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Zitkala-Ša and the Holistic God

Redefining American Spirituality in "The Great Spirit"

Jared Brockbank

Experiencing firsthand the United States' rapidly expanding influence over Native Americans, Sioux writer Zitkala-Ša documents and addresses the major changes in her culture through autobiographical essays. Though she had been immersed in Anglo-American culture for many years, the Dakota Native begins her 1902 essay "The Great Spirit" by stating, "When the spirit swells my breast I love to roam leisurely among the green hills" (114). Zitkala-Ša feels her divine Creator's power in nature and celebrates her Native beliefs through depictions of divinity in the beautiful scenery. She then contrasts these joyful scenes with somber images of her converted cousin. Through unnatural imagery depicting her cousin confined by Christianity, she challenges the audience to consider the religion's limitations. Although she appears to criticize American Christianity and its restrictions, Zitkala-Ša acknowledges the influence of America in her life by introducing an image of the national flag embodied in the Great Spirit. She uses this divine imagery throughout her essay to connect these seemingly conflicting ideologies found in the United States.

Zitkala-Ša's exploration of both Christian and Native views elicits various interpretations from cultural critics. Franci Washburn's analysis of Zitkala-Ša's

life explains how this Sioux writer, “torn between two worlds” (273), must grapple with her comfortable Dakota home and the intruding United States of America. Gary Totten, acknowledging Zitkala-Ša’s juxtaposition between these two religious worlds, argues that the essay functions as a “resistance to nationalist narratives” (Totten 105). Rather than resistance, Roumiana Velikova describes “The Great Spirit” as a “gesture of final reconciliation” (51). However, the terms “resistance” and “reconciliation” paint Christianity and Zitkala-Ša’s Dakota beliefs as a dichotomy—two completely separate and irreconcilable belief systems. In this view, she must either pit one against the other in a battle for dominance or accept the existence of both, being unable to change either view.

This dichotomous understanding of the two perspectives was common during the time Zitkala-Ša wrote “The Great Spirit.” Several articles about paganism—a term which Zitkala-Ša uses to describe her Native beliefs—were published shortly before she wrote her essay. One such article, published in 1900 in a New York City magazine called *The Outlook*, claims that

In his best estate [a pagan] ignores religion and lives a drear life entirely bounded by immediate interests and pleasures. . . . There are no springs of ethical vitality in paganism, no deep sources of spiritual inspiration, no breath of that idealism which alone lifts the life of the body on to a high plane and makes man something more than a splendid animal. (“Modern Paganism”)

Rather than supporting this common perception of disconnected worlds and the supposedly inherent inferiority of paganism, Zitkala-Ša’s imagery of divinity’s vastness in “The Great Spirit” suggests a spirituality that transcends religious divides and can, therefore, incorporate the idea of a Christian God. This requires no resistance or reconciliation between the religions. Thus, while her initial depictions of the Dakotan and Christian belief systems appear to suggest a dichotomous relationship in “The Great Spirit,” Zitkala-Ša uses divine imagery throughout her essay to create a more holistic conception of the American God and unite the two religions through this foundational belief.

To form this new vision of the American God, Zitkala-Ša explores the Dakotan and Christian viewpoints present in her life, beginning with her traditional beliefs as seen through the beautiful imagery of nature. She describes “the great blue overhead” and “huge cloud shadows . . . upon

the high bluffs," sweeping visions of the Great Spirit's immense grandeur. This grand sight may make human beings feel comparatively small, but nature can also offer peaceful relief from the everyday world, such as in "the sweet, soft cadences of the river's song." Zitkala-Ša argues this combination of great and small "[bespeaks] with eloquence the loving Mystery" (114). She teaches the audience that the Great Spirit, like the natural imagery in the introductory scene, embodies both awe-inspiring grandeur as well as peaceful intimacy which allows for a loving relationship between Creator and creation. She finds the grand, intimate, unrestrained Great Spirit in the natural environment and rejoices in her connection with and knowledge of Him.

Combining Zitkala-Ša's loving depictions of the Great Spirit and the essay's original title, "Why I Am a Pagan," leads some critics to interpret "The Great Spirit" as an act of Native resistance against Christianity. According to Totten, Zitkala-Ša "resists the authority of the dominant culture's narratives by celebrating the natural world" (105). Her celebration of nature in the introductory scene may support Totten's notion of resistance when considering the essay's original title, which suggests to the audience that Zitkala-Ša's piece will be a defense of her "pagan" beliefs and, as Totten might say, a resistance to differing beliefs. "Resistance" implies a conflict where Zitkala-Ša must promote her Dakota beliefs in opposition to the advancement of "nationalist narratives" (Totten 105): a Pagan versus the Christians. Zitkala-Ša appears to be justifying her resistance as she points out the unnatural aspects of Christianity, such as when her "solemn-faced" Christian cousin "[mouths] most strangely the jangling phrases of a bigoted creed" (116). Nature does not jangle—man-made things do; Zitkala-Ša's solemn description does not include anything natural. By associating her pagan beliefs with nature and then contrasting the Great Spirit's manifestations with artificial descriptions of Christianity, Zitkala-Ša argues that the Christian God manifests Himself in documents and imperfect ideologies formulated by man; therefore, as an artificial being, the Christian God must not be divinity in its true form. On the other hand, the Sioux author highlights her ability to have a personal connection with a loving Creator in nature, widening the divide between her gloriously complete Great Spirit and the coldly insufficient Christian God. When viewed as an argument for why she is a Pagan, this uncomfortable contrast might support Totten's notion of resistance.

