

## EPILOGUE\*

On the quiet corner of the tree-shaded street the white stucco house was the picture of peace, hedges trimmed by Norman Rockwell. Suburbs are everywhere the same. In the town of Pierre, South Dakota, they were merely more so. It was a comfortable feeling, the neat and easy conformity of the house on the pleasant street.

It was the suburban home of Reverend Vine Deloria, Sr., an archdeacon of the Episcopal Church.

The minister is a Sioux. He is the son of a Yankton war chief, who was one of the earliest Christian ministers among the Plains tribesmen at the time of Sitting Bull. He is by heredity both a war chief and a minister. In his thirty years in the Episcopal Church he has brought the faith to hundreds of hamlets and back-country villages of the Dakota Sioux. The minister has devoted a lifetime to proselytizing Christianity. From parish to parish he has journeyed to preach "the Gospel of the white man to my Indian people."

He had come to rest in a corner of suburbia to ponder his own preachments. He had come to doubt, not the Gospel but the white man, and his thoughts returned more and more to the Gospel of the Indians. The minister had retreated behind the curtains of his suburban home to prepare for the religious battle: "With my own soul," he said. . . .

He had accepted Christianity easily, he said. It was easy for the Indians to do, because philosophically they believed in Christianity, long before the missionaries came.

"Christianity was not new to the Sioux; the Sioux had their own kind of Christianity. We just did not call it that. We believed in one God, the Great Spirit. We believed in our own kind of Ten Commandments. And we behaved as though we believed in them. That's why it was easy to change to the white man's religion. It was there to start with."

. . . . "Missionaries always told the Indians that they had the only path to the Great Spirit. That there was only one path. The Sioux did not believe that the Great Spirit was as small as that. If there was only one path then the Great Spirit would have to be as small as a church.

---

\*Excerpted from Stan Steiner, The New Indians (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 105-10.

The Sioux believed that the Great Spirit was as large as the world.

"That disillusioned the Indians. Churches, the denominations, are like fraternities; yes, they are. Except that the fraternities don't steal each other's members."

And there was another reason why the white man's religion conflicted with the Indian's Christianity:

"The white man cannot stand a peer. He believes no one is his equal. Yes, oh yes, he loves to help the down-trodden, to pity the Indian, to convert the heathen, to save the sinner. But he would not permit the Indian to look him in the face and say, 'I am your peer,'" the minister said.

In the nineteenth century it might have been possible to establish a national Indian Christian church. Had an Indian liturgy been written, had the rituals of the tribal religions been encouraged and embraced by the Christian churches, had an Indian saint, a Guadalupe of the United States, been sanctioned, as in Mexico, the history of Christianity among the Indians might have been quite different.

The Reverend Deloria doubted that the white man would have permitted it. He doubted, even now, that he understood it. . . .

"The ways of our forefathers have not passed away. My father is in my heart often these days. Religion is strong in the hearts of my people. It is in my heart, too."

In his easy chair, with a Bible on his knees, much penciled with marginal thoughts, the Reverend Deloria leaned back and closed his eyes. He is a man of the prairie, lean, clear as the wind, his eyes sharp, his words hard. There is a Sioux's resilience, unflinching and severe, beneath his dignified warmth.

"Once the white man thought he was chosen of the Lord. He knows now that three-quarters of the people of his world are not white. He knows that the Lord created most people with dark skins, like Indians. He knows this. But I still do not trust him.

"Sometimes I despair of the white man's ever becoming a Christian. Sometimes the Holy Bible does not seem to teach people anything. And the Lord seems to have forsaken us. I go down to the cellar of my house when I feel that, where I have my drum, and I beat my drum quietly. Quietly so the Lord will not hear me, so that the Lord will not be offended. Though I think the Lord would not mind the drum.

"I feel better then. I feel Indian."