The Ghost Dance Religion – Wovoka's "Messiah Letter" and Z.A. Parker's "The Ghost Dance Among the Lakota"

Date: ca. January 1889; June 20, 1890
Author: Jack Wilson, a.k.a. Wovoka; Z.A. Parker
Genre: Letter; sermon; report

Summary Overview

In Nevada in January 1889, a Paiute holy man called Wovoka had a vision that caused him to advocate a new American Indian religious movement called the Ghost Dance. Though an earlier Ghost Dance movement had arisen twenty years earlier, led by a Paiute named Wodziwob, Wovoka's Ghost Dance arose within the context of the massive loss of American Indian land, sovereignty, and culture as a result of the end the Indian Wars that had been ongoing since the Civil War. Wovoka's Ghost Dance was a peaceful movement that drew upon Christian morals, calling on Indians to live peacefully and ethically, abstain from alcohol, and work hard. As most tribes were facing difficult times due to being rounded up onto reservations, the Ghost Dance spread rapidly, as it promised a restoration of Indian life and culture, and the destruction of the whites by God. In 1890, the Ghost Dance had reached the Lakota at Pine Ridge Reservation in Dakota Territory. The Lakota had resisted confinement to the reservation, and their most noted leaders, Red Cloud, Crazy Horse, and Sitting Bull, had become symbols of Indian resistance.

The two documents presented here give two very different views of the Ghost Dance religion. One, the "Messiah Letter," was written by Wovoka, in which he describes the movement in detail. He outlines a peaceful movement that will allow Indians to regain their past glory, while eschewing warfare against the whites. Z.A. Parker's description of witnessing the Ghost Dance performed at Pine Ridge, from the perspective of a white woman, gives some important detail interspersed with perspective that clearly categorizes the Ghost Dance as a form of hysteria, not in line with Christian faith and practice.

Defining Moment

American Indian nations faced an increasingly hopeless situation in the late nineteenth century. Beginning in the 1830s, eastern tribes were being forced off of their land and marched over 1,000 miles to Indian Territory, in present-day Oklahoma and Kansas. The western tribes, though some still held their ancestral lands, were witnessing a massive influx of whites moving west. Also confined to reservations, the land base of the Indian nations was shrinking rapidly, as the more fertile lands were being transferred to white immigrants. Federal Indian policy, as implemented by government officials and missionaries on the reservations, as well as in boarding schools where Indian children were forced to attend, held that Indians needed to give up their traditional religions, languages, and lifestyles in favor of American Christianity and farming.

At the same time as the Indian Wars were causing massive casualties, as well as cultural displacement, among Indian nations, a Northern Paiute holy man from western Nevada named Wovoka began to spread the word of a new religious movement that would eliminate the American settlers and restore the Indian way of life and the lands their ancestors had held. To bring this utopia about, Indian people needed to perform the Ghost Dance, as described by Wovoka, observe a Christian-based moral code, and remain at peace with white people. As Indians around the Great Basin began performing the dance, stories of visions and healings began to spread.

In late 1889, two Lakota men named Short Bull and Kicking Bear visited Wovoka, learned the Ghost Dance, and brought it to the Pine Ridge, Standing Rock, and Rosebud Reservations in Dakota Territory. The Lakota had already had their holiest place, the Black Hills, which had been promised to them in perpetuity in the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868, taken from them by gold-seeking white Americans. They had resisted, to the point of fighting against the U.S. Army, but even their iconic victory

over General George A. Custer at the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876 did not slow white expansion. The Ghost Dance gave the people of Pine Ridge, who had a profound sense of hopelessness in the aftermath of the Sioux Wars, hope for a different future. The Lakota, perhaps more than most tribes, were forced to abandon their seasonal cycle lifestyle of following the bison, and were forced to practice agriculture, which had previously been only the domain of women. Also, the lands in Dakota Territory to which they had been assigned were particularly poor for agriculture without irrigation.

Many tribes throughout the West sent holy men to learn the Ghost Dance. The Ghost Dance, which promised a way back to the Lakotas' cultural past, and large numbers accepted its message and began participating in the dance. The most influential Lakota leader at the time, Sitting Bull, supported the practice among his people, though he did not participate in the dance itself. Agents of the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, including Standing Rock's James McLaughlin, opposed the movement, as they believed it presaged a renewed call for war against the United States.

