

Mighty Upheaval on the Minnesota Frontier: Violence, War, and Death in Dakota and Missionary Christianity

JENNIFER GRABER

STEPHEN Riggs, Presbyterian missionary to the Dakota Indians, anxiously awaited a letter from the American Tract Society. He expected a reply about his proposed account of the recent war between the Dakotas and Euro-American settlers in Minnesota. After more than two centuries of contact between Dakotas and Europeans, and later Americans, relations had broken down entirely. Confined to reservations with some of their people starving, disgruntled Dakota warriors attacked villages and outlying cabins across southern Minnesota. Over several weeks in August and September 1862, they killed at least five hundred settlers and depopulated as many as twenty-three counties. The Reverend Riggs and his family barely escaped. Like so many Minnesota settlers, their home and possessions were destroyed. Military reinforcements eventually stopped the Dakotas' progress, compelling some to surrender and others to escape west to the plains. When hostilities ended, Riggs served as an interpreter in the negotiations over captives and at military tribunals organized to deal with detained Dakota fighters. He later visited Dakotas incarcerated in prison camps, paying special attention to the more than three hundred men sentenced to death for their part in the uprising. In light of his dramatic experience, Riggs proposed an account of his family's escape, along with details of the Dakota warriors' capture and confinement, in order to share how God had worked through this "mighty upheaval."¹

Parts of this paper were presented at the American Society of Church History annual meeting in San Diego. I thank Rick Pointer and Rachel Wheeler for offering helpful comments in that setting. Thanks also to my colleagues in the Young Scholars in American Religion Program for the suggestions they provided during the work's early stages. Thank you to Jon Ebel for his important suggestions as this article took on its final form and to the anonymous reviewers at *Church History*, who provided additional helpful feedback. I appreciate the assistance of people with long experience studying Dakota language and history. Laura Anderson offered suggestions about Dakota translation and naming, and William Beane shared letters that the Dakota community in Flandreau, South Dakota, has translated from Dakota into English. *Philamayayapi*—Thank you.

¹The Dakota are the eastern bands of the Seven Council Fires, the native peoples often called the Sioux. They are sometimes referred to as the Santees or Eastern Sioux. The Dakotas are composed

Jennifer Graber is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at the College of Wooster.

Riggs's suggestion repelled American Tract Society leadership. The society's agent, Israel Warren, replied to Riggs in February 1863 that the proposed publication was "unacceptable." Stories of massacres and executions, Warren argued, were "better for the papers" and should "pass into oblivion." Such violent images, including dramatic descriptions of the recent hanging of thirty-eight Dakota warriors or accounts of their survivors being forcibly relocated to prisons and reservations further west, would "haunt" readers. The ATS was in the business of converting sinners and improving morals. Riggs's proposed manuscript would do neither. "Scenes of human crime and wretchedness," Warren concluded, were "not religious literature."²

Though the ATS determined that Riggs's account of Indian attack and American military victory lay outside the realm of religion, the missionary could not agree. He had regular encounters with dozens of incarcerated Dakotas who professed Christian faith and requested baptism. Indeed, Riggs and other evangelists who represented the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) among the Dakotas came to see the war and its aftermath as the precipitating event in widespread Dakota conversions to Christianity and the key to future Indian evangelization across the American West. They pointed to Dakota conversions, particularly those of warriors about to be executed, as an unsettling but clear sign that God sometimes worked through violent and coercive means.³

The missionaries formulated this new position based on their interpretation of Dakota statements of faith. They had the words of Mahpiyawisicun (French Cloud), who spoke on behalf of his entire band the day before he was hanged. According to the missionaries, this native leader affirmed that "all the Washpekute [the Dakota band called the Leaf Shooters] now say they will keep Holy day. We desire as many of us as shall live with all our wives and our children to keep the law of the great God." Whatever

of four bands: the Mdewakantons, Wahpekute, Wahpetons, and Sissetons. The conflict between American settlers and Dakotas has been given several names, including the Great Sioux Uprising, the Dakota Uprising, the Dakota War, and the U.S.–Dakota War. There are several histories of the war. For a particularly good one, see Duane Schultz, *Over the Earth I Come: The Great Sioux Uprising of 1862* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992). The phrase "mighty upheaval" comes from a missionary biography. Such dramatic descriptions can be found throughout the primary documents written by Americans. See Winifred W. Barton, *John P. Williamson: A Brother to the Sioux* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1919), 67.

²Israel Warren to Stephen Riggs, 24 February 1863, Stephen R. Riggs Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (hereafter MHS).

³Richard Pointer has written about several episodes in which missionaries experienced significant change as a result of their contact with native peoples. See *Encounters of the Spirit: Native Americans and European Colonial Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

Mahpiyawisicun (French Cloud) intended by this statement or what it implied for his people's future, the Dakotas were at a crossroads in December 1862. They had lost their battle with the Americans. Those who had not escaped onto the plains were incarcerated in two prison camps. Many Dakotas viewed the battles and subsequent punishments as turning points in their history, although in a decidedly different manner than the missionaries. Defeat at the Americans' hands prompted their reconsideration of the Dakota spiritual pantheon. As Mahpiyawisicun's (French Cloud's) statement attests, some Dakotas searched for transformative sacred power and community survival through affiliation with the Christian God. The war, then, was the crucible in which both missionaries and Dakotas reformulated their religion. Both sides began to see the 1862 conflict as a cosmic battle that forever altered their understanding of and relationship to Christianity.⁴

I. INTRODUCTION

Though recent scholarship on encounters between native peoples and Euro-Americans has dedicated more attention to the creation of indigenous Christianities, the surge in Dakota conversions after the 1862 war has proved perennially difficult to interpret. Most studies of the conflict and its aftermath present a story of vanquished Dakota spirituality. Historian Robert Berkhofer's classic comparative study of Indian-missionary relations posits the U.S.-Dakota War as a prime example of missionaries forcing change on native peoples. "The connection between coercive power, conversion, and civilization is most dramatically demonstrated in the mass baptisms and huge reading classes conducted by missionaries in the prison and camp of the captive Indians after the victorious white expedition of late 1862." Even studies that note some persistent Dakota cultural features in their nascent Christianity rely on a narrative of dramatic religious change. For instance, historian Bonnie Lewis has argued that the Dakotas, even if they did not *reject* their traditional ways, significantly *redefined* them in the conversion process. But what if interpreting Dakota Christianity has less to do with the missionaries' offerings or the Dakotas' capacity for maintaining their culture and more to do with how the combatants experienced war as a religious problem and responded to it? Historian David Silverman has observed that Native Americans "filtered" Christian teachings through their own understandings of the world, a process Silverman has called "religious

⁴Thomas Williamson to Selah Treat, 29 January 1863, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (hereafter ABCFM) Papers, MHS. I will say more about my sources for Dakota conversion statements later in the paper. Wherever possible, I provide names in the Dakota language followed by an English translation.

translation.” While scholars have explored many filters, such as native understandings of sacred power, disease, and kinship, have we left native understandings of violence and war insufficiently examined?⁵

This essay explores how two communities experienced religious transformation during and after their encounter with war. If, as historian Harry Stout has recently argued, war is the norm rather than the aberration in American national life, how are we to understand the transformations experienced in 1862 by missionaries and Dakotas as part of a larger American story? How can we look at a war in one locale—one episode in the midst of a greater cataclysm, the Civil War—and understand how violence worked to reshape the participants’ religious lives? Indeed, because historians have focused on the spasmodic violence between North and South in 1862, they have failed to see the conflict on the western frontier as the inauguration of a long series of battles that also had significant religious import. Like the Civil War, the conflict between Americans and Dakotas presented an unprecedented religious challenge to its participants.⁶

The U.S. victory in the war prompted ABCFM missionaries to embrace evangelistic methods that featured state violence and confinement as acceptable, if not providentially prompted means for effecting American Indian conversion. This position was revolutionary given the ABCFM’s history of protesting earlier episodes of U.S. confinement and relocation of

⁵Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *Salvation and the Savage: An Analysis of Protestant Missions and American Indian Response, 1787–1862* (Louisville: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 151; Bonnie Sue Lewis, *Creating Christian Indians: Native Clergy in the Presbyterian Church* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 34, 102; David J. Silverman, “Indians, Missionaries, and Religious Translation: Creating Wampanoag Christianity in Seventeenth-Century Martha’s Vineyard,” in *American Encounters: Natives and Newcomers from European Contact to Indian Removal, 1500–1850*, ed. Peter C. Mancall and James H. Merrell (New York: Routledge, 2007), 153. Kidwell contrasts scholars who emphasize Indian acculturation with those who speak, instead, of adaptation. Acculturation, she writes, “presupposes that cultures are characterized by discrete sets of traits and values, and in the historical experience of contact between cultures, those of the dominant society are accepted by and replace those of the subordinate society.” Clara Sue Kidwell, “Native American Systems of Knowledge,” in *A Companion to American Indian History*, ed. Philip J. Deloria and Neal Salisbury (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002), 94. Other recent studies of missionary–native contact that focus on adaptation rather than acculturation include Emma Anderson, *The Betrayal of Faith: The Tragic Journey of a Colonial Convert* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), and Rachel Wheeler, *To Live Upon Hope: Mohicans and Missionaries in the Eighteenth-Century Northeast* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2007). Gary Clayton Anderson’s work details decades of interaction between Dakotas and Euro-Americans. See *Kinsmen of another Kind: Dakota–White Relations in the Upper-Mississippi Valley, 1650–1862* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984; repr., St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1997). Linda Clemmons’s work looks particularly at missionary–Dakota interactions. See “Satisfied to Walk in the Ways of Their Fathers: Dakotas and Protestant Missionaries, 1835–1862” (Ph.D. diss. University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, 1998).

