

The religious revelation of Wovoka between syncretism and cultural adaptation

I will articulate my presentation according to this scheme.

At first I will introduce a theoretical perspective:

- How can we talk about patchwork religion in an historical perspective?
- Is it relevant, to introduce the concept “patchwork religion” in the historiographical reflection?

Next, I will present a case study: the 1890 Ghost Dance.

I particularly want to highlight the different religious traditions that contributed to the birth and spread of this religious movement.

1. Patchwork Religion in an historical perspective

The social sciences have recognized the existence of a trend towards the construction of an individual-patchwork religion, recognizable in contemporary Western societies, especially European and American. For example, we can look at the researches on the contemporary spirituality led by the Bielefeld University. In recent decades religion has increasingly turned into a private affair.

The loss of Christian churches' authority, and the rise of religious pluralism and individualization, have led to a religious bricolage, an individual patchwork or re-composition. According to this perspective, the religious menu is individually constructed and religion has become something akin to a self-service convenience store. It is like participating in an “a la carte” dinner in a posh restaurant that offers a variety of dishes.

I endorse the idea of Patchwork Religion as a spiritual experience characterized by the coexistence of elements from different traditions, religions, exoteric and



spiritual movements. The result of this patchwork is the building of an individual faith or spirituality.

I mentioned the social sciences because history, to my knowledge, has not yet thoroughly taken into account the category of “Patchwork Religion”. On the contrary, it has explored the concept of syncretism, as presence in a religious belief of mythic elements, organization and rituals from different traditions.

Should we therefore consider Patchwork Religion and syncretism as synonyms? In my opinion, not at all.

The historiographical investigations on syncretism focused mainly on collective experiences, such as the Afro-American religion (Candomblé, Voodoo) and other local re-interpretations of the principal religions.

But the key concept of patchwork religion is “Individual”. The patchwork idea focuses on the centrality of the individual, who more or less consciously chooses to tap into different traditions to build for him or herself a religious sensibility.

The processes that we want to study tell us about religious beliefs born from a single individual and built with the contribution of different beliefs.

From an historical perspective, this explanation is not sufficient because every faith has a substantial individual component, since no one is fully assimilated to a religious tradition.

We need to be more specific.

Where this individual component is fundamental in the transmission of the message of faith, then the patch acquires an historically meaningful value.

In the patchwork religious experience a person receives a revelation based on different recognizable traditions and takes on the responsibility to communicate it. For this he can need co-workers, who often add new elements from their own culture and their own feelings.

There is a practical element suggesting not using interchangeably Patchwork Religion and syncretism. The latter term, in fact, was often identified with a negative connotation. Catholic culture in particular has called syncretism as an illegal contamination, a threat, a taboo, a sign of decadence. And this point of view is reaffirmed in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.



The category Patchwork Religion allows us to avoid value judgments. It is substantial for a scholar grew up in a Christian-Catholic-Western culture.

To conclude the first section of my speech:

I don't think that the idea of Patchwork Religion can be efficiently applied to the principal religions. Over the centuries they have taken a composited theological-regulatory system, whose elements come from different traditions and have merged into an identity regarded as unique, as theologian Perry Schmidt-Leukel has clearly demonstrated for the catholic culture. For example, in the Christianity it is nearly impossible to recognize specific legacies, an individual and composite dimension historically traceable. The question is not recognizing from the outside general features of a cultural environment in the construction of a religious identity, but to find them through individual experiences traceable from the sources.

2. Case –Study. Wovoka and the Ghost Dance of 1890

The Paiute Prophet.

The 1890 Ghost Dance and particularly the teaching of the Northern Paiute Prophet Wovoka contains all the elements that permit his inclusion in the category “patchwork Religion”, as defined in the first section of my speech. Let us see why.

In the 1880s the Western American Indians lived in very difficult conditions. Worn out by wars against the Union Army, many tribes were confined to reserves and forced to endure the government programs of assimilation. One of the few possible escapes was the reliance on traditional religious practices and on the prophetic dimension, the search for supernatural help to overcome an unbearable state of prostration.

From the year 1859, the US Government confined Northern Paiute (Numu) in the Walker River Reservation, Nevada, where they had been moved from their settlements in the Great Basin.



On January 1, 1889 in the territory of the Northern Paiute Reservation and in other western territories, a solar eclipse darkened the skies. At this moment a 29 year old shaman of the tribe, Wovoka (Wood Cutter) was in a coma. The length and the cause of his condition are unknown to us.

During the eclipse, he experienced an awakening or re-birth. Upon reviving, Wovoka announced that he had been to Heaven and conversed with God.

