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Todd M. Kerstetter. *God's Country, Uncle Sam's Land: Faith and Conflict in the American West.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006. viii + 213 pp. $36.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03038-3.

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The Limits of Religious Tolerance in the American West

Todd Kerstetter argues on the first page of his recent study of religious conflict that "three powerful forces in American history–liberty, faith, and the West's mythology–have intersected with unique results in the American West" (p. 1). His argument rests on careful case studies of the Mormons in nineteenth-century Utah, Lakota Ghost Dancers and the massacre at Wounded Knee, and the Branch Davidians, whose standoff with federal authorities ended in a deadly fire. Kerstetter calls these incidents "three glaring and tragic exceptions" to the relatively peaceful coexistence of diverse religious groups in the West (p. 168). The author identifies the source of the violence in the three episodes as a fundamental conflict between people who tried to create God's country in the West and a federal government that could not tolerate forms of religious practice and social organization that appeared to threaten mainstream American cultural values.

Kerstetter uses his introduction and his first chapter to provide necessary context for the three case studies. He surveys some of the recent influential literature from the 1980s and 1990s that examines the complex relationship between the federal government and the American West. The U.S. government was the primary sponsor of Western settlement and development, but its experiments in the region helped create and reinforce the power of the government through the extension of federal authority and bureaucracy. As for religion in the West, a subject of considerable and unfortunate neglect, Kerstetter contends that tolerance remained a dominant feature of interreligious engagement with a few notable exceptions. A surprisingly brief review of American religious history leads him to conclude that the emergence of a Protestant-dominated "religious mainstream" in the East set limits on Western religious groups like the Mormons and American Indians. The federal government expressed these mainstream religious values in its battle against Mormon polygamy and the Ghost Dance movement in the nineteenth century. Kerstetter asserts that the destruction of the Branch Davidian compound a century later "shows that remarkably little had changed since the 1890s when it came to attitudes about religion" (p. 32). The West may not have been the region of tolerance and openness that has attracted so much support and commentary in American mythology.

The chapter on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints explores the impact of the Utah War of 1857-58 on Mormon religion and society. In 1857 the federal government sent a large detachment of the U.S. Army to Utah to install officials who would reign in the rebellious territory. The public practice of plural marriage, resistance to federal authority, and the erection of a theocratic government in Utah disturbed Americans in an expanding continental nation. The Mountain Meadows Massacre of September 1857, in which Mormon settlers attacked a wagon train of Arkansas and Missouri emigrants, killing around 120 people, only increased the tension. Negotiations between LDS leaders and federal officials avoided a more general military conflict. Over the next several decades the government attacked the practice of polygamy, until finally the church abandoned it in the 1890s as Utah became a state.

Kerstetter insists repeatedly in this chapter that the conflict was religious in nature, a point that seems quite obvious given the circumstances. The Mormons had suffered religious persecution since the very origins of the faith in the 1820s and 1830s. At the same time, Kerstetter argues that "Mormons, and anyone else who doubted it, learned that morally speaking, the Constitution is a Protestant document and the United States a Protestant nation" (p. 80). The supposedly Protestant origins of the Constitution have been and continue to be hotly debated and hardly provide support for such a confident statement. Furthermore, recent studies of American religion in the nineteenth century reveal a religiously diverse, complex, and often discordant nation that undermines his notion of a unified Protestant state.

The reliance on a conception of a "Christian mainstream" continues in the chapter on the Ghost Dance revival (p. 123). The Paiute prophet Wovoka shared a vision in 1889 of a dance that would restore the earth to Native peoples. Ghost Dancers would bring about the final destruction of the whites and all the evils they had introduced, clearing the path for a reunification of all Indians, living and dead, in a world of peace and prosperity. The dance spread quickly throughout the West. Lakotas started dancing in 1890. Indian agents, army officers, and journalists watched nervously, fearing an uprising on the Sioux reservations. Their mounting concerns turned to terrible action in December 1890 with the infamous massacre of Big Foot's band at Wounded Knee Creek.

Kerstetter concludes that in the process of suppressing the Ghost Dance "the United States had shown that it would stop at almost nothing to impose Christian ideals on its peoples, even in that portion of the country best known for its freedom, liberty, and opportunity" (p. 123). Indeed, the government emphasized Christianization as part of its "civilization" program for Indians, but religion seems only part of the problem in this instance. The Ghost Dance represented a Native resistance movement that was politically and militarily unacceptable to the American government at the end of the nineteenth century. While the government ostensibly tried to transform Indians into Americans, the massacre at Wounded Knee appears less a part of this process and more like an extension of the violence of colonization and conquest that isolated people on reservations and made them available for social experiments. Although the massacre was not really a battle, there are good reasons that Wounded Knee remains so closely connected to the so-called Indian wars of the era. American violence toward Native peoples did not disappear after 1890. As Kerstetter admits, it continued in the institutions and laws that governed American Indian communities.

In the third case study, the author turns his attention to a painful event of our own time, the Branch Davidian disaster at Waco in 1993. Seventy-four people, including twenty-one children under the age of fourteen, died in the fire that engulfed the Mount Carmel compound on April 19. Only nine people survived. In this compelling chapter, Kerstetter admirably avoids the sensationalism that has so often obscured the nature of the events. The two-month standoff between the followers of David Koresh and federal authorities reveals the limits of religious tolerance in America. Most observers, including President Clinton, labeled the Branch Davidians a cult and dismissed Koresh as a mentally unbalanced ego-maniac who manipulated his followers, molested children, and collected a heavy arsenal of firearms. After years of living quietly and unobtrusively for the most part in central Texas, the irritant became too strong. The government, according to Kerstetter, had to remove the "barbarians in the garden" (p. 125).

A short concluding chapter identifies some of the connections between the three widely separated episodes that help explain the hostility toward the participants in these religious movements. In particular, Kerstetter notes the shared belief in direct revelation; the existence, to varying degrees, of plural marriage; the perception that the federal government was a primary enemy; and the role of the media in shaping the opinions of Americans. The ambitious effort to combine three remarkably rich case studies in an analysis of religious conflict in the West contains some significant problems, however,

as might be expected in such a complex work. Most importantly, Kerstetter fails to make the case sufficiently that there is something peculiarly Western about all of this. Highlighting these spectacular episodes of religious violence obscures the quieter and persistent, yet equally destructive, violence that has characterized interreligious engagement not only in the West, but across America. The aggressive suppression of prophetic revitalization movements, the treatment of American Indians in government boarding schools, nativist movements that targeted immigrant religions, the conquest of Catholic Mexico, repressive exclusion laws, and forms of vigilante "justice" all suggest that the three examples are not aberrations in a history marked largely by religious tolerance. They instead reveal the enormous power expressed, over the course of two centuries, in the conquest of the continent and the control of religious groups perceived as dangerous or disruptive. Kerstetter acknowledges these other issues, but they seem to work against his argument at times. Kerstetter deftly analyzes the tension between the myth of individual liberty and religious tolerance in the West and the reality of state power, the core strength of this book, yet he perhaps overemphasizes the existence of an amorphous "Christian mainstream" that animated government policy. Nevertheless, Kerstetter presents a provocative and creative study of American religion in the West that will hopefully stimulate conversation and debate in an area that has been neglected for too long.

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