⁶Harry S. Stout, “Review Essay: Religion, War, and the Meaning of America,” *Religion and American Culture* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 275–89.

native peoples in the American Southeast and the approach ABCFM missionaries had taken among the Dakotas for twenty-five years prior to the war. In the wake of devastating defeat, the Dakotas reconsidered their traditional spiritual pantheon's power. They sought to align themselves with the dominant spiritual power, which in this case seemed to belong to the Christians. These transformations did not involve changed goals. Both sides maintained something of their original aims: the missionaries still wanted to evangelize Indians and the Dakotas still struggled to maintain their kinship networks and some of their traditional ways. The experience of war—whether it ended in victory or defeat—prompted the participants to embrace radically different methods for securing these interests. As war would increasingly become the norm for interaction between Americans and Indians on the plains, we must consider these religious transformations and their impact on the development of the American West.

With the war as a lens for exploring religious change, this essay offers new possibilities for understanding the role of violent conflict in the lives of Protestants who articulated the emerging idea of manifest destiny and the dynamics of religious modification in Native American communities who engaged in war in an effort to protect their way of life. Just as much as we need to understand the religious worldviews that came in contact on the frontier, we must also understand how participants understood episodes of violence within their frameworks for interpreting divine and human powers at play in the world.⁷

II. “YOU THEN PROMISED US WE SHOULD HAVE THIS SAME LAND FOREVER”—TAOYATEDUTA, 1854⁸

By the start of the 1862 conflict, the Dakotas had been in contact with Euro-Americans for nearly two centuries. Since their first interaction with French

⁷Mark Noll makes a case for exploring religious change during moments of violent conflict. See *The Civil War as Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 14. Three very different books serve as models for how I investigate specifically native worlds under siege, Anderson's historical work on the effects of colonization and epidemics on the Canadian Innu, Lear's philosophical reflections on the Crow chief Plenty Coups and his people's move to a reservation, and Blackhawk's work on the effect of colonizing violence in the American Southwest. See Anderson, *The Betrayal of Faith*; Jonathan Lear, *A Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006); and Ned Blackhawk, *Violence Over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006). For an excellent example of work that explores the way Protestant missionaries shaped the rhetoric of westward expansion, see Cameron Addis, “The Whitman Massacre: Religion and Manifest Destiny on the Columbia Plateau, 1809–1858,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 25, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 221–58.

⁸Gary Clayton Anderson, *Little Crow: Spokesmen for the Sioux* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1986), 103.

traders in the 1650s, the Dakotas had a long tradition of relationships with traders based on practices of adopting them as kin. These relationships were maintained by ongoing gift exchange and acts of reciprocal obligation. The Dakota continued this mode of relationship when the British took control of the territory in 1760 after the French and Indian War. These relationships lasted until the Americans sent explorers, including Zebulon Pike, into the region after the turn of the nineteenth century. Representatives of the young country tried to maintain relationships with Dakotas and other native peoples through trading connections. The Americans' interest in securing land for settlers, however, changed the dynamics of Dakota relationships with outsiders. These changes were amplified by the fur trade's steady depletion of game and the United States' effort to establish forts in the area. In response, some Dakotas moved further west, toward the plains. Those who stayed in Minnesota found life increasingly difficult. By the 1850s, a series of treaties resulted in many Dakotas living on a bounded piece of land. By the early 1860s, several Dakota bands struggled to feed themselves as game was limited and land restrictions made hunting and gathering difficult. Some were close to starvation.⁹

The Dakotas' difficulties in the early 1860s stood in sharp contrast to a culture that had thrived in the Minnesota woodlands, even after initial contact with Europeans. Dakota social organization designated that men hunted for food and defended against enemies. Women farmed and took care of domestic concerns. Historians have found that the Dakotas had a complex diet and social system. Because neither the French nor the British sought to settle on Dakota lands, contact with these Europeans had not dramatically disrupted Dakota social customs and agricultural practices. The fur trade established with these newcomers, however, had affected Dakota hunting. Over the course of the nineteenth century, depleted forests made Dakotas alter some of their traditional practices.

While Dakotas dealt with a changing physical and social landscape, most of them insisted on the continued power of their spiritual pantheon and a traditional understanding of how sacred power worked. Dakotas, like their close cousins in other Siouan groups, perceived a "power that circulates everywhere that is visibly concentrated in transient forms." They called the general form of this power *wakan* and believed it could be manifest in many forms, both human and nonhuman. This power could be used for good or for ill. For any attuned Dakota, this power inspired awe. Dakota life involved constant interaction with beings that wielded sacred power and objects or people that manifested *wakan*. Through ceremony, Dakotas strived to align

⁹For background on European–Dakota contact, including the argument about strong fictive kin relationships, see Anderson, *Kinsmen of another Kind*, chapter 4.

themselves with *wakan* beings and things. The Dakotas' petitionary prayer reflected their status in a power-filled universe that could both help and harm. "O *Wakantanka*," they prayed, "have pity on me" or "have mercy on me."¹⁰

Dakotas took great care when approaching anything that manifested *wakan*, including the elderly, children, successful hunters, and healers. When they first encountered the French, the Dakotas perceived them to have *wakan*. Their trade goods, especially gunpowder, appeared particularly powerful. To align themselves with this new power, Dakotas approached them with piteous weeping. This "ceremonial abasement," as one historian has called it, reflected a more general posture of seeking mercy and protection from any spirit, person, animal, or object that evidenced *wakan*. The Dakotas' sense of the unimaginable strength of sacred power caused them to come "helpless and humble" before it. Spiritual power was not to be defeated, rather it was to be bowed before and harnessed for the good of one's kin.¹¹

In their ritual acts to spirit persons and their interactions with powerful human beings ranging from babies to French traders, the Dakotas believed that their survival hinged on a constant assessment of *wakan*. Through prayers, offerings, and weeping, the Dakota attempted to forge relationships with persons and things that were strange and *wakan* in order to marshal that power for their people's benefit. Dakotas showed their willingness to be obliged to these persons and objects with the hope that they might be obliged to the Dakota in return.

Even as the settler population grew around them and as the U.S. government began to appropriate land through treaties, most Dakotas persisted in their ritual system that acknowledged mysterious, powerful forces that animated the world. They also insisted on staying in the Minnesota River valley. They struggled to make reservation life viable. Men often crossed reservation boundaries to hunt or participate in war parties against the neighboring Ojibwe. Women tried to grow and gather enough food to supplement the

¹⁰Kenneth M. Morrison, *The Solidarity of Kin: Ethnohistory, Religious Studies, and the Algonkian-French Religious Encounter* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 145; Julian Rice, *Before the Great Spirit: The Many Faces of Sioux Spirituality* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 15, 30; Kidwell, "Native American Systems of Knowledge," 88. For more on the notion of *wakan*, see James R. Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual* (Lincoln, Neb.: Bison, 1991).

¹¹For more on this attitude toward Europeans, see Bruce M. White, "Encounters with Spirits: Ojibwe and Dakota Theories about the French and Their Merchandise," in *American Encounters*, ed. Mancall and Merrell, 216–45. For more on relationships between the Dakota and the French, see Anderson, *Kinsmen of another Kind*. On Dakota weeping, see volume introduction and speech by Tiyoskate in Mark Diedrich, *Dakota Oratory: Great Moments in the Recorded Speech of the Eastern Sioux, 1695–1874* (Rochester, Minn.: Coyote, 1989), 7, 10. For Dakota approaches to spiritual power, see Ella Deloria, *Speaking of Indians* (New York: Friendship, 1944; repr., Lincoln, Neb.: Bison, 1998), 51.

uneven supplies provided by government annuities. The Dakotas worried that traders cheated them out of annuities' full financial benefits and that the government would not keep all its treaty promises. As they faced an uncertain future, some Dakotas looked to ABCFM missionaries who were among the only Americans sympathetic to their concerns.

The ABCFM missionaries had arrived in 1835, a relatively stable point in Dakota history. The missionaries encountered a people who maintained many of their traditional cultural patterns, despite the adjustments made to accommodate trade goods and traders. At the time, the Dakota still moved about their lands freely, even though settlers were starting to arrive in greater numbers. They prospered from their participation in the fur trade. The missionaries came upon a people committed to their sacred traditions. The Dakotas had heard of Christianity in their seventeenth-century encounters with French priests. Some of them had interacted with a recent and short-lived Methodist mission. Few Dakotas, however, had ever chosen to embrace the French priests' Catholicism or the Americans' varieties of Protestantism. Those who had converted were typically of mixed origin, often the children of French fur trader fathers and Dakota mothers. If the Dakotas had any leanings toward Christianity, it occurred on the margins of Indian society and was predisposed to Roman Catholic expression.¹²

The ABCFM missionaries hoped to convert and civilize the Dakotas they encountered. They came energized by Second Great Awakening fervor and bearing a message of revivalist Calvinism. Most of them testified to a spiritual experience that prompted their work with the Dakota mission. Early ABCFM missionaries, the Pond brothers, shared an emblematic story of conversion and calling. In 1830, revival broke out in their hometown of Washington, Connecticut. Sensing divine power at work on them, the brothers dedicated their lives to Christ and to spreading the gospel. After trekking out West, they heard of an Indian tribe yet to be evangelized. They decided the Dakotas were "proper subjects for Christian effort," furnishing an "opportunity for self-denying labor." Stephen Riggs and Thomas Williamson, also compelled by the "claims of the heathen" and stories of missionaries to native peoples in Oregon, brought their families to southern Minnesota with ABCFM support. Their mission impulse reflected the growing number of Protestant missions to Indians. The ABCFM, especially, articulated their aim to preach the gospel and incubate forms of American civilization among Indians. Once they had convinced the Indians of their need for this change, the missionaries

¹²Anderson, *Kinsmen of another Kind*, chapters 7 and 8; Clemmons, "Satisfied to Walk," 40, 88–89.

hoped to relinquish their positions and let a self-sufficient Dakota Christianity rise up on the Minnesota frontier.¹³

The ABCFM missionaries envisioned the Christian gospel as the Indians' first step toward civilized living. Their missions proffered evangelistic messages along with models of American civilization. Earlier ABCFM missions among the Cherokees and Choctaws in the American Southeast included boarding schools, model towns, and programs to teach Indians to speak and read English. These missions succeeded in garnering Indian converts to Christianity and civilization, but they were not without problems. The programs nearly bankrupted the ABCFM and did not protect the Indians from American settlers' desire for land. The U.S. government removed the Cherokees and Choctaws in the 1830s. ABCFM workers protested this policy, arguing that the nation had an obligation to protect civilized Indians and honor treaties that ensured their title to ancestral lands.¹⁴

