

11. The Charismatic Patterns: Canada's Riel Rebellion of 1885 as a Millenarian Protest Movement (1985)

Manfred Mossmann

Millenarianism has been a common phenomenon in the Third or, perhaps more precisely, the Fourth World (that of oppressed minorities). Acculturation leads to social anomie, at which point economic forces give way to spiritual forces: visionaries emerge and appeals to spirituality prevail, soon compounded by reliance on the supernatural and the forging of legends. It is in such a charismatic context that the Riel saga can be profitably examined.

The Wider Context

On October 20, 1982 the police in Maiduguri (North-Eastern Nigeria) who tried to arrest members of an Islamic sect named "Dan Kabarv" were met by gunfire. The following three-day battle cost more than 500 lives. The group's leader, prophet and spiritual father, Mallan Muhammad Marwa, had been killed during riots in December 1980. The sect was outlawed by the Nigerian government.¹ This has been the most recent example of a millenarian protest movement.

These movements, which have emerged in many parts of the world over the centuries, usually occur during an era of rapid and intense socio-economic change. The intrusion of a "colonizing people" into the living space and way of life of a "native people"² usually precipitates a "culture clash." The symptoms are: decline of group identity, loss of self-respect, élite displacement, decline of social status and economic well-being (often seen in close connection with destruction of traditional ways of life and imposition of heavy taxes), disruption of community units and kinship bonds leading to growing frustration, violent resistance and a simultaneous rise of a prophetic leader.³

Historical publications in Canada have depicted Louis Riel as a rebel and traitor, a French-Canadian martyr, a frontiersman, and a Métis hero and saint.⁴ In Thomas Flanagan's book *Louis "David" Riel*, the author stresses the socio-economic side of the Riel Rebellions and the millenarian aspects of Riel's philosophy, or *Weltanschauung*. Flanagan suggests that Riel should be placed in the context of medieval visionaries, such as Joachim of Fiore and Bridget of Sweden, and notes that the Métis resistance was similar to "religious resistance movements of the Third World."⁵

In his study of millenarian protest movements against the European colonial order, Michael Adas⁶ establishes a number of structural elements common to those movements and their prophetic leaders. The Métis and Riel almost ideally fit into the general pattern. This becomes clear when Riel is compared to Birsa Bhagwan, Saya San, Te Ua Haumene and Antonio Conselheiro,⁷ four major leaders of millenarian prophet-inspired protest movements in India, Burma, New Zealand and Brazil.

The Socio-economic Context

In all of these examples the prophetic leader's people inhabit a relatively isolated, homogeneous, inaccessible and sparsely populated area. Following the intrusion of a foreign culture their (aboriginal) land rights are endangered.

Originally a valley people, the Mundas (Birsa's people), under pressure from various invaders, had been pushed to the highlands of Chota Nagpur in Central Eastern India. Following the establishment of British control, "landlord exactions merely increased and the position of the Mundas ... worsened as long-standing methods of exploitation were intensified."⁸ There were riots and a resistance movement culminating in continuous rebellious agitations among the Mundas in the 19th century.

In the second half of the last century Lower Burma was rapidly transformed from a frontier/wilderness country into a prosperous province of the British Empire. After an initial economic improvement the local population was faced with a web of problems, the question of land rights being among the most important ones. Economic depression and sociocultural disruption (including the running out of living space and the loss of control of the peasant over his land) were main factors out of which Saya San forged his rebellion.⁹

The Maori (Te Ua's people) had lived in virtual isolation on the North Island of New Zealand, where they had developed a sophisticated tribal system. The impact of Europeans upon them was sudden. After an initial short period of adjustment and well-being, the Maori became impoverished, were

driven into emotional despair, and had to witness the factual abolition of their land rights:

Even government agencies created to protect Maori interests fed the settler's seemingly insatiable hunger for Maori land. In 1852, the Colonial Office hesitantly granted representative government to the people of New Zealand, which effectively meant the European settlers. It became increasingly obvious to the Maoris that they must organize and resist further encroachments or perish.¹⁰

In the Manitoba Act of 1870 the Métis were offered 1.4 million acres of land as a compensation for aboriginal rights. There were, however, practical problems: the Act did not state how the land was to be distributed, only Métis of the "third generation" and later generations were eligible, surveying had to be completed, the old river lot system was ignored, and distribution of land did not begin till March 1873.¹¹ In 1876, when the final regulations were issued, those Métis who had endured often became the easy victims of land speculators. It seems fairly obvious that the vast majority of Métis, with their "simple characters"¹² as Bruce Sealey calls it, were not in a position to resist the discrimination of the white governmental and bureaucratic machine. Sealey sums up the situation of the 1870s:

It is clear that the law was prepared for the benefit of settlers who understood the value of the land, or for the profiteers in a western society based on capitalism. There was very little left for many Métis but to move away and attempt to re-establish the old way of life based on trapping and hunting.¹³

Just like the Mundas, the Métis were pushed out of their original area of settlement by land-hungry foreigners. Many Métis went across the border to the United States, others went west, where they set up new settlements in northern Saskatchewan. That migration only eased difficulties for a short period of time. The basic problems, however, remained unsolved.

