

Janet Dimock, "The Effect of United States Land Allotment and Religious Policies on American Indian Culture" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 1, No 2 (Fall 1972).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

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The Effect of United States Land Allotment  
and Religious Policies on American Indian  
Culture

By  
Janet Dimock

Traditional American norms, as applied by the United States government, conflicted with the American Indian culture. The governmental policy was based on the idea that "Indians must be redefined in terms that white men will accept...."<sup>1</sup> That meant that the Indian must assimilate, particularly in terms of his religion and economic life style. He could no longer remain a hunter with a belief in the "Great Spirit," but had to be transformed into a Christian, church-going, self-supporting farmer. The years from 1870 to 1890 seem to contain the focal point of this movement. This seems ironic because that was the era of the disappearance of the yeoman farmer. America was trying to transform the Indian from tribalism to a way of life which was incompatible with the advancing civilization.

This idea of resocialization was not entirely unacceptable,

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<sup>1</sup>Vine Deloria, Custer Died for Your Sins (1969), p. 91.

for the alternate solution was that of extinction. An extinction policy, although called "revolting" in 1880 by Carl Schurz, the Secretary of the Interior, was extremely popular among the American people.<sup>2</sup> An example of this attitude was revealed during the Modoc War of 1873, after several murders were committed by the Modoc chief, Captain Jack and his followers. Columbus Delano, the Secretary of the Interior, called for a policy of pacifism. The citizens of Verka, California, publicly denounced Delano, and circulated a poster ridiculing his peaceful policy. When General Sherman proposed Modoc extermination, he reportedly was "applauded everywhere."<sup>3</sup> Sherman suggested making an example of the Modocs, to discourage other tribes by giving them "no reservation. . . except graves" on their chosen land.<sup>4</sup>

Assimilation was the only way for the Indian to survive. In the late 1880's, Alfred Riggs, an authority on Sioux life, believed that the only way for the Indian to escape extinction was for him to become a homesteader and a citizen. Unless this came about, he

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<sup>2</sup>Carl Schurz, "Extinction or Civilization of the American Indian," Republic, 11, 308.

<sup>3</sup>Henry E. Fritz, The Movement for Indian Assimilation, 1860-1890 (Philadelphia, 1963), p. 171.

<sup>4</sup>ibid., p. 170.

feared that public opinion would demand their complete removal.<sup>5</sup> It seemed that the Indian had to conform, and in the process lose most of his heritage.

These alternatives were familiar to the white population of the time. In 1867, Senator James Doolittle of Wisconsin presented a joint House and Senate committee report on the status of the Indian in the United States. It found that Indians of all tribes were decreasing in number, due to disease, intemperance, war, and starvation. Their culture was being crushed by an onslaught of white settlers from East and West, and they were being overrun by a class of "adventurers" whose only laws were "necessity and self-defense." The report issued a warning that the Indian way of life was threatened. The railroads would soon be cutting through buffalo country, bringing hunters and sportsmen to slaughter them, destroying the basis of Indian life. The report went on to predict that "All the Powerful tribes of the Plains must inevitably vanish."<sup>6</sup>

The report rationalized this gradual destruction from the perspective of manifest destiny. It explained the Indians' decrease as the result of the "irrepressible conflict between a superior race and an inferior race. . . ."<sup>7</sup> Manifest destiny was one of

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p.228.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

the main obstacles to the survival of Indian culture; it was even more difficult for the Indian to survive when the white society insisted that one way of life and religion was superior to another. Time and time again, in the areas of land and religious policies, manifest destiny reappeared, and it was to be manifest destiny which dominated the land allotment policy of the government during the 1870's, 1880's, and 1890's.

Land allotment was one of the first issues which was raised between Indian and white. As the white population increased, and as the American government grew in power, the Indians gradually lost control over their territory. White settlers were so numerous that Indian lands were soon overrun. The early government policy was to set aside a certain area of land for each tribe. This most closely conformed to Indian cultural tradition, as it allowed for the tribal ownership of land, a concept basic to Indian culture. But the Indian rebelled when he was told by the government to settle down and farm, an order contradicting a long and glorious tradition of hunting as the mainstay of his life. The Indian had a great reverence for the earth. An example of this can be seen in a Crow prayer to the Great Spirit. The tribe thanked the Great Spirit for their land, which the prayer said was neither cold nor hot, dusty nor snowy, and it was the place where they could find true happiness.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Deloria, Custer Died for Your Sins, p. 103.

