



*Tah'-koo Wah-kan'; Or, The Gospel among the Dakotas*  
Stephen R. Riggs (1869)

*In 1862, Dakotas who had been removed to a reservation in Minnesota launched an uprising against white settlers. US forces defeated the uprising a few weeks later. A military court sentenced over 300 Dakota men to death for taking part in the uprising; however, president Abraham Lincoln commuted all but 38 of those death sentences. The hanging of the 38 men whose sentences Lincoln did not commute was the largest legal mass execution in US history. Those who had been spared the death sentence remained imprisoned near the city of Mankota, Minnesota, while around 1,600 Dakota non-combatants—mostly women, children, and the elderly—spent the winter in an internment camp at Fort Snelling, 80 miles away.*

*Stephen Riggs was a white Presbyterian missionary who had been working among Dakota people for 25 years prior to the uprising. In these selections from a mission history he wrote, Riggs recounts how prisoners at Mankato and Fort Snelling displayed a surge of interest in Christianity. Riggs deems this surge to be the outcome of a divine plan, in effect justifying what Riggs also deems to be the United States' unjust treatment of Dakotas. The title of Riggs's book is a phonetic spelling of Taku Wakan, a concept in traditional Dakota religion. In the book's preface, Riggs defines Taku Wakan as "the marvelous, the mysterious, the incomprehensible, of the Dakotas," but he explains that he is appropriating the term to refer to "the marvelous workings of the Spirit in leading [the Dakotas] into the Christian faith."*

#### Cause and Consequence

As "affliction cometh not forth of the dust, neither doth trouble spring out of the ground," so this uprising came not without cause. [...W]hile some of the causes were more superficial and born of the occasion, others were deep-rooted and had been long working. [...] The whole Indian system, as adopted and acted upon by our government, seems to be unwise. We have, in our treaty-making, assumed that the various Indian tribes occupying our territories are independent nations, whereas they are wanting in all the elements of sovereignty, having no government and consequently no power to compel the fulfilment of treaty stipulations. Not capable themselves of making and enforcing laws for the protection of person and property, it became our duty as a great Christian nation to act towards them the part of guardian, making them amenable to law and bringing them under the controlling influences of a Christian civilization. This we failed to do. Besides, the Indian Department has for years been proverbially corrupt and corrupting. [...] Thus the Dakotas had many complaints to make of wrongs, real and supposed. [...]

But now the uprising was checked. Little Crow and Little Six and all the leaders in the rebellion, with the most guilty of their followers, had fled, taking with them many who were not so guilty. Between four and five hundred men, with their families, including the most loyal<sup>a</sup> of that part of the Dakota nation, had given themselves up or otherwise had fallen into the hands of our troops. A military commission was organized, before which, during the next month, seven-eighths of these men were brought to prove their innocence or to be condemned as guilty. Of those who

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<sup>a</sup> To clarify: Riggs means loyal to the United States.

were thus brought to trial, about 50 were acquitted, 303 were condemned to be hung, and 20 were to be imprisoned from one to five years.

In looking back upon the work of condemnation accomplished by that commission, two things are very apparent. (1) In the majority of instances, the trial was so brief and hurried that the facts could not possibly be ascertained. It is to be remembered that 40 cases were finished in one day, and there were other days when over 30 were disposed of. (2) The principle that all participation in the outbreak was worthy of death, acted upon by the commission, was a very wrong one. [...] In considering this action of the military commission, as it has now become a part of history, it is necessary to remark that the action and the principles on which it was based were the result of the highly exasperated state of feeling which existed in the minds of all white people on the border against all Indians. "They are Indians" was regarded as a sufficient justification of hasty and superficial trials. Six months afterwards, when men came to discriminate, that same commission would have conducted the trials more properly, and the majority of the findings would have been quite different.

But here again we are reminded that God's thoughts are not as our thoughts. His plan embraced the end, and these condemnations were doubtless necessary to accomplish that end. [...]