Author Biography

Wovoka, also called Jack Wilson, was born in Nevada around 1856. He had been raised by a white rancher's family after his father died, where he learned English and Christian religion. At the age of about thirty, Wovoka began to make experience visions like the Ghost Dance prophet Wodziwob had some twenty years earlier. He foresaw a new pan-Indian religion, with a moral code like Christianity, but that would bring about the end of white dominance and herald a return to the Indian past. His new religious movement espoused pacifism and personal ethics, but at the same time was influenced by the dances and mystical aspects of the religious beliefs of his own tribe. Tribes like the Lakota took Wovoka's message and adapted its principles to meet their own circumstances. The author of "The Ghost Dance among the Lakota," Mrs. Z. A. Parker, was a teacher on the Pine Ridge Reservation who observed Lakota performing the Ghost Dance on June 20, 1890. Little else is known of her, other than the fact that she was associated with the famous Smithsonian ethnographer James Mooney. Mooney took accounts like Parker's as sources for his own writings on the Ghost Dance.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

Wovoka: The Messiah Letter

When you get home you must make a dance to continue five days. Dance four successive nights, and the last night keep up the dance until the morning of the fifth day, when all must bathe in the river and then disperse to their homes. You must all do in the same way.

I, Jack Wilson, love you all, and my heart is full of gladness for the gifts you have brought me. When you get home I shall give you a good cloud which will make you feel good. I give you a good spirit and give you all good paint. I want you to come again in three months, some from each tribe there [i.e., Indian Territory].

There will be a good deal of snow this year and some rain. In the fall there will be such a rain as I have never given you before.

Grandfather says, when your friends die you must not cry. You must not hurt anybody or do harm to anyone. You must not fight. Do right always. It will give you satisfaction in life. This young man has a good father and mother.

Do not tell the white people about this. Jesus is now upon the earth. He appears like a cloud. The dead are still alive again. I do not know when they will be here; maybe this fall or in the spring. When the time comes there will be no more sickness and everyone will be young again.

Do not refuse to work for the whites and do not make any trouble with them until you leave them. When the earth shakes do not be afraid. It will not hurt you.

I want you to dance every six weeks. Make a feast at the dance and have food that everybody may eat. Then bathe in the water. That is all. You will receive good words again from me some time. Do not tell lies.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

Parker: The Ghost Dance among the Lakota

We drove to this spot about 10:30 o'clock on a delightful October day. We came upon tents scattered here and there in low, sheltered places long before reaching the dance ground. Presently we saw over three hundred tents placed in a circle, with a large pine tree in the center, which was covered with strips of cloth of various colors, eagle feathers, stuffed birds, claws, and horns-all offerings to the Great Spirit. The ceremonies had just begun. In the center, around the tree, were gathered their medicine-men; also those who had been so fortunate as to have had visions and in them had seen and talked with friends who had died. A company of fifteen had started a chant and were marching abreast, others coming in behind as they marched. After marching around the circle of tents they turned to the center, where many had gathered and were seated on the ground.

I think they wore the ghost shirt or ghost dress for the first time that day. I noticed that these were all new and were worn by about seventy men and forty women. The wife of a man called Return-from-scout had seen in a vision that her friends all wore a similar robe, and on reviving from her trance she called the women together and they made a great number of the sacred garments. They were of white cotton cloth. The women's dress was cut like their ordinary dress, a loose robe with wide, flowing sleeves, painted blue in the neck, in the shape of a three-cornered handkerchief, with moon, stars, birds, etc., interspersed with real feathers, painted on the waists, letting them fall to within 3 inches of the ground, the fringe at the bottom. In the hair, near the crown, a feather was tied. I noticed an absence of any manner of head ornaments, and, as I knew their vanity and fondness for them, wondered why it was. Upon making inquiries I found they discarded everything they could which was made by white men.

The ghost shirt for the men was made of the same material-shirts and leggings painted in red. Some of the leggings were painted in stripes running up and down, others running around. The shirt was painted blue around the neck, and the whole garment was fantastically sprinkled with figures of birds, bows and arrows, sun, moon, and stars, and everything they saw in nature. Down the outside of the sleeve were rows of feathers tied by the quill ends and left to fly in the breeze, and also a row around the neck and up and down the outside of the leggings. I noticed that a number had stuffed birds, squirrel heads, etc., tied in their long hair. The faces of all were painted red with a black half-moon on the forehead or on one cheek.