Although the original title may imply feelings of resistance toward Christianity in Zitkala-Ša's essay, its new title turns the focus from exposing differences to finding religious unity through divinity itself. The original publication of "Why I Am a Pagan" in 1902 was met with backlash—especially from General Richard Pratt, who supervised Zitkala-Ša's work at the Carlisle Indian School. He wrote in the campus publication, *The Red Man and Helper*, that her essay was "trash" and that she was "worse than a pagan" (Zitkala-Ša xix). Following this negative response to her original essay, Zitkala-Ša republished her piece with a new conclusion and a new title: "The Great Spirit." The new title's divine emphasis demonstrates a shift of objective and approach in her essay. Velikova writes that "the retitling of the fourth essay from 'Why I Am a Pagan' to 'The Great Spirit' takes the tendency of replacing the specific and the personal with the abstract and the representative to an even higher level" (51). Since Zitkala-Ša's essay now focuses on the universal Great Spirit rather than specifically her as a pagan, the title no longer suggests that she will be defending her personal Dakota beliefs. Instead, there is no need for conflict because her critique of the Christian God is not a resistance to Anglo-American religion but an invitation to consider the possibilities introduced by her Dakota beliefs, including the limits of Christians' conceptions regarding divinity. In this way, Zitkala-Ša's essay becomes a holistic exploration of spirituality rather than a resistance driven by personal opinions.

By refusing to portray Christianity and her Native beliefs as two conflicting worlds, Zitkala-Ša subverts the common perception of paganism's inferiority at the time of her essay's publication, consequentially inviting readers to broaden their perception of divinity. Zitkala-Ša demonstrates within the first sentence of "The Great Spirit" her ability as a self-proclaimed pagan to be filled with the spirit and feel elevated by her beliefs. Directly opposing the claim made in an article published by *The Hartford Courant* in 1900 that paganism is "a low order of civilization" ("Paganism"), her diverse descriptions of nature present the Natives' beliefs as intricate and nuanced—not barbaric ideologies held by an unrefined people. Additionally, her strong spirituality does not align with the statement that pagans "[live] apart from . . . the best culture" ("Paganism"). She celebrates her own culture and its spiritual beliefs through fond descriptions of nature on a "genial summer day" (Zitkala-Ša 114). Though she does challenge the notion of Christianity's perfection, she in no way demeans Christian believers—noting with a

“strong, happy sense” that everyone is “so surely enfolded in [the Great Spirit’s] magnitude” (Zitkala-Ša 115). As the essay title suggests, Zitkala-Ša focuses on her belief in the divine as a common connection between the two religions. Challenging the common practice of the time to favor one religion over another by criticizing the other’s differences, Zitkala-Ša refuses to resist Christianity by praising paganism. Instead, she focuses on the divine connection between all believers while still acknowledging differing perspectives.

Though the less conflicted representation between Dakota and Christian beliefs causes some critics to read “The Great Spirit” as an act of reconciliation rather than resistance between two separate worlds, this interpretation fails to recognize Zitkala-Ša’s new conception of American spirituality. Continuing her focus of divinity, Zitkala-Ša closes her essay by explaining that “the phenomenal universe is [the Great Spirit’s] royal mantle. . . . Caught in its flowing fringes are the spangles and oscillating brilliants of sun, moon, and stars” (117). This language, reminiscent of the star-spangled banner, simultaneously describes an iconic symbol of the United States and a part of Zitkala-Ša’s Great Spirit. Through this abstract depiction of the American flag, she acknowledges the presence of American religious views in her own life and creates a more inclusive view of divinity. Aware of this inclusion, Velikova states, “[The ending passage] is a tour de force of symbolic integration in which nature, religion, and politics; Indianness and Americanness; the literal and the figurative, merge in a gesture of final reconciliation” (51). Zitkala-Ša concludes her essay by uniting the two cultures in her life, but Velikova’s choice to use the term reconciliation implies that these two worlds remain separate. In other words, the “warring allegiances” are no longer in conflict with each other, but they may not be completely united (Velikova 52). When regarded as reconciliation, Zitkala-Ša’s inclusion of American imagery in her exploration of the Great Spirit demonstrates that she accepts both ideologies in her life while still viewing them as separate worlds, but this interpretation overlooks the author’s efforts to unite believers through imagery of an all-encompassing deity.

