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Incommensurability and Nicholas Black Elk: An Exploration

SCOTT J. HOWARD

INTRODUCTION

The issue of Black Elk's Christianity has been, and continues to be, the focus of recent scholarship. His statements to different individuals at various times in his life have enabled him to be all things to all people, for depending on what source is studied one finds a Catholic dogmatist, a Lakota-Christian syncretist, or a Lakota traditionalist. Note, respectively, the following examples: In a letter to the *Catholic Herald*, November 2, 1911, Black Elk stated, "Perhaps you can not live lives split in two, which does not please God. Only one church, one God, one Son, and only one Holy Spirit—that way you have only one faith, you have only one body, and you have only one life and one spirit," and, similarly, in 1934, after the publication of *Black Elk Speaks*, "Now I have converted and live in the true faith of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."¹ In contrast, Frank Fools Crow says that Black Elk "had decided that the Sioux religious way of life was pretty much the same as that of the Christian churches, and there was no reason to change what the Sioux were doing. We could pick up some of the Christian ways and teachings, and just work them in with our own, so in the end both would be better."² And, finally, Ben Black Elk related that near the end of his father's life their conversations were about the old ways and that Black Elk felt he may have made a mistake, that traditional religion may have been better for the people.³

Until Clyde Holler's 1995 study, *Black Elk's Religion: Catholicism and the Lakota Sun Dance*, scholars' interpretations of Black Elk's religious beliefs have been divided, and their final positions have reflected their respective disciplinary or religious concerns. Raymond J. DeMallie, William K. Powers, and Julian Rice lean toward the view of Black Elk as a traditionalist who turned to Catholicism for practical purposes, as a matter of expediency in helping the people of his community; Paul Steinmetz and Michael Steltenkamp, both

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Jesuits, see Black Elk as making a sincere conversion, one based on the supposition that some form of Christianity is the fulfillment of the Lakota religious tradition. Holler commends Steltenkamp's recent (1993) book, *Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala*, with providing a needed corrective to the one-sided, traditionalist portrayal of Black Elk that has grown out of *Black Elk Speaks*, but criticizes Steltenkamp for "falling prey to the very either/or he cautions against."

That an inherent conflict exists between Lakota traditionalism and Catholicism is the assumption upon which the either/or proposition rests, for how can someone believe two religions at once? Holler correctly observes that Black Elk saw both religious traditions as manifestations of one thing, the sacred. Holler bases his interpretation on the observation that "[t]he truth claims of religion are not of the same logical type as scientific propositions, but are instead symbolic. . . . Religion 'means' in somewhat the same way as a work of art means—through the medium of culturally conditioned symbolic expression." Since this is the case, Black Elk's seemingly contradictory religious beliefs were not in conflict. However, Holler's interpretation is incomplete, for while the view that both traditions are manifestations of the sacred and therefore noncontradictory is a crucial aspect to Black Elk's thought, it is only one component of several that form the foundation of his worldview. Because Holler's interpretation hinges on a single concept, he dismisses the most obvious answer as to why Black Elk's statements were so contradictory: that Black Elk's positions were, in part, stages in his life determined by social circumstances and his role as intercessor, or protector, of the Lakota people. A Black Elk who saw both traditions as manifestations of one thing, the sacred, would have no reason to change his position concerning either one; therefore, Holler rejects a "stage" model explanation and states that he "cannot accept DeMallie's picture of Black Elk's religion as being characterized by stages, so that he is by turns a traditionalist, a Catholic, and a born-again traditionalist." But, as the source material suggests, Black Elk did change his position over time, so DeMallie's evaluation seems to be a reasonable one.⁴

Holler's explanation, then, stops short, relying on a single, foundational concept to explain the contradictions in Black Elk's life and thought rather than applying a number of foundational views that form the Lakota worldview, and Black Elk's worldview in particular. That Black Elk saw no tension, or contradiction, between the two traditions is clear, but his understanding of and relationship to both is much more complex. There is more at work here than just the belief that Catholicism and Lakota religion are both meaningful expressions of the sacred. What is clear is that Black Elk saw himself as a creator of his people's present and future. Furthermore, his experience with Catholicism and Christianity affected the way he expressed himself. But the observable facts of his life and, more importantly, the context from which they arise are usually rendered piecemeal for the sake of argumentation. Until one begins to understand the underlying structure and full context of Black Elk's thought, labels such as *Catholic*, *Lakota-Christian syncretist*, and *traditionalist* have little significance, and the term *belief*, even less.

The Black Elk we encounter in the scholarly literature is variously a product of oversimplification and of misinterpretation caused by incommensurability, a

term I am adapting from Thomas Kuhn, who used it in reference to comparative study of scientific theories over time. When no common measure to evaluate one worldview in terms of the other exists, the two views are incommensurable. Because of their cultural assumptions about the nature of religious participation, or, as is the case with Holler, because of their desire or need to reduce the multidimensional personality of Black Elk and his actions into a unidimensional, easily grasped explanatory concept, or because of a focus on larger Lakota cultural phenomena—missionaries and scholars have presented incongruent pictures of Black Elk. Understanding incommensurability and its implications is the first step in constructing a more comprehensive and holistic portrait of Black Elk and his way of seeing. I will begin where Holler left off and explain more fully, in the light of incommensurability, how and why Black Elk saw both religious traditions as manifestations of the sacred; then I will evaluate Michael Steltenkamp's most recent book, *Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala*, in order to illustrate how incommensurability affects interpretation. In the process, my aim is to present an interpretation of Black Elk's worldview that is consistent with the views he expresses in *The Sixth Grandfather*, the most substantial, direct, and objective source available concerning Black Elk's beliefs.

WAKAN, SPIRITUAL HOLISM, AND INCOMMENSURABILITY

When missionaries arrived in Lakota territory, they began teaching the gospels. The immediate problem of course was the difference in language, which, we will see, reflects a difference in thought; for even those who speak the same language may mean very different things though the particular words are the same. Only through context can one gain an understanding of the meaning that another is attempting to relay. If intra-language communication can be taxing, imagine the difficulties of inter-language communication.