The Indian had no concept of individual land ownership. This was noted by Helen Hunt Jackson, an early advocate of Indian rights, on her visit to the Mission Indians of California. She cited an example in her 1883 report on the conditions and needs of the Mission Indians to the commissioner of Indian affairs. She stated that the Indians still believed in the "communal system." "It seems not to occur to these Indians that land is a thing to be quarreled over."<sup>9</sup>

This sentiment was also expressed by Red Cloud, chief of the Teton Sioux. In 1870, at a dinner in his honor, he said: "We do not want riches. . . . We want peace and love. . . and we want you to help to keep us in the lands that belong to us. . . ." <sup>10</sup> More than a decade later, in 1883, White Thunder replied to a question by Senator Dawes as to whether the Indians would be willing to sell their lands. He declared: "Our land is the dearest thing on earth to us. . . . It is very important for us Indians to keep it!" <sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, this very important aspect of Indian culture had no place in United States governmental policy from 1870 to 1890. Tribal ownership of land was an impossible concept for the United States

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<sup>9</sup>Helen Hunt Jackson, A Century of Dishonor (Minneapolis, 1887), p. 476.

<sup>10</sup>Annals of America, X, 1866-1883 (1968), p. 244.

<sup>11</sup>Dee Brown, Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee (New York, 1970), p. 423.

government, or its people, to accept. Therefore, the treaty method of granting tracts of land to each tribe was changed to that of granting land "in severalty." This policy had its beginnings back in the 1860's, but was not formalized until March of 1870, in a bill proposed by Alfred Riggs, the missionary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to the Santee Sioux. Riggs' bill proposed that if an Indian could read and write either his own or the English language, he should be given land and citizenship. This bill never became law, but it was a predecessor of the Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887.<sup>12</sup>

Riggs' bill did not pass, not because it was adverse to the Indian culture, but because it was as yet unacceptable to the white population. Both bills were really humanitarian in intent. They strove to give the Indians a place in American society, to protect him from annihilation, and make him a useful element in that society. Carl Schurz said in an article in the Republic: "We are frequently told that Indians will not work. True, it is difficult to make them work as long as they can live upon hunting. I have no doubt," he continued, "that they can be sufficiently civilized to support themselves. . . and altogether cease being a disturbing element in society."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Fritz, The Movement for Indian Assimilation, pp. 208-209.

<sup>13</sup>Schurz, "Extinction or Civilization of the American Indian," Republic, II, 309.

Schurz went on to state that the government must provide "paternal care" until Indians are "advanced" enough to support themselves. There was no malice intended in this approach. What was lacking, however, was an understanding of the Indian. This lack of understanding is evident in several contemporary works on the "civilization" of the Indian.

In 1886, Charles Ellis, of East Saginaw, Michigan, published an article entitled "Our Future Indian Policy." His article was written before the passage of the Dawes Act, and he commented on several bills before Congress. Ellis described the three most significant proposals, those of Sheridan, Holmes and Dawes. General Sheridan proposed giving each Indian a half-section of land, selling the remainder of Indian territory to the government at \$1.25 an acre, putting the profit into the United States Treasury, and letting the Indians live off the profits. Holmes would have transferred all the tribes to large reservations, and sold the "abandoned" land for \$1.25 an acre. Dawes suggested allotting land to each individual Indian and giving him ownership and citizenship after twenty-five years. The remainder of the Indian lands would be sold at \$1.25 an acre.

Ellis criticized Sheridan's plan because a half-section of land would be a "jail" to the Indian, who could not be self-supporting, and who would become a ward of the government. He agreed with the intention of Holmes' suggestion, as it would have



united all the Indians. Neither Ellis nor Holmes realized that each tribe was a separate entity. Ellis approved of Dawes' proposal, because it gave the Indian twenty-five years of protection from the "human jackals of society," whites who wanted to confiscate Indian lands. Ellis would have liked to have seen the Indian protected for a longer period of time by a paternalistic government, until they become "so much like whites. . . there will no longer be any lines of protection," and until "no man shall dare wrong another, when race and color prejudices shall have been lost. . . ."<sup>14</sup> Ellis, like so many others, wanted to help the Indians, but could only see the situation from the white man's point of view. The Indian must be just like the white before he could be accepted.

