

Book Review

BLACK ELK, LAKOTA VISIONARY: The Oglala Holy Man and Sioux Tradition

HARRY OLDMEADOW. FOREWORD BY CHARLES TRIMBLE. WORLD WISDOM (WWW.WORLDWISDOM.COM), 2018. PP. 256. \$19.95. PAPER

Reviewed by **Samuel Bendeck Sotillos**

“[W]e Indians know the One true God, and that we pray to Him continually.”¹
—Black Elk

MILLIONS HAVE BEEN INSPIRED around the world by the life and spiritual legacy of the Lakota holy man Hehaka Sapa, more commonly known as Black Elk (1863-1950). It is in large part through John G. Neihardt’s book *BLACK ELK SPEAKS*, first published in 1932, that Black Elk became widely known and revered. Even though numerous books have been written about the Lakota *wicasa wakan* or holy man, Harry Oldmeadow’s book is indispensable as it not only corrects the historical record through drawing upon recently discovered sources, but situates Black Elk within a universal context that extends across the world’s religions. This engaging account by Oldmeadow explores the fascinating life of Black Elk, his visions, his relationship with Catholicism, and his diligent efforts to revive the First Peoples religion.

This book contrasts the misguided notions of “the vanishing Indian” and that the First Peoples are relics of history to be viewed solely in museums or in the anthropology aisles of the library as reminders of a distant and romanticized past. In fact the opposite is true. The First Peoples are still here and, although not generally known, there is a growing revival of the American Indian religion. It is without a doubt that the trauma of colonialism, racism, and forced assimilation has caused irreversible damage to the First Peoples, and it is with great sensitivity and respect that we recall anew the important reminder of Joseph Epes Brown (1920-2000), a renowned scholar of Native American traditions and world religions: “We are still very far from being aware of the dimensions and ramifications of our ethnocentric illusions. Nevertheless, by the very nature of things we are now forced to undergo a process of intense self-examination; to engage in a serious re-evaluation of the premises and orientations of our society.” Oldmeadow suggests that a key obstacle with understanding the American Indian or any First Peoples religion is that “The extirpation of indigenous cultures is, *essentially*, not a clash of ‘races’ or even ‘civilizations’ but of Tradition and modernity.”

Oldmeadow presents his three convictions for preparing this book on Black Elk:

[F]irst, the spiritual heritage of the Plains Indians deserves a more honored and more fully understood place among the world’s great religious traditions; second, Black Elk’s account of his early life, his Great Vision, and the principal rituals of the Lakota comprise an eloquent expression of the heritage and one of the most radiant spiritual testimonies of our time; third, the Lakota visionary and his tradition offer the contemporary world profound lessons of the most urgent importance.

Oldmeadow clarifies from the onset that this book is not intended to be “a full-dress biography, nor a history, nor a systematic account of Lakota religious life.” The book consists of seven chapters and of three appendices that contain excerpts and selections from letters that help further situate Black Elk’s life and important mission.

Oldmeadow proposes that any research conducted on Black Elk requires the following three books: *BLACK ELK SPEAKS* (1932) by John G. Neihardt; *THE SACRED PIPE* (1953) by Joseph Epes Brown; and *THE SIXTH GRANDEATHER* (1984) by Raymond DeMallie. He additionally examines the controversies that surrounded Black Elk and his collaborators, Neihardt (1881-1973) and Brown. While Neihardt’s book provides a fascinating narrative on Black Elk and his remarkable visions, Brown’s provides a more articulate presentation of traditional Lakota metaphysics, cosmology, and ritual life. DeMallie’s book brings to light for the first time the transcripts from Neihardt’s interviews with Black Elk obtained in

1931 and 1944 that formed the basis for *BLACK ELK SPEAKS* and *WHEN THE TREE FLOWERED* (1951). As well-intentioned as Neihardt was, DeMallie’s book presents how Neihardt introduced and omitted information that was not as Black Elk shared with him. Yet it is safe to say that without Neihardt’s book, non-Native peoples would know much less about the pre-reservation days and the sacred traditions of the Lakota.

Black Elk’s conversion to Catholicism was surrounded by controversy and often misunderstood. Oldmeadow points out that there are three distinct schools of thought pertaining to Black Elk’s relationship to the Christian tradition: “(a) no more than an expedient stratagem and that he remained true to the ancestral ways; (b) deep and sincere, entailing a repudiation of his old beliefs; or that (c) he somehow blended and reconciled Lakota tradition and Christianity.”

Brown corresponded with anthropologist and one-time student Michael Steltenkamp about Black Elk’s involvement with the Christian tradition: “I have felt it improper that this phase of [Black Elk’s] life was never presented either by Neihardt or indeed by myself. I suppose somehow it was thought this Christian participation compromised his ‘Indianness,’ but I do not see it this way and think it time that the record was set straight.” Some have suggested that Brown had deliberately structured his book by drawing a parallel between the seven Lakota rites and the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church, but this assertion according to Oldmeadow appears to be little more than a coincidence.