In *Sacred Language*, William K. Powers discusses the difficulties in translating Christian concepts into Lakota, a process called explanation, "exchanging one set of symbols for another with the understanding that in the process some common relationship exists between the two sets of symbols that are being exchanged." He uses the Christian idea of the Lamb of God as an example: "Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world have mercy on us." In a culture like the Lakota's, an attempt to communicate or explain this idea was initially almost futile. According to Powers, a verbatim translation of this passage from a Lakota Bible renders it, "Wakantanka's little mountain sheep suddenly puts badness in another place, pity us." Not only is the Lakota passage ungrammatical, Powers observes, but "in a society where there are no lambs, God is not One, sin does not exist, and the world is a relatively small universe equal to one's own territory," it also lacks reference to any meaningful cultural experience.⁵

Likewise, there are Lakota descriptions of *wakan* beings that seem, from an outside perspective, to be illogical and contradictory. For example, note this description of *Wakinyantanka*, the great Thunderbird of the West, an important aspect of Lakota religion:

[He lives] in a lodge at the top of a mountain at the edge of the world where the sun goes down. He is many, but they are only as One; He is shapeless, but He has wings with four joints each; He has no feet, yet He has huge talons; He has no head, yet He has a huge beak with rows of teeth . . . His voice is the thunder clap and rolling thunder is caused by the beating of His wings on the clouds; He has an eye, and its glance is lightning . . . He devours his young and they each become one of His many selves.⁶

The logical contradictions include *Wakinyantanka* being many but one (which, of course, is similar to the concept of the trinity in Christianity) and being formless yet still described in physical terms, with wings, feet, talons, a head, and a beak with rows of teeth. The second part of the description can be seen as an explanation for thunder and lightning. Someone outside the culture would label this as an example of mythology. What distinguishes the Lakota view of “many and One” from the Christian view of “three and One” is that *Wakinyantanka* is just one manifestation of *wakan* in the Lakota universe. Furthermore, the relationship an individual has to that which is *wakan*, in whatever container it resides, is different from the Christian’s relationship with the trinity, for *wakan* is neither good nor evil, and its harnessing is the basis of traditional Lakota religion.⁷

Wakan has been variously translated as meaning sacred, holy, force, energy, consecrated, powerful, mysterious. In the literature, “power” and “sacred” seem to be the most common translations. However, to translate *wakan* as simply “power” or “sacred” is to ignore many of its uses and to risk misleading English speakers into a false sense of understanding. Referentially, the best English equivalent seems to be sacred; but the sense of the word *wakan* definitely connotes something powerful. As an example of the many uses of the word, consider the following explanation by Good Seat (born ca. 1827), one of Walker’s informants:

Wakan was anything that was hard to understand. A rock was sometimes *wakan*. Anything might be *wakan*. When anyone did something that no one understood, this was *wakan*. If the thing done was what no one understood, it was *Wakan Tanka* [*tanka* means big, large, great]. How the world was made is *Wakan Tanka*. How the sun was made is *Wakan Tanka*. How the men used to talk to the birds was *Wakan Tanka*. Where the spirits and ghosts are is *Wakan Tanka*. How the spirits act is *wakan*. A spirit is *wakan*.⁸

On the other hand, in *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions*, Lame Deer, a Mnikowoju Lakota and Holy Man born in the 1900s, offers an explanation of *wakan* that reflects the “power” aspect of the word: “In the old days men used to have an . . . altar made of raised earth in their tipis on certain occasions. It was so *wakan* you couldn’t touch it or even hold your hand over it.” Lame Deer explains that the altar represented the unused earth force and that “there is so much [force] left over that’s not used up . . . that has to be used wisely and in moderation if we are given some of it.”⁹ Because of the political implica-

tions of the word *power*, force may be the more appropriate term. In his Lakota grammar text, Albert White Hat, Sr. explains *wakan* as power or energy, and gives some informative examples of its use:

Power, energy. The power to give life and to take it away. In our philosophy every creation has this potential. When *tate*, "the wind," was created we were given air to breathe. Air can be healthy or poisonous, enabling life or causing death. Another example is *woope*. "the laws." Laws can build community or be used to destroy culture. Similarly, a man or woman has the power to give life or take life. *Wakinyan wakan*: "The thunder that has that power." *Mni wakan*: "Water that has that power." (A description of alcohol.) *Cannupa ki he lila wakan yelo/ksto*: "The Pipe is very powerful." Root word: *Kan*: "The veins in the body."

As the root of the word implies, *wakan*, like blood, is a fundamental "substance" or attribute of creation or being, the energy that circulates through all things. White Hat also comments on the Western influences that have affected the Lakota language, using the translation of the word *wakan* as an example:

Back in the 1940s, people in their 80s and 90s were conditioned to read and write the Lakota language in a non-Lakota way. Through this process, the language changed to reflect the Christian perspective of early missionaries. Words could have as many as four different interpretations. For example, *wakan* means "energy." It implies and teaches that creation has the power to give life or to take it away. Christians understood this word to mean "something sacred." Anthropologists translated *wakan* as "mystery." In such ways, traditional Lakota meaning becomes corrupted and lost.¹⁰

The above definitions and explanations of *wakan* are intended to serve as a caution to the problems of translation and to the ambiguity inherent in language. Words like *sacred*, *shaman*, *spirit*, and *religion* when applied to Lakota concepts may cause more confusion than clarity, and the substitution of equally difficult English concepts, such as power, may prove unhelpful and perhaps even more misleading. To fully understand *wakan* one must understand its many uses, for a word's use determines its meaning. In the discussion that follows, *wakan* is used in the sense of "energy" or "force"; but as the above examples illustrate, no single English word is equivalent to *wakan*, and the reader should bear this in mind.