After traveling to heaven and seeing all the dead people living “happy and forever young”, Wovoka reported, God told him to go back to the earth and tell the people to be good and love one another. The prophet, as he identified himself, promised that if they “faithfully obeyed his instructions they would at last be reunited with their friends in this other world, where there would be no more death or sickness or old age”.

What are these instructions?

According to the written texts of the revelation, we can summarize:

“The Indians must not hurt anybody or do harm to anyone. They must not drink whiskey and not fight. They must do right always. They must not refuse to work for the Whites, and not make troubles any more with them”.

Wovoka was also told by God that Northern Paiute, and probably other Native Americans, were to perform a traditional dance lasting three or five nights in succession (the sources are conflicting).

The Prophet demonstrated the power of his prophecy in ways common to Paiute shamans: the weather control. He predicted and took credit for rains that ended a prolonged drought and this success won him an instant following on the nearby Walker River Reservation.

In this case, we can find some key elements of patchwork religion: the revelation to an individual, the prophetic dimension and the coexistence of different religious traditions in a single message.

The first dances probably took place in the spring of 1889, with only local Paiutes attending. News of the religion spread quickly, and when the second dance was held, many visiting Indians were there.



The Paiutes themselves called the movement Naniguwka (Dance in a circle).

Paiute Tradition

I will now highlight the other basic elements of Patchwork Religion emerging from this case: the coexistence and the intertwining of different recognizable religious traditions.

The characteristics of Wovoka's revelation clearly demonstrate a debt with two main religious traditions: Paiute and Christian. The spread of the original message in other Indian tribes and the subsequent intervention of other traditions would help build a set (patchwork) even more complex.

The vision is the foundation of the revelation.

When a person is given a visionary experience, they are also given the responsibility to relate it and share the sacred power that comes with it. As a result, myth and ritual are transmitters of sacred power.

The Prophet almost surely experienced 'minor' visions before his Great Revelation. He was not an outsider. Wovoka's father Numu-Tavibo (Northern Paiute-White Man) was a medicine man, so trance states undoubtedly belonged to Wovoka's shamanic kit.

Tavibo had played a leading role in the movement that arose among the Walker River Paiute known as 'Ghost Dance of 1870'. It is a posthumous name, attributed later by the euro-Americans to relate it to what would have happened twenty years later. The origin of the movement of 1870 was due to the Paiute prophet called Wodzivob (Grey Hair).

Wodzivob prophesied the resurrection of the dead and the restoration of the environment to its state prior to Euro-American expansionism: "Our fathers are coming, our mothers are coming, they are coming pretty soon. You had better dance. Never stop for a long time. Swim. Paint in white and black and red paint. Every morning wash and paint. Everybody be happy".

Certainly, the young Wovoka also participated in the movement.

Christian Tradition



Wovoka's prophecies also exhibited a great Christian influence: no lying, no stealing, and no wars.

At about the age of eight he began working on the Mason Valley ranch of David and Abigail Wilson. He became the constant playmate of the couple's three sons and was accepted into their home, where he was known as Jack. Indeed, Indians and whites know Wovoka as Jack Wilson. The Wilsons, devout United Presbyterians, invited him into their household for meals as well and exposed him to Bible readings, evening prayers, grace before meat, and similar family devotions. It is impossible to recover what he heard or how he interpreted it. Wovoka did not speak a good English nor understand it well. The Bible used by 19th century Presbyterians was the 1611 King James Bible, written in "Archaic English".

It is also reasonable to suspect that this early exposure to Christianity influenced the development of the Ghost Dance doctrine. The Presbyterian sermons included temperance, the suppression of vice and the promotion of good morals, anti-tobacco reform. The missionaries were also opposed to gambling, social dancing, Native American traditional religions, and in particular, syncretic religions.

With the spread of the new religion outside the borders of the Walker River Reservation, the Christian element acquired new relevance.

A number of observers, Indian and white alike, reported that Wovoka claimed to be Jesus. For example, the Northern Cheyenne Porcupine described the prophet as the Messiah returned to earth, probably affecting other reporters who began to recognize in the shaman's body the stigmata of Christ's Crucifixion.

The anthropologist James Mooney, also known as "Indian Man", was the first to study the new religion through interviews and field researches. He interviewed the Paiute Prophet during the first months of 1892. Among other things, Mooney pointedly asked:

"Are you The Christ, the Son of God, as has been so often asserted in print?"

Wovoka's reply: "[Only]... a prophet who has received a divine revelation".



Lakota Tradition.

According to the Wovoka's message, Indian skeptics as well were to be excluded from the Millennium. This belief and the miraculous virtues demonstrated by Wovoka facilitated the spread of the new religion in other Indian tribes.

Our sources say that representatives from over 30 tribes traveled to meet the Prophet. Wovoka spoke his own language, Northern Paiute, and passable English as well. The Prophet did not know sign language, hence his communications with so many delegates speaking so many different languages would have been problematic.

