7. Kenekuk and the Missionaries

The arrival of Kenekuk and the Vermillion people in the West in 1833 immediately attracted the attention of Christian missionaries intent on winning Indian souls. At first, Kenekuk and his followers appeared to accept the priests and ministers with open arms. The Indians intended to reestablish their prosperous way of life along the western banks of the Missouri, and they knew that the missionaries could act as intermediaries between them and a federal government that was painfully slow in delivering promised treaty annuities.

Over the ensuing years, Catholics and various Protestant groups founded missions and schools on Kickapoo lands, confidently embarking on the task of converting Kenekuk’s followers to Christ’s ways while convincing them of the superiority of white culture. Firm believers in the American melting pot, the missionaries were certain that Christ’s teachings and an appreciation for the “manual arts” would radically improve the Indians’ way of life. But making Christians out of “heathens” remained the missionaries’ primary goal, and the Kickapoo Prophet’s religion so closely resembled Christianity that most preachers thought conversion would be easy.

Despite their initial optimism, the missionaries found, over time, that they won but few disciples. While the Vermillion people willingly adapted to white society’s secular ways, they paid scant attention to the Gospel. Their loyalty to Kenekuk’s religion frustrated and angered the white clergy, who eventually left Kickapoo country to work among more credulous Indians.
The Kickapoo village locations in Kansas, 1833–1854.

The Baptists made the first attempt at proselytizing among the relocated Kickapoos and their Potawatomi allies. In May 1833, Isaac McCoy instructed the Reverend Daniel French to visit the Kickapoos, who reportedly had asked the Baptists to educate the Indian children. Because Kenekuk’s people seemed devout, worked hard, and abstained from alcohol, Baptist expectations for success were high. Their hopes were quickly dashed, however, for the Indians stubbornly maintained a “remarkably uniform” attachment to the prophet. “For a few weeks it was hoped that the religious disposition of the party would facilitate our labours among this tribe generally,” McCoy wrote, “but in this we soon discovered that we had been mistaken.” After a short stay, French left because both the Vermillion and the Prairie bands
had rejected his overtures. Later, the disgruntled McCoy admitted that Kenekuk’s followers displayed a few good ethics, but the Baptist claimed that in actual practice “the morals of the party were scarcely, if any better, than those of their dissolute kindred.” To McCoy, their religious beliefs were merely “a step from savage blindness into greater absurdity.”

The Kickapoo enjoyed only a brief respite before other preachers arrived to “save” them from their “heathen” ways. In July 1833, the Presbyterian missionary William Smith visited the villages and found the Indians “moral in their deportment and . . . very sincere in their religion”; he astutely concluded that Kenekuk’s faith was too strong to counteract. Smith thought that the Jesuits might have better success, because the prophet’s religion closely resembled Catholicism, and he quickly abandoned thoughts of establishing a Presbyterian station in the area.

Shortly after Smith’s departure, one of the most colorful characters ever to preach in Indian country appeared. Her name was Harriet Livermore, and she was determined to save the entire world, not just the Indians, from the clutches of Satan. As the daughter of a New Hampshire congressman, Livermore had enjoyed the excitement of Washington social life until a young man had rejected her affections. Withdrawing into a deep depression, she felt that her previous life had been meaningless: “Where were the hours I had sacrificed to the God of this world, in dancing, card playing, novel reading and foolish talking?” After a period of mourning, she decided to start anew: “It was in September, A.D. 1811, that tired of the vain, thoughtless life I had led, sick of the world, disappointed in all my hopes of sublunar bliss, I drew up a resolution in my mind to commence a religious life—to become a religious person.”

She renounced her old ways and became a disciple of the Philadelphia humanitarian Elias Boudinot, who suspected that the American Indians were one of the lost tribes of Israel. Boudinot was convinced that the millennium was imminent and that the Indians were God’s chosen people. He died in 1821, but Livermore had found his ideas convincing and would eventually seek out the Indians for her own spiritual fulfillment.

In an age when professional women were rare, she became an itinerant preacher and by the late 1820s was famous (or notorious) in the eastern states for her spellbinding sermons. Writing to a friend in April 1827, Dolley Madison said of Livermore: “I for one would go to listen to her in search of light! But is she of the pure in spirit, filled with true religion without alloy, or does worldly ambition for éclat tarnish the perfection of the soul she possesses?” John Greenleaf Whittier called Livermore a “brilliant darkeyed woman, striking in her personal appearance and gifted in conversation”; his famous poem “Snowbound” featured this strange, “violent-tempered woman of indomitable will.” John Quincy Adams detected “a permanency in this woman’s monomania which seems accountable only from the impulse of vanity and the love of fame. The religious spirit easily allies itself to these passions, and they easily grasp the garb of religion.”