For the Lakota, all things in the universe are imbued with this "force," are *wakan* to varying degrees, so they are separate but still one. Often the term *Wakantanka* is used to describe this totality. However, *Wakantanka* is not a god-head, but rather an umbrella label for the various *wakan* beings or for *wakan* actions, to differentiate them from those things which are less *wakan*. This is how Good Seat uses the phrase in the passage quoted above. Based on Walker's interviews with George Sword, Raymond DeMallie and Robert Lavenda have constructed two diagrams that organize the Lakota spiritual universe into analytical charts. In each diagram *Wakantanka* is the highest.

One diagram shows the *tobto* (literally, four times four), which represents, according to them, a unity expressed in kinship terms and political metaphors that personify the *wakan* beings and which constitutes the foundation of Lakota metaphysics. The diagrams reflect an attempt to systematize the Lakota universe by organizing the *wakan* beings hierarchically. Since the diagrams are based on Walker's interviews with Sword, they most likely reflect Walker's preoccupation with hierarchy and structure more than Sword's.¹¹

DeMallie and Lavenda's diagrams are an exogenous attempt to categorize and systematize Lakota metaphysics, for Lakota people do not think about these relationships in such a systematic, hierarchical way. In fact, there is even disagreement on which beings constitute the "Superior *wakan*," as DeMallie and Lavenda label them. The "Superior *wakan*" include *Wi* (Sun), *Shan* (Energy), *Maka* (Earth), and *Inyan* (Rock). In contrast, Lame Deer states that the four great supernaturals are *Tunkan*, the stone spirit; *Wakinyan*, the thunder spirit; *Takuskanskan*, the moving spirit; and *Unktehi*, the water spirit.¹² *Tunkan* and *Takuskanskan* correlate with the "Superior *wakan*" *Inyan* and *Shan* in DeMallie and Lavenda's diagram. *Wakinyan*, however, is on the diagram placed as "Kindred *wakan*" (which is one level below "Superior *wakan*") rather than as one of the four great supernaturals; and, finally, *Unktehi* is altogether absent from the chart. Despite incongruities that may arise due to the richness of Lakota symbolism and metaphor, the diversity of Lakota religious thought, and the independence each Holy Man exerts, direct comparisons between the *tobto* construction based on Walker's work and other Lakotas' descriptions of the relationship among the various supernaturals are a useful aid—if one realizes that no chart or Holy Man's description should be taken as orthodoxy—in apprehending the underlying structures and complexities of the constituent elements of the Lakota universe.

In order to gain that which is *wakan*, one must wait for a vision or must actively seek a vision, through the *Inipi* (Purification Rite), *Wiwanyank Wacipi* (Sun Dance), or *Hanbleceya* (Crying for a Vision). Sometimes, as in the case of Black Elk, a vision may come about during an illness or injury. Black Elk's Great Vision was given to him when he was nine years old and very ill. A sacred person, a *wicasa wakan*, was the human receptacle of power.¹³ Explain DeMallie and Lavenda, "Within the category of human, the transmutation of *wakan* varies. In its most obvious form, the *wakan* of a warrior is physical prowess and invulnerability to enemies, while the *wakan* of a shaman is spiritual," and, focusing on the *wicasa wakan*, "the most important thing about the shaman's powers was that they were not considered unique possessions of the individual. Rather, the shaman was cast in the role of a vehicle of power for the good of the people." So just as *wakan* manifests itself in various ways in objects, so too does it manifest differently in individuals, yet it is not an impersonal, neutral force:

It follows from this idea of transmutation that *wakan* is personal insofar as it becomes an attribute of individuals and that it is not a neutral quality. As it exists in the world, it exists for good or evil. . . . If *wakan* could exist by itself (and we emphasize that it cannot), it would be neutral in the same way that electricity is neutral.

Finally, *wakan* is an expression of numinosity, that nonrational *mysterium tremendum* that inspires fear, awe, and fascination, but that cannot be conceptualized only felt. It is the very basis of religion.¹⁴

Of course early missionaries were unable to grasp the subtleties of the Lakota universe. Even Stephen Return Riggs did not fully comprehend it, and to be sure the above description of the *tobtob* and the *wakan* beings does not fully communicate the complexity, synchronicity, and subtlety of Lakota metaphysics. However, awareness of the disparity between Lakota thought and Christian-European thought is the first step in more fully understanding Black Elk and those with whom he interacted.

As mentioned earlier, our worldview informs our language, and our language informs our worldview. To extend this, our worldview informs our actions and how we respond to situations and people. For example, I have yet to encounter any instances of pre-European-contact Native peoples trying to convert others to their religion. There are many instances of Native peoples integrating “outside” rituals into their own religion, the syncretic Ghost Dance being the most obvious example. For the Lakota, since *wakan* is manifested in many forms, any *ritual* could perhaps give one “power.”

Contemporary examples of the inclusive nature of Lakota thought can be seen in some Christian religious services. Martin Broken Leg, a priest in the Episcopal church who was ordained in 1971, currently serves as canon at the Calvary Cathedral in Sioux Falls. He is also a professor of Native American studies at Augustana College. Questions of religious subordination aside, the following passage from *Vision Quest, Men and Women and Sacred Sites of the Sioux Nation* exemplifies the term *syncretism*, describing how a contemporary Episcopal service has been transformed to enable Lakota-Dakota people to “relate to God out of their [own] cultural context”:

At the cathedral, my task is to model an “Indian-ized” approach to worship. We use the basement of the cathedral. We use a circle—we’ve taken the tepee as a model. Instead of a fire in the middle, we have a sand table and candles and a small altar that sits on the west end. We have colored flags for each of the directions. We begin our service with sage and we have an eagle feather fan that we use. The services are simple. We start out after the smoke. We have a prayer to the directions. Then we have readings and the homily. For communion we use frybread, our own bread that’s cooked in a skillet. Our idea is to take the things out of the ordinary Indian life and use them.¹⁵

In the early reservation period, of course, traditional practices were not tolerated. In fact, the U.S. government prohibited traditional public rituals such as the Sun Dance, the Keeping of the Soul, and the giveaways. So, unlike today, the combining or synthesizing of the two religions was not an option. Since traditional Lakota religion was forbidden, many ceremonies, including the Sun Dance, were performed in secret.¹⁶ However, because of these social conditions, many Lakota practiced both religions.¹⁷ The Catholic missionaries’ view concerning dual participation and syncretism seems to be quite different.