By 1884 the situation in the Métis communities in Saskatchewan paralleled the one in Manitoba after 1870: decreasing employment opportunities, economic decline, insecurity about land titles, and an increasing influx of white settlers meant potential threats to Métis land ownership. As Flanagan notes, all in all the situation was even more desperate than in 1870: "the half-breeds resident in the North-West had been allocated nothing, even though the Dominion Land Act of 1878 had allowed a distribution of land in the North-West."¹⁴ Furthermore, there was the problem of those Métis squatting

on land reserved by the government for the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR).

The question of land, of effective (legal) control over "Native" lands, was regarded by the native groups as essential to guarantee survival. Moreover, for some the land seems to have been more than just a source of income; it was associated with a way of life and identity. That those people had an understanding of the value of land, even if not all the legal implications, seems to be clear from the fact that they were willing to fight and die for their *Lebensraum*.

Economic order among the peoples considered here was basically pre-industrial and agrarian (or semi-agrarian/nomadic). Self-supply was the primary, yet not the exclusive goal. Socio-economic life was strongly community-orientated. The continuous impact of the colonizers brought accelerated change and relative deprivation for the Native people. The deprivation stemmed from a feeling among the colonized "that a gap existed between what they felt they deserved in terms of status and material rewards and what they possessed or had the capacity to obtain."¹⁵ A people which had had little contact with industrialized culture was suddenly overwhelmed by it and was forced to prove its identity on a collective and individual basis against that foreign culture, which was not willing to accept the "Native" culture as equal.

The Métis were an idiosyncratic product of the fur trade and by the beginning of the 19th century they had established a distinctive way of life that was semi-agrarian/nomadic, combining petty farming with hunting. Others worked as HBC employees, salt miners, freighters or lime makers.¹⁶ The core of the Métis economy was the buffalo. The annual hunts were carried out according to strict rules and were both economic and social events.

The last century in Western Canada was a time of enormous and continuous socio-economic changes, and until about the 1870s the Métis had been well able to adapt to changing circumstances. The disappearance of the buffalo, though, was a most serious blow to the Métis economic system. Furthermore, the coming of the railroad made the old means of transportation largely superfluous. Those Métis who had migrated west were now further removed and in some cases completely cut off from the prosperous trade centres, most notably Winnipeg. The only alternative offered within the new Canadian way of life was to become a settler. That was the point where the Métis, product of social change, ironically became also victims of social change.

It is hard to assess why the Métis seemed unwilling and/or unable to adapt to the post-1870 capitalist system. They were illiterate, and legal

proceedings necessarily involved written correspondence. Thus, most Métis had to leave it to their leaders to draft petitions for them, many of which were delayed in a slow governmental machine and in some cases not answered at all. The conclusion is that the Métis tried, but had no real fair chance, because (a) their starting position, against the white settlers for example, was weaker, and (b) they were discriminated against in a number of vital areas, religious, racial, economic, linguistic.¹⁷

The Prophetic Leaders

The lives of Birsa, Saya San, Te Ua and Antonio Conselheiro show remarkable parallels. As far as social background is concerned, Adas establishes two major types of prophetic leaders:

At one pole are indigenous authority figures whose position is threatened by changes introduced by the agents of alien civilizations... At the other pole of the continuum are men of low birth, who are exposed to a high degree to alien but dominant civilizations. On the basis of my sample, this is the more common background for prophetic protest leaders.¹⁸

The four prophetic leaders outside Canada can be placed around that second pole: Birsa was born as the fourth son of a poor peasant family in Chota Nagpur. Since his parents were unable to support him as a young child, he was sent to live with his uncle. Te Ua, who belonged to the Taranaki tribe, was kidnapped at the age of three and was kept as a slave among another New Zealand tribe, the Waikato. Saya San was born in Shwebo in 1882. Early in his life he moved away from his family and made a fairly poor living from fortune-telling and working as a medical healer. Conselheiro surrounded himself with the notion of the mysterious past of a mythic hero. He seems to have been wandering in the Brazilian backlands in his early life, living on alms.

