these by whites. The full transcripts were later published under the name *The sixth grandfather*, edited by the anthropologist Raymond J. DeMallie.⁸³

The core of Black Elk’s presentation is an extended vision which he experienced at the age of nine. Its vividness and comprehensiveness marked him as someone destined to be a spiritual leader and healer. As Black Elk told it, ‘In my vision they had predicted that I was chosen to be intercessor for my people so it was up to me to do my utmost for my people and everything that I did not do for my people, it would be my fault. . . .’⁸⁴

Part of the fascination of *Black Elk speaks* was undoubtedly that it bore witness to the major events of Sioux history during his lifetime: Black Elk observed the Battle of Little Big Horn as a teenager; in the 1880s he travelled with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show and

80 See Steinmetz, *Pipe, Bible, and Peyote*, pp. 37–8, 87–8. William Powers, *Beyond the vision*, p. 99, disputes the term ‘syncretism’ as applied here; he sees it rather as a strategy by the Catholic Church to gain new converts.

81 See Holler, ed., *The Black Elk reader*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000, for selections from these different points of view.

82 According to William Powers, the Lakota who remembered Black Elk did not regard him as an exceptional figure, but one of a number of Native catechists. See ‘When Black Elk speaks, everybody listens’, in Christopher Vecsey, ed., *Religion in Native North America*, Moscow, ID: University of Idaho Press, 1990, pp. 140–7.

83 De Mallie’s introduction constitutes the fullest biographical source for Black Elk. See *The sixth grandfather*, pp. 1–74.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 294; cf. pp. 123, 214.

danced for Queen Victoria; upon his return, he participated in the Ghost Dance and fought the US troops in the aftermath of the Wounded Knee massacre. Neihardt's version ended at this point, presenting Black Elk as a 'pitiful old man' whose vision had failed him. In other words, Neihardt's version represented the romanticization of the vanishing Indian, an image which could soothe the conscience of a white readership who could retain the Social Darwinist vision of white superiority. In fact, as the *Sixth grandfather* reveals, Black Elk's intent was just the opposite: by telling these things to Neihardt, he had hoped to revive and strengthen Lakota culture by communicating it to whites. This is just one of many significant omissions in Neihardt's version.

Another is that, thirteen years after the Wounded Knee massacre, Black Elk converted to Catholicism. Admittedly, he did not talk much about this phase of his life to Neihardt, and the reasons for the conversion have never been fully elucidated. There is evidence for personal, pragmatic, and ethical motives. We do know that, two years after Wounded Knee, Black Elk married, and it is likely that his wife was a Catholic, for their sons were baptized in the 1890s. When asked later by Neihardt about his Catholicism, Black Elk simply replied, 'My children had to live in this world.' One of his boys, Ben, later attended the Carlisle school.⁸⁵ Also, Black Elk had continued to practise healing using the *Yuwipi* ceremony in the 1890s and early 1900s. According to his daughter (by his second marriage) Lucy, herself an ardent Catholic, he had been performing these rites in 1904 on a boy who had been baptized when a Jesuit entered, grasped Black Elk by the neck, and said 'Satan, get out!'. The Jesuit also invited the holy man to accept instruction in Christianity, and after two weeks of instruction, Black Elk was baptized and given the name Nicholas (for the saint on whose feast day the baptism occurred).⁸⁶ In addition, there were ethical considerations. According to his vision, Black Elk was to make war using a lethal herb; he now shrank from the possibility of using it to kill innocent women and children.⁸⁷ Finally, it should be noted that this was not his first brush with Christianity: as a condition of travelling with the Wild West show, he was required to accept baptism; he may have in fact converted to Episcopalianism some years before. Soon after returning, however, Black Elk returned to his Native religion and soon joined the Ghost Dance movement (as did other Sioux who had accepted Christianity) – a good example of Native pragmatism.

Whatever his motives, after his conversion Black Elk quickly assumed a leadership role within the Catholic mission, insofar as he was able. He became one of the first Native catechists, filling in for priests as they travelled from church to church. Soon he was going on missionary expeditions to other Indian nations such as the Arapahoes and Winnebagos. One Jesuit missionary praised his zeal in doing so, comparing him to St. Paul. His daughter Lucy recalls accompanying him on a fundraising tour to the east coast, where he spoke through an interpreter. He was said to have effected 400 conversions.⁸⁸ There is every indication that Black Elk's turn to Catholicism entailed at least a partial repudiation of Native

85 DeMallie, ed., *The sixth grandfather*, p. 47; on Black Elk's first marriage and sons, see pp. 3–14; on the school, p. 23. See also William Powers, 'When Black Elk speaks', pp. 140–1.