Fools Crow, as quoted earlier, claimed that Black Elk thought that Lakota religion and Christianity were “pretty much the same” and the two religions could be worked in with each other “so in the end both would be better.” Compare Black Elk and Fools Crow’s view with that of Henry M. Teller, newly appointed secretary of the interior in late 1882, writing to Hiram Price, the commissioner of Indian Affairs, prompting him to take action against the Sun Dance and other traditional practices and chastising “medicine men” for hindering the “civilization” of their people: “Another great hindrance [besides the Sun Dance, other traditional dances, giveaways, and polygamy] to the civilization of the Indians is the influence of the medicine men, who are always found with the anti-progressive party. The medicine men resort to various artifices and devices to keep the people under their influence . . . using their conjurers’ arts to prevent the people from abandoning their heathenish rites and customs.” Holler explains that Price responded by establishing a Court of Indian Offenses, which closely followed Teller’s directive, stating that “any Indian who shall engage in the Sun Dance, scalp dance, or war dance, or any other similar feast, so called, shall be deemed guilty of an offense, and upon conviction thereof shall be punished for the first offense by the withholding of his rations for not exceeding ten days or by imprisonment for not exceeding ten days.” Subsequent offenses raised loss of rations to thirty days or imprisonment for thirty days.¹⁸

This overt ethnocentrism persisted into the next century—for example, in the views expressed by Sister M. Claudia Duratschek, author of *Crusading Along Sioux Trails*, published in 1947: “A fervent and outstanding catechist who, however, has been cast [in *Black Elk Speaks*] incorrectly as a pagan medicine man, was Black Elk. This quondam Ghost Dancer and chief of medicine men, after his conversion, like a second St. Paul, went around trying to convert his tribesmen whom, before his conversion, he had helped to *shackle in the fetters of paganism* [italics mine].”¹⁹ Of course it is not fair to generalize all missionaries as sharing this view, but since Duratschek’s book was published by the Benedictine Convent of the Sacred Heart one can assume there were no objections to the blatant ethnocentrism she exhibits. In his essay, “The Catholic Mission and the Sioux, a Crisis in the Early Paradigm,” Harvey Markowitz describes the prevailing attitude of Catholic missionization: “The idea that ‘Devil-dominated heathenism’ and Christianity might be phases of a single process of religious growth . . . was totally unacceptable to Catholic missionaries. Instead they viewed these two forms as antithetical. To replace Sioux heathenism with the sacraments represented a religious revolution, not evolution. Given such a perspective, missionaries rejected the notion that a Lakota could participate in traditional Indian ceremonies and simultaneously be a Catholic.”²⁰

Comparing the attitude of Duratschek and most missionaries with that expressed by Fools Crow, we can see that the problem, really, is one of incommensurable worldviews. The Lakota’s worldview—its social context, language, and spiritual or metaphysical universe and view of reality—is disparate with the Christian-European worldview. Ian Hacking, in *Representing and Intervening*, explains that the term *incommensurate* comes from Greek mathe-

matics and means “no common measure.” An example he gives is that the diagonal of a square cannot be used to measure the lengths of the square’s sides. Working from Thomas Kuhn, in referring to scientific theories over time, Hacking proposes that “successive and competing theories within the same domain ‘speak different languages’ [and] cannot be strictly compared to each other nor translated into the other.”²¹ The same may be true of different worldviews; there may be no common measure to evaluate one in terms of the other.

This inability to communicate or have a common point of reference or measure multiplies exponentially in the case of the Lakota because, to adopt Hacking’s phrase, their “network of possibilities, embedded in different styles of reasoning” greatly differs from the Christian-European’s. Powers’ translation from the Lakota Bible was an extreme example. Black Elk, I contend, “believed” in Catholicism, but not in the same way, or for the same reasons, that a Westerner or missionary would have; most importantly, Black Elk’s network of possibilities, because it did not rest on actual propositions or on doctrinal statements of belief, was inclusive—capable of including many rituals and practices—whereas the Christian network is basically exclusive, regarding other religions and systems of thought as incorrect or “pagan.”

Hacking defines contrast between one perspective and another as dissociation. The Christian missionaries were dissociated from the network of possibilities that existed in the Lakota worldview. The question then arises, can anyone understand a culture outside his or her own? The answer is, perhaps. The implication of incommensurability is not cultural isolationism, for a person can learn the *language* of another culture. To get into the Lakota mind, or any perspective outside one’s own culture or time, one must become dissociated from his or her own worldview, in essence, learn the *language* of that culture or historical period. The difference in perspectives is not subjective, but rather relative to cultural experience and language, a matter of *cognitive* contextualization or, in the case of learning a new perspective, re-contextualization. However, many fundamental assumptions—cause and effect, reason, and universals or ideals²²—underlie the Western worldview. The relationship among faith, belief, and ritual will serve to illustrate one such cultural assumption or bias: the significance of propositional religious *belief*.

In his book *Faith and Belief*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith distinguished between the concepts of faith and belief by defining belief as propositional.²³ In other words, belief is that which is usually expressed in a language statement, for instance, in The Apostle’s Creed from *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. . . .” Propositional creeds have held an important role in Christianity, for there are certain things one must profess in order to be a Christian. A student in a philosophy of religions class mistakenly assumed that one must have a belief (a language statement or proposition of some sort) before one could have faith in something because otherwise you would not know what you believed! But this is not necessarily the case. Smith argues that propositional belief has been overemphasized and that the common faith which underlies belief is more important. Propositional belief,

however, has been a critical component in Christianity and has given the religion continuity.