In an article entitled "How Shall the American Savage be Civilized," Lieutenant George S. Wilson of the 12th Infantry outlined a detailed plan for the Indian's civilization. He based his proposal on his own study of the Pima tribe of Arizona. His plan covered every aspect of future Indian life, from model farms and boarding schools to a new form of government.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Charles Ellis, "Our Future Policy With the Indian," Nation, XLIII (March 11, 1886), 215.

<sup>15</sup>George S. Wilson, "How Shall the American Savage be Civilized?" Atlantic Monthly, L (November, 1882), p. 601.

Wilson stressed conversion rather than education. "Indians are savages," he declared. "Our task is to convert from one life to another, and we . . . begin with savages, whose life comprises but little this side of the stone age." He continued to insist that Indian morality, philosophy, and religion were as unsophisticated as their arts, and that the Indians have "never made an implement of iron."<sup>16</sup> Since Indian technology was so limited, it followed that the Indians were very primitive and needed guidance. Wilson took a paternalistic attitude toward the "savages," but he had absolutely no regard for Indian culture.

The last example of contemporary opinion is in an article by Jefferson Davis, appearing in the North American Review, in November of 1886. Like Ellis and Wilson, Davis offered a paternalistic approach, from the perspective of traditional white values. Davis declared that the first step toward civilization for the Indians was to abandon the hunter in favor of the "agricultural condition." Then he could be taught by the whites that he must "eat his bread by the sweat of his brow," as Davis declared, "the fathers of our race did."<sup>17</sup> Although a

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 602-607.

<sup>17</sup> Jefferson Davis, "Our Future Indian Policy," North American Review, CXLIII (November, 1886), p. 601.

humanitarian, Davis had little regard for Indian culture. The Indian was inferior, he said, but with practice could be brought up to the level of white society.

The humanitarian, but decidedly narrow, viewpoints expressed above, were realized with the passage of the Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887. The "Dawes Act" provided for the "breakup of Indian tribal relationship, and the abandonment of the 'domestic nation theory.'" It assigned 160 acres to each family head, 40 acres for each additional minor, and 80 acres to unmarried men, age 18 or over, and to orphans. If the land was only suitable for grazing, the amount was doubled. Each Indian would gain citizenship after twenty-five years. To cover all tribes not affected by the Dawes Act (the Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole), the Dawes Commission was formed in 1893. It urged the tribes to divide their lands, abolish tribal government, and to comply with state and federal law. In 1905, the commission declared its work done.<sup>18</sup>

These laws succeeded in protecting the Indian from extinction; however, in the process, they destroyed a way of life. Tribal government and tribal ownership of land were eliminated. Indian cultural norms gave way before United States government policy. The Indian had no choice; he had to give in

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<sup>18</sup> James Truslow Adams, Dictionary of American History (New York, 1940), pp. 113-114.

before the onslaught of white population, or fight and die. What was imposed was a humanitarian, but white-value oriented policy, which almost completely erased the Indian's traditional outlook towards land ownership and economic lifestyle.

Governmental policies concerning religion went hand in hand with that of the land allotment policy. In order for the Indian to be an accepted member of American society, he not only had to be a hard working farmer, but also a Christian. Regardless of his past beliefs, the Indian had to be converted. This attitude is accurately illustrated in an introduction to Helen Hunt Jackson's A Century of Dishonor, written by Bishop H. B. Whipple. Whipple was known as one of the foremost advocates of Indian rights, as well as a promoter of Christian religion. Whipple proudly noted that "the scalp dance," "Medicine drum," and "wigwam" have been replaced by the "Indian churches," "bells calling Christians to prayer," and the "log cabin, a Christian home." Whipple stated that "the Gospel will do for our Red Brothers what it has done for other races—give to them homes, manhood and freedom."<sup>19</sup>

Because the Indian did not fit into the Christian conception of a true religion, it was assumed that he had no real religion.

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<sup>19</sup>Jackson, A Century of Dishonor, pp. ix-x.

Furthermore, the Indian was not even considered a man because he lacked the blessing of the Christian God. Mrs. Jackson said that four things would help the Indian: "time, statesmanship, philanthropy, and Christianity."<sup>20</sup> Religion was an integral part of Indian life. It had an "undefined sphere of influence in tribal society." It affected every aspect of life, especially the reverence for land. Vine Deloria, the author of Custer Died for Your Sins, called it a "living, undefined religion, where man is a comfortable part of his world."<sup>21</sup>

The coming of the Christian missionary effected a great change on this life. Christian religion had an entirely different outlook. Each sect competed with others for converts. When the Indian missions came on the scene, there was open rivalry. Catholics were constantly fighting Methodists or Dutch Reformed over who had control over the Indians. On the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota, denominational strife was so intense between the Catholic, Episcopal and Congregational Churches that the reservation was eventually divided into segments.<sup>22</sup> Christian influence on the reservation was unavoidable, as in 1870 each reservation was assigned to a specific church having exclusive rights. The Indian Bureau in Washington granted these

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 507.

