

REVITALIZATION MOVEMENTS AND THE HOPE OF PEACE

by *Alice B. Kehoe*

Abstract. Anthropological analysis of religion, following Bronislaw Malinowski, is founded in empirical observational data gained at least in part by participant observation. Malinowski described religion as a "sociological charter" which is a "retrospective moral pattern of behavior," constructed as a myth after the fact of behavior. Anthony F. C. Wallace's revitalization model provides the mechanism through which the Malinowskian charter is developed. Jack Wilson's Ghost Dance religion is briefly described as an example of a revitalization movement, and it is suggested that both contemporary peace movements and militant Christian movements are revitalization movements.

Faced as we are with the possibility of a holocaust of ineffable horror, we must bring the insights gained from the social sciences to bear on the analysis of the contemporary political situation. In this essay I collect well-founded principles advanced by the anthropologists Bronislaw Malinowski and Anthony F. C. Wallace, illustrate them with examples of religious movements devoted initially to visions of peace, and conclude that current peace activism may be described as a multifarious kind of revitalization movement.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Scientific study of religion began in the 1920s with Malinowski's major essays insisting on the primacy of sound empirical data in any discussion of religion under the aegis of anthropology. Many nineteenth-century scholars calling themselves anthropologists did no direct field research on religion. The Europeans disdained fieldwork as a kind of manual labor, sweaty physical effort producing raw data like stoked

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grain which needed to be threshed and winnowed before it was fit for the library table of the gentleman scholar (Stocking 1983, 80). This scholastic tradition accepted the written text as the sufficient and proper material for study. Herbert Spencer practiced an extreme form of this armchair scholasticism, not even reading entire texts himself but hiring aides to copy out "facts" on index cards, ready to be brought to his desk whenever he needed a fact to support his theory (Kehoe 1982, 114). American anthropologists, coming from a society that honored honest labor, considered hands-on fieldwork entirely compatible with the role of scholar (Hinsley 1981). Lewis Henry Morgan, himself from a farming family, sat by ponds observing beaver and on steamboat decks interrogating Indians along the Missouri. His great systematizing of kinship terms has endured because it was built from his struggles eliciting and organizing live data. Religion was not one of Morgan's interests; indeed he resisted even joining a church, and he neither queried nor observed Indians on matters of religion. It remained for Malinowski, the expatriate Pole, to "relinquish his comfortable position in the long chair on the veranda" (Malinowski 1954, 146) and create that watershed in anthropology *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), where fact is the product of firsthand observation of actual behavior. The primacy of field observation as the touchstone of theory distinguishes anthropological studies of religion from more traditional treatises in the comparative study of religions.

Malinowski's 1926 *Myth in Primitive Psychology* is a seminal presentation of the thesis that religion functions as the moral order legitimizing socially acceptable behavior. Malinowski focuses on myth as "sociological charter," strongly emphasizing that myths are not simply tales, nor are they explanations; rather they are akin to precedent in law, establishing a "retrospective moral pattern of behavior" (1954, 144). Variations in myths arise to "charter" new communities or societal changes. Rituals enact—not re-enact but rather *enact*—myths: the *Oxford English Dictionary* says that to enact is to "ordain, decree; play (scene, part, on stage or in life)," and Malinowski insists on the simultaneity of these three senses of *enact* if we are to understand religious myth and ritual. Religion exists, insofar as it has any tangible existence, as ritual and other expressive behavior including myth-telling and exhortations alluding to transcendental legitimization. Malinowski takes full cognizance of religion as solace or inspiration to the individual (Malinowski 1954, 56-57), but above all religion is integral to society, as its presumptive etymology from Latin *religare*, "to bind," implies. Religion furnishes the model, the understanding, of cosmology and consequent moral precepts that empowers through transcendental vitalization the structure of a society, its *modus vivendi*.