Faith, on the other hand, can be thought of as that which lies at the most basic level of meaning and often evades propositional explication due to its fundamental nature. For the Christian this would include basic concepts such as love and hope, and for the Lakota faith in the sacred force—that which is *wakan*—which circulates through all creation. Propositional belief, then, is faith expressing itself in a formal, culturally contextualized statement or tenet, either for the purpose of conformity or to further understanding for comparative reasons.

In contrast to the Christian model, the Lakota model lacks a belief statement. Propositional, doctrinal belief is not part of Lakota religion. When one seeks a vision there is no statement of truth or doctrine that one is expected to return with or profess. A Lakota's vision, though informed by his culture's symbols and language, is personal and not determined by or contingent upon statements of belief. For Christianity belief has been the constant that has given it continuity. For the Lakota, however, continuity was achieved through ritual. Cultural transmission occurred through the smoking of a sacred pipe, Crying for a Vision, the Sun Dance, other ceremonies and rituals, and storytelling. The change side of the model came through personal visions and the role of the Holy Man, who sought to understand his own visions and those of others, and amended rituals as he saw fit. Sword states that the *wicasa wakan* "must know all the laws and customs of the Lakotas, for he may prohibit or change any of them," and that "a shaman could change any custom or ceremony."²⁴

In Fools Crow's reasoning we see the flexibility and openness that results from a lack of propositional religious creeds or belief statements. When Fools Crow, for example, was asked if he included an erect reproductive organ on the man tied to the Sun Dance pole, as they had in ancient times, he responded, "No, the green color is used now as a prayer for reproduction and healthy growth." On the other hand, when questioned why there are four or five Sun Dances a year at Rosebud and only one at Pine Ridge, Fools Crow explained that, "We only have one, which is the way it was done in the old days."²⁵ Interestingly, Fools Crow does not say that they are having more Sun Dances than they should at Rosebud, but merely notes that things are done differently at Pine Ridge. In one instance he breaks with tradition, substituting the color green for the male part, and in the other follows it, citing tradition to explain why there is only one Sun Dance at Pine Ridge each year.

Black Elk's reasoning was similar, which is not surprising since his influence on Fools Crow, his nephew, seems to have been a profound one.²⁶ In terms of Black Elk, one could use faith and belief (in their propositional sense) to explain why there was no conflict between his traditional religion and Catholicism and to flesh out more fully Holler's explanation that Black Elk would have seen both as expressions of the sacred. In this scenario, faith would be the sacred, and belief the manifestation of that sacredness. The content or meaning remains the same, but the form has changed. Catholicism, then, would be *wakan* expressing itself in another form, a different *container*. Rather than seeing belief as the source of continuity and faith as the source

of change as they are in traditional Christian thought, in viewing Black Elk one can align faith with continuity and belief with change: the unconscious, deep, spiritual holism of Lakota thought gave continuity to Black Elk's life and understanding, and the adaptive, conscious component allowed him to adjust his beliefs in order to better aid his people.²⁷

Regardless of the technically verbose construction one uses to explain the intricacies and subtleties of his thought, what is clear is that Black Elk circumscribed Catholicism *within* the bounds of his traditional worldview, which, because of the situational nature of *wakan*, was inclusive rather than exclusive.

INCOMMENSURABILITY APPLIED

There are several dimensions to Black Elk's way of seeing, the non-propositional religious outlook just described being only one of them. To stop at such an explanation, however, would be an oversimplification and only a minor extension, through specific explanation and example, of Holler's observation that Black Elk saw both religious traditions as manifestations of the sacred. In order to illustrate the effects of incommensurability on interpretation and, at the same time, to elaborate on the foundational concepts that form Black Elk's way of seeing, I will now present an extended critique of Michael Steltenkamp's arguments in *Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala*, the first major study of Black Elk's life as a catechist. That Black Elk's work as a catechist and his experience using the Catholic Two Roads Map²⁸ strongly influenced his telling of his Great Vision to Neihardt serves to support Steltenkamp's implied thesis: that Black Elk evolved a Christian consciousness, or worldview, and interpreted his vision in terms of that consciousness. In the first chapter of Steltenkamp's book, entitled "Lakota Culture," he gives an overview (twelve pages) of traditional Lakota society and devotes two paragraphs to the traditional Lakota spiritual worldview, emphasizing the belief that "all Lakota had access to, and could acquire, supernatural power and purpose."²⁹ For a book concerned with explaining Black Elk and his religion, Steltenkamp should have devoted much more space to describing the conceptual framework which formed Black Elk's worldview. A reasonable evaluation of Black Elk's thought, working solely from Steltenkamp's book, is virtually impossible.³⁰

There are three major problems with Steltenkamp's argument: the many variables involved in a direct comparison between Black Elk's vision and the Two Roads Map; the author's disregard of the full context of the symbols in Black Elk's vision and their relationship to other views that Black Elk expresses elsewhere in *The Sixth Grandfather*; and the author's one-eyed approach of interpreting everything from a Christian perspective.

That there are similarities between the vision Black Elk communicated to Neihardt and the Two Roads Map he used for teaching the catechism is not surprising. Unquestionably, Black Elk's language, the way in which he finally communicated himself to Neihardt, was affected by his experience with Christianity, but this experience was subordinate to his preexisting worldview. It is also important to remember that Black Elk's son, Ben, who was raised as a Catholic, served as translator during the interviews. Hilda Neihardt

describes the tedious process of interpretation and transcription: "One of the old men spoke in Lakota for a few minutes, then Ben translated, into English, haltingly at first. If the meaning was unclear, Neihardt questioned, then Ben repeated the question to the storyteller and waited for his response. When that particular portion of the story was understandable my father repeated it, Ben said 'that's it,' and Enid [Hilda's older sister] recorded it in her short-hand book. If there was no problem with understanding what the teller was saying, Enid recorded it immediately."³¹ Hilda's description of the process illustrates the language difficulties involved in rendering Black Elk's narratives into English.³²

