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# WOUNDED KNEE AND THE GHOST DANCE: CHRISTIAN PRAYER, AMERICAN POLITICS, AND INDIAN PROTEST

Louis S. Warren

**Rani-Henrik Andersson.** *The Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. xxii + 437 pp. Figures, maps, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index.

**Heather Cox Richardson.** *Wounded Knee: Party Politics and the Road to an American Massacre*. New York: Basic Books, 2010. 363 pp. Figures, maps, notes, and index.

**Gregory E. Smoak.** *Ghost Dances and Identity: Prophetic Religion and American Indian Ethnogenesis in the Nineteenth Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. xiii + 289 pp. Figures, maps, notes, and index.

Perhaps the most notorious massacre in American history took place on December 29, 1890, when 400 U.S. troops surrounded, disarmed, and then gunned down a band of Minneconjou and Hunkpapa Sioux Indians at Wounded Knee, South Dakota. The government put 146 bodies into a mass grave, but more fled the scene and later died from their wounds and exposure.

The atrocity was the culmination of army efforts to suppress the Ghost Dance, a pan-Indian religious movement inspired by the visions of Wovoka, a Paiute prophet. We do not know for certain what Wovoka told his followers. But Sioux and Cheyenne disciples often presented the prophet either as an Indian Christ or as his messenger, and his teachings were certainly infused with Christian ideals. Wovoka claimed to have visited heaven, where God told him Indians should perform a communal dance and live by a moral code: do not lie, do not steal, love one another, remain at peace, and go to work. For all this, their reward would be a renewed earth (in some versions, one cleansed of white people), with the Indian dead returned to life, and Indians young and forever free. Coming on the heels of centuries of violence, at the nadir of Indian fortunes in the far West, the prophecy attracted a large following. Among the Lakota, it became known as "the spirit dance," which eventually translated into its most enduring name among Americans, the Ghost Dance.

Some thirty tribes across the far West took up the Ghost Dance; but historians, drawn to the drama and tragedy of Wounded Knee, have focused overwhelmingly on the Lakota Sioux. Rani-Henrik Andersson's *The Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890* is firmly in this tradition. Taking a page from Robert Berkhofer, Andersson uses the Lakota Ghost Dance as a case study for creating a "Great Story," a "multidimensional interpretation" that incorporates "various viewpoints of evidentiary sources, others' stories, other scholars' texts, and the historian's own text" into one "interpretive system" (p. xiv).

Sprawling across dozens of conflicting and contradictory accounts and disparate testimonies from hundreds of eyewitnesses, the book offers less a single interpretive system than competing viewpoints. The Ghost Dance teachings arrived at Pine Ridge through Sioux and Cheyenne travelers returning from Nevada. They found growing numbers of adherents in South Dakota as the U.S. Congress stripped away Sioux land and handed it to white settlers, then reduced rations on which the Indians depended for survival. On top of all this, drought withered the land in the summer of 1890. Officials worried that the "messiah craze" would make the reservations uncontrollable. As the dances grew in size, efforts to suppress them only increased tensions. The army's arrival made matters worse, and when officials tried to arrest Sitting Bull for fomenting the dance, resistance flared and the famed Hunkpapa chief was killed. Despite efforts to keep the peace by Indians and even some soldiers, two weeks later came the massacre at Wounded Knee.

Andersson examines in great detail the reception of the Ghost Dance among Indian agents, the army, Christian missionaries, the press, and the U.S. Congress. All these groups opposed the dance for different reasons. Indian agents saw it as a threat to their authority and to the assimilationist policies they were meant to enforce. For their part, army commanders saw their deployment as a chance to assert control over Indian reservations (which were legally the charge of civilians in the Office of Indian Affairs). Despite the fact that there were only some 26,000 Sioux and probably only 4,000 Ghost Dancers among them, General Nelson Miles warned that the Ghost Dance would bring on "the most serious Indian war" in the history of the U.S. (then a nation of 63 million), during which the interior West was "liable to be overrun by [a] hungry, wild, mad horde of savages" (p. 143). Ever on the lookout for promotion and advancement (he may have been planning to run for president in 1892), Miles ordered so many soldiers to the Sioux reservations that the "Ghost Dance War" of 1890–91 became "the largest military operation in the United States since the Civil War" (p. 161).