Efforts to evangelize, civilize, and protect native peoples, however, sometimes did lead missionaries to call for segregating Indians by moving them from their homelands. Baptist missionary, Isaac McCoy, argued in the 1820s that some Indians might need to be removed to keep them from traders and settlers' negative influences. Missionaries, then, had multiple ways for understanding Indian removal and segregation. Most of the time, they based their conclusions on what they thought would guarantee the Indians' protection and fair treatment, as well as the natives' continued growth in Christian and civilized culture. The missionaries to the Dakota, then, began their work after a series of developments in earlier missions. The aim of delivering the gospel could be realized multiple ways, through massive programs designed to civilize or through more modest efforts to move Indians away from threats or to try to keep them on land where they had established flourishing Christian communities.¹⁵

The ABCFM missionaries—the Pond brothers, along with Stephen Riggs and Thomas Williamson—began their work among the Dakotas with a modest array of stations. They started churches and day schools; they used the government-provided civilization fund to hire teachers and farmers. These early efforts garnered little interest among the Dakotas. Some Indians attended school. A few women and mixed-bloods converted. The missions

¹³Samuel W. Pond, Jr., *Two Volunteer Missionaries Among the Dakotas or the Story of the Labors of Samuel W. and Gideon H. Pond* (Boston: Congregational Sunday-School and Publishing Society, 1893), 12–13, 17; Berkhofer, *Salvation and the Savage*, 1, 4, 10, 13. The Pond brothers arrived in Minnesota as independent missionaries. They became official ABCFM missionaries a year later. For Riggs's and Williamson's decisions to become missionaries, see Stephen Riggs, *Mary and I: Forty Years with the Sioux* (Chicago: W. G. Holmes, 1880), 5–6.

¹⁴See William G. McLoughlin, *Champions of the Cherokees: Evan and John B. Jones* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), especially chapters 1 and 2.

¹⁵Berkhofer, *Salvation and the Savage*, 101–3.

did not attract substantial numbers of full-blood Dakota men, as conversion required them to farm rather than hunt and also to forego warfare, one of the primary modes for asserting male identity in Dakota culture. By the late 1830s, the missionaries had not managed to effect the changes they desired.

Despite these modest beginnings, the missionaries' spiritual fervor remained strong and the young evangelists did not question their methods. Missionaries Riggs and Williamson demanded complete commitment from their earliest converts. Like so many other Protestant mission efforts, the Dakota missions emphasized total Indian transformation through education and exposure to civilization. As historian Robert Berkhofer has observed, becoming Christian meant becoming "anti-Indian" by denouncing all former habits and superstitions. Missionaries expected Dakotas to cut their hair, destroy ritual objects, put away plural wives, and discard their blankets for Euro-American dress.¹⁶

The dramatic changes demanded by Christian conversion became more of an issue as church membership increased in the 1840s. Dakota society was, at this point, still relatively stable. The people still moved about their lands freely. They could hunt, although the signs of later depletion were noticeable. There were not enough converts to change Dakota society drastically. But the decade saw an extended drought that caused some Dakotas to wonder if the people were being punished. In response, some Dakotas, including medicine men, recommended renewed attention to ritual acts intended to guarantee Dakota wellbeing.¹⁷

Just as the Dakotas experienced an environmental struggle and a moment of uncertainty regarding sacred power, three full-blooded Dakota men became members of ABCFM churches. Their actions aroused suspicion, if not hostility, among other Indians. Stephen Riggs wrote that the years 1842 to 1848 saw the rise of Dakota "soldiers" who tried to keep people from reading the Bible and attending school. He also reported that Dakotas suspicious of the missions destroyed Christian Indians' property by cutting up their blankets and killing their animals. He even went so far as to attribute sudden and mysterious deaths to soldiers trying to imitate Indians who joined the missions. The missionaries noted the medicine men's particular power to encourage this resistance. The tension, however, did not last. The drought ended. The conversions dropped off. Once again, the missions did not appear as a threat to Dakota traditions.¹⁸

¹⁶Berkhofer, *Salvation and the Savage*, 13–15, 122.

¹⁷Berkhofer, *Salvation and the Savage*, 144; Clemmons, "Satisfied to Walk," 285–88.

¹⁸Stephen R. Riggs, *Tah-koo Wah-kan; or, The Gospel among the Dakotas* (Boston: Congregational Publishing Society, 1869; repr., New York: Arno, 1972), 198–99. Factionalism—or divisions within native communities over the question of incorporating or embracing some aspects of Christian thought or practice—has been called one of the most destructive effects of missionary efforts

But other threats loomed. Government officials persuaded the Dakotas to cede huge tracts of land in an effort to accommodate settlers and provide at least some permanent territory for the native peoples along the Minnesota River. In 1851, the Dakota signed the treaties of Traverse des Sioux and Mendota, which designated two reservations in return for government annuities of money and supplies. The ABCFM missionaries supported these treaties. The agreements allowed the Dakotas to remain on at least some of their traditional lands, but the tracts were small enough that certain cultural transformations were inevitable. When the Dakota bands began their move to the reservations, Riggs and Williamson established new missions in what they hoped would be a place for permanent Dakota settlement and a fruitful setting for evangelization.

The transition to the reservations proved to be a significant turning point in Dakota–American relations. When the Dakotas determined their own migration patterns, they maintained a sort of *détente* with missionaries, the converts who joined them, and other settlers in the area. This arrangement, however, became strained in the 1850s. Reservation life proved a significant challenge to some Dakota practices of community sustenance. Hunters were barred from searching for game off the reservations, although many continued to do so. Reservations also limited women’s traditional areas of gathering and farming, which had been practiced in several sites rather than in one. American efforts to keep Dakotas on the new reservations were also part of a plan to quell intertribal warfare. Dakota men, who established their bravery in battle, resisted American efforts to keep them on a bounded piece of land and away from enemies they had fought for generations. Some Dakotas responded to the restrictions of the reservation by taking up farming and insisting that such practices did not undermine Dakota sacred traditions. Other Dakotas, however, perceived the reservations to be an affront to their traditional culture and encouraged others to oppose such changes. Missionaries reacted to the Dakotas who they perceived to be behind the movement to resist Christianity and civilization. The ministers identified the greatest resistance among medicine men or conjurers.¹⁹

By the early 1860s, the former amity had all but disappeared. The Dakota felt cheated out of annuities promised in the 1851 treaties. They distrusted settlers and traders who always seemed to take advantage of them. Settlers bristled

among American Indians. The Dakotas, like many other missionized people, experienced significant conflict between factions often labeled “Christian” and “traditionalist.” See Willard Hughes Rollings, “Indians and Christianity,” in *A Companion to American Indian History*, ed. Deloria and Salisbury, 123–24.

¹⁹Clemmons, “Satisfied to Walk,” 133–35.

when Dakotas strayed outside reservation boundaries, which they needed to do to find adequate food. Missionaries felt uneasy as the reservations failed to yield tangible success. They agreed with the Dakotas that both traders and government agents cheated the Indians out of their fair share of annuity support; but they were frustrated that the increase in Indians willing to farm had not translated into widespread interest in Christianity.²⁰

Tensions were high, but the missionaries were not necessarily inclined to change their approach to Dakota evangelization. They assumed that the reservations would change Dakota habits over time. They hoped that the Dakotas who had turned to farming would eventually join Christian churches. As Thomas Williamson reported to the ABCFM just six weeks before the war, the day schools on the reservation had decent attendance and some Dakotas came to hear his Sunday afternoon sermons in the Dakota language. Even as the missionaries seemed willing to stay the course, more and more Dakotas felt that decisive action was necessary. They wanted their people either to accept at least some parts of the missionaries' and government officials' program to "civilize" their culture or to fight back against the growing threat to their livelihood. The Mdewakanton Dakota chief, Taoyateduta (Little Crow), was among those who believed that contact with Americans would only increase, even though the Dakotas had been promised their lands forever. Careful choices about adaptation, then, were necessary. The chief had taken up farming and was in the midst of building a frame house. Though committed to Dakota sacred traditions, he wondered what the missionaries had to offer. The day before the U.S.–Dakota War started, Taoyateduta went to church.²¹

III. "TAOYATEDUTA IS NOT A COWARD. HE WILL DIE WITH YOU!" –18 AUGUST 1862²²

Taoyateduta (Little Crow) led the Dakotas into war despite his sense that it was both wrong and had little chance for success. In June 1862, tensions flared between Dakotas and Americans when several bands arrived at the reservation's Upper Agency to receive annuities and goods. Rumors circulated that these items would not arrive, and the reservation agent struggled to get the Dakotas to leave. A few weeks later, more than five

²⁰Anderson, *Kinsmen of another Kind*, chapters 10 and 11.

²¹Thomas Williamson to Selah Treat, 2 July 1862, ABCFM Papers, MHS. Taoyateduta attended the Reverend Samuel Hinman's Sunday morning service at an Episcopal mission church. See Anderson, *Little Crow*, 133.