In its construction, the Two Roads Map also shows something of a chameleon-like character. According to Steltenkamp, the Two Roads Maps that were used had varying details, though their basic design was the same. Because Black Elk may have taught from various maps, it is difficult to determine even the color of the roads and how Black Elk described them. Lucy Looks Twice, Black Elk's daughter, recalls to Steltenkamp how her father taught her the meaning of the map: "I remember Ate Ptecela ["Short Father," Father Lindebner, from the Holy Rosary Mission] used to bring a kind of map—with a red road and a yellow road on it. And my father taught me what it was—the good road and the bad road. . . . [O]n the red road we want to walk. . . . He learned the idea of the black road when he was a catechist." Lucy seems to be describing a map with three roads: a red road, a yellow road, and a black road. Two pages later Steltenkamp includes the reflections of John Lone Goose, a friend of Black Elk's who was also a catechist: "Father gave him a Two Roads Map, and he taught from it the rest of his life. One road was black and is the devil. The other is yellow—the very good road to heaven."³³ Lucy implies that the yellow road was the "bad road," since, as she says, the "good road" was red; Lone Goose, however, says that the yellow road was "the very good road to heaven." This seemingly problematic description is actually an excellent example of the ambiguity of memory and of language. Lucy says that Black Elk learned the "idea of the black road" from being a catechist, and it is clear that the "good road" on the Two Roads Map was actually yellow or gold. Since it is doubtful that any missionaries would have made some maps with yellow "good roads" and others with yellow "bad roads," it would seem that Black Elk made his own decision concerning the color of the "good road," for in *The Sixth Grandfather* he always referred to it as "the good red road."³⁴ So, Black Elk may have described the Two Roads Map in terms of his vision, substituting the red road for the yellow road, or, influenced by the map, he may have later chosen a color for the "good road" in describing his Great Vision to Neihardt. There is really no way of knowing. In either case, however, his choice of color reflects the universal Lakota use of red to distinguish anything that is *wakan*.

These examples, of the Neihardt interviews transcription process and of the possible variability of the Two Roads Maps from which Black Elk taught, illustrate the immediate difficulties inherent in comparing Black Elk's Great Vision and the Two Roads Map. In order to understand how Black Elk related to his Great Vision and to religion in general, one must take a broader per-

spective. This involves an analysis of the major differences between the two roads of Black Elk's vision and the two roads of the Catholic Two Roads Map, and an attempt to measure Black Elk's visions in terms that are commensurable with Christianity. In so doing, we will see that Black Elk did not evolve an ostensibly Christianized worldview and that Steltenkamp's assumptions cause him to misinterpret the fundamental "concepts" that shape Black Elk's way of seeing.

Reasoning *from* the Catholic Two Roads Map rather than *to* it and failing to put Black Elk's symbols in their full context, Steltenkamp overemphasizes the relationship between Black Elk's Great Vision and the map:

Black Elk used the Two Roads Map during his life as a catechist, and many references within his vision correspond directly to the old picture catechism. Some of the surprising parallels include thunder beings, a daybreak star, flying men, tree imagery, circled villages, a black road, a red road, friendly wings, an evil blue man living in flames, a place where people moaned and mourned, emphasis on the people's history, and gaudily portrayed, self-indulgent individuals. Other, more detailed segments of Black Elk's vision are either explicitly or implicitly present in the Two Roads Map.³⁵

Steltenkamp dismisses a Jungian, archetypal explanation of the similarities, which seem rather obscure except for a hellish interpretation of the "place where people moaned and mourned," the "gaudily portrayed, self-indulgent individuals," and the "evil blue man living in flames." Each of these hellish parallels quickly loses resonance once placed in the full context of the vision. Black Elk's description of the people, unlike Steltenkamp's, is not steeped in Christian idiom; what he actually said was, "They [the Grandfathers] showed me a circle village and all the people were very poor in there." DeMallie notes that throughout the interview the word *poor* is used in the sense of *emaciated*. Black Elk continues, saying, "All the horses were hide and bones and here and there you could hear the wail of women and also men. Some of them were dying and some were dead." They suffer from physical rather than spiritual starvation. The "evil blue man living in flames" might, from a Christian perspective, represent Satan. In his vision Black Elk stabs the blue man through the heart and kills him. This could be seen as a symbolic vanquishing of evil; however, near the end of his vision the Grandfathers tell Black Elk to drink a cup of water that contained "a man painted blue [who] had a bow and arrow and . . . was in distress." Black Elk drinks from the cup and then says, "From this I received strange power and whenever I was conjuring . . . I could actually make this blue man come out and swim in the cup of water I used." From a Christian perspective, then, Black Elk would be gaining power from the devil. The incongruities and contradictions that arise from interpreting the symbols of Black Elk's vision from a consistently Christian perspective cannot be meaningfully reconciled.³⁶

Steltenkamp's singular approach causes him not only to misinterpret Black Elk's images but to pigeonhole Black Elk's words (which are actually Ben's translation through the process described above) and interpret them to

fit his argument. Steltenkamp explains the differences between the roads in Black Elk's vision and The Two Roads map as follows:

[T]he north-south red road and the west-east black road of Black Elk's vision do not bisect one another on the catechetical chart. The map's two roads appear as distinct routes separated by illustrations of Christ's life. (Interestingly, though, the vision imagery depicts these roads in the form of a cross.) So too, the map's black section is not strictly designated as one of troubles, any more than the red road is designated as good (even though "good," or "better," would be implied as the Christian era eclipses its prehistory). Finally, the catechism's specifically marked paths of good and evil never intersect with the red and black sections.