Brown provides a cogent account of Black Elk’s “conversion” phenomenon

through a lens that both situates the uniqueness and embraces all the sapiential traditions of the world:

Throughout virtually all indigenous American Indian traditions, a pervasive theme has been that all forms and forces of all orders of the immediately experienced natural environment may communicate to human beings the totality of that which is to be known of the sacred mysteries of creation, and thus of the sacred essence of being and beings.... Such conditioning to openness of mind and being towards manifestations of the sacred makes it understandable that for these peoples religious matters of whatever origin are not open to either question or argument. When, therefore, the Christian message came to the peoples through dedicated missionaries who led exemplary and sacrificial lives, the people easily understood the truths of message and example due to the profundity of their own beliefs; it was not difficult for them to adapt new expressions of values into the sacred fabric of their own culture. The historical phenomenon is thus not conversation as understood in an exclusivistic manner by the bearers of Christianity, but rather a continuation of the people's ancient and traditional facility for what may be termed non-exclusive cumulative adhesion. If this process of polysynthesis can be accomplished with neither confusion nor dissonance, it is ultimately due to the ability of American Indian peoples to penetrate and comprehend the central and most profound nature of all experience and reality.

While it is true that Black Elk does at times make exclusivist claims suggesting that Catholicism replaced the old beliefs and practices of the Lakota traditions, these statements need to take into

consideration the Jesuit disapproval of the book *BLACK ELK SPEAKS* and how this condemnation impacted Black Elk. American anthropologist Raymond DeMallie explains:

[The publication of *BLACK ELK SPEAKS*] put Black Elk in an awkward position in relation to the Catholic Church. His reputation on the reservation was built as a Catholic catechist, not as a native religious leader. The Jesuit priests at Holy Rosary Mission were shocked and horrified at the suggestion that one of their most valued catechists still harbored beliefs in the old Indian religion. For them to accept *BLACK ELK SPEAKS* at face value necessarily called into question the genuineness of their success in converting the Lakotas to Catholicism. Rather than accepting the book as a true representation of Black Elk, they blamed Neihardt for telling only part of Black Elk's story. The priests objected most strongly to the epilogue portraying Black Elk as a believing, practicing "pagan" praying to the six grandfathers when he knew well that the Christian God was the only source of salvation. Ben Black Elk told the missionaries, no doubt truthfully, that he and his father had not realized that Neihardt intended to include the final prayer on Harney Peak in the book. Although the old man was embarrassed in front of the priests... he never denied the sincerity of his final appeal to the six grandfathers.

Brown's arrival that was anticipated by the holy man himself is a continuation of where Neihardt's work left off, yet Brown's work is centered on establishing a resurgence of Lakota spirituality. Michael Oren Fitzgerald notes the relevance of Brown's letters that have recently been made available:

[They] provide a final chapter to Black Elk's life because of their sharp contrast to the despair in Black Elk's closing

words in *BLACK ELK SPEAKS*, "you see me now a pitiful old man who has done nothing, for the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead." These words were spoken at a time when most American Indian traditional ceremonies were still outlawed.... Joseph Brown's arrival in 1947 was a catalyst that provided Black Elk the practical support to work toward perpetuating ancestral spiritual traditions, both through the recording of his account of the seven sacred rites of the Lakota and through Black Elk's efforts to reestablish an "Order of the Pipe" for his tribe.

We are informed by Black Elk's daughter, Lucy Looks Twice, that during his last days, far from rejecting the traditional Lakota spirituality, Black Elk had emphasized that "The only thing I [Black Elk] really believe in is the pipe religion." Brown recounts that "Black Elk says he is sorry that his present action towards reviving Lakota spiritual traditions shall anger the priests, but that their anger is proof of their ignorance; and in any case *Wakan-Tanka* [the Great Spirit] is happy; for he knows that it is His Will that Black Elk does this work."

A missing link that is little known is Black Elk's association with Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), foremost spokesman for the perennial philosophy, and how this relationship aided in the larger context of the Lakota holy man's mission. It was Schuon who, after reading the book *BLACK ELK SPEAKS*, felt that Black Elk had more to reveal about his religion, and asked his collaborators if there was someone who could try to find Black Elk. This proposition was discussed with Brown, who agreed to it and was able to find Black Elk in South Dakota in September 1947; again,

Brown's arrival was anticipated by the holy man himself.

Brown lived with Black Elk and his family for extended times over a two-year period. During this time, Schuon corresponded not only with Brown but also with Black Elk himself. We are told that the reason that Black Elk chose Brown to record the sacred rites of the Lakota was because he was sent by a "holy man from the East." Lucy Looks Twice (1907-1978) recalled to Brown about the Lakota holy man's final weeks, as Brown informs readers:

Every afternoon at about the same time he would go into something of a trance as if he were talking with some unseen person. Once he scolded his daughter-in-law for entering the house at that time, for he said that she had made the man leave. When they asked him who it was who came to talk with him (more precisely this person came to pray for Black Elk, saying that he knew he was soon to die, and he wished to help him in his suffering), he said it was "a holy man from Europe." His relatives were frightened by these experiences, and Mrs. Looks Twice, noticing a large wooden rosary which always hung over his bed—a Moroccan one that I had given him because of his fondness for beads, and for the barakah—took this away from him, and according to her after this he did not talk anymore with the "strange man." At Black Elk's death, possibly thinking that it had not been right to do this, she saw that this rosary was buried in the coffin with him.