Riel's early years have been covered in various biographies. For this chapter, suffice it to repeat that he was born in 1844 in St. Boniface where his father "farmed and raised livestock on a modest scale; he also operated at various times a grist mill... But he was always in debt to the Hudson's Bay Company, and his best efforts did not succeed in elevating him above the bottom layer of the Métis bourgeoisie."¹⁹

As far as family background is concerned, Riel had a divided class identity of upper class (through the Lagimodière connection) and middle class (through his father). His social status was continually shifting. For example, during his time in Montreal he experienced a decline in social status and would have to be placed closer to the lower classes. As the other

lower class prophets of Adas's system, Riel was exposed to a high degree of foreign civilization throughout his life. By 1870 he had certainly also become a Métis authority figure whose position was challenged. He could at that point be placed around Adas's first pole.

The prophetic leaders of millenarian movements are relatively well-educated and well-travelled. The leaders considered here received an uncommon, special education away from their original homes, an education which put heavy stress on religious matters. Besides that, the four leaders outside Canada studied with Native people and acquired an extensive knowledge of native cults and shamanistic rituals as well as of Christian religions.

While attending school in his home village, the special abilities of Birsa were recognized and he was sent to higher education in the town of Burja. "At Burja he became a Christian and was baptized with the name David. He soon advanced to a larger mission school, where he came into close contact with European teachers for the first time."²⁰ Te Ua was educated at the Methodist mission school at Kawhia Harbor on the West coast of New Zealand, where he too was made a Christian. Before that he had learned the magic art from one of the tribal priests.

Bishop Taché had arranged for Riel to be sent east to the Collège de Montréal with rich people covering the expenses. He was supposed to become a Catholic priest and return to the West as one of the first Métis missionaries.

Quite often the education is broken off or the overall result is not inclusive enough to secure the future prophetic leader a permanent place in the "colonizers'" society. Birsa was expelled from mission school after seven years. Te Ua too came back to his home village. Riel was dismissed for breaking the house rules, and after finally giving up his intention of becoming a priest and having unsuccessfully tried to enter law, he returned to Red River.

These disappointing experiences left the future leaders with a feeling of ambivalence towards the colonizers' education and made them largely mistrust their culture and religion. After that initial rupture they came to regard their "Native" culture and surroundings as their primary physical and spiritual home. Familiarity with both their own people's and the colonizers' culture and way of life enhanced the prophetic leaders' authority among their own people and enabled them to act as cultural middlemen, or as Adas calls them "cultural brokers."²¹ Education was also an important factor, since the followers of the five prophets considered here, including the Métis, were in their vast majority illiterate people, and among such people literacy "was also frequently seen as a sign of his [the prophet's] capacity to master the secrets of the European overlords."²²

The question of the sociology of charisma is important. Bryan Wilson states that "Charisma is not a personality attribute, but a successful claim to power by virtue of supernatural ordination."²³ Since it is extremely hard to find objective criteria for the validity of such a claim to divine sanction, recognition by the prophet's followers becomes the decisive factor.²⁴ The successful relationship between prophet and followers can be described as "one of supreme personal trust"²⁵ or, better and simpler: faith. That the prophets considered here had that trust and faith seems evident,²⁶ and it makes them truly charismatic. To prove that point with Riel, witness an excerpt from a letter of Father Fourmond: "Notre population ... dans sa simplicité, voyant ce singulier personnage, Métis comme eux, prier presque jour et nuit ... elle avait en lui une confiance aveugle et le prenait pour un saint."²⁷

Traditionally, charismatic leaders arise in times of social unrest and change. "Charisma is undoubtedly a case of social change: but it also appears to be a response to it, a response to social disruption."²⁸ Max Weber goes one step further by saying: "Within the sphere of its claims, charismatic authority repudiates the past, and is in this sense a specifically revolutionary force."²⁹ Riel did not repudiate the past, but there was a revolutionary trait about him, in that he combined the role of prophetic leader opposed to the Catholic priests in Batoche with the role of political leader opposed to established governmental authorities.

As far as the prophetic leaders' *Weltanschauung* is concerned, they developed a somewhat simplistic view of the world which they wrote down and/or preached to their followers with considerable success. Its core is a binary system made up of such primary dualities³⁰ as man/God, earth/heaven, good/evil and friend/enemy—a system which was evidently very appealing to the mostly peasant followers, especially as a strong in-group/out-group feeling, a feeling of solidarity, could thereby be established.