As the crowd gathered about the tree the high priest, or master of ceremonies, began his address, giving them directions as to the chant and other matters. After he had spoken for about fifteen minutes they arose and formed in a circle. As nearly as I could count, there were between three and four hundred persons. One stood directly behind another, each with his hands on his neighbor's shoulders. After walking about a few times, chanting, "Father, I come," they stopped marching, but remained in the circle, and set up the most fearful, heart-piercing wails I ever heard-crying, moaning, groaning, and shrieking out their grief, and naming over their departed friends and relatives, at the same time taking up handfuls of dust at their feet, washing their hands in it, and throwing it over their heads. Finally, they raised their eyes to heaven, their hands clasped high above their heads, and stood straight and perfectly still, invoking the power of the Great Spirit to allow them to see and talk with their people who had died. This ceremony lasted about fifteen minutes, when they all sat down where they were and listened to another address, which I did not understand, but which I afterwards learned were words of encouragement and assurance of the coming messiah.

When they arose again, they enlarged the circle by facing toward the center, taking hold of hands, and moving around in the manner of school children in their play of "needle's eye." And now the most intense excitement began. They would go as fast as they could, their hands moving from side to side, their bodies swaying, their arms, with hands gripped tightly in their neighbors', swinging back and forth with all their might. If one, more weak and frail, came near falling, he would be jerked up and into position until tired nature gave way. The ground had been worked and worn by many feet, until the fine,

flour-like dust lay light and loose to the depth of two or three inches. The wind, which had increased, would sometimes take it up, enveloping the dancers and hiding them from view. In the ring were men, women, and children; the strong and the robust, the weak consumptive, and those near to death's door. They believed those who were sick would be cured by joining in the dance and losing consciousness. From the beginning they chanted, to a monotonous tune, the words

Father, I come;
Mother, I come;
Brother, I come;
Father, give us back our arrows.

All of which they would repeat over and over again until first one and then another would break from the ring and stagger away and fall down. One woman fell a few feet from me. She came toward us, her hair flying over her face, which was purple, looking as if the blood would burst through; her hands and arms moving wildly; every breath a pant and a groan; and she fell on her back, and went down like a log. I stepped up to her as she lay there motionless, but with every muscle twitching and quivering. She seemed to be perfectly unconscious. Some of the men and a few of the women would run, stepping high and pawing the air in a frightful manner. Some told me afterwards that they had a sensation as if the ground were rising toward them and would strike them in the face. Others would drop where they stood. One woman fell directly into the ring, and her husband stepped out and stood over her to prevent them from trampling upon her. No one ever disturbed those who fell or took any notice of them except to keep the crowd away.

They kept up dancing until fully 100 persons were lying unconscious. Then they stopped and seated themselves in a circle, and as each recovered from his trance he was brought to the center of the ring to relate his experience. Each told his story to the medicine-man and he shouted it to the crowd. Not one in ten claimed that he saw anything. I asked one Indian—a tall, strong fellow, straight as an arrow—what his experience was. He said he saw an eagle coming toward him. It flew round and round, drawing nearer and nearer until he put out his hand to take it, when it was gone. I asked him what he thought of it. "Big lie," he replied. I found by talking to them that not one in twenty believed it. After resting for a time they would go through the same performance, perhaps three times a day. They practiced fasting, and every morning those who joined in the dance were obliged to immerse themselves in the creek.

GLOSSARY

consumptive: wasted of body; debilitated by illness

earth shakes: a reference to the coming of the new world

good cloud: rain, perhaps

good paint: literally, face and body paint, but perhaps also presence or power

Grandfather: a universal title of reverence among Indians and here meaning the messiah

medicine man: a traditional healer and spiritual leader

needle's eye: a chanting circle game in Victorian times

young man … father and mother: Possibly this refers to Casper Edson, the young Arapaho who wrote down this message of Wovoka

Document Analysis

Wovoka's "Messiah Letter" was written to Arapaho and Cheyenne holy men who had traveled to Nevada to meet with him and learn the Ghost Dance. It was dictated by Wovoka and written down by an Arapaho named Casper Edson and the daughter of a Cheyenne named Black Short Nose. It was published by Smithsonian ethnographer James Mooney. The letter describes the basic tenets revealed in Wovoka's vision, leaving much room for interpretation and variation in how they were implemented.

Wovoka instructs Indians to perform the dance for five days. He did not dictate the exact form of the dance, but the circle dance, which was common among western tribes, was most commonly used. Wovoka then gave himself supernatural status, by stating: "[i]n the fall there will be such a rain as I have never given you before." Later, Wovoka claims, "Jesus is now upon the earth. He appears like a cloud," referencing himself as the bringer of the weather.