Andersson's broad-gauged study is rich with detail and repays close reading, but his conclusions are at times disappointingly bland. He speculates that some Ghost Dancers could read press coverage of events, which would imply they knew their ritual was attracting a great deal of attention. Did they try

to calm public fears by speaking to the press? Andersson does not say. Most disappointing is his treatment of journalists. Press coverage of the Ghost Dance has long been cited as a chief cause of the official hysteria that led to the massacre, but Andersson finds contemporary reporting to have been sensationalist, sympathetic, or both; throwing up his hands, he concludes that "any attempt to generalize" about newspaper coverage "is very difficult and, for the most part, unfair" (p. 249). Difficult it may be, but without some analysis of how the public narrative of the Ghost Dance took shape, this study is sadly lacking.

In other ways, the pursuit of the "Great Story" comes at the expense of rigorous definitions. Although he warns against the "artificial" division of Sioux into "progressive" and "nonprogressive" camps (p. 20), Andersson falls into the trap of using these very categories. Thus, "the very progressive Yanktonai Sioux" were mostly pro-government Christians with little enthusiasm for the Ghost Dance (p. 77). "Nonprogressives," on the other hand, represented by the likes of Sitting Bull, were hostile to the government, enamored of old cosmology, and receptive to the new prophecy. "Progressive" Christian Indians thus squared off against "nonprogressive," presumably non-Christian Ghost Dancers.

But if the Ghost Dance expressed New Testament teachings, might so-called nonprogressives have been both Christian *and* opposed to of government policy? As one Ghost Dancer put it, the dance was the Indian means "to worship the Great Spirit in our own way," a sentiment that Sitting Bull apparently echoed (pp. 169, 172). The paradox was not lost on contemporary white observers. Lieutenant Marion Maus concluded the Ghost Dance was "a version of Christianity that suited the Indians' hopes and expectations" (p. 222). Father Francis Craft and others expressed similar sympathies. And yet, the hoary assumption persists in Andersson's book, as elsewhere, that the Ghost Dance was a badge of pagan "nonprogressive" leanings.

A tradition of countering the government in tribal councils, court cases, schools, and in Washington would become central to Lakota identity and persistence. In this context, the Ghost Dance represented a kind of liberation theology, a radical weave of New Testament teaching with Indian custom and hope. It served modern purposes of galvanizing Indian unity and peace at the same time it allowed opposition to U.S. policy. In following authorities who proclaimed the Ghost Dance non-Christian and nonprogressive, Andersson obscures its role as a Christian faith for the Indian oppressed.

In *Wounded Knee: Party Politics and the Road to an American Massacre*, Heather Cox Richardson takes a markedly different tack. Here national politics loom large. Partisan struggle defined the era. After barely electing Benjamin Harrison to the White House in 1888, Republicans lost the House of Representatives and nearly saw their Senate majority vanish in the midterm elections of 1890.

Locked in a struggle with resurgent Democrats for control of a deeply divided country, Republicans looked to the West.

Because Western voters tended to favor Republicans, the party of Lincoln set out to maximize their seats in the Senate and House by rushing statehood for Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho and carving two new states out of Dakota Territory. To free up more land for South Dakota settlers, they drove through a bill to break up the Great Sioux Reservation. The immense loss of land by the Lakota, followed by a severe reduction in rations dictated by officials who wanted to push the Sioux into farming, led to social upheaval among the Lakota and enthusiasm for the Ghost Dance.