As far neglected part of Riel's *Weltanschauung* is his "Monadism." In his typical philosophically distortive manner, Riel developed a crude mixture of Leibniz,³¹ primitive Christian thinking, and electromagnetism as discovered by Oersted in 1820. In Riel's world, which is made up of "essences," the "monades" are the smallest indivisible entities:

Les essences se composent de 'Monades'... Les 'Monades' sont de deux genres; elles sont, les unes mâles, les autres femelles... Une monade est une électricité... Une monade mâle est une électricité positive. Une monade femelle est une électricité négative... Les monades sont de deux sortes. Les unes sont actives et les autres sont passives.³²

In another document, probably a draft for a book on his religious/philosophical principles,³³ Riel writes more along the same lines and defines the relationship between man and God as a sort of magnetic field where the tension between the active essences of God and the passive essences of mankind contain the world in harmony. Religion is the magnet which draws together the divine and the human essences, which has been disrupted by man's original sin.³⁴ Living in harmony is a divine gift and a divine prerogative:

L'homme étant créé d'essences passives, ne peut pas, quand il a complètement rompu avec les essences actives, se remettre par lui-même en harmonies avec elles. Car cette harmonie est un don des essences divines.³⁵

Man has both negative and positive forces in him. Sin and rupture from God stem from man bringing up his negative forces against the negative commandments of God:

Et comme les électricités de même nom se repoussent, l'homme entre en dispute avec son Dieu. Lorsque les électricités *Négatives* divines nous défendent quelque chose, si nous nous interdisons toute autre chose que celle-là, nous mettons aussi au jeu nos électricités *Négatives*; et comme les électricités de même nom se répugnent nous nous querellons avec les essences divines.³⁶

There can be no doubt that in Riel's system of repulsing and attracting forces, of active and passive electricities, God remains the "magnet number one."

The Prophetic Leaders and Their Special Missions

As pointed out above, prophetic leaders derive their primary and principal legitimacy from divine authority. In most cases, though, additional "secular" and other assistance is sought. Consequently, the five leaders considered previously were eager to attain the support of local and/or other authority figures. In Riel's case a letter from Bishop Bourget was of particular importance:

Mais Dieu qui vous a toujours dirigé et assisté jusqu'à présent ne vous abandonnera pas au plus fort de vos peines. Car il vous a donné une mission qu'il faudra accomplir en tous points.³⁷

In addition, both Saya San and Riel claimed to be of royal descent, thus enhancing their claims to power and leadership:

Celui que le monde attendait dans la personne d'Henri cinq se trouve dans le Prophète du Nouveau Monde, Louis 'David' Riel qui par sa mère Julie de la Gimodiere est un des princes descendant de Louis XI.³⁸

To keep up their prophetic claims the prophets had to "deliver," that is to say, they had to perform some sort of magical acts.³⁹ That Riel was very much aware of the nature of his prophethood and its wider implications can be illustrated by the following quotation from one of his writings in Regina prison:

C'est Dieu qui, par la grâce et la force divine de Jésus-Christ, a soin des missions extraordinaires. Les hommes envoyés du Saint-Esprit ne se caractérisent pas eux-mêmes. Ils sont environnés et accompagnés de marques qui les caractérisent. Leurs bons désirs, leur bonne volonté ont des sanctions indubitablement bonnes et saintes. Le doigt visible de Dieu les désigne par les résultats de leur conduite.⁴⁰

Four of the prophetic figures considered here experienced an initial vision or a series of visions triggered off in an unusual situation. After having been shunned from his village, Birsa was struck by lightning while walking through a forest. "This incident was followed by a series of dreams, the content of which Birsa interpreted as injunctions for him to return to his people and rescue them from their misery."⁴¹ Te Ua had his first vision during a serious illness and claimed that the angel Gabriel had spoken to him.

Riel later stated that his mission began in St. Patrick's Church in Washington on December 8, 1875 with a sudden experience of a mystical ecstasy and a following powerful vision.⁴² This in Riel's view marked the beginning of a new era, the *Heilswende* (turning point of salvation) leading to the Métis fulfillment of God's providential plan and to the second coming of Christ, a day so important that it marked the redemption of man's original sin in the Garden of Eden.⁴³

In these visions the prophetic leaders were told by God or some other supernatural power that they had a special task to perform in the world, a sacred mission which would lead to the redemption of their people and their own personal glory. An important means to reach that goal was the establishment of a form of new church, and generally speaking a new religious-political order.

Both Riel and Te Ua established parallels between the Jews and their own people, the Métis and the Maori, both seeing them as the new chosen people of God. Riel even created a mythic genealogy which made the Métis relatives

of the Jews in both spirit and blood.⁴⁴ Another interesting parallel between Riel and Te Ua lies in the fact that both were considered to be insane by some of their friends and fellowmen at the time: Te Ua was taken away in chains and Riel was confined in the asylum at Longue Pointe.

An essential part of the visionary contents and the prophetic mission claim was the renaming process. The prophets adopted special names for themselves⁴⁵ and their world.⁴⁶ This re-naming of course was not an end in itself, but meant redefining, re-evaluating, attributing new meaning⁴⁷ and creating a utopian alternative to the modern world.