Livermore paid little attention to either public acclaim or ridicule. “As to being made a spectacle, a public show, a kind of by-word among a multitude, a derision and scorn to thousands, it does not affect me, when my heart is devoted to God.” Despite criticism from
some quarters, she continued her crusade and in 1827 harangued a Washington audience that included President Adams and several congressmen, warning them to repent, for the end of the world was at hand. Five years later, after failing to persuade the citizens of Charleston, South Carolina, to free their slaves, she decided to take her message to the Indians.6

Livermore left Washington in May 1832, in search of the Indian prophet who preached rousing sermons on the true path to God’s heart. Could this Indian be God’s true messenger, the man who Boudinot had predicted would soon lead Indians—the chosen people—to the promised land? Although a “small voice” from above kept whispering “‘Thou must go to Jerusalem,’” Livermore’s “face was then set as a flint towards the wilderness of America”; she had to find out for certain if this Indian was a bona-fide holy man.

For over a year she traveled slowly westward. “Other females were in company with a husband, or a father, or a brother, or in charge of a Missionary, and a member of his family,” she wrote with unconcealed pride; “I am conscientiously solitary!” She sallied forth, “undismayed by Cholera, sandbars, or floating timbers, by officers, soldiers, agents, traders, commissioners, or the devil.”7 In the summer of 1833 this Pilgrim Stranger, as she modestly called herself, finally arrived at Fort Leavenworth, where she expected “to pitch my tent with the prophet’s band of the Kickapoo nation.”8

Most of the details of her meeting with Kenekuk have been lost to history; but it seems likely that the Kickapoo Prophet politely greeted this woman who spoke directly to God and preached that Christ would soon return to save the red people from destruction. “Watch and pray.” she warned, “for we know not at what moment the whirlwind may rise, and the horrible tempest come. The event of course is nigh—I believe at the doors; and the condition of my red brethren is one of the beacons that warns me. May God preserve us from falling into ‘the great transgression!’ ”9

In August 1833, Livermore gave Kenekuk the dreadful news: Napoleon Bonaparte had risen from the dead as the Antichrist; Andrew Jackson’s administration would be overthrown, and Napoleon’s military dictatorship would impose its tyranny over the world. The rapture, she declared, was at hand! “It is the literal reign of anti-christ,” the time when the devil will rule the world. “It is impossible to avoid this terrible object.” She begged Kenekuk to give her sanctuary on Kickapoo lands, for on September 4 the Prophet Elijah would reappear to save the Indians from impending doom. The Hebrew prophet would swoop down to lift Kenekuk and all of the Kickapoos away from the chaos and transport them up to heaven.10 Livermore had no intention of being left behind with Napoleon and the devil; she would cling to the skirts of Elijah and the Kickapoos as they made their flight to the promised land.

Kenekuk’s reaction to Livermore’s prophecy was not recorded, but the thought of spending an eternity with the Pilgrim Stranger was probably more than even a compassionate man could bear. He most likely listened politely, as was his nature, and then gave little more thought to this crazy white woman. Commissioner Henry Ellsworth’s response, however, was clear and immediate. Astonished that William Clark had actually given Livermore permission to pursue her calling among the Indians, Ellsworth dashed off an urgent appeal to officials in Washington for the authorization to evict this “deranged” woman from Indian
country. “It is true, her visit to the Kickapoos is by the consent of the Superintendent of Indian affairs at St. Louis,” he wrote. “But I do not believe, Gen. Clark is acquainted with her present principles. With the kindest feelings as a Gentleman, to a Lady, I am decidedly of the opinion that her residence among the Indians can do no good and may do much harm.”

On August 18 the impatient Ellsworth took matters into his own hands; confronting Livermore, he demanded that she leave the area immediately. “The Government did not want to have the Indians believe that God communicated in an audible voice to their prophet,” he told her. The recent Black Hawk War had demonstrated “the bad influence of Indian dreamers.” The Indians, he insisted, needed to tend their crops and support their families; they had no time for “superstition.” He promised to do what he “could as a gentleman to make her departure agreeable.”