Republicans nonetheless lost control of the Senate when South Dakota voters turned to the Farmers' Alliance in 1890. Desperate to sway the settlers back into their column, the Harrison administration decided that sending troops to deal with the Ghost Dance would gain them more votes in South Dakota. "The fate of the Minneconjous at Wounded Knee was sealed by politicians a thousand or more miles from the rolling hills and cathedral clouds of the Great Plains. The soldiers who pulled the triggers in South Dakota simply delivered the sentence" (p. 18).

Putting party politics at the center of the Ghost Dance is a novel approach and not without merit. Richardson's careful reading of the period press provides her with abundant detail into party infighting, which she narrates well. She devotes much of her story to the careers of John Sherman, one of the nation's most powerful senators and a presidential hopeful, and his brother, William Tecumseh Sherman, the hero of the Civil War and later the man charged with winning the Indian Wars in the West. Through their story, she details the rise of Republican dominance after the Civil War and the party's increasing devotion to the tariff as a means of shoring up the manufacturers who were key supporters. Indeed, in explaining how the tariff dimmed the prospects of farmers and other staple producers to aggrandize industrialists, Richardson shows a rare gift for illuminating the heated debates that characterized Gilded Age politics.

But the account comes to feel one-sided. In this book, American politics are overwhelmingly Eastern politics. In Washington, D.C., the issues are complex and the battleground protean. Political endurance goes to the savvy and clever.

Westerners, on the other hand, and especially Lakotas, seem possessed of simple goals and can only react to Eastern decisions. Thus Indians were forced to "negotiate the tension between their traditional culture and the new economy pushing in on them from the East" (p. 52). What this "negotiating" involved goes mostly unsaid, but Richardson implies that Indians wanted merely a return to the old ways, after the land losses of 1890 left the Sioux "no longer able to hunt enough game for themselves," and thus "dependent on the government for food" (p. 117).

In fact, owing to the decline of wildlife across the Plains, long before 1890 Sioux hunters had been unable to feed their families. As we have seen, only a minority of Lakotas took up the Ghost Dance. Most did not anticipate a return of the old ways, and for them the question was how to innovate a new means of survival while remaining Lakota. Thus, for the vast majority, the real choices were all about how to survive under a government that sought to keep them divided and powerless; how to get farm equipment, rations, jobs, and education without destroying Indian families; and how to negotiate with Indian agents who often knew little about Indians and cared less. These were the issues Lakotas debated and that permeate archival sources of the era. The disputes were arguably more serious than those of Democrats and Republicans, for the wrong choice could push starving kin into oblivion. But none of this comes across in Richardson's *Wounded Knee*, where Republicans and Democrats make the history, and Sioux families only become its victims.

Ethnohistorical shortcomings become more pronounced in Richardson's treatment of the West beyond South Dakota. She is a good writer, and, when she takes time to explain details such as day-to-day life at reservation headquarters, she can paint narrative moments with great skill. But she gets into real trouble when she ventures into landscapes she apparently has never seen, such as the Nevada homeland of the Ghost Dance prophet. She refers to "the Great Basin that lies in the heart of Nevada" (p. 120), but the Great Basin is bigger than France and considerably bigger than Nevada, which itself occupies only part of the basin's western half. She describes the "twisted Joshua Trees" of northern Nevada, when in fact these trees are confined to ranges hundreds of miles south. She speculates that the Lakotas called the Pyramid Lake Paiutes "Fish Eaters" because eating fish seemed peculiar to them, when even a cursory reading of the sources would reveal that several different bands of nearby Paiute called themselves that or similar names. Indeed, her research seems to have gone on hiatus at this point. How else to explain that she attributes a paragraph on the political economy of Northern Paiutes not to scholars like Julian Steward, Catherine Fowler, or Ed Johnson—or even to the Smithsonian's go-to-sourcebook, the *Handbook of North American Indians*—but to Wikipedia? (p. 331, n.72)