The renaming factor corresponds with the futuristic tendency Guglielmo Guariglia discusses in his study of prophetic movements. He establishes three basic tendencies: a tendency towards the past, e.g. nativism; one towards the present, e.g. syncretism; and one towards the future, e.g. millenarianism.⁴⁸ Those major tendencies can be detected in the "missions" of all five prophetic leaders: that is to say, they were all looking back to a past golden age, working for the present which was to be seen as a time of hardship and testing, and looking ahead in the future to a perfect utopian-millenarian state.

W.E. Muhlmann gives the following definition of nativism:

Wir verstehen also Nativismus als einen kollektiven Aktionsablauf, der von dem Drang getragen ist, ein durch eine überlegene Fremdkultur erschüttertes Gruppen-Selbstgefühl wiederherzustellen durch massives Demonstrieren einen "eigenen Beitrags." Das "Eigene" liegt in dem Wunsch and Willen, sich abzusetzen gegen den Eindruck übermächtiger Fremdkultur, es liegt in der Manifestierung des Gefühls: "Wir sind auch etwas!"⁴⁹

Through the prophet's personal appeal and divine authority, a restoration of the shattered group identity and the overcoming of inferiority feelings were temporarily possible. Due to their superior intelligence and rhetorical abilities the prophetic leaders were able to restore their peoples' pride and give them a "voice."

The prophetic leaders were intelligent enough to know that they could not restore the past and were instead working to preserve certain well-respected values of the past and integrate them into their new system. All five prophets considered here mixed aspects of their "Native" tradition with European thought and tradition, especially as far as religion is concerned.

That leads us to our next point, syncretism. The new religious doctrines and religions/political orders were basically eclectic, and the truly original

ideas in them were minimal.⁵⁰ Following the classic definitions of millenarian movements established by Talman and Cohn,⁵¹ the Riel Rebellion of 1885 was typical insofar as salvation was to be

- a. collective, to be enjoyed by all the nations of the world and especially the Métis as a community, God's faithful and chosen people to redeem all peoples of the world;
- b. terrestrial, in the sense that Riel's theocratic utopian state was to become reality in Canada;
- c. imminent, insofar as the mission of Riel and the special task of the Métis had already begun on 8 December 1875. Final salvation though was still many years away (to come in the year 4209);
- d. total, in the sense that everyone would be thoroughly affected and the final result would be a radical change in way of life for everyone. Again, that final stage of perfection would be the result of a process of continuous moral reform throughout many years;
- e. miraculous, because it would be brought about with the help of God. Riel's belief in the direct influence and his complete trust in divine providence are evident from a large number of his writings.

A common factor in the prophetic act are apocalyptic visions concerning the forces of the enemy who are opposed to the prophet and not among the "chosen." Te Ua was talking about a great flood that would destroy all Europeans. Riel had similar visions in Beauport, but became more moderate later.⁵² Conselheiro was the most radical of the prophets considered here, since in his millenarian visions the final catastrophe and the second coming of Christ were imminent:

In 1899 the waters shall turn to blood, and ... the earth some place shall find itself in heaven. There shall be a great rain of stars, and that will be the end of the world.⁵³

After the apocalyptic times of extreme hardship and testing, probation and purification, the preparation time for the millennium or the millennium itself would begin. Except for the famous land division scheme,⁵⁴ we have little knowledge of how in Riel's case that preparatory millenarian state was supposed to look. The remark "Jesus Christ wants to perfect the government of His church and to make His apostles able to exercise charitable coercion

on men"⁵⁵ gives us some idea of a theocratic oppression system. Further clues can be found in a notebook where Riel establishes an elaborate ecumenical council system:

les trois conseils districts dans chaque nationalité pourraient se saluer et s'édifier en convention une fois tous les trente ans. Et ce triple conseil de toutes les nations du nouveau monde feraient un grand acte d'amitié chrétienne et un grand pas vers la concorde universelle... Les chefs des chevaliers de chaque pays formeront un conseil à part... Les chefs des prêtres et ministres solitaires de chaque nation constitueront un autre conseil... Les dénominations religieuses du nouveau monde ont besoin d'être reliées ensemble d'une manière étroite. Il n'est pas impossible qu'elles entrent à cet effet dans une entente générale et qu'elles consentent toutes à former un ordre religieux dont le but serait de réformer sans cesse le clergé, les soldats et la congrégation et les simples fidèles appartenant à chaque denomination.⁵⁶

Obviously, like many other utopian states, Plato's Republic for example, Riel's future society was to have three major classes: *prêtres*, *chevaliers* and *simples fidèles*. It is not clear what he means by "*chevaliers*," probably people with military and police functions. It seems evident though that the church's hierarchical system was to be imposed upon the society as a whole and there would be "*gouvernement des chefs*," government from the "top." Also note the idea of a special religious reform order devoted to continuous reform in all spheres of the different social groups.