But Livermore demurred, declaring that God had forbidden her from ever leaving, and she would go only if shackled in irons. “My mind is pacified by the toil and mortification I endure,” she rhapsodized, “for a hope that my testimony will be of some service to the Indians, and a determination to try to comfort them, stimulates my willing spirit to persevere, and the weak, suffering flesh is forced to yield.” But when September 4 passed and Elijah failed to make his appearance, she threw herself to the ground shouting: “What shall I do?” Her mission had failed. “O! could I realize,” she wrote, “that the murmuring breeze of the forests in Missouri [Kansas], would mingle with my simple songs, repeated by the Christian Kickapoo, or Potawattamie Indians, in their sorrowful days, my praises to God should ascend on the wings of the morning, on the cloud of the evening, in strains of adoring gratitude, that he permitted me to write them. But, alas! I fear this joy may never be mine. Those tribes know not the white man’s language.”

The Pilgrim Stranger soon departed on an even more quixotic and heroic mission, for God had “ordered” her to Jerusalem to spread Christ’s teachings among the Jews.

Much to the relief of Ellsworth and the other federal officials, the dedicated souls who thereafter descended on the Kickapoo villages preached more conventional doctrines. On November 18, 1833, just ten days after Ellsworth had temporarily eased the Prairie Band’s displeasure with the new lands, the Jesuit Father Benedict Roux arrived to scout out prospects for a Catholic mission. Roux especially hoped to confer with the Kickapoo Prophet, but Kenekuk and most of the other men were away hunting. The priest was not discouraged, however, because women, children, and old people flocked around him like “an angel sent from heaven.” He was pleased to find that they “pray every day, morning, night and before meals; they sanctify Sunday as we do and spend it entirely in prayer. They do not swear nor wage war, nor lie, nor have more than one wife; they believe in Heaven, Purgatory and Hell, [and] honor the Blessed Virgin and Saints.” The Jesuit wrote to his superiors in St. Louis that Kenekuk had “two very docile sons, who, like their father, show themselves favorably inclined towards religion.” If God would only send one of them to the priesthood, he thought, “what mighty conquests for religion would then ensue!” Because of all the “edifying things” that he had witnessed, Roux was sure that a Catholic mission would be a tremendous success. His favorable report prompted Catholic officials to initiate plans for a station on the Kickapoo
When Roux returned to the villages for a brief visit on January 1, 1834, Kenekuk told him that the Indians were anxious for the “blackrobes” to show them the way to heaven. The prophet had good reason for making a favorable impression on the priest. Kenekuk knew that the Indians’ economic security would be enhanced if the federal government were to live up to its treaty commitment to provide money, farm tools, housing supplies, and educational needs. Because the Kickapoos’ repeated pleas for promised federal assistance had fallen on deaf ears, he had decided to allow missionaries, who had greater influence over Washington bureaucrats, to proselytize among his people. Although he realized that the priests and ministers posed a threat to his authority, Kenekuk had enough confidence in his own religious powers to permit competition from outsiders.

Before the Catholics could act, the Methodist minister Jerome C. Berryman wandered into the villages with plans of his own. Sometime in January 1834, Berryman spent his first night in a Kickapoo wickup and discovered that it would take hard work to “civilize” these “very strange” people. He noted the Indians’ blankets, breechcloths, leggings, and buckskin moccasins as evidence of their primitive nature. Their bark wickiups, crude furnishings, and homemade farming tools, moreover, convinced him that these people “had never been, properly speaking, settled, but had always led a roving life.”

Berryman was, nevertheless, greatly pleased by the devoutness and the conduct of the prophet’s followers. “When I went to that people,” he recalled, “I found among them a man of their own tribe by the name of Ke-en-e-kuk who exercised unlimited sway over the larger portion of the tribe, but the rest [the Prairie Kickapoos] despised him. The last named, however, were opposed to any innovations upon their savage habits, and consequently opposed to missions and schools.” The Methodist was encouraged when, after an initial coolness, Kenekuk invited Berryman to preach at Kickapoo services. Within a short time, the preacher had baptized over four hundred Indians, including the prophet himself. Berryman’s superiors were so enthusiastic about their prospects for winning converts that they gave Kenekuk a Methodist preaching license; they also promised him an annual salary of two hundred dollars to serve as a preacher’s assistant.

Convinced that the prophet had been a practicing Christian for about twelve years, Berryman asserted that Isaac McCoy had made a “great mistake” in implying that the Indian leader knew little theology. The more perceptive Methodist reckoned that the Kickapoos and their allies had been without proper guidance for so long that “their theory and practice of religion would be imperfect.” Although Kenekuk’s followers had “many religious peculiarities foreign to Christianity,” they were “truly pious” and “united with us.” Kenekuk further convinced the preacher about his sincerity when he advised his followers to seek out Berryman for religious instruction. The white minister was happy to comply; within a few months he and his wife, Sarah, were teaching about forty children in a log schoolhouse that was built near the villages.