Research failings aside, the larger argument of the book is not always persuasive. Did party politics somehow make Wounded Knee different? Alongside the Pequot Massacre of 1637 or the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864 or the Camp Grant Massacre of 1871, Wounded Knee looks awfully familiar. Could the killings have been avoided if Republicans were less partisan? Here, Richardson's evidence proves thin. Troop deployments were popular in Western states and Harrison might have seen them as a means to gain South Dakota voters, but there is no evidence he did so. Richardson herself points out that it was not Harrison, but General Miles who escalated the conflict by sending

so many troops, in order to “end the conflict quickly, advance the primacy of the military, and defend his political future” (p. 229). Apparently, partisan rivalry took a back seat to military ambition at least some of the time.

Fueled by land grabs and drenched in Indian blood, American growth was also political. At its best, Richardson’s *Wounded Knee* is a stark reminder of how brazen and bloody those politics could be.

For both Andersson and Richardson, the Ghost Dance itself represents something of an atavistic impulse, a premodern longing for a pre-U.S. America. In both books, a more nuanced perspective on the ritual might have offered a more compelling history. In this respect, both authors might have benefited from closer attention to Greg Smoak’s *Ghost Dances and Identity: Prophetic Religion and American Indian Ethnogenesis in the Nineteenth Century* (2006).

Although he opens his story at Wounded Knee, Smoak focuses not on the Lakota but on the Shoshone and Bannock peoples of Fort Hall Reservation in Idaho. Partly by virtue of its location near the railroad that carried Indian and other travelers in 1890, the reservation at Fort Hall served as a vital conduit between the Nevada prophet and his Great Plains disciples. It was while stopping in Fort Hall that Sioux and Cheyenne sojourners first became aware of the prophecies, which already circulated among the Shoshone and Bannock tribes. From Fort Hall, many journeyed to Walker River, Nevada, to meet Wovoka.

As Smoak explains, the Ghost Dance originated long before 1890, in a complex series of changes far to the west, on the Columbia Plateau, a high-country sagebrush steppe and grassland that covers much of the inland Pacific Northwest (including the area of Fort Hall). As early as 1800, before the U.S. conquest, plateau societies were radically altered by horses, guns, disease, changing trade relations, and demographic migrations. Shoshones, a hunting and gathering people who took to horses for buffalo hunting by the late 1700s, were joined in southern Idaho by groups of Paiutes who moved east from the Great Basin (the province to the south of the plateau) and also took up horses and buffalo hunting, and who came to be known as Bannocks. The two peoples allied against Plains rivals, especially the Blackfeet. Nonetheless, throughout the historic period, pronounced ethnic differences persisted between them. They never spoke the same language, and their alliances did not unite them as one people.

The Ghost Dance emerged in part from the prophetic traditions of the Columbia Plateau, where visions of apocalypse and renewal appear to have been endemic. Indeed, long before whites settled here, millenarian rituals known collectively as the Prophet Dance characterized the region. Typically, these rites originated with a prophet who had visited heaven and returned to preach the righteous path. In many cases, the prophet brought with him a ceremony and songs that would reunite all the peoples of the earth, much like the Ghost Dance would years later.



In Smoak's formulation, disease and trade both stimulated new religious rituals like the Prophet Dance, and, through these, a kind of evangelical Christianity spread far in advance of white missionaries and settlers (just as disease, horses, and weeds did). The earliest Christians in this region were not whites but Catholic Iroquois (who relocated with the fur brigades of the Northwest Company by 1820) and Spokane and Kutenai leaders who learned Christian teachings as children in the Hudson Bay Company's Red River Settlement before 1830. Through these native evangelists, an Indian-inflected Christianity stirred souls from Montana to Oregon. The new religion was strongest among the Salish and most renowned among the Nez Perce, who sent a delegation to Saint Louis in 1831 to obtain "the book" and its knowledge, and thereby helped kick off a wave of Protestant missions to the region.