²²Anderson, *Little Crow*, 132.

thousand Dakotas gathered at the Lower Agency to await annuity distribution. The agent there offered some supplies to stave off some bands' starvation. In August, several Dakota young men broke into an agency warehouse full of food supplies. They were stopped only when soldiers pointed a howitzer at them. In a statement that took on mythic dimensions, the frustrated agent remarked that if the Indians were starving they could certainly eat grass.²³

On August 17, four Dakota hunters roamed about the tiny village of Acton after an unsuccessful hunt. They argued about stealing eggs from a local farmer, a dispute that ended in one Dakota man challenging another to attack and kill the farmer. The challenges escalated and the Dakotas killed five settlers in Acton. Once they returned to their village, they argued that the Dakotas ought to attack and drive all the settlers out of Minnesota rather than wait for American authorities to punish them for the murders. Some Dakota leaders, especially Taoyateduta (Little Crow), questioned the wisdom of inciting war. Nevertheless, many young men had already made their decision. Many saw the war as chance to reunite Dakota society, which had been undermined and divided by American efforts to acculturate them. Chiefs such as Taoyateduta (Little Crow) saw the potential for his people's ruin. But when men ready to fight questioned his bravery, he promised his support. The next morning, the Dakotas began their attacks in earnest.²⁴

The six-week conflict devastated the peoples of southern Minnesota. In the first few weeks, the Dakotas took the upper hand by destroying villages and terrorizing settlers living on far-flung homesteads. The warriors killed hundreds of settlers, including a high percentage of women and children. Many of the killings were brutal, including hacked-off limbs and tomahawked heads. Settlers who escaped before attacks or fled with injuries trudged across the countryside for days or weeks before finding safe shelter. The Dakotas took scores of captives, including mixed-bloods who were unsympathetic to the war and American women and children from various Minnesota settlements. They looted homes and businesses. They set fire to what was left. Some Dakotas argued to stop the violence, but the warriors continued as victory appeared imminent. They vanquished a squad of local soldiers at Birch Coulee. They mounted huge attacks on Fort Ridgley and

²³Schultz, *Over the Earth I Come*, 7–16, 25–29.

²⁴Schultz, *Over the Earth I Come*, 30–33, 39–45; Anderson, *Little Crow*, 130–34. Some scholars see episodes such as the U.S.–Dakota War as evidence of dramatic shifts in the norms and practices of Indian warfare after European colonization. See Tom Holm, "American Indian Warfare: The Cycles of Conflict and the Militarization of Native North America," in *A Companion to American Indian History*, ed. Deloria and Salisbury, 155–56, 170.

the town of New Ulm to destroy any possibility of the Americans' defending their settlements.²⁵

With the Dakotas advancing across the southern part of the state and settlers on the run, ABCFM missionaries expressed shock and disbelief. They feared for the future of their missions and for the fate of the small group of Dakota Christians. On August 24, Stephen Riggs wrote to Selah Treat of the ABCFM that his family had finally made it to safety. He informed the board that Christian Dakotas were held captive by their warring comrades and "the Dakota mission is broken up." Riggs's colleague, H. D. Cunningham, also wrote back East about "the end of the labors of the Missionaries among the Dakotas." A few weeks later, Thomas Williamson wrote to Treat of his sadness about the "sudden termination of our missionary labors." The flight from their homes, the sight of dead settlers across the Minnesota landscape, and the destruction of their missions made renewed evangelistic work seem a distant possibility.²⁶

The missionaries also expressed fear that the Dakotas who professed Christianity might have participated in the slaughter. When the missionaries and their families made it to safety, they were met by rumors that mission Indians played a key role in planning attacks and killing settlers. The pastor of St. Paul's First Presbyterian Church sent ABCFM staff a Minnesota newspaper clipping that claimed the Christian Indians "exceeded their savage brethren in atrocities." The missionaries' experiences were at odds with these claims. Many of them fled their homes when Christian Dakotas warned them about imminent attacks. They felt compelled to circulate counter narratives that spoke to the complexity of Indian participation in the war. By September 8, Thomas Williamson wrote to the ABCFM that mission Indians played a crucial role in the missionaries' escape and that he planned to dispel rumors that put converted Indians at the head of the uprising. In October, the ABCFM magazine, *Missionary Herald*, ran a story about John Otherday, a Christian Dakota who risked his life to save dozens of American settlers during the war. A St. Paul minister who heard Otherday speak reported that the Dakota convert attributed his valiant acts to the "gospel of Jesus."²⁷

²⁵The war between the United States and Dakota followed the pattern of many Indian conflicts in the nineteenth century. See Patricia Nelson Limerick, "Haunted America," epilogue in *Sweet Medicine: Sites of Indian Massacres, Battlefields, and Treaties* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 119–63.

²⁶Stephen Riggs to Selah Treat, 24 August 1862, ABCFM Papers, MHS; H.D. Cunningham to Selah Treat, 29 August 1862, ABCFM Papers, MHS; Thomas Williamson to Selah Treat, 8 September 1862, ABCFM Papers, MHS.

²⁷J. Mattocks to Selah Treat, 23 August 1862, ABCFM Papers, MHS; Thomas Williamson to Selah Treat, 8 September 1862, ABCFM Papers, MHS; "Noble Conduct of a Christian Indian," *Missionary Herald* 58, no. 10 (October 1862), 299.

The missionaries' spirits revived as Union Army reinforcements promised to halt the Dakotas' advance. President Abraham Lincoln ordered General John Pope, who had recently experienced defeat at the Second Battle of Bull Run, to lead volunteer regiments in the fight to suppress the Dakotas. Minnesota's governor appointed Colonel Henry Hastings Sibley to gather and lead local forces. These reinforcements dealt several blows to the Dakota fighters. The Indians faltered in their efforts to take Fort Ridgely. The German immigrants who defended New Ulm also held off Dakota attacks. As U.S. reinforcements arrived, the tide turned and the Dakotas were forced to go on the run. Overwhelmed at the Battle of Wood Creek in late September, some of the Dakotas hoped to regroup and find assistance among other Indian nations. Taoyateduta (Little Crow) and many of the warriors escaped onto the plains of the Dakota Territory and Canada. Others, mostly those who had not played significant roles in the uprising or those who had refused participation altogether, surrendered to American troops by late September 1862.²⁸

As it became clear that American forces would quell the Dakota uprising, the missionaries considered what to do next. Initial feelings of shock, disbelief, and even despair soon grew into resolve that they would have a hand in shaping the war's aftermath. They concentrated especially on promoting a fair process of justice for captured Dakotas and providing specific protections for Christian Dakotas who had not participated in the war. Stephen Riggs served as the primary translator in the military tribunals established to try and punish Dakota warriors. Other ABCFM missionaries began to position themselves as spokesmen for the innocent Dakotas, trying to turn public favor toward Indians who had assisted settlers. Thomas Williamson wrote to the press in order to protect "friendly Indians" from the "foolish and wicked" calls for the entire tribe's extermination. Influencing the process of judgment proved to be a complicated task. Editorialists and politicians across the state made public calls for the banishment, imprisonment, or extermination of all Dakotas within the state's borders.²⁹

With citizens ready to kill or exile them, the Dakotas found themselves at a crossroads. Those who escaped to the plains wondered how they would sustain themselves and find other Indian bands to join them in their continued resistance to American incursion. Those incarcerated in Minnesota were left reeling by the Americans' choice to put those who had surrendered themselves on trial. The hastily appointed tribunal tried up to forty Dakota men a day and sentenced more than three hundred to death by hanging.

²⁸Schultz, *Over the Earth I Come*, chapters 12 and 13.

²⁹Carol Chomsky details Riggs's role in the trials. See Chomsky, "The United States–Dakota War Trials: A Study in Military Injustice," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 1 (November 1990): 13–98. Thomas Williamson, "Causes of the War," unidentified newspaper clipping, Thomas Williamson Papers, MHS.

Though Minnesotans worked diligently to determine the Dakotas' future, the native peoples were kept uninformed about these plans. The military commission failed to notify the defendants about their sentences. In November, soldiers marched hundreds of Dakota women and children more than one hundred miles across the state and confined them for the winter at Fort Snelling, just south of Saint Paul. Officials did not tell family members about what would happen to the men they left behind. The men found guilty were also marched across the southern part of the state to a makeshift prison in the small town of Mankato. The incarcerated Dakotas had no idea what the future would bring. They knew that they were separated from their families, a devastating blow to a people with close kinship ties. Their journeys across the state proved that Minnesotans were ready to kill them all. As the captured men were marched toward Mankato, a band of citizens in New Ulm attacked them. Two men reportedly died from their injuries. Citizens also assaulted the column of women and children, killing a Dakota baby by dashing the child to the ground.³⁰

As the Dakotas settled into their prison camps, the missionaries struggled to determine their relationship with the Dakota survivors and what role they ought to play in the Indians' future. The war's trauma still haunted them. They had escaped with only their lives. They knew many among the dead. Their homes and missions were destroyed. Dakotas they knew, including a few church members, were sentenced to death. Determined not to let all the Dakotas pay the price for the acts of some, the missionaries pledged their service to the incarcerated Dakotas. As they struggled to comprehend the war and address the needs of imprisoned Indians, the missionaries considered new ways of understanding God's intentions for Indian missions and the methods of Protestant evangelical activity. As the Dakotas perceived threatening mobs and the offers made by missionaries, they explored new possibilities for communal survival.

IV. "THE WAR IS NOT ENDED, BUT HAS JUST BEGUN" —THOMAS WILLIAMSON, OCTOBER 25, 1862³¹

As hostilities ended, both Dakotas and missionaries considered how they would emerge from the catastrophic conflict. The missionaries engaged

³⁰Lois A. Glewwe, "The Journey of the Prisoners: Convoy to South Bend," in *Trail of Tears: Minnesota's Dakota Exile Begins*, ed. Mary Hawker Bakeman and Antona Hawkins Richardson (Roseville, Minn. Prairie Echoes, 2008), 94; Mary Hawker Bakeman and Alan Woolworth, "The Family Caravan," in *Trail of Tears*, 67.

³¹Thomas Williamson to Stephen Riggs, 25 October 1862, Stephen R. Riggs Family Papers, MHS.

the incarcerated Dakotas, including those who had once resisted their evangelistic advances. They also positioned themselves with the wider public as spokesmen concerning the Dakotas' future prospects. The Dakotas, on the other hand, worked from a much more tenuous position, as they had no idea what the future held for them. Locked in prisons with families broken up, the people considered their best options for emerging from the conflict with at least their lives and their kinship groups intact. Both missionaries and Dakotas experienced warfare in a way that prompted dramatic reconsideration of their religious worlds.