Such efforts to convert Kenekuk’s people as well as the Prairie Kickapoos continued throughout those early years on the Missouri River. Most missionaries thought that the
prophet’s religion was a midpoint between paganism and Christianity, and they reasoned that with just a bit more education, his people would accept conversion. They found Kenekuk’s capriciousness a hindrance at times, but they were sure that they could readily overcome this and other obstacles.

A few preachers, however, suspected that the prophet’s religion would be difficult to counteract. Visiting the Berrymans on June 27, 1834, the Presbyterian missionary John Dunbar noticed that Kenekuk held “an almost unbounded influence” over his band. “Whatever the prophet says is law and gospel with them,” Dunbar noted in his journal. He was impressed that the Kickapoo leader forbade stealing, lying, profane language, and whiskey drinking. “But whether he prohibits every vicious practice,” Dunbar continued, “is quite doubtful. His religion may, perhaps, be said to be good, so far as it goes, but how far it does go precisely, I have not been able to ascertain.”

Dunbar returned in July with his colleague Samuel Allis, who had been anxious to learn about the prophet’s religion. Allis was astonished by what he saw, especially the practice of flagellation. He later wrote, with more feeling than grammatical skill:

The Kickapoos and Potawatomies that were with them, have about nine correcters, which do all the whipping. These men have small whittled stick they carry with 'em, attend the metings to regulate the children and dogs, and see if all are in there places, they also attend school, one or more of them, to regulate the children, and if they are not there the teacher must not whip the children, even parents are not permitted to whip there own children. I believe Friday in each week is whipping day with them, all that have done 'rong dureing the week, come forward and confess and take a whipping, this is sort of Catholic form. They also put a cross at the graves of some of the dead.

The prophet says the Great Father (God), took him out of his hart and placed him in this world. He went astray until about nine years since, reformed, and began to serve God, and had since ben Holy; [he] has ben led by the Great Spirret to do good and lead his people (many of them) in the right way. I am afraid his hart has not ben changed, but [he] is a desineing man, and is imposing upon his people. I believe to this is the opinion of Brother Berryman.

Some of his people, I believe, do as well as they know how; they talk much about the good way and the bad way, and about praying to the Great Spirret. [They] meet together often to worship, and have a great many ceremonies, but they seem to know little about Jesus Christ, and the way of salvation throu a Redeemer.

Despite observations by astute outsiders that the Methodist venture was doomed to failure, Berryman and his colleagues remained ever hopeful. On January 28, 1835, after a year’s labor among Kenekuk’s people, Berryman assured his superiors that the “prospect of success, I have no hesitation in saying, is good.” A short time later, however, he complained that Kenekuk rarely allowed him to hold services in the church that the government had recently built on the reserve. Although the prophet insisted that his people were too ignorant to understand the white man’s words and kept promising to ease them into Methodism, Berryman was dubious.

The Methodist preacher came to realize, moreover, that Kenekuk’s “peculiar” methods
always prevailed, and like Dunbar and Allis, Berryman was shocked that the Indians willingly submitted to corporal punishment. “I have often seen both men and women at their public meetings for worship come forward and receive a number of lashes on their bare backs, so well laid on as to cause the blood to run freely,” he wrote later. “Many of them bore visible scars on their backs, caused by former flagellations. We found out finally that this presumptuous man [Kenekuk] claimed to be the son of God come again in the flesh, and that the Father had sent him to the red people this time as he did to the white people before!” This was superstitious nonsense, Berryman railed; he lamented the fact that many Indians believed that the shedding of blood was “expiatory in its effects, hence their willing submission to the lash.”

In spite of such misgivings, the Methodist superintendent Thomas Johnson remained optimistic. Although Johnson admitted in June 1835 that the Kickapoo mission had encountered some difficulties, these were “fast giving way, and I think our prospects of ultimate success are as good as they ever have been.” This was an accurate assessment—the Methodists’ prospects had never been good. Their hopes were dealt a severe blow the following month, when another Jesuit priest arrived at the Kickapoo villages in response to Father Roux’s encouraging reports to the Catholic authorities.