Steltenkamp then brushes aside his own observation that the roads in Black Elk's Great Vision bisect one another rather than form two parallel lines like the roads on the Two Roads Map, stating that "Black Elk's comments to Neihardt sound as if he might just as well have been talking about the Two Roads Map and the instructions he received concerning it."³⁷ For support he then cites a passage from *Black Elk Speaks*, where Black Elk is reflecting on his vision: "It was the pictures I remember and the words that went with them. . . . It was as I grew older that the meanings came clearer and clearer out of the pictures and the words; and even now I know that more was shown to me than I can tell."³⁸ It's difficult, at best, to comprehend how the above passage supports Steltenkamp's claim that Black Elk was making a direct reference to the Two Roads Map when telling his vision to Neihardt, for the "pictures" and "words" are clearly the images Black Elk saw and heard in his vision. Furthermore, ironically presenting an argument against himself, Steltenkamp notes that this passage from *Black Elk Speaks* "may have been composed entirely by Neihardt, as it does not appear in the stenographic record." To cover for this, he cites DeMallie's observation that often one learns about matters through offhand remarks when working in the field and must rely on memory later. Steltenkamp adds, "something of this nature may have transpired." That this is sometimes the case is surely so, but for an author whose chief aim is, in his own words, "to set forth an examination of Black Elk's life that is empirically verifiable,"³⁹ material recorded under such circumstances makes for poor "empirical" support.

Steltenkamp is also misleading in stating that Black Elk's "vision imagery depicts these roads in the form of a cross." Black Elk means that the roads "cross," that they bisect one another. (Steltenkamp even points this out, so, again, I fail to grasp his reasoning.) The black road and red road (leading from west to east and south to north, respectively) that Black Elk describes in his vision form not a crucifix but rather two bisecting lines around which a perfect circle could be drawn. This pattern is prevalent in a variety of rituals and traditional structures, such as the tipi, purification lodge, medicine wheel, or altars for the Sun Dance, though the Sun Dance pole itself forms a crucifix design.⁴⁰ In *The Sixth Grandfather* Black Elk expresses his faith in the power of the circle: "You will notice that everything the Indian does is in a cir-

cle. Everything that they do is the power from the sacred hoop. . . . The power won't work in anything but circles. . . . Everything tries to be round—the world is round.”⁴¹ Based on this foundational view, Black Elk describes the altar made for the horse dance ceremony he performed around 1881, at the age of eighteen or nineteen: “Right in the middle of the tipi we made a circle with a little trench and put two roads across—the red running north and south, the black running east and west.”⁴²

Black Elk's explanation of the altar clearly expresses an “Indian” approach to reality. Lame Deer describes the prevalence of circles in Lakota life and their relationship to how the Lakota view reality:

The nation was only a part of the universe, in itself circular and made of the earth, which is round, of the sun, which is round, of the stars, which are round. The moon, the horizon, the rainbow—circles within circles within circles, with no beginning and no end. . . . To us this is beautiful and fitting, symbol and reality at the same time, expressing the harmony of life and nature. Our circle is timeless, flowing: it is new life emerging from death—life winning out over death.⁴³

Paula Gunn Allen, a Laguna Pueblo/Sioux, further explains in her essay, “The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Perspective,” that Indian peoples generally view space as spherical and time as cyclical, whereas non-Indians tend to view space as linear and time as sequential. This contrast in the perception of space and time is the most fundamental difference between the Indian and European worldviews, and Steltenkamp passes over it because he is working from the non-Indian perspective. Allen elaborates on these differences in Indian and non-Indian conceptions of reality as follows: “The circular concept requires all ‘points’ that make up the sphere of being to have a significant identity and function, while the linear model assumes that some ‘points’ are more significant than others. In the one, significance is a necessary function in being itself, whereas in the other, significance is a function of placement on an absolute scale that is fixed in time.”⁴⁴

In contrast, the Two Roads Map clearly expresses the non-Indian perspective that views space as linear and time as sequential. The two roads are parallel (though there are “bridges” between them to show those who are passing back and forth) and lead up an “absolute scale that is fixed in time” to the point when the second coming will arrive. Near the top of the map, the end of each road is blazoned in fire. A church window with a cross upon it is filled with fire, and, likewise, the road to hell ends in flames. Between these two infernos is Christ on a cloud with two angels below him. Above him is heaven, for he is also sitting with angels surrounding him. The map ends there because time and space end there.

Steltenkamp fails to discuss the implications of this fundamental difference between the Indian and non-Indian perspective, thereby ignoring the foundation upon which Black Elk's thought is constructed; he therefore approaches the relationship between Black Elk's traditionalism and Catholicism disproportionately, emphasizing the influence that Catholicism had on his traditionalism rather than the other way around. His comment,

cited above, about the Christian era “eclipsing” its prehistory, a sort of religious manifest destiny, clearly shows this Christian bias.

Black Elk’s discussion of the four time periods, or “ascents,” in his Great Vision and the man he sees in his Ghost Dance vision have an affinity with Christianity. However, once put into context both fail to support the contention that Black Elk had evolved a substantially Christianized worldview.

Steltenkamp’s misinterpretation of the Great Vision is based on Black Elk’s statements concerning the four ascents, which seem to end apocalyptically. Steltenkamp claims that “The vision was . . . enhanced by the substance of a salvation history that was succinctly delineated on the Two Roads Map.”⁴⁵ A closer examination of the full vision and other statements Black Elk made elsewhere refute this interpretation and show that the “salvation” Black Elk seeks is of a different nature than that expressed in the Two Roads Map. Keeping in mind that Black Elk saw time as cyclical and space as spherical, an apocalyptic interpretation of the four ascents is untenable. In his Great Vision, the Western black spirit tells Black Elk to “Behold the Universe” and then Black Elk says, “As I looked around I could see the country was full of sickness and in need of help. This was the future and I was going to cure these people.”⁴⁶ This fourth ascent is not the end of the world, a final judgment which determines salvation or damnation and marks the end of corporeal existence as we currently know and understand it, but rather one more cycle in the circular flow of space and time.