As the missionaries preached to incarcerated Dakotas and interacted with surviving Minnesotans, they increasingly focused on the difference between innocent and guilty Indians and how each group ought to be treated. To wider audiences, the missionaries insisted that not all Dakotas participated in awful acts of violence. They emphasized that some Dakotas had protested the war and risked their own lives to save settlers. The innocent demanded recognition of their courage in resisting their warring relations' actions. The guilty, they insisted, deserved death. Riggs affirmed this position in his work with the military tribunals and continued to advocate the necessity of the death penalty in the last months of 1862. Both Thomas Williamson and his son, John, who was also a missionary, confirmed that those guilty of murder ought to pay with their lives.³²

The missionaries expanded their notions of innocence and guilt, however, beyond conduct in war. They began to connect Dakotas' actions during the war to their religious affiliation prior to the conflict. The missionaries' experiences with converted Indians certainly influenced this reasoning. The missionaries knew that many Dakota Christians objected to the war and refused to participate. They attributed their escape from attack to mission Indians who gave them timely warning. For the missionaries, Christian Indians could not be held responsible for the war. Those under the influence of Dakota religion, then, were surely the primary instigators of the conflict. Increasingly, the missionaries attributed primary blame for the war not to Dakota chiefs and warriors but to spiritual leaders, namely the medicine men. They had always characterized these men as staunch resisters of missionary advances. The war, however, caused the missionaries to see the medicine men not as mere stumbling blocks to the gospel but as active workers seeking to destroy American civilization. Already by mid-October, Thomas Williamson wrote to the ABCFM that the "conjurers" were the "prime movers in the outbreak." In a hint of the narrative that would emerge,

³²Stephen Riggs to Selah Treat, 24 November 1862, ABCFM Papers, MHS; John Williamson to Selah Treat, 5 November 1862, ABCFM Papers, MHS; Thomas Williamson to Selah Treat, 21 November 1862, ABCFM Papers, MHS.

Williamson continued that God would subvert the medicine men's aims and use the outbreak for "extending the righteous kingdom of the Redeemer."³³

As the missionaries associated traditional Dakota religion with the war effort, they also argued that the Indians' military defeat proved the futility of their spiritual pantheon. Preaching among the confined survivors, the missionaries claimed that the Dakotas' gods and medicine men had failed. The message seemed to be garnering at least some consideration. On November 5, John Williamson wrote that he held prayer services at Fort Snelling in a tent overflowing with Dakota people. They renounced their "conjurers and their gods," he reported. The war had been a "course of training" in order to "open their hearts to the truth." His father also reported Dakota response to his preaching about the war. After an early December Sabbath in the Mankato prison, Thomas Williamson wrote to Stephen Riggs that he had never preached to such "big and attentive audiences before."³⁴

The missionaries articulated this narrative of Dakota spiritual failure as incarcerated Dakotas awaited pronouncements about their future. Even though President Lincoln was reviewing the trial records for more than three hundred capital cases, rumors abounded that all those found guilty would soon be hanged. Most Minnesotans begrudged Lincoln's intrusion, wanting instead a quick and dramatic execution. Many believed that a mass hanging would not only satisfy aggrieved settlers but also would teach surviving Indians a lesson. In that spirit, most Minnesotans wanted the incarcerated Dakotas to witness the executions. Williamson and Riggs agreed and wrote to the ABCFM's Selah Treat that all the Dakotas should observe the hangings. General Pope extended his vision of the hangings' pedagogical possibilities and argued that the neighboring Winnebagos should also be in attendance. The vast majority of Minnesotans eagerly awaited word from Washington that the execution of more than three hundred Dakotas could take place as planned.³⁵

The missionaries supported the execution of guilty warriors and developed a notion of Indian guilt that mixed acts in war with prior religious association. The hangings, therefore, punished not only the Indians' participation in violent atrocities but also their refusal to accept the Christian message missionaries had presented for decades. Dakota warriors and medicine men had led their people down the wrong path. Their gods had not saved them from humiliating defeat. The Dakota men on the gallows would show all

³³Thomas Williamson to Selah Treat, 17 October 1862, ABCFM Papers, MHS.

³⁴John Williamson to Selah Treat, 5 November 1862, ABCFM Papers, MHS; Thomas Williamson to Stephen Riggs, 5 December 1862, Stephen R. Riggs Papers, MHS.

³⁵Thomas Williamson to Selah Treat, 17 October 1862, ABCFM Papers, MHS; Stephen Riggs to Selah Treat, 24 November 1862, ABCFM Papers, MHS; Bakeman and Woolworth, "The Family Caravan," 54; Glewwe, "Journey of the Prisoners," 90.

survivors the peril of rising up against settlers and resisting the omnipotent Christian God.

Military defeat and the hangings became symbols of the Dakotas' spiritual failure and the superior power of the Christian God. The missionaries pressed this message in their prison camp sermons. On November 28, John Williamson wrote that the prisoners at Fort Snelling realized the "power of the medicine men" was destroyed. "Their idols," he noted, "by the hundred have been broken, cast away, and buried, as unable to protect them." Williamson took this moment as an evangelistic opportunity, a chance to speak to a people "without a priest and without a god." The *Missionary Herald* ran a letter from the young missionary in a similar spirit. The Dakota women and children, he reported, "all say that there is no religion now but that of Jehovah." Hoping to secure a position evangelizing the incarcerated Dakotas, he implored readers that they could not stop the missions at such a crucial moment.³⁶

Other ABCMF missionaries articulated this message of Dakota failure and Christian victory. Aging missionary Gideon Pond wrote in *New York Evangelist* that the "real cause" of the war was "pagan resistance to Christianity." Paganism had been overpowered. It "over-did itself and has been signally defeated." Thomas Williamson went even further in his own *Missionary Herald* article. He did not place sole blame on the medicine men, but he argued that these traditional spiritual leaders had quickly turned the war toward their own cause. The medicine men, Williamson wrote, made it "a war not of races, but of religions, of gods." It was the Dakotas, Williamson insisted, not the Christians, who made "this war a religious one."³⁷

The missionaries continued to develop their narratives about failed Dakota gods and the triumphant Christian deity in the week before the executions. In early December, Lincoln issued the final execution orders. Those Dakotas who had killed soldiers in battle had their death sentences commuted. Thirty-nine Dakota men who were found guilty of killing settlers or raping women were scheduled for execution. The missionaries spent a great deal of time with the condemned once they were separated from the rest of the prisoners a few days before Christmas. Faced with news that they soon would be hanged, the condemned Dakotas considered their people's future while waiting in prison. Many of them spoke to Williamson and Riggs, or to Father Ravoux, a Catholic missionary with a history among the Dakotas. Considering their impending deaths and uncertain about their families'

³⁶John Williamson to Selah Treat, 28 November 1862, ABCFM Papers, MHS; John Williamson, "Results of the Outbreak," *Missionary Herald* 59, no. 1 (January 1863): 14.

³⁷Gideon Pond, "Religious Aspect of the Indian Raid," *New York Evangelist* 33, no. 11 (12 March 1863): 2; Thomas Williamson, "Report of the Massacre and Subsequent Religious Interest," *Missionary Herald* 59, no. 7 (July 1863): 201.

futures, twenty-four Dakotas requested instruction from Father Ravoux. The rest chose Williamson as their spiritual advisor. Most of the condemned received baptism in the next few days. Williamson wrote down what he understood to be their conversion narratives.³⁸

Missionary-penned narratives intended to convey Indian sentiments present a particularly vexing interpretive task, one that historian Daniel Richter has called “a tricky art.” It is especially troubling to attempt this interpretive work with sources from a moment when Americans exerted total power over captive Indians. Historian Erik Seeman has addressed the potential “peril” of this activity in his work on colonial-era Christian Indian deathbed scenes. He has shown how several of these narratives simply bolstered the missionaries’ notions of ideal Indian faith. At the same time, Seeman noted examples in which the narratives defied easy interpretation and evidenced Indian ideas and behaviors that would have troubled the missionaries. Scholarly work on captivity narratives reveals a similar impulse in some recorded statements by American Indians. Literary critic Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola has argued that in some of these texts Indians “talk back” to settlers, challenging their viewpoints.³⁹

Taking this work on death scenes and captivity narratives as inspiration, might there be a way to read Williamson’s record of Dakota conversion narratives with an eye toward traditional Dakota conceptions of sacred power and approaches to military defeat? Can they be read as something more than the Dakotas’ total rejection of their traditions and acceptance of the Americans’ religion? To be sure, the Dakotas underwent a dramatic religious transformation in the weeks and months after the war. The question is what sort of transformation. These narratives show that, at least among those who requested baptism in the days before the hangings, the Dakotas believed that the traditions they once followed had failed them significantly. Capeduta (Scarlet Beaver), for instance, declared that his people needed to forsake their “past ways” to avoid future “trouble.” The missionaries were

³⁸Schultz, *Over the Earth I Come*, 1–5. Father Ravoux recounted his time working with the condemned. See Augustin Ravoux, *Reminiscences, Memoirs, and Lectures of Monsignor A. Ravoux* (St. Paul, Minn.: Brown, Treacy, 1890), 72–81. Catholics emphasized that Ravoux baptized many more Dakotas than the two Protestant missionaries who had lived among the people for so long. Writers of Catholic periodicals pointed to the Dakotas’ overwhelming choice of Ravoux as a way to protest governmental and Protestant mission board policies that marginalized Catholic missionaries. *New York Freedman’s Journal and Catholic Register*, 7 February 1863.