Father Charles F. Van Quickborne was little concerned that the Methodists had already established a mission and school for the Kickapoo bands. In their relations with Indians, the Jesuits had always held several advantages over their Protestant counterparts. The blackrobes were not hindered by family responsibilities or financial concerns, and their vow of chastity was appreciated by the Indians, who realized that interracial unions often ruptured the tribes’ political harmony. The priests’ classical education, moreover, gave them a far greater understanding of other cultures. The blackrobes willingly made concessions to local customs, moreover, and unlike most Protestant ministers, they began serious mission work only after they had mastered tribal languages and had come to understand the folkways. The Jesuits had few qualms about debating theological questions with tribal religious leaders: they seized the opportunity to discredit competitors and to enhance Jesuit prestige among the Indians. Rather than attempting to stamp out traditional dances, games, and festivals, the blackrobes tolerated these native ceremonies and sought to merge them with Catholic rituals and permitted the Indians to express Catholic doctrine in their tribal language and thought structure.

With this history of Jesuit success, Van Quickborne had no inkling that serious difficulties might ensue when he began to proselytize among the Kickapoos. Father Roux’s glowing reports had mentioned nothing about the Vermillion Band’s well-established religion, which shielded the Indians against any outsider who might seek to change their ways. The ethnocentric Van Quickborne would never admit that Kenekuk’s moral code approximated that of the Jesuits, and he would scoff at Indian claims that they had already discovered the true path to salvation.

On July 4, 1835, the blackrobe ventured into the Kickapoo villages, determined to snatch Indian souls from the clutches of Satan as well as the Methodists. The following day was Sunday, and he was invited to say Mass at the home of Lawrence Pensineau, a trader for the
American Fur Company. After Mass, the Kickapoo Prophet greeted the priest, and after a brief exchange of pleasantries, the two launched into a discussion of theology. Curious about the Jesuit’s intentions, Kenekuk asked him to explain Catholic doctrine.

With a scornful air, Van Quickenborne seized this opportunity to demonstrate his superiority over an uneducated Indian. “We teach,” he replied, “that every man must believe in God, hope in God, love God above all things and his neighbor as himself; those who do this will go to heaven, and those who do not will go to hell.” The priest added that the biblical prophets had “proved through miracles that God had spoken to them.” This was an obvious attempt to discredit Kenekuk’s claims that he was acting under the direct command of the Great Spirit.

The Kickapoo Prophet interrupted to proclaim that he too had performed miracles. “This is the very way I got to be believed when I began to preach,” Kenekuk said; “I raised the dead to life. There was a woman, who, so everyone thought, could not possibly recover her health; I breathed on her and from that moment she began to improve and is now in good health. Another time I saw an infant just about to die; I took it in my arms and at the end of a few days it was cured.”

When Van Quickenborne blandly replied that Kenekuk had merely doctored the sick and had not performed any miracles, the Indian flared up in anger. A stranger had dared contradict the Kickapoo Prophet! After a few minutes, however, his vexation eased, for he recognized the futility of arguing with this contentious Jesuit. Kenekuk knew that with both Catholics and Methodists stationed among his people, the missionaries would have to compete for the Indians’ favor, so he decided on a diplomatic approach. “I realize that my religion is not a good one,” he admitted, “if my people wish to embrace yours, I will do as they say.”

On the following Sunday, Kenekuk announced that the Great Spirit had long promised to send someone to help them complete their religious instruction. Perhaps the blackrobes were the answer to the Kickapoos’ prayers; if his followers wanted to become Catholics, the prophet would allow it.

Van Quickenborne was skeptical about Kenekuk’s motives: “God alone knows whether he spoke sincerely.” Van Quickenborne was, however, less suspicious about the Prairie Kickapoos, when, after a council, Pashishi requested that “a blackrobe come and reside among us with a view to instruct us.”

With this invitation in hand, Van Quickenborne hurried to Washington to seek federal aid for a Catholic mission to the Kickapoos. Arriving in September, he established temporary headquarters at the Jesuit-operated Georgetown University, a short carriage ride from most federal offices. On September 17 he sent to federal authorities an outline of his plans for a mission. The Kickapoo chiefs, he avowed, “including even the prophet Kenekuk,” had expressed their strong desire to have the Jesuits settle among them. “The prophet said that he had always hoped that a Black-gown . . . would be sent by the Great Spirit to help him in instructing his people and teaching them the truths he did not know.” Five days later, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Herring agreed to provide the Jesuits with $500 to be paid as soon as they had built their school. The commissioner realized that tensions were
mounting between the Vermillion and Prairie Kickapoo bands, and he evidently thought that the Catholics could help to settle their quarrels.