### The Morning Light

It has been already stated that the ancestral religion of the Dakotas was opposed to the religion of Christ. It was also opposed to Christian civilization. It has been said also that the conflict which they inaugurated and carried on so furiously was regarded by themselves as a conflict between the gods. In one aspect, the question was, "Shall the Indian or the white man rule?" But in another and more important one, it was, "Shall the kingdom of Christ be set up among the Dakotas, or shall the *worship of stones* be continued?" So especially thought those 330 prisoners, who were wearing chains on their ankles in Mankato in the winter of 1862-63. And they regarded the question as having been settled by the events of the last few months. The power of the white man had prevailed, and the religion of the Great Spirit, or the white man's God, was to be supreme. In accordance with this conviction, they were now ready to listen to the messages of God's word; and they were ready also, and desirous, to avail themselves of the book-education which the great part of them had before rejected with scorn.

Very soon after these prisoners were removed to the vicinity of Mankato, Dr. Williamson<sup>b</sup> and his sister, Miss Jane S. Williamson, [...] visited the prison and distributed some slates, paper, and pencils. In the prison were eight or ten young men who had previously learned to read and write their own language. To them, materials for writing were peculiarly acceptable, as they had then been imprisoned five or six weeks, and the time passed heavily. But when these men commenced writing for their own relief and amusement, it was found that many others wished to learn. From that time, all the elementary books that could be anywhere procured were in demand; and the young men who were at all skilled in the books became the teachers of classes of 10 or 15 each. During the whole winter that followed, anyone going into the prison in the daytime could see

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<sup>b</sup> Thomas Williamson, who, like Riggs, was a white Presbyterian missionary. Thomas had been working among Dakota people since the mid-1830s; his sister Jane had joined him in the 1840s.

these groups scattered all over, around little fires made on the earthen floor, and all diligently engaged in learning to read and write. It was, indeed, a strange sight. [...]

Here was a fact that could not be gainsaid. So far as their religion was concerned, the genuineness of their professions might be doubted and disbelieved; but here was a conversion which commanded belief. These men, only a few months before, were determinedly opposed to education. They would not permit their children to go to school. Now they have taken hold of it with an enthusiasm which is amazing. And not only do they learn themselves, but they write down to their wives and children and their other friends, exhorting them to learn also. [...] Thus was the number of Dakota readers of the Bible greatly multiplied in a few months, and that at no outlay to the mission except for the books. Twenty-five years of labor had preceded; the language had been reduced by patient and persistent work to a written form; and books had been prepared to meet the demand as it progressed. But here was a revolution in letters, which asked us only to stand still and see what God was working out!

There was, besides, a revolution in their minds of more significance than their educational progress. Indeed, there was a revolution of which their desire for education was only one exponent. The gods whom they and their fathers had worshipped and trusted [...], together with the so-called medicine men and the war prophets—all these had failed to deliver them. The spell was broken, and they turned now to Christianity. [...] Dr. Williamson commenced visiting them and preaching to them regularly on the sabbath. Before the executions, there was manifested more than usual religious interest; and one old man, whose name was on the list to be executed, came forward on the sabbath preceding that event and desired to be baptized. It is proper to say he did not then know that he was in that black catalogue of 39. Two days after, he and the 38 others were taken out of the common prison, and placed in a room by themselves, and more securely chained. Round Wind, for that was his name, said that he was ready to go to the “spirit world,” for he believed in Christ the Savior. He did not, however, die with the rest but was pardoned by a telegram from President Lincoln, which came only the night before the executions took place. The old man attributes his salvation directly to God. The fact was, he had been condemned on the testimony of a German boy, who declared that he was the man who killed his mother. The boy was mistaken. Round Wind was several miles off when the boy’s mother was killed.

The executions made a profound impression upon all in the prison, and fear undoubtedly had a powerful effect upon them. They knew that their remaining pagans would not save them. If they became Christians, as the missionaries urged them to do, would that deliver them? Perhaps. Something like this may have been the process of thought in their minds. It would not be strange. Then, too, the unexpected deliverance of Round Wind may have pressed in this same direction. But whatever was the moving cause—fear, or hope, or *both combined*—one thing was certain: they now received the preached word of the Lord as hungry men take food.

The sabbath immediately after the executions, which was the last in the year, the prisoners were all permitted to come out into the prison yard, where the author preached to them. [...] In the prison yard, the fresh snow lay nearly a foot deep; but these men, chained two and two, came around the speaker and stood during the whole service. By this time many of them had learned to sing, and they did sing with spirit some of our most moving Dakota hymns. They opened also

their ears to the truth, and it was to them evidently “good tidings of great joy.” [...] During the next five or six weeks, the religious interest continued to increase. [...] The men had begun to ask to be baptized into the faith of Jesus, the Son of the Great Spirit. Day after day, the number desiring to make a profession of this new faith increased. [...] here were added to the church [in one] day more than 200 souls!