Schuon had written an introduction to the first French edition of *THE SACRED PIPE* and when parts of this introduction were read to Black Elk by Brown, he is reported to have been "extremely pleased." Additionally, it is not generally known that Black Elk was also in correspondence with Schuon's brother,

Erich Schuon, who was a Trappist monk known as Father Gall (1906-1991). Black Elk adopted Father Gall as his son, whom he named Lakota Ishnala or “Lone Sioux” and “[Black Elk] said that he had told you that you shall always be a Lakota, for when you die your body, which is of earth, shall remain with the white man, but your soul shall return to us.” Frithjof Schuon was adopted into both the Lakota and the Crow tribes.

The late doyen of the world’s religions, Huston Smith (1919-2016), situates the First Peoples religion as one of the religions of the world: “[T]he Native American religion embodies the Sophia Perennis [or perennial philosophy] in its own distinctive idiom.” It is in this universal and metaphysical light of the perennial philosophy that the First Peoples religion needs to be situated, as Brown writes:

It has long been necessary to situate correctly the so-called primitive religions in the context of the world’s historical religions, and in so doing to recognize that in spite of many elements unfamiliar to the outsider, Native American traditions, at least where there has not been excessive compromise to the modern world, are in no sense inferior, but indeed are legitimate expressions of the philosophia perennis.²

In the great vision, Black Elk is taken to the center of the earth, where he sees the “whole hoop of the world” where all people and sentient beings are interconnected and all is rendered sacred in Wakan-Tanka:

And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and

the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy.

The Great Spirit, as Black Elk informs us, is both transcendent and immanent:

We should understand that all things are the work of the Great Spirit. We should know that He is within all things; the trees, the grasses, the rivers, the mountains, all the four-legged animals and the winged peoples; and even more important we should understand that He is also above all these things and peoples.

According to Lakota metaphysics, transcendence becomes immanent at the center of the human being, allowing the Great Spirit to dwell within. As described by Oldmeadow, “The Great Spirit as Creator orders the cosmos through the seven directions (the four cardinal points, zenith, nadir, and the center where they all meet).

The Lakota holy man discusses his motivation underlying the book *THE SACRED PIPE*, which could be said to also indirectly refer to the book *BLACK ELK SPEAKS*:

I [Black Elk] have wished to make this book through no other desire than to help my people in understanding the greatness and truth of our own tradition, and also help in bringing peace upon the earth, not only among men, but within men and between the whole of creation.

One of the most celebrated and honored Lakota Sun Dance chiefs of the twentieth century, Fools Crow (1890-

1989), describes Black Elk’s role in preserving the First Peoples religion:

My uncle, the renowned Black Elk, has earned a place above all of the other Teton holy men. We all hold him the highest. I have never heard a bad word about him, and he never said a bad word about anyone. All he wanted to do was love and serve his fellow man... [I]n the Indian custom, he was also a father to me. I stayed with him quite often, and sometimes for long periods of time. We also made a few trips together, and over the years talked about many things. I learned a great deal about *Wakan Tanka*, prophecy, and medicine from him.

While many books have been written about the Lakota wicasa wakan, none have arguably explored the entirety of Black Elk’s life and the centrality of his universal vision as this book by Harry Oldmeadow. I am confident that this work will assist with correcting the historical record and will draw more interest to the life and legacy of Black Elk. This book depicts how the spiritual legacy of Black Elk is instrumental in representing the ancestral traditions in the pre-reservation era, their destruction, and subsequently a powerful revival that continues into the present-day. It is in this light that Black Elk, the Lakota holy man, needs to be regarded. Through the timeless wisdom of the First Peoples religion, a corresponding universal metaphysics can be found that is at the heart of all religious and spiritual traditions of the world. It is through the Lakota saying that it is imprinted in the hearts and minds of the people that we can identify the sacred unity within the

created order, *Mitakuye oyasin*—“All my relatives” or “We are all related.”

¹ Joseph Epes Brown, *THE SACRED PIPE: BLACK ELK’S ACCOUNT OF THE SEVEN RITES OF THE OGLALA SIOUX* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), xx.

² Joseph Epes Brown, “The Question of ‘Mysticism,’” in *THE SPIRITUAL LEGACY OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN: COMMEMORATIVE EDITION WITH LETTERS WHILE LIVING WITH BLACK ELK*, eds. Marina Brown Weatherly, Elenita Brown and Michael Oren Fitzgerald (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2007), 82.

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