On June 1, 1836, Father Van Quickendenborne and three assistants disembarked from a steamboat near the Kickapoo villages and were immediately greeted by Kenekuk and Pashishi, as well as several other Indians. Van Quickendenborne was confident that the Jesuits would win many souls, especially among the Prairie Kickapoos. He informed his superiors that Pashishi was “quite proud of the circumstance of our coming at his particular invitation and for this reason wished me to build near his town; on the other hand the Prophet expressed a wish that we should do as much for his band as for the others.” To avoid hard feelings, Van Quickendenborne decided to locate the station halfway between the rival villages.27

A few weeks later, Father Christian Hoecken arrived and immediately began to study the Kickapoo vocabulary. Because Hoecken mastered their language quickly, many Indians grew fond of him; they called the kindly priest their Kickapoo Father. He encouraged them to perform their own music at church services, and during Mass the Indians always “behaved modestly,” But although Hoecken made friends easily, he found the winning of Indian souls more difficult; by the end of the year the Jesuits had converted two Kickapoo children, but no adults had consented to become Catholics. Father Peter Verhaegen, the superintendent of the Missouri Catholic Missionary Society, grimly noted during a visit to the mission that the Indians remained strongly “adverse to a change of their superstitious practices and vicious manners,” Even the ever-optimistic Van Quickendenborne grudgingly admitted that it was “one thing to come to the Indian mission and another to convert the Indians.”28

Although many Indians pointed out that the Methodist school already more than served their needs, the Jesuit institution opened its doors early in 1837. The enrollment at Berryman’s school had dropped from ninety to sixteen students since its inception three years earlier. While few children attended the Protestant school, fewer still went to the Catholic one. Those who did attend, furthermore, were usually more interested in food or presents than in reading, writing, arithmetic, and the catechism. In his 1837 school report, Father Verhaegen warned federal officials that if conditions did not improve soon, the Jesuits “might be compelled to abandon the buildings and the land (about 15 acres well fenced in), which would cost a loss to the society of at least $3000.”29

The Jesuit endeavors had faced severe handicaps since the priests’ arrival the previous year. Kenekuk, angry that the blackrobes called him a false prophet and denounced his religion, commanded his followers to ignore the Jesuits. Even Pashishi, who had invited the priests to build a mission, had become somewhat disenchanted. He nevertheless favored the Catholics over the Methodists; the most likely candidates for sainthood, he thought, were the priests. “It is very seldom that white people go to heaven,” he reasoned. “If any get there it must be the preachers, particularly the blackrobes who keep no women at all.” But he warned that if a priest ever tried “to change the old customs of my forefathers, I will quiet him and listen to him no more.”30

When the Jesuits pressured the Prairie Kickapoos to attend Mass, settle down, and abstain from whiskey and gambling, the Indians responded in typical fashion. “We want no prayer,”
they announced; “our forefathers got along very well without it and we are not going to feel its loss.” Despite such obstinacy, the priests’ spirits remained high. “It is a well known fact that the Indians in general are predisposed in favor of Catholic Black-robcs.” Van Quickenborne wrote his superiors in February 1837. “With the help of God and with patience we can go far.”

But Van Quickenborne and his fellow missionaries never got far with the Kickapoos. By the summer of 1837, Van Quickenborne had exhausted his strength in endeavoring to make Christians out of them. On August 17 the seemingly indefatigable priest died following a brief illness; he was only fifty years old.

The other Jesuits tried to carry on, but their task proved impossible. By autumn, many Prairie Kickapoos had wearied of Jesuit attempts to change their ways. These Indians also resented Kenekuk’s interference in their affairs and prepared to leave for more hospitable surroundings. Pashishi told Father Hoecken that whiskey peddlers from Missouri had also contributed to their discontent; alcoholism had affected his people so greatly that they must move or be destroyed. Drunken Indians, moreover, made poor farmers and even worse churchgoers.

Father Verhaegen was especially upset by the Jesuits’ lack of success; he held Berryman and the Methodists primarily responsible. The Jesuits’ failures, Verhaegen speculated, were owing “first to the presence and opposition of a Methodist Minister who lives among them, to the vicinity of the whites, and to the difficulties which always attend the commencement of such establishments.” Thinking as much about the financial cost to the Church as about the loss of converts, Verhaegen wondered: “If the Kickapoos go away, what will become of the buildings which we have erected and the improvements which we have made?” He advised federal officials that in the future, priests must use primitive dwellings and build permanent structures only after they had become sure of reaping an ample harvest of Indian souls.