What is important to note here is that the survival and reproduction of a society, that is, of its members and their offspring, is not at all the same thing as the survival and reproduction of the human species as a larger population; nor, at the opposite scale, is it the same as the survival and reproduction of any individual human. Members of a society may condone or even urge interpersonal violence (for example, many conservative American Christians believe literally “spare the rod and spoil the child”), may believe their society can survive only when certain persons are killed (for example, the Aztec commitment to human sacrifice), or may believe their society can and should survive at the expense of other societies, through war or genocide. Wanton abuse and murder cannot be tolerated because too many members of a society would be incapacitated from cooperative action for the group as a group to survive, but so long as the production necessary for the survival and reproduction of the society is not endangered, violence may be ignored, condoned, or even promoted as a means of subordinating certain classes of persons (peasants, slaves, conquered ethnic groups, women, children) whose autonomy is seen as threatening the structure.

The foregoing, incidentally, implies that not all behavior is adaptive to the evolutionary success of the individual or kin group. Within anthropology and its half-sibling sociobiology, there are schools of thought working from the premise that behavior persisting through generations should be advantageous to the survival and reproduction of at least the kin group including the persons engaging in the behavior. From my reading of biology and ecology, it seems less speculative to premise that much behavior may be inconsequential in terms of natural selection, just as many physical traits may be “neutral” for selection. Once it was fashionable to ascribe a grand design to the natural world, with all physical traits and animal behavior having a purpose, although it might be hidden from human understanding, in that omniscient Design. The notion that all genes or behavior that persist have been selected *for* is nothing but the Grand Design model resurrected. Charles Darwin was revolutionary in eschewing the premise of teleology in nature; he remarked with significant modesty, “I treat the subject simply as a naturalist, and not from a general point of view” (quoted in Callan 1970, 17). Where such an angel feared to tread, it behooves us to proceed most cautiously. Where *non erat demonstrandum*, the scientific course is to withhold imputation of purpose. Such avoidance of commitment to functionalism as an overriding principle is politically wise, too, for a strong functionalist position supports the status quo—supposedly, cultural behavior that has persisted is desirable for optimum functioning of the individual and of the society—and

must lead to the conclusion that beating children or tearing out the beating hearts of young Mexicans are beneficial and should continue. Neither logic nor conscience is outraged when one takes Darwin as exemplar and premises that natural selection may be a universal process yet not one that has directly affected every particular gene or instance of behavior.

The existence of violence poses no explanatory problem for the modest anthropologist treating the subject simply as a naturalist. Violence or war can be a strategy to enrich an individual or group by usurping, despoiling, or intimidating another. As Malinowski demonstrated, the strategy is legitimized by a *retrospective* moral pattern of behavior, a myth or alleged historical event constructed to incorporate elements carrying moral worth. Myths are constantly being constructed in our society as in others past and contemporary, but seldom out of whole cloth; instead, myths are constructed by modifying or rearranging or juxtaposing existing myths. Even written myths such as those in the Bible are being reconstructed by every new interpretation. Moral principles, exemplified in myths, have some constraining effect on many persons, but cold, hard observation shows how common also is the retrospective myth justifying behavior not explicitly condoned earlier: to take an illustration we can all agree upon, look at Adolf Hitler's Aryan myths creatively interpreted out of Richard Wagner's *Ring* operas.

When times seem out of joint (as in Weimar Germany), a "prophet" is likely to be recognized articulating a new moral pattern of behavior. This pattern must be legitimized, and it was Malinowski's genius to point out that this is done retrospectively by claiming issuance from a preexisting God or Nature or former age. Anthony F. C. Wallace charted the process of what he termed revitalization in a classic paper (1956) developed from his study of the Iroquois Handsome Lake's "Longhouse" religion. Handsome Lake was fortunate in that his gospel founded a religion that seems not to have been perverted into legitimation of violence. His was a prophecy of accommodation that continues to be followed by many Iroquois.