³⁹Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East From Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 110–29; Erik R. Seeman, “Reading Indians’ Deathbed Scenes: Ethnohistorical and Representational Approaches,” *Journal of American History* 88, no. 1 (June 2001): 17–47; Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola, *The War in Words: Reading the Dakota Conflict Through Captivity Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 160.

right, it seems, to identify a Dakota willingness to question their traditional spirit beings when faced with catastrophic loss.⁴⁰

But these narratives also reveal that the Dakotas might not have been throwing off their entire understanding of the universe and embracing Christianity to fill the void. Several of the letters show that even as the Dakota showed their willingness to question traditional spirit beings, they did not necessarily alter their notions about how sacred power worked and what it ought to do. Several of the warriors' statements show that they associated an alliance with the Christian God with tangible benefits this new power ought to provide. When Mahpiyawisicun (French Cloud) declared that his union with traditional spirits was dissolved, he noted, "We desire that the great God should remember and have mercy on us." Hehaka Maza (Iron Elk) stated the Dakotas' expectation even more clearly. "So if the great God helps us some of us wish to be baptized and thus go to him."⁴¹

These statements reveal that the Dakotas persisted in their philosophy of sacred power. Or as historian Kenneth Morrison has written about French–Algonquian contact, new alliances did not mean that understandings of power had changed. As noted earlier, the Dakotas had a sense of how sacred power worked. It could be manifest in multiple ways. Human beings were expected to respect sacred power and work to harness it for their people's good. If vanquished in war, the Dakotas had an epistemology that required them to consider whether their enemy's supernatural beings had superior power. The loss in war, then, did not completely change their religious worldview, but rather reified their conception of how power worked.⁴²

Humility in the face of great and overwhelming power was particularly appropriate in moments of such loss. By late 1862, the Dakotas were defeated in battle. Their warriors were about to be executed in a humiliating manner. The survivors would not be able to provide appropriate ritual burial. Such losses demanded explanation, in this case, a reassessment of their spiritual pantheon. These losses also called for action. But the Dakotas had few options for culturally appropriate responses. They could hardly seek revenge or torture a captive enemy. They were deprived of weapons and were themselves held captive. But the warriors could address these losses and their imminent deaths without fear. This concern comes through clearly in the warriors' conversion statements. Dotemena (Round Wind) noted without any apparent worry that he would "soon go to the great God." Wamniomni hota (Grey Whirlwind) told his sister, "Do not grieve because I must die, I think I will be happy." Even those Dakotas who insisted on their

⁴⁰Thomas Williamson to Selah Treat, 29 January 1863, ABCFM Papers, MHS.

⁴¹Thomas Williamson to Selah Treat, 29 January 1863, ABCFM Papers, MHS.

⁴²Morrison, *The Solidarity of Kin*, 145.

innocence felt compelled to show courage in the face of the gallows. Rdainyankna (Rattling Runner) wrote to his father-in-law that his kin should not grieve because a “brave should be prepared to meet death, and I will do so as becomes a Dakota.”⁴³

The warriors could also provide for their kin’s survival. Indeed, concern for family stability permeates each of the statements that Williamson dictated. Capeduta (Scarlet Beaver) affirmed that he and his followers wished “all our wives and children may follow the law of the great God.” Mahpiyawisicun (French Cloud) and Hehaka Maza (Iron Elk) wrote the same about their “wives and children.” Snamani (Sounding Walker) impressed his children to attend missionary school. Tatehihohe (Passing Wind) implored his brother and sister to “pray to the great God and listen to the missionaries.” Hotaninku (Coming Voice) asked his wife to trust in the great God. Dotemena’s (Round Wind’s) concern did not stop with his wife. His letter implores her to command their three children and their nieces and nephews do the same. The Dakotas facing their deaths chose to show no fear on the gallows. They could draw this strength from within. But to secure their kin’s survival in an uncertain future, they sought an alliance with the Christian God.⁴⁴

In his work on seventeenth-century southern New England, historian Richard Pointer has shown that Native Americans put their “own thematic stamp” on the forms of Christianity that emerged among them. He argues that even Puritan-penned documents show that Indian affirmations of Christianity reflected “themes drawn from native spiritual and moral values,” including the maintenance of relationships. Pointer has also emphasized the way American Indians interrogated the Christianity that Puritans purveyed. They asked what biblical passages meant and what sort of rituals they would have to perform if they aligned with the Puritan’s God. In the same way, Dakotas in prison camps considered their community’s needs and evaluated the ABCFM missionaries’ message. The surviving Dakota statements affirm that the warriors assumed that the Christian God had great power. But they still had questions about what this God would demand of them and whether this God would protect their families after the impending executions.⁴⁵

⁴³For more on Dakota warfare practices and grieving rituals, see Wilson D. Wallis, *The Canadian Dakota* (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1947), 21, 31–33; and Jessica Palmer, *The Dakota Peoples: A History of the Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota Through 1863* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2008), 149–50, 213–14. For expectations about revenge, see Black Eagle and Mazomani’s speeches in Diedrich, *Dakota Oratory*, 28, 36. Thomas Williamson to Selah Treat, 29 January 1863, ABCFM Papers, MHS; Diedrich, *Dakota Oratory*, 82.

⁴⁴Thomas Williamson to Selah Treat, 29 January 1863, ABCFM Papers, MHS; Williamson recorded the Dakotas’ testimonies in a December letter to the ABCFM. See Thomas Williamson, 25 December 1862, Thomas Williamson Papers, MHS.

⁴⁵Pointer, *Encounters of the Spirit*, 58.

The Dakotas' concerns were tied to a long tradition associated with filling the voids created by death in battle. Traditionally, the Dakotas responded to such losses by seeking revenge through acts of war or torturing captive enemies. Depending on the circumstances, however, the Dakota opted for another strategy. In times of population instability, Dakota groups instead adopted enemy captives, integrating them into families as replacements for lost warriors. Onto these former enemies fell all the obligations the departed fighter once fulfilled. An adopted captive married the fallen warrior's wife and served as father to his children. He honored the dead soldier's elders. He fought as a Dakota. In turn, Dakota relatives welcomed this person immediately and without question. This former enemy was now their relative. The Dakotas were obligated to him and he was obligated to them. As anthropologist Ella Deloria has observed, the substitute warrior was expected to be a better relative because his acceptance into community came at such a high cost.⁴⁶

To be sure, it is one thing to adopt a man from another native nation and another thing to embrace a new resource for sacred power. Nevertheless, this tradition of ritual adoption—along with other Dakota concerns for family survival—illuminate the Dakota decisions for baptism inside prison walls. The Dakotas had long practiced modes of openness to new things in moments of communal instability. They had ancient traditions for securing kinship ties in the face of death. Could Christian conversion, then, serve to keep their families together, obligating them to Christian worship, but at the same time obligating the Christian God to look kindly on them as a people?⁴⁷

As the executions neared, missionaries and Dakotas developed competing narratives about the meaning of the war and the nature of emerging Dakota Christianity. According to the missionaries, the war, executions, and Dakota conversions were surprising events that confirmed the truth they had known all along. The missionaries had always sought Dakota rejection of their own practices and acceptance of the Christian gospel, but they never dreamed that it might be accomplished through violence and death. Dakota conversions prompted new providential explanations among the missionaries. The condemned Dakotas, on the other hand, seem to have reasoned from a traditional conception of sacred power that their established spiritual traditions were exposed as fatefully weak. Their only hope for survival, then, was an alliance with the ascendant sacred power, the "great God" of the Americans who had defeated them so soundly in battle. This narrative took

⁴⁶Deloria, *Speaking of Indians*, 34–36.

⁴⁷For more on the importance of kinship among American Indian communities, see Jay Miller, "Kinship, Family Kindreds, and Community," in *A Companion to American Indian History*, ed. Deloria and Salisbury, 140.

shape in the lead-up to the executions, but it found a full flowering and dissemination in the months that followed. For the missionaries, it involved a new conception about the future of Indian missions. For Dakota survivors, it included a new set of ritual obligations, along with a new set of expectations about their people's future.

V. "MY GRANDMOTHER TOLD ME ABOUT THE SADNESS"

—ROSE BLUESTONE⁴⁸

On the day of the hangings, crowds gathered for a dramatic public spectacle. Fourteen hundred soldiers in full-dress uniforms watched over a gallows specially constructed for the proceedings. More than one thousand spectators observed. According to the *Mankato Record* and other eyewitness accounts, the warriors walked two-by-two toward the gallows, their faces painted black. The *Saint Paul Pioneer* described the death song the warriors sang as they marched, "a mournful wail" occasionally accompanied by a "piercing scream." Both papers reported that the Dakotas met their deaths with no apparent fear. As the rope was cut and the platform beneath their feet dropped away, the crowd let out a cheer. Soldiers buried the warriors' bodies in a mass grave on the outskirts of town.⁴⁹

Many Americans wanted news from the Mankato gallows. They got it through widely circulated reports from Minnesota newspapers or extended coverage in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. The missionaries, however, deemphasized the Dakotas' demeanor on the gallows and focused, instead, on the Indians' choice for Christ. In the months after the hangings, the missionaries circulated narratives about the death of traditional Dakota religion and the "Indian Pentecost" at work in the prison camps. They hoped to galvanize public support for a new mission to Dakota survivors and other Indians on the plains. The Dakotas experienced the early months of 1863 in

⁴⁸Jane Katz, ed., *Messengers of the Wind: Native American Women Tell Their Life Stories* (New York: Ballantine, 1995), 70.