86 Ibid., p. 141; De Mallie, *Sixth grandfather*, p. 14; Steltenkamp, *Black Elk*, p. 34.

87 De Mallie, *Sixth grandfather*, pp. 14, 135–7.

88 Steltenkamp, *Black Elk*, pp. 62–7, 88.

religion. As he wrote to the *Sinasapa Wocekiye Taeyanpaha* in 1911, ‘Therefore my relatives unify yourselves. Perhaps you cannot live lives split in two, which does not please God. Only one church, one God, one Son, and only one Holy Spirit – that way you have only one faith, you have only one body, and you have only one life and one spirit.’⁸⁹ It is also true, however, that Black Elk shared his knowledge of Lakota religion with the missionaries, and that he thought that certain Lakota beliefs should be kept secret, as he confided to his nephew Frank Fools Crow in 1916.⁹⁰

Black Elk’s decision to talk to Neihardt in 1930 and the publication of *Black Elk speaks* constituted another turning point in his development, one which ushered in a period of simultaneous practice of Lakota and Catholic religion. Once again, his motives are obscure, but it is quite possible that he perceived the same deterioration of life on the reservation that had struck other observers, and concluded that Christianity alone was failing to provide sufficient spiritual meaning to his people.⁹¹

In any event, the publication of *Black Elk speaks* scandalized the missionary community and proved to be an embarrassment to Black Elk and his younger children. He was persuaded to issue a statement repudiating the ending and to proclaim the superiority of Catholicism: ‘I know that the Catholic religion is good, better than the Sun dance or the Ghost dance... The Indian medicine men did not stop sin. Now I despise sin. And I want to go straight in the righteous way that the Catholics teach us so my soul will reach heaven.’⁹² Nonetheless, this did not prevent him from resuming some sacred dances and from continuing to educate the white public about Lakota religion. This took the form of his participation, for most of the rest of his life, in an Indian pageant for tourists each summer on a site on the way to Mount Rushmore. According to De Mallie, he was the main attraction, re-enacting the healing cures, a burial, and the Sun Dance.⁹³ As in all previous phases of his religious life, Black Elk thought it important to make religion manifest through public performative utterances.

Black Elk’s thinking did not remain static during the last years of his life, but evolved in the direction of underscoring the parallelisms between Lakota religion and Christianity. The product of this was a final book, *The sacred pipe*, again told to a white writer, Joseph Epes Brown (who had been inspired by *Black Elk speaks*). It was published posthumously in 1953. In this case, it is impossible to sift out the role of Brown’s editing, since there is no alternative version of the conversations. The book presents seven sacred rituals as central to the Lakota, intended to parallel the seven sacraments. There is no attempt to interpret one in terms of the other, rather to inform white readers about Lakota rituals themselves. In the preface, however, the Christian belief in Jesus as the Son of God is presented as

89 De Mallie, *Sixth grandfather*, p. 21.

90 On his sharing knowledge with Jesuits, see Raymond A. Bucko, *The Lakota ritual of the Sweet Lodge*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998, p. 118. On his relationship to Fools Crow, see Mails, *Fools Crow*, p. 88.

91 The outside study in the 1940s led by Gordon Macgregor concluded that young people on the reservation did not look to priests or ministers for leadership or guidance. Macgregor, *Warriors without weapons*, pp. 201–2.

92 De Mallie, *Sixth grandfather*, p. 60; Steltenkamp, *Black Elk*, ch. 6.

93 De Mallie, *Sixth grandfather*, p. 64.

similar to the Lakota belief in *Wakan Tanka* sending the White Buffalo Calf Woman – and the belief on both sides that the end of the world is not far off. Black Elk/Brown also emphasized that the book had a universal message beyond that of helping the Lakota people: ‘to help in bringing peace upon the earth, not only among men, but within men and between the whole of creation’.⁹⁴

Like *Black Elk speaks*, *The sacred pipe* was highly influential in the Indian revival of the 1960s and ’70s, having bestowed a written form on many of the traditional rites. It appealed not only to Europeans and Euro-Americans who were seeking alternative forms of spirituality, but also to a generation of Native Americans who had grown up apart from the reservations and did not know the rituals first hand.⁹⁵ That being said, the Christian influence cannot be denied. Rather than being used explicitly to reinterpret the rites, Christianity operated more subtly, as a filter through which certain Lakota elements were retained and others left out. For example, the limitation of the basic rituals to seven ignored some major ones, not least the *Yuwipi* ceremony that Black Elk had been practising on the eve of his conversion.⁹⁶ These filtered versions of Lakota rituals presented in *Black Elk speaks* provide a graphic illustration of the Comaroff’s ‘colonization of consciousness’, where Christianity controls the terms of what appears to be an ‘authentic’ Native discourse. Also, the impact of Christianity as an agent of pacification is evident: the function of the Sun Dance as a preparation for war is passed over. Perhaps most profoundly, Black Elk’s reference to *Wakan Tanka* in the singular reinforced its function as a translation for ‘God’, which followed missionary practice but not necessarily past Lakota usage.⁹⁷ It is also clear, however, that this meaning has caught on with many Sioux. Even those who have embraced the revival of traditional religion tend to claim that they and Christians worship the same God.⁹⁸

Conclusions

In sum, the Sioux encounter with Christianity exhibited a spectrum of actions, ranging from assimilation to resistance, but with the predominant forms being a flexible and pragmatic attitude towards beliefs and a dualism of ritual practice. Syncretism, in the sense of an overt combination of disparate elements, was a minority phenomenon.