THE GHOST DANCE RELIGION

Other prophets have preached peace to less effect. One notorious example is the Ghost Dance religion of the Paiute prophet Jack Wilson (Wovoka). Jack Wilson's people are the Tovusi-dokado, a Numa group speaking Paiute and living along Walker River in western Nevada. They aboriginally ate bulbs of a local grass, tovusi, which gave them their name, and other plant foods, especially pine nuts, plus fish, rabbits, fowl, antelope, and deer. They were nomadic, building small round

houses of tule reed thatch, they wore little clothing, and they are noted for their fine basketry. They cooperated in harvesting pine nuts and in driving antelope, ducks, mudhens, rabbits, and fish into nets or blinds; but they had no hierarchical governance structure and no officials with coercive authority. Any Numa who hung around the Walker River long enough was called a Tovusi-dokado; any Tovusi-dokado was free to go anywhere he or she pleased, if courteous to people already there. Certain persons were chosen by spirits, as communicated in dreams, to be blessed or allied with one or another spirit and thereby enabled to cure illnesses, successfully organize and carry out game drives, or control the weather. There was a strong tendency for children of such persons to follow in their parent's footsteps. Numa religion chartered its culture by postulating a world of spirits who empowered humans to carry out the production necessary for the society's survival and reproduction. By subordinating persons to spirits, the religion maintained individuals' autonomy vis-a-vis one another, maximizing the flexibility essential to survival in this desert, yet structured temporary assumptions of management when valuable to the group. The religion placed high value on respect and courtesy, conducive to allowing the maximum number of persons to harvest the highly localized major resources. Numa celebrated the joy of cooperation in round dances at harvest festivals, reinforcing freely entered cooperation by this ritual.

Then in 1859 the Walker River valley was invaded by Euro-Americans. Ranchers took over the valley bottom, their cattle trampling the tovusi grass. Soon they dug irrigation ditches and put diversionary dams in the river, so that the fish on which the Numa depended died off. Tovusi-dokado became Walker River Paiutes working for wages on the invaders' ranches. In 1881 a railroad line was completed into Walker River valley, stimulating an agribusiness orientation among the colonists and bringing in Chinese laborers to compete with the Paiute. The next year, a day school for Indian children was opened, and in 1887 a boarding school. An Agency had been established for the Walker valley Paiute in 1860, but in 1883 it began using an Indian police force, and in 1885 the United States courts took jurisdiction over Indians.

Jack Wilson had been born when his people's valley was invaded. As a youth he worked on the ranch of David Wilson, who called him Jack and had him join the Wilson family for prayers and Bible reading. Grown up, Jack took the train to the hop harvests in eastern Washington, where Indians from dozens of people converged to make a little money. After a few years, Jack married a Numa and settled down in Walker River valley, working again on the ranch but also developing power, like his father, as a weather controller and doctor in the native tradition. Jack Wilson was prosperous by Paiute standards, content to

live in a simple wickiup but wearing store-boughten clothes and using a good shotgun for hunting. His people respected him, a physically imposing man and a born leader, son of a leader (the local newspaper compared him to his contemporary, Henry Ward Beecher).

In 1889, on New Year's day, there was an eclipse of the sun over western Nevada. Jack Wilson was ill with a fever in his wickiup. People about him shouted at the frightening phenomenon darkening the sun, and he lapsed into an altered state of consciousness in which he believed his soul journeyed to Heaven and received from God a commission to deliver, to

tell his people they must be good and love one another, have no quarreling, and live in peace with the whites; that they must work, and not lie or steal; that they must put away all the old practices that savored of war; that if they faithfully obeyed his instructions they would at last be reunited with their friends in this outer world, where there would be no more death or sickness or old age. He was then given the dance which he was commanded to bring back to his people. By performing this dance at intervals, for five consecutive days each time, they would secure this happiness to themselves and hasten the event (Mooney [1896] 1973, 772).

Wilson recovered and fulfilled his commission, preaching to his Paiute compatriots and writing letters to other Indian reservations, inviting them to come learn the new gospel. Thanks to the efficacy of the United States Postal Service and the railroad trains, which generally allowed Indians to ride free in boxcars throughout the West, Jack Wilson received a steady stream of visitors. Most of them were deeply impressed, as was the anthropologist James Mooney from the Smithsonian, with the prophet's dignified bearing, aura of confidence, and power to induce trance visions in himself and in others. Many visitors were delegates from other reservations charged to discover the validity of Wilson's claims; most of them accepted him as a true prophet and carried his gospel to their homes. It was particularly welcome on the Plains where the bison on which the Indians had depended had disappeared less than a decade before, leaving the people bereft, forced to camp around government agencies to get niggardly rations.