⁴⁹These articles were reprinted in *New York Evangelist* 33, no. 3 (15 January 1863): 7, and *Janesville Daily Gazette* (3 January 1863). In an interesting narrative choice, Schultz opens his history of the war with a different account of the Dakota executions. He quotes a biography of Minnesota governor, Henry Sibley, which states that the condemned warriors sang a Christian hymn on the way to the gallows. See Schultz, *Over the Earth I Come*, 1. Bonnie Lewis also makes this claim. She cites a Dakota Presbyterian minister's oral history as her source. See Lewis, *Creating Christian Indians*, 106. No account from 1862 that I have found includes references to the Dakotas singing a Christian hymn. The Pond brothers, who witnessed the hangings and could speak Dakota, reported that the warriors sang a traditional death song, or "tune of terror." Samuel W. Pond, *Dakota Life in the Upper Midwest* [originally titled *The Dakota or Sioux in Minnesota as They Were in 1834*] (Minnesota Historical Collections, vol. 12, 1908; repr., St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2002), 82.

a decidedly different way. The hangings comprised their culture's lowest point, a place from which only profoundly new ways of being would ensure their people's survival. The gallows, then, became a symbol for all that had gone wrong in their culture. It served as a painful reminder of the price the Dakota had paid—and would continue to pay—for their assault on American culture.⁵⁰

Despite being among the last people to speak with the condemned, the missionaries said little about the gallows and focused instead on the surprising number of Dakota conversions in the days before the hangings and those in the three months that followed. They reported to readers throughout the country that a truly "pentecostal" work was at hand. At least 230 of the estimated 300 men left in the Mankato prison after the hangings announced their desire for baptism in early January 1863. At Fort Snelling, where more than 1,000 Dakota women and children were held, between 300 and 500 people began to attend religious services. ABCFM missionaries baptized more than 140 Dakotas at Snelling by the end of April. Episcopal and Catholic missionaries baptized still more. The missionaries claimed that by the time they left the state, all but one Dakota left in Mankato had been baptized. According to historians, the surge of conversions at Mankato and Snelling was just the beginning. Both camps were removed to either a military prison in Iowa or a reservation at Crow Creek in South Dakota. Within a few years, most Dakotas were at least nominal members of Christian congregations.⁵¹

Stephen Riggs connected the wave of conversions in 1863 to the hangings of late December. He claimed that the surviving Mankato prisoners witnessed the executions through cracks in the prison's log walls. When Riggs preached to these inmates a few days later, he reported, "their fears were thoroughly aroused" and that "it was a good time to unfold to them God's plan of

⁵⁰The *New York Times* reprinted an article from the *St. Paul Press*. See "Execution of the Indians in Minnesota, *New York Times*, 4 January 1863, 3. Also see Adrian J. Ebell, "Indian Massacres and War of 1862," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 27, no. 67 (June 1863): 1–24. Missionary Samuel Pond made the connection to the biblical Pentecost in his memoirs. See Pond, *Two Volunteer Missionaries*, 225.

⁵¹Thomas Williamson to Selah Treat, 20 January 1863, ABCFM Papers, MHS; Stephen Riggs to Selah Treat, 10 March 1863, ABCFM Papers, MHS; John P. Williamson to Selah Treat, 7 May 1863, ABCFM Papers, MHS. The ABCFM missionaries translated and disseminated the Mankato conversion statements. They then accepted letters from and delivered letters on behalf of the surviving prisoners at Mankato and Snelling. They also continued to receive letters once the Dakotas were removed from the state. These letters remained un-translated in the Stephen R. Riggs Papers at the MHS for decades. Dakota descendants have recently begun to translate them and they have not yet been shared widely with scholars. Some of the letters from the Iowa military prison are featured in Sarah-Eva Ellen Carlson, "They Tell Their Story: The Dakota Internment at Camp McClellan in Davenport, 1862–1866," *The Annals of Iowa* 63, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 251–78.

saving from sin.” Thomas Williamson also continued his work among the survivors at Mankato, instructing those who requested baptism. By February, he referred to conversions among the survivors as a “mighty work of God.”⁵²

Riggs’s subsequent visits to the Mankato prison confirmed his sense that something truly miraculous was at hand. The prisoners attended daily religious services. Riggs saw them engaged in reading circles, writing letters to family members at Fort Snelling, and reading letters received from relatives. Some town folks were skeptical of the Mankato revival. The *Mankato Record* noted that some inmates were baptized into more than one denomination. The article’s writer also questioned whether the conversions would last beyond “close confinement.” Riggs, however, was convinced. He wrote to the ABCFM that more had happened in the Snelling and Mankato prison camps than in his twenty-six years of missionary work. Considering this success, Riggs remembered his service during the military tribunals. He noted that the commissioners might have been right when they proposed, “the best way to civilize Indians is to imprison them.” While he might not have accepted the notion back in October, his experience in the meantime changed everything. What he witnessed in the Indian prisons was “a most amazing work of God’s Spirit.”⁵³

Even as Dakotas attended prayer meetings, sang hymns, and accepted baptism, there were signs that Dakota conceptions of sacred power persisted. They continued to believe that their ritual actions mattered. The Dakotas who remained in Mankato wrote a statement of faith in which they declared that they had “brought death” upon themselves by resisting missionary advances. Now they realized that the “Holy Son [Jesus]” pitied them and his Father could make them live. These prisoners affirmed the older Dakota notion that the people should align themselves with forces that could work on their behalf and not with those who would bring them harm. This impulse was also evidenced in some Dakotas’ willingness to align themselves with multiple sources of sacred power through baptism into more than one Protestant denomination.⁵⁴

⁵²Riggs, *Mary and I*, 185–86; Thomas Williamson to Stephen Riggs, 22 February 1863, Stephen R. Riggs Papers, MHS.

⁵³Stephen Riggs to Selah Treat, 26 March 1863, ABCFM Papers, MHS; *Mankato Record* (28 March 1863). William Beane, a member of the Dakota community in Flandreau, South Dakota, has pointed out that dedication to kinship ties prompted many Dakotas to take reading and writing lessons from missionaries. Never before their incarceration did the Dakotas depend on writing to communicate with one another. With families separated at the prison camps at Snelling and Mankato, however, letter writing became the primary mode for keeping track of kin. Riggs reported to Selah Treat that he carried hundreds of letters back and forth between the two camps. William Beane, interview by author, Fall 2009, phone interview.

⁵⁴Stephen Riggs to Selah Treat, 20 February 1863, ABCFM Papers, MHS; *Mankato Record* (28 March 1863).

The converted Dakota also held onto their understanding that obligation between the people and sacred beings went both ways. Like the condemned Dakota who wanted the great God to help them, so later converts also wanted this God to act on their behalf. These expectations sometimes unnerved the missionaries. Stephen Riggs reported that the March 1863 communion service he performed in Mankato was “very orderly” with one exception. Two older Dakotas turned the period for confessing their faith into something else. “One of them expressed the hope that the Lord would loose *that chain which was on his ankles*.” Hoping to stop the spread of such notions, Riggs countered, “Satan’s chain was more galling than [the one on his ankle].”⁵⁵

The survivors’ persistent belief in traditional notions of sacred power is exemplified in a letter written from the Mankato prison in the months following the executions. Mahpiyahotón (Sounding Heavens) wrote to Riggs on behalf of himself and other incarcerated Dakotas. His letter included three requests: that Riggs would help them secure land, a meetinghouse, and a missionary. While the last two items signal the prisoners’ move toward Christianity, the letter’s language reflects the persistence of a traditional epistemology. In the letter’s three short paragraphs, Mahpiyahotón expressed his hope that God would show mercy on the Dakota. He signaled his belief that his new affiliation ought to benefit his people. He told Riggs that if the missionaries supplied a meetinghouse then the Dakota will “gather into [it] our fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters and our wives and children.” This Dakota letter revealed a continued sense that the Dakotas must approach sacred power with humility and relate to it in ways that benefited the entire community.⁵⁶

Dakota expectation for better times under the Christian God’s protection were highlighted again when Dakotas received the devastating news that they would be transported from the state and still segregated into two large groups. Their alliance with the Christian God and friendships with missionaries did not secure them the future they wanted. The men found guilty of crimes during the war would be sent to a military prison in Iowa. The surviving women and children were transported to the Crow Creek reservation in what is now South Dakota. Riggs noted that the Dakotas at Fort Snelling objected to their removal, especially that men and women would continue to be separated. Surely this separation went against the condemned warriors’ dying wishes that families remain intact. Riggs overlooked the continued trauma of family separation and preached to the

⁵⁵Stephen Riggs to Selah Treat, 26 March 1863, ABCFM Papers, MHS.

⁵⁶Mahpiyahotón (Sounding Heavens) to Stephen Riggs, 1863, Stephen R. Riggs Papers, MHS. The letter at the MHS is in Dakota. It is one of a collection that has been translated by Dakota descendants in Flandreau, South Dakota.

inhabitants that their move to enclosed quarters on the plains was truly providential. The missionaries, he intoned, “had been for several years thinking of how we could get the gospel to the Yankton Dakotas.” Hopeful that he would have a platform for addressing the Dakotas’ western cousins, he wrote, “Now the Lord has opened the way in a manner none of us had thought of.” For Riggs, the war, subsequent punishment, and new reservations were not just the outcomes of human conflict. Rather, they constituted God’s mysterious but providential plan for Indian evangelization.⁵⁷

In the end, the missionaries used their narrative about the Christian God overcoming the Dakotas’ false gods and idols to argue for a new missionary approach based on Indian confinement. “Their own superstition,” Riggs reported of the confined Dakotas, “is dashed to pieces like a potter’s vessel.” The Christian God used imprisonment and then difficult conditions on reservations to bring the gospel to the Dakotas. Writing about the Crow Creek reservation, Riggs wrote that the Lord used “sword and famine” to evangelize the Indians and that death and sickness served as a portal for religious truth. Gone were the ABCFM methods used from the 1830s through the 1850s. Missions required much more than model farms and day schools. Persuasion was no longer enough. The war convinced Riggs and his colleagues that real conversions resulted when Indians realized their gods had no power and when their material situation left them no possibility for continuing their own cultural traditions.⁵⁸

If the missionaries experienced a change of evangelistic philosophy, the Dakotas underwent an even more dramatic transformation, one that many descendants identify as the turning point in their culture’s history. The effects did not stem directly from observing the hangings. Despite public pressure that all the Dakota—and perhaps even other Indian nations—ought to witness the executions, very few actually did. Those confined at Fort Snelling were over eighty miles away on the execution day. The men with commuted sentences remained in the Mankato prison, although Riggs said they could see the proceedings from cracks in the wall and many newspapers reported that the inmates could at least hear the warriors’ death song and the crowd’s cheers. Dakota oral tradition maintains that the women who cooked and kept fires in the Mankato prison were forced to witness the hangings. Rose Bluestone, a Dakota woman who died in 1993, reported that her grandmother was among those Dakota women who watched their husbands and fathers die on the gallows. Bluestone still had her great-grandfather’s pipe, which he handed to his wife and daughter before the execution. Referring to her

⁵⁷Stephen Riggs to Selah Treat, 21 April 1863, ABCFM Papers, MHS.