### The Advancing Day

The religious awakening which commenced in the prison at Mankato extended to the camp at Fort Snelling. There was, indeed, a kind of electric sympathy existing between the two places. Communications were numerous and frequent. Many of the same influences which were operating on those in prison were equally powerful in the camp. The women, too, being more easily impressed than the men, were more disposed to accept the gospel. Another advantage which the women had was that they had not generally been so much under the influence of their ancestral superstition. One woman, writing to her husband confined in prison, said to him: “You have been a great *wakan'* man; what do you think of it now?” The question had reference to the man's faith and intimated her own past unfaith in those things, as also her present belief in the new religion. [...]

As in the prison, so in the camp, the school and the church occupied the time. Every evening, and often during the day, men and women and children were crowded into tents and engaged in prayer and praise. Hard by the camp stood a large one-story warehouse, the upper part of which, immediately under the roof, was procured for holding religious services. Often that room was packed, away under the roof, with old and young met to praise and pray to the God of our fathers; and of many it will be said: “This Indian was born there.” More than 100 were added to the church in the four or five months they were kept at Fort Snelling. [...]

In the month of March, the author went up to Mankato and spent ten days with Dr. Williamson in the prison. At this time, the Lord's supper was first administered to them. The prison was a low building made of large logs on a vacant lot between two houses. The sides were only about four feet high, and there was only room for all the prisoners to lie down. [...] Some had their chains removed from their ankles; others were still wearing them but were not fastened to a fellow prisoner, while some still remained as they had been. [...] The only exception to a very orderly communion was that one old man, as he took the bread and wine—homemade currant wine—prayed audibly that that chain might be taken off. The minister remarked that there were other, stronger chains than that binding us, the chains of sin, which the Master was able and willing to take off and to bring us into the perfect liberty of his children.

In the spring of 1863, soon after navigation opened on the Mississippi, both the prisoners at Mankato and the occupants of the camp at Fort Snelling were removed. The majority of the latter were taken to Crow Creek, on the Missouri, and the former were placed in one of the military camps near Davenport, Iowa.

A writer for the *Saint Paul Press* said of the prisoners, as they descended the Minnesota and Mississippi, that they were much engaged in religious worship, carrying their prayer meetings far into the hours of the night. And as the boat which conveyed away these 270 chained Indians

passed St. Paul, they were singing the words of David to the tune of Old Hundred. The following is a pretty close translation of the first part of that Dakota hymn:

Jehovah, have mercy upon me  
for thine own mercies' sake.  
Thy lovingkindness is very great;  
therefore, place me in thy heart.

My sin has been against thee only,  
so that if thou shouldst condemn me—  
if thou shouldst punish me—  
I would esteem thee just.

I know mine own iniquity—  
the foolish things I've done.  
From these, do thou me cleanse  
and wash me thoroughly.

For blotting out transgression,  
not any thing is able;  
the blood of Jesus only  
shall cleanse away my sin.

**Source:** Stephen R. Riggs, *Tah'-koo Wah-kan'; Or, The Gospel among the Dakotas* (Boston: Congregational Sabbath-School and Publishing Society, 1869), v, 323-363 (chaps. 19-21), [https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.\\$b282352](https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.$b282352). Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Section headings correspond to chapter titles in the source publication; chapter summaries and epigraphs that followed these titles in the source have been omitted. Two run-on sentences broken up. The expression *opened in* emended to *opened on* because the latter sounds more natural in context. English spellings and punctuation emended in line with modern conventions (including in the quotation from Riggs's preface that appears in the shaded headnote). The rendering of Dakota words, including the use of accent marks, replicates the source publication. Some spelled-out numbers converted to numerals. The style of a year range emended. All words and phrases italicized in the source publication are italicized here as well; plus, italics added to a newspaper title. Capital letters at the beginning of poetic lines converted to lowercase for readability. The use of lowercase for *sabbath* reproduces the usage of the source.

These edited excerpts from Riggs's book are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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