I would argue that much of the explanation for the distinctiveness of this pattern can be traced to the overweening presence of whites that was part and parcel of settler colonialism – not only military, political, and economic dominance, but also the potentially suffocating embrace of white culture, including as it did the whites’ shifting perceptions of and ongoing fascination with Native customs and values. This would account for the Native need to

94 Black Elk, ‘Foreword’, in Joseph Epes Brown, *The sacred pipe*, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953, pp. xix–xx.

95 William Powers, ‘When Black Elk speaks’, pp. 147–8.

96 Black Elk had steadfastly refused to perform it for Neihardt, despite the latter’s repeated requests. See De Mallie, *Sixth grandfather*, p. 15n.

97 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

98 Bucko, *Lakota ritual*, pp. 83, 171; Marla Powers, *Oglala women*, p. 191; Waziyatawin Wilson, *Remember this!*, p. 117.

preserve a separate sphere of belief and practice, in secret if need be. And it would also account for the Natives' relative aversion to religious experimentation within their newly adopted Christianity as compared to many cases in Africa.⁹⁹ The missionary churches served, as we have seen, as preservers of Sioux languages and forms of association, thus helping to conserve the culture even when flouting the missionaries' own initial project of extirpating it. One can think of this as a mixing of religious traditions, but of a different kind than implied by the term syncretism. If the latter suggests a mixing of heterogeneous religious *contents*, we have here a willingness to assimilate foreign contents combined with the conservation of indigenous *forms*. This approximates Horton's thesis of world religion as a catalyst for a type of change that would have occurred without it.

One might still ask why Christianity took firmer root among the Sioux than among other Indian nations. Certainly the traumas of dislocation, poverty, and disease were not unique to them. The answers must necessarily be tentative, but I believe they had to do with matters of timing. The translation of the New Testament into Dakota was completed in 1865, shortly after the defeat of 1862 and at the time of the first wave of conversions; by 1879 the Old Testament was completed, as the trauma of the Western Sioux was reaching its height. Also, this period coincided with Grant's peace policy, by which different denominations were assigned to different reservations. Although this did not entirely eliminate sectarian competition, particularly between Catholics and Protestants, it tended to minimize this. This may be compared to other nations such as the Cherokee and Navajo, where numbers of Protestant denominations on a reservation were much higher and the numbers of Christians much lower.¹⁰⁰

At the same time, the disillusionment with Christianity as catalyst tended in the long run to reinforce a sense of ongoing difference between the two cultures and the unequal terms of the agreements between them, as the Comaroffs' model suggests. Black Elk's story can also be read in this way.¹⁰¹ Yet even here we have pointed to signs of another type of combination that is distinct both from syncretism and the conservation of form, namely convergence: the two religions should retain their integrity, but are nevertheless viewed as representing distinct approaches to the same spiritual reality.

Finally, the nexus of spirituality and force in Native belief which enabled the Sioux to embrace the Euro-American God both illustrates and modifies the association of knowledge and power that Michel Foucault articulated. Foucault stressed that power in society operates not only through violence or repression, but also through discourses; power thus becomes inseparable from what people hold to be true. At the same time, the Sioux example suggests new ways of interpreting this connection that go beyond Foucault. Whereas

99 Some literature since the 1980s suggests this may be changing, e.g. Robert Allen Warrior, 'Canaanites, cowboys, and Indians: deliverance, conquest, and liberation theology today', in Treat, ed., *Native and Christian*, pp. 93–100; Steve Charleston, 'The Old Testament of Native America', *ibid.*, pp. 68–80.

100 McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Christianity*, p. 19. The Choctaw minister Steve Charleston described eastern Oklahoma as a 'cultural patchwork quilt' consisting of 'dozens of tribes to go along with dozens of churches', in Treat, ed., *Native and Christian*, p. 69. On the Navajo, see Guy H. Cooper, 'Individualism and integration in Navajo religion', in Vecsey, ed., *Religion in Native North America*, p. 79, and Evan Z. Vogt, 'Navajo', in Edward H. Spicer, ed., *Perspectives on American Indian cultural change*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961, pp. 320, 324; Cochran, *Dakota Cross-Bearer*, p. 199.

101 E.g. Dale Stover, 'A post-colonial reading of Black Elk', in Holler, ed., *Black Elk reader*, pp. 127–47.

Foucault emphasized through his examples (asylums, school systems, prisons) how a given set of institutionalized power relationships *produced* a certain kind of truth, the impact of leaders and healers such as Black Elk suggests the reverse: that spiritual truth produces certain kinds of power relationships. This demonstrates both how religious factors are interwoven with political and social ones and how, at the same time, religion operates as an autonomous causal component within world history.

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