Velikova’s notion of reconciliation in “The Great Spirit” aligns with the concept of American pluralism, yet these ideas fail to recognize the deeper spiritual connection that Zitkala-Ša portrays in her essay. In his essay “What Does It Mean to Be an ‘American’?” Michael Walzer states that pluralism exists with “no merger or fusion but only a fastening, a putting together:

many-in-one" (635). Regarding Zitkala-Ša's spiritual perspective, Velikova says that the author "[allows] a naturalized version of the American flag—the symbol of American statehood—into the universe governed by the Great Spirit of her Indian religion" (61). Therefore, Velikova argues that Zitkala-Ša supports a pluralist view of religion and spirituality. Velikova would agree that "there is no movement from many to one, but rather a simultaneity, a coexistence" (Walzer 636). In this view, Zitkala-Ša's Native Dakota religion still reigns supreme but with a concession of the existence of Christianity as a limited and imperfect understanding of the Dakota Great Spirit. Zitkala-Ša might accept Christianity as a different religion existing on the American continent, but it is still a separate world—one from which she has turned away.

Rather than dividing Christians and those who share her Native beliefs, Zitkala-Ša asserts a deeper spirituality that contradicts Walzer's pluralist idea of two separate worlds coming together through mere citizenship. In his essay, Walzer argues that if pluralism denotes many-in-one, "perhaps the adjective 'American' describes this kind of oneness. [A person] might say, tentatively, that it points to the citizenship, not the nativity or nationality, of the men and women it designates" (635). Walzer's view of pluralism posits that the Dakota and the Christian are united by the land on which they live. Simply put, the connection between these two groups is merely geographical. Velikova may not explicitly mention citizenship in her analysis, but her idea of reconciliation between "Indianness and Americanness" still leaves room for a cultural disconnect. According to Velikova, Zitkala-Ša may reconcile the different worlds—possibly through shared citizenship—but they are not perfectly unified. Zitkala-Ša suggests a deeper connection. In her essay, she draws on the "subtle knowledge of the native folk which enabled them to recognize a kinship to any and all parts of this vast universe" (Zitkala-Ša 115). The scope of Zitkala-Ša's "kinship" transcends the union that comes merely from citizenship. Consequently, applying Walzer's pluralist idea of religion in America to "The Great Spirit" undercuts Zitkala-Ša's endeavor to show that all people are intimately connected through God rather than merely citizenship.

Acknowledging the spiritual relationship between human beings, Zitkala-Ša calls for compassion toward all people. She follows her seemingly critical portrayal of Christianity by writing of "a wee child toddling in a wonder world" (Zitkala-Ša 117). Through the innocence and naiveté captured

by this image, Zitkala-Ša demonstrates sympathy for Christians. She suggests that each person, including the Christian, is like a little child searching for protection and comfort. Zitkala-Ša liberates all believers from cultural boundaries and conflicting views by unifying human beings through their shared relationship with God. Both the Christian and Zitkala-Ša have found a connection to God, albeit through different “conceptions of Infinite Love” (Zitkala-Ša 117). By equating humankind with children, Zitkala-Ša shows that her motives for writing “The Great Spirit” are out of “keen sympathy [for her] fellow-creatures” of God and not out of spite (115–16). Her idea of American spirituality focuses on love and understanding, building on the expansive kinship that comes from being children of a divine being.

By emphasizing the need for compassion toward all people because of a divine connection, Zitkala-Ša creates a new conception of the American God. The Dakota author makes it clear to the audience that she is not concerned with “racial lines” or country borders, for she sees that “all are akin” (Zitkala-Ša 115–16). Zitkala-Ša is not simply “allowing” America into the realm of her Great Spirit, as Velikova states, but she is creating a new American spirituality where all perspectives, regardless of their practices, are united through God. As Washburn explains, Zitkala-Ša “[takes] the torn fragments of her life and [stitches] them, at times painfully, into a functioning, productive bicultural identity” (273). The Dakota and Christian beliefs become one in Zitkala-Ša. She depicts a divine being whose influence shines down from the heavens and illuminates all of His children. Zitkala-Ša may refer to Him as the Great Spirit, but the universe from which “His divine breath” flows closely resembles the American flag. With this image, she argues that proper American spirituality is founded on an all-encompassing conception of the divine.

In “The Great Spirit,” Zitkala-Ša lovingly creates a new vision of American spirituality that respects both the Christian and Dakota conceptions of divinity. Although she may illustrate the differences between the two ideologies, she does not resist Christianity as Totten suggests, nor does she imply that one religion must be superior to the other. Instead, Zitkala-Ša’s focus on an all-encompassing God challenges Christian believers to think bigger in terms of divinity. Zitkala-Ša’s depiction of holistic divinity does much more than reconcile two belief systems as Velikova argues; the Native author creates a new conception of God that transcends cultural and religious divides. By focusing on divinity, Zitkala-Ša unites human beings

on an intimate and sacred level. She demonstrates an effective way to confront seemingly different faiths. Instead of dwelling on their fundamental differences, Zitkala-Ša encourages all believers to come together through shared, intrinsic beliefs while respecting the various perspectives and interpretations. This approach does not dilute traditional Dakota or Christian ideologies—it celebrates the great divine being who unites all people.

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