Like Riel, Birsa and the other prophets made it clear that victory over the colonizing powers was only the first step towards a new social, political and religious order. Generally speaking, that new society would be theocratic in essence, and free of foreign oppression, moral digression, social injustice and economic hardship. In that respect all prophets thought in global terms and envisaged what Riel in the quotation above calls "*la concorde universelle*." In Saya San's millenarian ideology: "The totality of Burma's people shall be made happy through an abundance of gold and silver and gems. [And the] people of the entire world shall equally become Buddhist... people will be pious, freed from illness and shall have peace of mind and body."⁵⁷ Saya San combined pagan/native, Buddhist and biblical thought. The prophetic leader Birsa acted similarly. Riel, Conselheiro and Te Ua, on the other hand, had a preference for biblical models. In Riel's case we can speak of "biblical

model-syncretism," since he combined the roles of prophet, priest and messiah and saw himself in line with David, Daniel, Moses, and, especially towards the end of his life, with Jesus.⁵⁸

Here is one of Riel's typical visions from October 2, 1885, which articulates this biblical model:

[margin] C'est la main de Dieu qui m'a fait faire mon chemin autour de la montagne sainte ... l'italien vertueux et le canadien français m'aident a faire route dans les vallées et les endroits bas de l'humanité. C'est l'église qui parle en moi. [main text] Dieu m'a fait voir que je montais par degré la montagne sainte ... les puissances mettaient le pied sur quelque machination internationale; passaient quelques foyers de conspiration diabolique ... ce chemin était étroit... Le Dieu tout puissant en avait soin. "J'arrive au bout de mes difficultés..." [margin] L'italien humble et vertueux est d'une amabilité et d'une simplicité admirables. Il peut me conduire a une paix glorieuse.⁵⁹

Both the margin and the main text start off with a special prophetic *Botenformel* ("announcing formula"): "*C'est la main de Dieu*" and "*Dieu m'a fait voir*."⁶⁰ The prophet thereby announces the following words as being of divine origin.

As Northrop Frye has recently pointed out, "the image of a Messianic figure flanked by two others"⁶¹ is one of the well-established patterns of the Bible. Just like other prophets in the Old Testament,⁶² Riel is fascinated with the concept of trinity.

One picture immediately springs to mind here: the transfiguration of Christ.⁶³ Moses and Elias as the precursors and supporting figures of Jesus have counterparts in the French-Canadian and the Italian, who are the assisting figures for Riel's New Church in the New World. As allegorical figures the French-Canadian represents French culture and the Catholic Church in Canada, the Italian represents the European immigrant who is willing to accept French superiority in Northern America. Besides that, his extreme friendliness and simplicity make him the ideal "*simple fidèle*" in Riel's thinking. The Italian's virtue probably refers to the virtuous state Riel believed the Roman Catholic Church and the Vatican were in before 1870. Frenchman and Italian, who together form the basis for Riel's new order and new church, are allegorically its moral support and individually its potential members. Riel seems very much aware that he needs human co-operation for his endeavours to "progress" and that only in harmony between man

and the almighty God, faithful co-operation between the two, lies the key to overcome the devilish conspiracies and achieve true salvation.

Another biblical image immediately comes to mind: the ascent of Moses to Mount Sinai.⁶⁴ Riel further enhances that parallel by saying: "*C'est l'église qui parle en moi.*" Like Moses on Sinai receiving God's commandments and thus establishing the basic minimal norms for the Jewish religion, Riel hopes through ascending his visionary mountain to achieve communion with God above and to establish some fundamental rules for his new church.

The mountain in general and the holy mountain in particular were favourite images of the biblical prophets,⁶⁵ and the latter was often seen as the home of God.⁶⁶ Riel's description of the setting gives this vision a distinct mystical touch. Talking of high and low, God and humanity, devilish conspiracy and glorious peace, mountain and valley, he creates the basic antagonism so typical of medieval visionaries.⁶⁷ Another biblical/mystical image is the "*chemin étroit,*" the narrow path of redemption.⁶⁸ Riel's ascension step by step fits into the pattern of the medieval visionaries' gradual ascension towards the *unio mystica*, the union with God.⁶⁹ At the end of the vision Riel can be seen as being on the *via illuminativa*, one step closer to God, and it is his semi-transfigured ego which now speaks.⁷⁰ The time of earthly hardship is coming to its end and paradise looms ahead.⁷¹

Rebellion

Before the rebellious movements were triggered by the prophetic leaders, their people were in an emotionally agitated state of mind. The leaders were able to exploit that state of mind, and without this sort of special relationship the movements would not have been possible. Confronted with a highly critical state of affairs, or at least with a perception of things being catastrophic, the people turned towards their prophet as a person who supplied both security and identity. Furthermore, the prophets were said to have supernatural powers⁷² and were thus predestined to perform the extraordinary measures that seemed to be needed.