Jack Wilson's gospel, succinctly recorded by Mooney from the prophet himself three years after the vision, is an excellent example of Malinowski's concept of a sociological charter. Wilson outlines a moral order patterning relations of Indian with Indian and Indian with Euro-Americans, prescribing work and proscribing lying, stealing, quarreling, and war. We term this gospel religious because Wilson legitimized it by claiming it to be the directive of a transcendental Power, God. It incorporates a ritual, the dance, graphically symbolizing the moral order in the joining together of all men and women in a moving circle, carried along by their own voices in song. The founda-

tional myth is the story of Wilson's journey to Heaven and his commission. Among the Nevada Indians, Wilson was the prophet of a revitalization movement clearly incorporating the stages outlined in Wallace's model.

WOUNDED KNEE, 1890

Outside Nevada, on the Plains, Indians were suffering far more than the Paiutes. The Sioux were hardest hit: not only had the bison disappeared, but their efforts to farm were nullified by drought; then in 1890 the United States unilaterally reneged on its 1868 treaty, took half the Great Sioux Reservation including the game-rich Black Hills, and at the same time severely cut the food rations given at the agencies. Indian leaders protesting these injustices were imprisoned and the famous Hunkpapa chief Sitting Bull was murdered as police dragged him out of his home to jail because he was "uncooperative." Malnourishment lowered people's resistance to infections, and disease was common and often fatal.

Kicking Bear was a Lakota (Western Sioux) "holy man" (*wicaśa wakan*), who had traveled from his South Dakota reservation to Nevada seeking the messiah and who after meeting Jack Wilson had become a fervent apostle. Visiting Cheyenne and Arapaho celebrants of the Ghost Dance religion (so called because of the promise that those who follow it would be reunited with their deceased loved ones), Kicking Bear saw them wearing special shirts and dresses when they danced. Made out of white muslin and painted with an eagle on the back, symbolizing soaring to heaven, the idea of "Ghost Dance shirts" may have been borrowed from the Mormons' white "endowment robes" worn to protect their faithful from evil. Many Mormons had listened to Jack Wilson or his disciples. The Arapaho believed their special shirts and dresses were a general guard against evil, similar to the Mormon belief about endowment robes. Kicking Bear returned to his own people and urged the Lakota to wear special shirts; somehow the Lakota got the notion that the shirts were bulletproof. It is true that Jack Wilson himself was invulnerable to bullets, demonstrated when he had his brother shoot at him, but Wilson's power was his alone as one commissioned by God (and a trained shaman, son of a shaman). Wilson explicitly repudiated, in his interview with Mooney, the idea that his followers could be invulnerable by wearing special clothing.

In South Dakota, talk of Indians putting on shirts to protect themselves from bullets heightened the anxiety of the Indian agents who had to deal with thousands of hungry people who had just lost by a stroke of the pen half their land, and who had seen their rations cut below the subsistence level and their leaders persecuted, even mur-

dered. The Army was called out to ring the reservations. Big Foot, an aged, respected diplomat who was chief of the Minniconjous on Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation, was ordered to report to a nearby Army fort. At the same time the chief was asked to come to a meeting of Sioux leaders at Pine Ridge agency, miles south of the fort. Big Foot considered the second request the more important, and with his entire village of 350 people traveled toward Pine Ridge. The band was intercepted by troops and made to camp at Wounded Knee creek, Pine Ridge agency having become quite crowded. On the morning of December 29, 1890, just two weeks after Sitting Bull was murdered, Big Foot's Minniconjous were commanded to give all their guns to the Army officers at their camp. One deaf young man protested losing his expensive gun without compensation. Two soldiers grabbed at it. It discharged. That shot went harmlessly into the air, but it was heard as a signal; other Minniconjous leveled their guns at the troops, the troops fired a volley at the Indians whose families were just behind them in the tipis, and pandemonium broke loose. Families ran to the shelter of a ravine, but so did their men, shooting at the troops on the ridge above. Two artillery guns rained down shells on the Indians. At least 153 Lakota were killed, and of the bodies later collected into a mass grave, forty-four were those of women and eighteen of little children.