So it was that, long before the first Euro-American Christians arrived west of the Rockies, Shoshones, Bannocks, and others "had already interpreted and incorporated Christian teachings into their belief systems" (p. 69). By the time Brigham Young led his flock into the valley of the Great Salt Lake in 1847, there were many Indians throughout the region eager to discuss Christian and apocalyptic ideas. With a theology that presented Indians as the lost tribes of Israel, Mormons launched a vigorous missionary effort to reclaim them for the true church. At the same time, migration along the overland trails picked up markedly. The 1850s saw a surge in violence and disease.

During this period, Indian prophets first announced visions of the earth destroyed, swept clean of whites, and renewed for Indians alone (p. 75). In 1870, the first recognized Ghost Dance emerged from the Paiute reservation at Walker River, Nevada, in which the prophet Wodziwob foretold "a return of the old ways, with plentiful game and plant food and all Indians, living and dead, reunited on a renewed earth" (p. 114).

Although the 1870 Ghost Dance faded in the Great Basin, it endured for many years at Fort Hall, where authorities had, by this time, confined Shoshones and Bannocks to a single reservation. The dance was the ritual mostly of Bannocks who felt the deprivations of reservation life even more than did Shoshones. The religion foretold the destruction of the whites and the inheritance of a renewed earth for Indians, and it had paradoxical effects in expressing Indian resistance to Euro-American rule and enhancing Indian receptivity to Mormon preachers (who shared Indian contempt for U.S. policy). Indeed, as the Ghost Dance assumed a higher profile, Indians and Mormons "created a religious middle ground, a set of creative misunderstandings that, at least for the moment, brought them together" (p. 126).

By the mid-1870s, crowding at the Fort Hall reservation and constraints on traditional hunting and gathering led to increasing unrest. In 1878, the Ghost Dance became a unifying theology for pan-Indian resistance, as Bannocks extolled its vision of a renewed, post-U.S. earth to urge Shoshones and others into a united front against Euro-American encroachment.



After the so-called Bannock War failed to dislodge the colonizers, militant resistance ceased. The Ghost Dance, however, continued. Through the 1880s and '90s, Ghost Dance revivals became a ritual sinew binding Fort Hall Indians together, despite deep ethnic differences. Against the aggressive assimilation policies of the U.S., Ghost Dancing "provided a bridge to other Indian peoples and allowed the incorporation of new and powerful Christian doctrines. The Ghost Dance taught Indian peoples they were a distinct group with a distinct origin and way of life and a destiny separate from white America" (p. 154).

Only at the very end of this rich historical treatment does Smoak reach the 1890 Ghost Dance, which differed in some ways from earlier versions of the ritual, notably (according to Smoak) in promising peace among all people and a new world of racial harmony.

Smoak's deep history suggests the Ghost Dance grew, in part, out of Indian experience of whites and their Christianity, and that it was an Indian answer to the tensions of their multiethnic past and their new racial identity, which stripped away lineage and tribe and placed them in a single category known as "Indians." Smoak writes: "At Fort Hall, the Ghost Dances provided one path from older belief systems to a unified Indian identity that explained reservation life and gave hope for the future" (p. 190). The Ghost Dances of 1870 and 1890 represent "two periods of intense excitement in a continuing pattern of religious practice that stretched throughout the nineteenth century and survives to this day" (p. 204). The Northern Paiutes, Bannocks, Shoshones, Lakotas, and others who took one another's hands to dance the sacred circle were seeking a primitive paradise only in the sense that other Protestant revivalists were doing the same. As a uniquely pan-Indian Christian expression, the Ghost Dance was a modern protest against modern problems, not the least of which was an oppressive national government that endowed Indians with no political rights. In this sense, the ritual was less a marker of the past than a precursor to future protests. In this sense, too, the massacre of Wounded Knee was less an echo of old conflicts than a bloody warning about the road ahead.

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