When the disgruntled Prairie Kickapoos promised to return to their village after their winter hunt of 1837/38, Jesuit uneasiness subsided temporarily. But the Indians continued to reject the Jesuits’ advances. Many Prairie Kickapoos, furthermore, never returned from their hunt, preferring to join kinsmen who were already living in Texas and Mexico. When the priests threatened to close the mission in the spring of 1838, Pashishi begged them to stay for at least another year; his people would surely have reformed by then. “It is I who invited you to come here,” he pleaded. “I send my children to your school. You have done more good here in a year than others have done in five or six. You have cured our children of smallpox, you have befriended us in our needs, and you have been kind even to the wicked. The storm which makes the thunder roar above your heads will not last forever.”

The Jesuits’ morale improved somewhat on May 21, 1838, when Father Pierre Jean De Smet arrived at the mission. Four days later the noted Jesuit had a long talk with Pashishi, who readily acknowledged that Catholicism was the true religion. The Prairie leader confided that he often had a “vision,” or dream, of Jesuits in heaven, admonishing the Indians for their “unfaithfulness and vices.” Because the Kickapoos had rejected the laws of Christ, Pashishi continued, “the Great Spirit had abandoned them to all sorts of irregularities and
to the impositions of a false prophet [Kenekuk].” Failing to realize that these visions were similar to those of the Kickapoo Prophet, De Smet determined that Pashishi was “a man of good wit and good sense, who needs only a little courage to become an excellent Christian.” De Smet advised his fellow priests to continue their labors, for surely they could overcome the “impositions” of one uneducated Indian—Kenekuk—and make the Catholic mission a success. After all, Catholicism was the one true religion; Kenekuk’s faith was “heresy.”

Overcoming such heresy, however, proved impossible, because most of the remaining Prairie Kickapoos soon abandoned the reservation for locations far removed from the meddling missionaries. With the Prairie Indians gone, Kenekuk reigned supreme, and at Protestant-style frontier revivals he expounded his religious doctrines. He won adherents among other tribes in the region; since their days in the Wabash region, many Potawatomis had embraced the prophet’s message of peace and love. The Potawatomis intermarried with the Vermillion Kickapoos, who gladly accepted the former as members of the band. Together they pledged their faith and devotion to Kenekuk.

Because most Kickapoos and Potawatomis felt a deep loyalty to Kenekuk, missionary efforts to win converts proved more difficult than ever, and by autumn 1839, attendance at the Catholic and Methodist schools was light. Jerome Berryman held that the “detrimental influence” of Kenekuk was responsible for keeping Indian children away from the Methodist classroom; it was nearly impossible to teach when students could “abscond and go home with impunity.” The frustrated preacher blamed parental “ignorance and prejudice, instability and apathy,” as well as the inherent laziness of the older students, for the breakdown in school discipline. He also lamented that the tribes avoided “true” men of the cloth, such as himself, and flocked to an “impostor” such as Kenekuk. “The pretensions of these savage politicians are supported in the main by appeals to the credulity of the ignorant masses.” Berryman intoned; such impostors were responsible for many evils in the world.

The pretenders have performed some wonderful deed, seen some dazzling vision, or received some startling revelation from the Great Spirit, all of which is received upon the bare assertion of the deceiver with a willingness proportionate to his audacity and the stupidity of his dupes. This is the way that the great leaders among savages rise to place and power. There may be now and then an honorable exception. It is the fruitful source of the miseries that have fallen upon the savage tribes of America, and would to God it were true alone of these.

Does not the heathen world groan beneath the accumulating evils which arise from ignorance, superstition and vice on the part of the many and the shrewdness, ambition, and presumptuousness of the comparatively few on the other hand? Every age has produced in every country minds of lofty aspirations, and nothing but intelligence and virtue can prevent the reckless and ruinous adventures of such minds. This class of men must be held in check by the counteracting influence of popular virtue, or they will in time barbarize the world. Our own distracted country is cursed with too many Ke-en-e-kus today.

Agent Richard Cummins blamed poor school attendance and the rejection of missionaries, not on the Kickapoo Prophet, but on the unfortunate death of the government-employed blacksmith. For some reason Cummins omitted details about this event in his reports to
federal officials. It appeared, however, that the Kickapoos disliked their blacksmith and had been bickering with him for over a year. Sometime in 1839 he was killed, probably during an argument. The agent alleged that one of Kenekuk’s sons was the culprit. While no charges were ever filed, Cummins noted that “after this unfortunate circumstance happened, there seemed to be a backwardness in some of the parents of the children in sending or letting them remain at school.”37 The Indians’ general distrust of whites was probably strengthened by the incident.