Prophetic leaders experienced their most ardent support and a willingness to go to war in times when, due to basically economic hardships and the general feeling that something is "wrong," their people were in a psychological state which manifested itself in feelings of sadness, desperation and inferiority complexes combined with romantic dreams of a golden past.⁷³ That is exactly the state of mind the Métis were in in 1884–85, and it explains their devotion to Riel.⁷⁴ Flanagan describes the state of affairs thus:

The buffalo ... vanished altogether after 1878, adversely affecting numerous trades in which the Métis had been

prominent: buffalo hunting, trading with the Indians ... and transporting these goods to market. The Métis cart trains and boat brigades also suffered from the advent of railways and steamboats in the Canadian West. Deprived of much of the income from traditional occupations, the Métis had to rely more on agriculture. As they began to make this transition, they were struck, as were all western farmers, by the economic depression and fall in grain prices which began in 1883.⁷⁵

Besides that, "Their language and religion were jeopardized by massive English and Protestant immigration... And the benign neglect of the Hudson's Bay Company in local affairs was replaced by the stricter control of the Canadian state."⁷⁶

Three main factors are involved in bringing on violence in a millenarian protest movement: (a) the decision of the prophetic leader, (b) the prophet's loss of authority, and (c) the failure of established authorities.⁷⁷ The first two were of minor importance, if not irrelevant in the Rebellion of 1885, since Riel had not originally intended to start a second rebellion and since he remained the undisputed leader at Batoche. Although Flanagan is right in describing the controversy as a "train of mistakes, misjudgments and misperceptions on both sides,"⁷⁸ the inefficiencies of the Department of the Interior and the failure of the local missionary priests to function as "advisers and link"⁷⁹ constituted the decisive factors. In the end the government must take the blame, because it was basically the mishandling of the whole affair by the Canadian government and the tragic misunderstanding at Duck Lake which sparked the consequent violence. There can hardly be any doubt that Riel's principal and initial intentions were non-violent, directed at repeating the successful negotiation of 1869–70.⁸⁰ In July 1884 Father André described him in the following words:

Il a agi et parlé avec calme et bon sens... Tous ses efforts ... tendent a faire comprendre au peuple qu'en répondant à son appel il n'avait d'autre objet en vue que de l'aider par des moyens légitimes et pacifiques.⁸¹

Riel acted in full conviction of his prophethood and, as pointed out above,⁸² thought in wider terms than the Métis did: global salvation was the final goal. Therefore Flanagan is right in saying that "Preexisting local grievances were only pawns in a complex series of maneuvers aimed at vindicating Métis ownership of the North-West as a whole,"⁸³ and that Riel wanted "a massive settlement of aboriginal claims."⁸⁴ Louis Riel in 1885

was primarily a millenarian leader, not a political one. It was only after “constitutional” order and other agitation had proven fruitless that force was employed as an additional means by the “Native peoples” considered here to make their pleas heard.⁸⁵

For the sake of the “cause” Riel finally agreed to use force to fight force, and at one time even threatened a “war of extermination,” but even after open violence had begun, his view of the confrontation remained distinctly religious/prophetic.⁸⁶ In a vision from April 1885 he again evoked the image of the road leading up a mountain:

L'esprit de Dieu m'a fait voir le chemin d'en haut... C'est le chemin des Métis qui vont aux victoires d'ici bas : c'est aussi la route céleste qui conduit au paradis les âmes de ceux que le Seigneur a choisi sur le champs.⁸⁷

Riel leaves no doubt that he thinks God is actively involved on the Métis side and in the last sentence he seems to proclaim a concept close to that of the crusades and the Islamic notion of the *jihad*, or “Holy War.”⁸⁸

In the vast majority of millenarian protest movements there is what we might call “job-splitting” between the prophet and a military leader or a group of military leaders. As Adas has pointed out this often leads to internal fights for leadership, and in the course of mounting violence “secondary leaders” often take effective control of the movement.⁸⁹ As far as Conselheiro and Riel are concerned, they both seem to have been in firm control over the entire movement till the end of the resistance. Even such a prominent leader as Gabriel Dumont asked Riel first to give him men when he wanted to make a military move,⁹⁰ and against his better judgement gave up his guerilla tactics to follow Riel’s trench warfare. “I yielded to Riel’s judgement, although I was convinced that, from a humane standpoint, mine was the better plan; but I had confidence in his faith and his prayers, and that God would listen to him.”⁹¹ Dumont clearly states the point that in a millenarian movement “humane standpoints” are of secondary importance and belief in the prophet and his supernatural powers are absolutely imperative.