⁵⁸Stephen Riggs to Selah Treat, 26 March 1863, ABCFM Papers, MHS; Riggs, *Tah-koō Wak-an*, 367, 375–76.

grandmother who had witnessed events in Mankato, Bluestone reported, “She told me about it. She wanted me to know my history. . . . She told me of her grief. And of her fear. . . . From my grandmother, I learned about the sadness.”⁵⁹

This sadness continued for Dakota survivors removed to the military prison and reservation in 1863. Under confinement, many Dakotas continued to move away from traditional practices out of a sense that the war had proved their ineffectiveness. The people practiced fewer sweat lodges and relied less on traditional healing rituals. Christian conversions continued. From letters written during this period, it seems that the Dakotas viewed these changes as painful, yet necessary sacrifices. They had been wrong to kill so many settlers. Their traditional spirits and medicine men had not aided them. Only the Americans could help them now, and Christian conversion was necessary to garner their assistance. Securing a Dakota future required alliance with the powerful Christian God and the missionaries who served him.⁶⁰

VI. CONCLUSION

Stephen Riggs wrote about the U.S.–Dakota War for the rest of his life. His massive work on Dakota culture and his missionary memoirs included large sections on the conflict and its aftermath. In both works, Riggs offered a narrative that he and other missionaries developed in the months after the war. The Dakotas’ gods had failed. The people realized the truth about the Christian God. Their conversions in prison marked their turning away from the devil and their birth as a civilized people. God, then, worked through the terrible mediums of war, execution, and confinement. The ABCFM’s Selah Treat offered his support for this interpretation in an introduction to Riggs’s work. All had seemed lost in August and September 1862, Treat testified, but the work of God was “unexpected and strange.” Dakota evangelization, a project that had struggled for years before the war, had become a story of gospel success.⁶¹

In her work on the Canadian Innu, historian Emma Anderson has challenged scholars to consider how native people understood Christianity and how they

⁵⁹Katz, ed., *Messengers of the Wind*, 70, 73. The article about the executions in the *Mankato Record* placed some Dakota women at the hanging scene. See “Execution of the Indians in Minnesota,” *New York Evangelist* 33, no. 3 (15 January 1863): 7. Other Dakota survivors’ accounts emphasize the sadness and shame that many descendants felt about the war. See the discussion of Big Eagle’s account in Derounian-Stodola, *The War in Words*, 214–23; and George W. Crooks, “Reminiscence, 1937,” reel 1, frame 0243, Dakota Conflict of 1862 Manuscript Collections, Microfilm edition, MHS.

⁶⁰Carlson, “They Tell Their Story,” 263–77.

⁶¹Riggs, *Tah-koo Wak-an*; Riggs, *Mary and I*; Selah Treat, introduction to Riggs, *Tah-koo wak-an*, xxxii–xxxiii.

mitigated or complicated it. Noting Dakota conceptions of sacred power helps make sense of their affiliation with the Christian God in the months following the U.S.–Dakota War. Exploring Dakota traditional religion—along with traditions surrounding warfare—illuminates what ideas and expectations the people brought to their relationship with the Christian God and Protestant missionaries. Anderson’s suggestions about native Christianity might be equally helpful for understanding Protestant missionaries caught up in war. As the ABCFM missionaries’ work after the war clearly shows, these men underwent their own transformation. Their encounter with violence and devastation, punishment and incarceration caused them to mitigate and complicate the revivalist Calvinism they brought to the frontier. Their vision of missions made up of churches and schools became something else altogether, one of reservations and prisons that God used to make Indian converts.⁶²

Before the 1862 war, Dakotas, Europeans, and later Americans had been in contact for nearly two hundred years. Their relationships involved myriad negotiations and adjustments over the decades. Even the missionaries who arrived as late as the 1830s established relations based on at least some measure of cultural give and take. The war changed everything. It instigated dramatic religious change for both missionaries and Dakotas. Any study of emerging Dakota Christianity or Protestant missionary approaches to the post–Civil War “peace policy” with the western Indians must take account of the crucial role that experiencing war had on both sides. This study, then, not only makes a case for Stout’s call for integrating war into our narratives of American religious history, but also specifically demands that historians investigate the way war presented a particular religious challenge to both missionaries and native peoples in contests that stretched across the American plains.

For the missionaries, the war challenged their commitment to an evangelistic program based primarily on education and persuasion. To be sure, missionaries continued to live among plains Indians. They taught in classrooms and offered lessons in planting and plowing. But missionaries such as Riggs and Williamson experienced the war in a way that moved them from commitments about evangelical persuasion to support of arrangements that forcefully imposed Christian doctrine and structures of American civilization. They argued for this tough approach’s promise after their experience bringing the gospel to incarcerated Dakotas. To native people with no land and no certain future, the missionaries’ message about the Protestant God’s success and Dakota spiritual failure seemed to prove compelling. Riggs and Williamson were ready to extend this pattern out on

⁶²Anderson, *Betrayal of Faith*, 213–14.

the plains. While they would never advocate starting a war to accomplish these ends, they certainly accepted an advancing program of physical removal and forced enclosure of Indian nations.

Over time, the missionaries' narrative that had developed in response to tragic and violent circumstances became the official history of emerging Dakota Christianity. Riggs wrote in his memoir that the Dakotas started the war because they hated Christianity, not because they were almost starving to death. Their designs, according to Riggs, were thwarted. "God, who sits on the throne, had made [the war] result in [the Dakotas'] submission to Him. This was marvelous in our eyes." Historians of the Dakota missions offered a similar line of reasoning. John P. Williamson's biographer wrote that the executions "made a profound impression upon the other prisoners" and that "they felt their gods had failed them." An undated manuscript from around the turn of the twentieth century made similar claims. Presbyterian minister, Charles E. McColley wrote that even the innocent Indians' false convictions and sentences served in Mankato were necessary for the "Indian Pentecost." Their confinement, he argued, "counted more important than their personal liberty." They ushered in a moment in which "the Indians seemed to regard their gods as being defeated." Defeat and confinement convinced the Dakotas that "the God who had given whites such an advantage over the red men must be the great God."⁶³

The missionaries' willingness to see an ascendant Christian God teaching Indians these lessons through violence and then confinement also persisted. As President Ulysses S. Grant established the "peace policy," missionaries played a key role as civilizing agents on the growing number of Indian reservations in the American West. Some of the agents committed to a pacifist approach found themselves considering the use of violence when confronted by native groups who failed to follow their commands. In other situations, agents, missionaries, and members of the armed forces pressed messages of cultural defeat on American Indians imprisoned after losing wars across the frontier.⁶⁴

⁶³Riggs, *Mary and I*, 189–90; Barton, *John P. Williamson*, 60; Charles E. McColley "An Indian Pentecost, undated," reel 2, frame 0377, Dakota Conflict of 1862 Manuscripts Collections, Microfilm edition, MHS.

⁶⁴Quaker agent at Fort Sill, Lawrie Tatum, struggled to remain a pacifist in his work with Kiowa Indians. See Lawrie Tatum, *Our Red Brothers and the Peace Policy of President Ulysses S. Grant* (Philadelphia, 1899). For the stories of various groups incarcerated after wars on the plains, see Brad D. Lookingbill, *War Dance at Fort Marion: Plains Indian War Prisoners* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006); Karen Daniels Petersen, *Plains Indian Art From Fort Marion* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971); and Henrietta H. Stockel, *Shame and Endurance: The Untold Story of Chiricahua Apache Prisoners of War* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004).

The Dakotas' perspectives on these events have had less traction in American culture. For Dakota descendants, "the sadness" seems to encompass not just a tragic war but also its fallout throughout Dakota history. It includes not only the loss of the Minnesota homeland and their thirty-eight warriors on the gallows but also the traditions the Dakotas left behind as they secured a new future in which Americans would always play a powerful role. The reservation system did not bring the security for which Dakotas had hoped. In response, some Dakotas moved even closer to the Christian faith, hoping greater attachment and adherence would bring their people comfort. But others turned away, regretting that this newer spiritual attachment also failed to save them.

Historian Jill Lepore has written that wars have "victories of wounds" and "victories of words." Her work on King Philip's War details the terrible fighting—with its victories of wounds—that tore through seventeenth-century New England communities. The Dakotas and Minnesota settlers certainly experienced their own wounds. For six bloody weeks they fought each other across the state's southern frontier. But Lepore also examines the victories of words that followed the cessation of hostilities. She shows how the English colonists used their position of military victory as a platform for launching a verbal campaign about their own upright actions in the conflict. They overlooked "the elaborate meanings of Indian behavior" to promote a narrative in which the war served as God's judgment against the violent Indians.⁶⁵

To some degree, the ABCFM missionaries made a similar move. They saw the war as a vehicle for God's providential plan. But for Riggs and Williamson, this position required personal transformation, a reckoning with violence that turned mostly mild-mannered ministers into men who advocated huge campaigns of Indian confinement. Lepore's Puritan ministers were already comfortable with the smiting hand of Jehovah, but the Minnesota missionaries were not. It took incredible violence to change their more moderate, nineteenth-century Calvinism. Fleeing their homes, witnessing devastation, and interacting with confined people altered them. The war of words they waged seemed as much about processing their own traumatic experiences as persuading those around them of its spiritual import.

Dakota descendants are still presenting alternate stories to counter the missionaries' victory of words. As some contemporary Dakotas translate letters left by their incarcerated ancestors, still others gather regularly in southern Minnesota to retrace the route their people followed on their way to the prisons at Mankato and Fort Snelling. In both these acts of remembering,

⁶⁵Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Random House, 1998), 11, 13.

descendants consider the central event in their history, the “sadness” that affected them all. The process has been a painful one. Even so, these activities provide a space for Dakotas today to express their understanding of how some of their ancestors came to Christianity and what they believed this new affiliation meant for their people’s survival.⁶⁶

⁶⁶On commemorative marches in southern Minnesota, see Waziyatawin Angela Wilson, ed., *In the Footsteps of Our Ancestors: The Dakota Commemorative Marches of the 21st Century* (St. Paul, Minn.: Living Justice, 2006).