In the years that followed, the Kickapoos and their Potawatomi allies generally shunned the missionaries. By 1840 the Jesuits and the Methodists were spending most of their time preaching to white settlers across the river in Missouri or to soldiers at Fort Leavenworth. The preachers resented Kenekuk and held him primarily responsible for their failure to win converts. Father Nicholas Point, who visited the Jesuit mission in late December 1840, was shocked by what he observed: “Here had our missionaries been laboring for five years in their midst, and yet on Sunday during Mass you could scarcely see more than one of them in attendance at the chapel.” Point also condemned the Kickapoo Prophet: “By his cool effrontery and persevering industry, this man, who is a genius in his way, succeeded in forming a congregation of three hundred souls, whom he used to assemble in a church which the United States Government had built for him, and palsied all the exertions of four missionaries of the Society.” When the Catholic station closed its doors for good on May 1, 1841, Point wept for the “mission which had been plunged into the deepest abyss of moral degradation by the scandalous conduct of a people who pretend to civilization.”38

Kenekuk was a “false prophet!” railed the deeply resentful Father De Smet, who was appalled by the inexplicable failure of the Jesuit mission. “He calls himself the envoy of God, Christ under a new form, and invites all the nations of the earth to come and gather under his banner.” The priest had trouble in rationalizing the fact that one illiterate “savage” had prevented the highly educated Jesuits from converting the unschooled “heathens.” Like his fellow blackrobes, De Smet scorned those who regarded Kenekuk as their savior and was blind to the fact that the Indians’ syncretic religion served their needs far better than did Catholicism. Caring little that the Vermillion people were sober, industrious, and moral, he denounced them for their stubborn unyielding faith in a pagan dogma. For want of a better reason, he decided that the prophet was “profoundly ignorant of Christian doctrines” and that Kenekuk’s followers were as “densely ignorant” of sin, confession, and penance as the “rudest savages.”39 The Jesuits had little choice, he conceded, but to leave Kickapoo country and reap souls among less obstinate Indians.

The Methodists fared little better than the Catholics. Jerome Berryman left in October 1841 to direct the Shawnee Methodist Mission in present-day Johnson County, Kansas. His successor, Nathaniel Talbott, found that he had little to do, for only the few remaining Prairie Kickapoos bothered to seek his spiritual advice. In May 1843 the visiting minister William Patton noted that, although Talbott’s preachings were fairly well attended by the Prairie Kickapoos, most of the Indians “did not seem to be much concerned about their future and eternal interests. They appeared to be more anxious to have their faces well painted, and their
persons adorned after the manner of Indians, than to know what they were to do in order to be saved; yet several of them gave good attention, for awhile, to the things which were spoken.”

Although Talbott proselytized for several years, he won few converts among the Kickapoo and Potawatomis. He naturally blamed his meager harvest of souls on the “heathen prophet” Kenekuk. Talbott informed his superiors that the Indians “have among them a prophet who deceives them and does all he can against the gospel.” The Reverend Patton confirmed that “Jesus Christ has no part in the religion of the prophet. Let the church awake to their duty, and in every responsible way labor to dispel these dark clouds of superstition, sin and delusion.”

It was Methodism that was dispelled, however, and not the prophet’s religion. In the summer of 1848 the Reverend Edmund Wright happened upon Kenekuk as the Indian leader was visiting Weston, Missouri, just across the river from the Kickapoo village. Wright noted that this was the same man who for many years “has had a separate congregation every Sabbath, and has opposed the [Methodist] mission, pretending to be the Indians’ Savior and deriving his authority from certain characters on a ‘chip’ which he has called his Bible. Kenekuk has persuaded scores of Indians to believe that white men killed Jesus Christ before he had made an atonement for the Indians, and that he, Kenekuk, has been appointed by the Great Spirit to supply the deficiency.”

Kenekuk, ignoring the complaints of frustrated ministers and priests, carried on the work of the Great Spirit despite their hostility. The Kickapoo Prophet had outmaneuvered the white preachers, thereby ensuring a separate religious and cultural identity for his people. His next task was to provide for his followers’ economic security while preparing them for the thousands of white settlers who would someday invade their lands. Throughout the 1840s his band prospered, unhindered by meddling preachers, and, unified by the prophet’s religion, looked confidently to the future.