The job-splitting between Riel and Dumont had a tradition among their Indian relatives⁹² as well as in the biblical/Judaic tradition of the Métis’ European forefathers, where the prophets of the Old Testament hardly ever involve themselves in military activities.

Failure and Aftermath

After having instigated their movements the prophetic figures were faced with official persecution and were often forced to operate underground. After the Red River Rebellion, Riel was driven into exile in the United States

and even there had to fear for his life. In May 1885 he surrendered, obviously hoping to present his ideas to new and possibly sympathetic audiences.⁹³

A common factor in the lives of the prophetic leaders seems to be what we might call "the big mistake," a crucial blunder which severely shattered their individual and sometimes also their peoples' reputation. Driven by hunger, Birsa robbed a grave to steal jewels and was caught in the act. He was shunned from the village for this sacrilege. Te Ua failed to gain substantial and lasting respect among his fellow tribesmen and was rebuffed. In Riel's case his military strategy in 1885 can also be regarded as a major mistake in judgement.

In view of the superiority, both in military/logistic and in economic/political matters, of the colonizing peoples, final failure of the rebellious movements was inevitable. Although guerrilla tactics often brought initial and impressive victories for the rebels,⁹⁴ it merely helped to prolong the movements for a limited period of time and raised the overall number of casualties.

Much has been written about Riel's failure to form a workable alliance with the Indians. Although this would have certainly enhanced Riel's position, resistance through legal means appears to have been the only viable solution:

For all the rebel leaders with any vision ... recognized that the day when they could sweep the white man from the prairies was gone, if it had ever existed. What they hoped for was that a strong alliance of native peoples, willing to take decisive action, could force the Dominion government to negotiate...⁹⁵

Whereas some of the Native peoples revived their rebellions, legal action has been and still is the way in which the Métis continue to struggle for their rights.⁹⁶

After the prophetic leader's arrest or death, the movement for the time being is defeated and the leader later tends to become a sort of folk hero. Birsa was arrested in February 1900 and died in prison: "The prophet's capture ended the last and most serious Munda attempt to forcibly expel the invaders of their highland home."⁹⁷ Te Ua was captured in March 1866. Saya San was executed in August 1931. Antonio Conselheiro died in Canudos in August 1897. Clearly, "neither movement survived the loss of their prophet-instigators."⁹⁸ Prophets have always had a scapegoat and victim image,⁹⁹ and it was imprisonment and death which finally turned four of the five prophets considered in this chapter into martyrs and allowed them to become legends and folk heroes among their people:

There is, however, no doubt that Birsa is still remembered by the Mundas. His exploits are a popular theme of the Munda folk songs and stories. Many boys are named after him in the Munda country. By some Indian nationalists Birsa is hailed as an early "freedom fighter" and ardent Indian patriot.¹⁰⁰

Something similar happened to Riel in Canada. As Margaret Atwood says: "Riel is the perfect all-Canadian hero—he's French, Indian, Catholic, revolutionary and possibly insane, and he was hanged by the Establishment."¹⁰¹ He also fits in well with the classic tragic hero in Canadian literature who dies in the end resisting stronger powers—nature, Indians or the Mounted Police. Besides that, a minor but profitable folk industry of "Rieliana" has developed,¹⁰² which takes Riel into the realm of an *Oberammergau* religious tourism.

Conclusion

Riel can then be seen as a prophetic leader of a millenarian protest movement with strong bonds to the Bible and biblical mysticism. While almost all of the traditional elements of classical Third World resistance movements can be identified in the rebellion of 1885, it was also unique. It was modern in its attempt to integrate the means of political resistance, such as drafts of bills and petitions, with the establishment of a provisional government. It was also modern in its ambivalence about the use of violent militant force. In its national context it was typically Canadian, because it was built upon the participation of both Métis and Indians, and because it produced quite different reactions in English-speaking Canada and in Quebec.

Millenarian movements all over the world work according to similar patterns because they are all born out of similar socio-economic circumstances of deprivation, cultural disruption, loss of economic wealth, political power and social status of a "Native people," caused by the intrusion and discriminations of an industrialized, "colonizing people." These movements see the rise of a prophetic leader, who through his charisma strikes a supernatural chord in his mainly peasant or semi-nomadic followers, and through his exceptional personality is able to inspire his followers with a desperately needed hope for the future and with the firm belief that with the help of God or god-like powers armed resistance will lead to the coming of a new era of peace, justice, wealth and universal harmony—a new golden age.