The inventions of the whites were helping to spread Wovoka's religion. Educated Indians spread the news by letter and telegram, and the railroads helped Indians to travel long distances to meet the Prophet. Furthermore, the Indians were able to read newspapers; thus the English language, as well as the traditional Indian sign language, became primary means of communication between different tribes.

A delegation that met Wovoka in November 1889 was crucial to the future of the Ghost Dance. It included the above-mentioned Porcupine, Arapahos, Shoshones, Bannocks and the Lakota Short Bull and Kicking Bear.

We will focus on the Lakota contribution to building a different Ghost Dance from the original movement founded by Wovoka. In this case, the messengers, those who represented themselves as voices of the Prophet, add new fundamental elements from their own culture to his revelation. In this way, they enriched and complicated the Patchwork.

In 1883 the Office of Indian Affairs had forbade Lakota religious ceremonies. They tried to continue their traditional practices secretly, but the time of large public religious representations was over. In this situation, many Lakota turned to Christianity. The reality, however, was that for many, the Christian God was only one godlike being among others. At the end of 1880s, when life for the Lakota seemed hopeless, a rumor reached them: somewhere in the West, a



messiah was preaching a better future for the Indians. The Lakota decided to learn more and to meet the prophet.

The Lakota delegates understood Wovoka's doctrine in their own way: according to their interpretation, he was able to destroy the whites with a wave of his hands. In addition, the delegates said that because the whites had treated the Indians badly, they had to be punished. This, however, was not the original pacifist Wovoka's message. There were other changes. The Lakota attached to the Ghost Dance their own traditional ceremonies, such as the sweat lodge and dancing around a sacred tree under the protection of the sacred pipe. Also traditional games were revived during the ceremony. Finally, Lakota enriched the message announcing the return of the buffalo on the prairies.

The term Ghost Dance, by which the movement was known to the whites, was given the name by the Lakota. Because it was concerned with the return of the spirits from the world of the dead, the Lakota called it Wana ghi wa chipi (Spirit Dance or Ghost Dance), and since the dramatic and powerful Lakota was the prototype of the Western Indian in the popular mind (and still is), this was the name by which it seized the public fancy.

More, during the Lakota Ghost Dance men, women and children started to wear a sacred garment prepared only for this purpose. They called "the sacred shirt", the whites called it "Ghost shirt".

The belief that these shirts would guarantee the invulnerability spread quickly. Even though the origin of the ghost shirt is uncertain, it is clear that their bulletproof nature is as Lakota idea; no other tribe gave them such as a feature. Kicking Bear, Short Bull or one of the other delegates might have seen or heard about this miracle on their journey to meet Wovoka.

Other Traditions

The allusion to the shirts allows us to mention other religious traditions involved in the development of the Ghost Dance.

James Mooney maintains that the original idea came from the gown (toga) used by the Mormons, who were very interested to the Indians and whose influence among the tribes close to the birthplace of the Ghost Dance had been strong.



Mooney believes that the idea of this kind of sacred garment passed from tribe to tribe and finally reached the Lakota. It is indeed a credible reconstruction.

Two other movements affected the Paiute Prophet. The first one was the so-called 'Shaker' movement, founded in the Northwest by the wanapum prophet Smohalla and based on the need to return to the ancient Indian traditions, dance first of all. The second one was the Indian Church of the 'Shakers', originated in 1881 by the squaxin John and Mary Slocum and based on an original reinterpretation of the Christian message.

After Kicking Bear's visit, Sitting Bull's camp became the center of the Ghost Dance Religion among the Lakota. It is not clear whether Sitting Bull himself really believed in the doctrine. Of course, he did not accept the interference of the whites into the religious life of their people.

The Christian missionaries strongly opposed the new religion practices, condemning it as a product of the devil's trick.

The massacre of Wounded Knee stopped the spread of the Ghost Dance but it did not define his end. Arapaho, Cheyenne, Pawnee and Canadians Sioux kept it alive. Wovoka himself continued in his duties as a healer and his charisma was a reference point for many Indians who continued to visit him until his death (1932) and recognize him as a powerful shaman.

3. Conclusion

Can the concept of patchwork religion be an analytical tool for historiography?

Since I am here talking about it, I would say yes. Of course.

First, I think that it is fruitful to distinguish between syncretism and patchwork religion as concepts defining different phenomena. This distinction highlights the individual and the collective contribution in constructing structures, beliefs and rituals.

Second, as historians we must be confronted to our sources. We can identify Patchwork Religion if the sources allow us to recognize traditions and processes rooted in individuals rather than collectivities.



Third, since many years historiographical debate has recognized the importance of the interplay between individuals and macro features of social, religious, economic, cultural processes.