Wovoka then described how those who follow the Ghost Dance movement must conduct themselves. He tells followers to live in peace with all people, regardless of race, and to "do right always." At the aftermath of decades of bitter warfare, this was a very different approach. Wovoka asked his followers not to resist the whites, since the fulfillment of his prophecies will make all things right. He also says that the Ghost Dance is for Indians alone and must not be shared or even discussed with whites. Wovoka stated that he, personally, would reward the people only if they perform the dance and live as he instructed. If they did so, Wovoka stated that "the dead" would be "alive again," and that, though they have not yet arrived, they may be there by "this fall or in the spring." Wovoka dwelled extensively on the idea of keeping peace with white people, encouraging Indians to not avoid being employed by them.

As opposed to Wovoka's very peaceful description of what he hoped would revitalize the tribes, Z. A. Parker's account of the Ghost Dance demonstrates a number of differences between Wovoka's vision. Her portrayal of how the dance was practiced by the Lakota was laced with assumptions of what she perceived to be the militaristic nature of Indian dances. This perception would have been common and understandable, as decades of war between whites and Indians were just coming to a cataclysmic end. Parker assumed that the practice of the Ghost Dance by the Lakota was a prelude to resumed resistance to westward migration.

Parker described a facet of the Ghost Dance not from Wovoka, but unique to the Lakota: the ghost shirts, which were worn during the practice of the dance. She stated, "[t]he wife of a man called Return-from-scout had seen in a vision that her friends all wore a similar robe, and on reviving from her trance she called the women together and they made a great number of the sacred garments." The Lakota ghost shirts were the basis for much of the perception of the Ghost Dance as a militant movement. While Wovoka had emphasized peace with white people, the Lakota, who had been fighting whites for over thirty-five years, instead viewed the Ghost Dance as a millennial drama of which they would be a part. They dared whites, such as Indian Agent James McLaughlin (who adamantly opposed the Ghost Dance) to stop them, by claiming the ghost shirts would protect them from bullets. Additionally, part of the chant reported by Parker—"Father, I come; Mother, I come; Brother, I come; Father, give us back our arrows"—seems to imply both the resurrection of the Indians who had died before and the resumption of hostilities with the Americans.

Essential Themes

Alarmed by such accounts, James McLaughlin called for the Lakota to stop the Ghost Dance, but he was unsuccessful in doing so. He requested help from the U.S. Army in tracking any bands that left the reservation, and sent tribal police to the home of Lakota holy man Sitting Bull – one of the Ghost Dance's staunchest backers – to arrest him, but the ensuing melee ended up costing Sitting Bull his life. The army then arrived and chased down a band led by a chief named Big Foot. Immediately after the killing of Sitting Bull, Big Foot, took approximately 350 Lakota, mostly women and children, and fled the nearby Cheyenne River Reservation for Pine Ridge. They were pursued by troops under the command of Major Samuel Whitside and were eventually intercepted. Spotted Elk, who had contracted pneumonia during the journey, surrendered, and he and his band were escorted to Wounded Knee Creek. On December 29, 1890, soldiers were attempting to disarm the Lakota when a shot was fired. The federal troops opened fire on the largely unarmed camp with Hotchkiss artillery, killing at least 150 Lakota. The massacre at Wounded Knee is widely regarded as the symbolic end of the Sioux Wars, which had begun with the First Sioux War in 1854. The tragedy ended both the widespread popularity of the Ghost Dance movement and, for the most part, open warfare between whites and Indians.

After the Wounded Knee Massacre, Wovoka remained an influential religious leader among both his own Paiute people and Indians across the West. The peaceful nature of his movement was not lost on Indian agents in his home region, who saw him as a calming influence. In his later years, he made a living by selling items that he had personally used, from clothing to the paint and feathers used in Indian religious ceremonies. The Ghost Dance religion may have ended in 1890, but some tribes, especially on the Great Plains, still practiced the Ghost Dance for many years. Even during the Red Power movement of the 1960s, members of the American Indian Movement (AIM), specifically Oglala Lakota activist Leonard Crow Dog, performed the Ghost Dance. Many of the movement's participants looked to the Ghost Dance as inspiration for their own conflict, as it symbolized American Indian resistance to U.S. policy and the encroachment of American culture.

The locations of the drama that played out in the Ghost Dance movement in 1889-1890 remain holy to many Indian people. In 1973, AIM activists and about two hundred Lakota returned to Wounded Knee, seizing the town to protest the failure of the U.S. government to honor its treaties with Indian nations. FBI agents and U.S. marshals besieged the activists for seventy-one days, and one agent and two protesters were killed during the standoff. The event and the publicity given it by the press resulted in greater attention for the cause of American Indian rights throughout the United States.

—Steven L. Danver, PhD

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