<sup>21</sup>Deloria, Custer Died for Your Sins, p. 104.

<sup>22</sup>Fritz, The Movement for Indian Assimilation, p. 90.

"franchises." With the appearance of each church on the reservation, religious beliefs other than Christian ones were forbidden. Only in rare cases did any semblance of Indian religion remain, and only then without its original meaning. For example, the Sioux in the Dakotas were allowed to use the Sun Dance, but only for the mission's annual convocation. Soon, all social activity was outlawed, except for the church service.<sup>23</sup>

The Indians were forced to follow the way of the white man, because it was the "path of least resistance."<sup>24</sup> Vine Deloria stated that it was "no feat to convert the Indian. . . . It was less the reality of his religion and more the threat of extinction that brought converts. . . ." <sup>25</sup> As a result, the years from 1870 to 1930 were "record years for conversion."<sup>26</sup>

However, during the period of frantic missionary work, from 1889 to 1892, there was a definite revival of traditional Indian religion. The Paiute Messiah, Wovoka appeared, spreading the

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<sup>23</sup>Deloria, Custer Died for Your Sins, p. 106.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

"Dance of the Ghosts." Actually, there had been some dancing during the previous decade, such as the "Prophet Dance" of 1870, but only on a small scale.<sup>27</sup> However, when the Paiute Messiah appeared in 1890, he attracted a great following. Kicking Bear and Short Bull of the Sioux rode for over four days to see him. Less than a month after they returned to their reservation with news of the Messiah, and they taught the Ghost Dance, the activity was so prevalent that almost all other activities ceased. According to Chief Red Cloud: "Some said they saw the Son of God; others did not see him. . . . The people did not know or care. They snatched at the hope. . . . They caught at the promise they heard he had made."<sup>28</sup>

The promise Wovoka made was a combination of Indian and Christian religions. He called himself the Christian Christ, and predicted a great flood like that of Noah, which would result in white annihilation. His prediction was as follows:

All Indians must dance, everywhere, keep on dancing. Pretty soon in next spring Great Spirit come. He bring back all game of every kind. The game be thick everywhere. All

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<sup>27</sup>Fred Eggan, Social Anthropology of North American Tribes (Chicago, 1955), p. 413.

<sup>28</sup>Brown, Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee, pp. 433-439.

dead Indians come back and live again. They all be strong just like young men, be young again. Old blind Indian see again and get young and have fine time. When Great Spirit comes this way, then all the Indians go to mountains, high up away from whites. Whites can't hurt Indians then. Then while Indians way up high, big flood comes like water and all white people die, get drowned. After that, water go way and then nobody but Indians everywhere and game all kinds thick. Then medicine man tell Indians to send word to all Indians to keep up dancing and the good time will come. Indians who don't dance, who don't believe in this word, will grow little, just about a foot high, and stay that way. Some of them will be turned into wood and be burned in fire.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>ibid., p. 416.



The "Ghost Dance" was one great last effort against the acceptance of white culture, the one last attempt to regain independence. The Wounded Knee Massacre, where men, women, and children were slaughtered by soldiers, was provoked by the Ghost Dancing. But the great flood never came. There were a few great Indian religious leaders-Sitting Bull, The Prophet, Handsome Lake, and finally Wovoka, but when they died, Indian religion went underground and became unrelated to the social and political life of the tribe.<sup>30</sup> Many followed "the path of least resistance" and accepted the Christian religion.

The white cultural strength, by sheer weight, was too much for Indian culture. It disappeared, while white missionaries tried to turn the Indian into a Christian, self-supporting farmer. The Indian was no longer a hunter, but neither was he a white man. He found himself suspended somewhat between the two cultures; one he could not fully accept, for it was not his own. In 1890, the Indian was disenfranchised, trying to discover what he was in relation to the rest of American society. What did the Indian really want? When asked this some years back at a Congressional hearing, Alex Chasing Hawk replied, "'A leave-us-alone law!'" What was most needed was "a cultural leave-us-alone agreement in spirit and in fact."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Deloria, Custer Died For Your Sins, p. 106.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 27.