Jack Wilson's Ghost Dance gospel had only a tenuous connection to the massacre at Wounded Knee creek. The Lakota were not ready for Wilson's message. Only fourteen years before they had conquered at the Little Big Horn. Less than a decade earlier they had been self-sufficient bison hunters. Unlike the Tovusi-dokado they could still field thousands of well-armed soldiers of their own. In 1890 the Lakota were not looking for a new moral order but for means to shift the balance of power back in their favor. They sent a delegation of chiefs to Washington to insist that the 1868 treaty not be abrogated, and they invoked spiritual power to strengthen their chiefs by dancing the ritual that Kicking Bear and others had claimed could be efficacious in dismantling Euro-American encroachments. *Wakan Tanka*, the Almighty, had recently manifested itself powerfully in the person of a Paiute who could control the weather and was impervious to bullets. That person affirmed, they gathered from Kicking Bear and other Lakota who had seen him, the value and worth of the traditional Lakota sociological charter. As Malinowski declared (1954, 146), not the message but the audience determines whether a revelation will be a new sociological charter.

REVITALIZATION MOVEMENTS

Mooney compared the Ghost Dance religion and its prophet to Christianity. Wallace included both in his discussion of revitalization move-

ments. Wallace argues that changes in religion, that is, in moral order or sociological charter, may be expected to appear during periods of individual stress and cultural distortion resulting from situational changes causing traditional strategies to be ineffective. Out of the morass of confusion and discouragement arises a prophet articulating a new moral order and usually legitimatizing it by claiming divine commission or similar transcendental foundation. If the prophet attracts disciples, they will modify his gospel, adapting it to better fit the lives of converts. This process of adaptation is extremely important, accounting for the often wide discrepancy between the original gospel—say, Jack Wilson's or Jesus'—and the belief system of the sect—say, the Lakota or militant "nuke-the-Commies" Protestant Fundamentalist Christians. A major feature of Wallace's model is that he allows for the retention and perpetuation of much of the old moral order; the movement is more often a rearticulation than a radical departure. Analysis of the Ghost Dance religion shows it functioned primarily to revitalize in modified form the Indian heritages (Lesser 1933).

Analysis of the "Christian Right" ("new religious-political right") reveals a complex web of historical traditions, from the Indo-European mythic Warrior Lord and the Judaic covenanted nation, through Scottish Realism and the ideology supporting industrial capitalism, to William Jennings Bryan's attribution in 1915 of war and moral decay to the influence of the theory of evolution. Framing these strands within the overarching myth of the Book of Revelation, conservative American Christians have created a sociological charter that through retrospect justifies an authoritarian society subordinating women to men, subverting the United States Constitution to establish a state church, using Social Darwinist principles (without attribution) to disengage the state from poor relief, and militarism.

Against this sociological charter we see another revitalization movement articulating a charter for a world without nuclear war. The same cultural distortions, in terms of strategies appropriate decades ago but no longer, that stimulate some to reaffirm the Bible as a source of "traditional" values leads others to seek principles elsewhere—in ecology, non-Western religions, and concepts of utopias. The peace movement is really a set of movements with a variety of prophets from Helen Caldicott and Petra Kelly to Jeremy Stone, Sidney Drell, Seymour Melman, Kenneth Boulding, and Ryu Ota. Ota convened the First International Convention to Protect Life of the Earth in Japan in October 1984. Exactly why this revitalization movement has been gaining momentum so markedly in the last few years, I do not know (although one could model this in catastrophe theory, with the horror of nuclear war one vector). The opposing movement seen in the Chris-

tian Right has not been abating. On a more restricted level, movements to curtail interpersonal violence such as wife-beating and child abuse have been expanding alongside opposing movements such as Tough Love. Modern nations and the international society of today's world contain a multiplicity of actual societies in the sense of real communities of people, and each can have its charter upheld by its constructed myths. Lord only knows which may prevail.

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