In contrast to his Great Vision, Black Elk’s Ghost Dance vision is explicitly Christian in its symbolism, which is not surprising considering the Christian elements of the Ghost Dance ceremony itself. Black Elk describes twelve men and a thirteenth who seemed to have “wounds in the palms of his hands.” Before noticing the wounds, the twelve tell him to behold the man, whom they referred to as “Our Father, the two-legged chief.” Black Elk describes him as follows: “The man with outstretched arms looked at me and I didn’t know whether he was a white or an Indian. He did not resemble Christ. He looked like an Indian, but I was not sure of it.” Stepping out of his narrative for a moment, Black Elk reflects on his Ghost Dance vision and decides that his decision to follow it, instead of his original vision, may have been a mistake: “It seems to me on thinking it over that I have seen the son of the Great Spirit himself. All through this I depended on my Messiah [Ghost Dance] vision whereas perhaps I should have depended on my first great vision which had more power and this might have been where I made my great mistake.”⁴⁷ Black Elk places his Great Vision above his Messiah vision. For Black Elk, the distinguishing factor between the two visions is their efficacy, their ability to aid the people in leading a successful life. Since for the Lakota the Ghost Dance ceremony and visions ended in the Wounded Knee Massacre, perhaps Black Elk thinks they were not as *wakan* as his first vision.

Black Elk, it seems, measures “power” pragmatically. He tells of Drinks Water, a “medicine man,” probably a *wicasa wakan*, who lived long ago and “had the ability to make everything—[he] made sugar, tobacco, matches and other things just by his words alone. This is probably the only man who had the power direct from the Great Spirit and this is why he was so powerful.” Black Elk states that “In the [first] vision I was representing the earth and

everything was giving me power. I was given power so that all the creatures on earth would be happy." Through his own words, and with Neihardt's help, Black Elk hopes to create material security for his people. Furthermore, his vision determined his responsibility to his people and their well-being: "In my vision they had predicted that I was chosen to be intercessor for my people so it was up to me to do my utmost for my people and everything that I did not do for my people, it would be my fault—if my people should perish it seemed that it would be my fault. . . . I am just telling you this, Mr. Neihardt. You know how I felt and what I really wanted to do is for us to make the tree bloom. On this tree we shall prosper."⁴⁸ Black Elk's primary goal is not to save souls but rather to rectify the ailing social and economic conditions of the reservation in the 1930s. Since Catholicism was not at the time producing positive results, his prescription involves a return to traditional Lakota religion.

A CONVERSION STORY

An inclusive, non-propositional religious foundation, a view of space as spherical and time as cyclical, and a worldly, situational pragmatism are the three major ways in which the Lakota worldview differs from the Christian worldview. Black Elk is working from an entirely different perspective than Steltenkamp. The terms in which each thinks are incommensurable; their network of possibilities inhabit disparate worlds that are separated through a gulf not only in language but also in foundational assumptions about the nature of religion, reality, and society and about the way in which the three function together. Black Elk's pragmatism explains why he would sign his name to a letter that professed his sincere Catholicism, as he did shortly after *Black Elk Speaks* came out, and why he would tell others like Frank Fools Crow that Catholicism and Lakota religion were "pretty much the same." The following passage from *The Sixth Grandfather*, in which Black Elk digresses for a moment in telling his Great Vision to Neihardt, further supports a pragmatic explanation of Black Elk's actions and perhaps tells us more about his character and attitude than all of the scholarship to date: "I am liked by all people and can influence them. Everybody has respect for me—even the white people. The moment I see anybody I want to get along with him and I always do get along with him."⁴⁹

That Black Elk adjusted his views, or at least his tone, in order to "get along" with all people may explain how he has become "all things to all people" and why it is extremely difficult to pin down his foundational views. Furthermore, his own self-confidence seemed to reflect his own view of his success or failure in aiding his people, which he saw as his primary responsibility throughout his lifetime. Prior to the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890, Black Elk felt very powerful spiritually. He describes to Neihardt his visions of ghost dancing and of leading the people in the Ghost Dance ceremony, relating that "I was to perform the ceremony. They all looked forward for me to take part, because they knew I had a better vision than they had. . . . I was the leader in every dance. Soon I had developed so much power that even if I would stand in the center of the circle and wave this red stick, the people would fall into swoons without dancing and see their visions."⁵⁰

By 1904, however, Black Elk seems to have become depressed and frustrated, perhaps due to the religious and social constraints placed on the Lakota. In 1904, the year after his wife died, he converted to Catholicism. According to Lucy, Black Elk had been suffering a lot and experiencing "quite a bit of inner turmoil." Steltenkamp describes the physical effects of the conversion as being very positive: "He knew that something was not right in his life, and the symptoms were, minimally, social, physical, and psychological. After the visit to the hospital, during which time he received the Catholic sacrament of the sick, Black Elk undertook the work of the catechist, and his ulcers were never again bothersome. Lucy said that her father felt that 'the son of God had called him to lead a new life.'"⁵¹ I am not sure what Steltenkamp's use of the word *minimally* is meant to imply. As the second part of the quoted passage states, Black Elk recovered and was subsequently converted. While Steltenkamp's implication is that Black Elk had been suffering because he was in spiritual limbo, it might be more appropriate to say that the social turmoil of the reservation and the negative effects of forced acculturation perhaps caused Black Elk to suffer from a psychosomatic illness. However, it is clear that converting to Catholicism gave Black Elk a new vehicle for aiding his people, who desperately needed guidance. With the religious oppression that existed at the time, it is not surprising that Black Elk converted.

As if in contrast, Black Elk's traditionalism and self-confidence once again seem revitalized at the time of the Neihardt interviews. Black Elk, at least in 1931, was sharply critical of missionary influence: "The whites say that we have the power from the devil, but I'll say that they probably have that themselves"; and he makes the following unequivocal indictment of the white race:

The first thing an Indian learns is to love each other and that they should be relative-like to the four-leggeds. The next thing is telling the truth. Whatever they say, they stand by it. Here's where the Indians made their mistake. We should treat our fellow men all alike—the Great Spirit made men all alike. Therefore, we made a mistake when we tried to get along with the whites. We tried to love them as we did ourselves. On account of this we are now in misery. They were men like us. . . . Because we Indians were relatives to the four-leggeds, we wanted to get along with them. But now we see that the white race has done great wrong to the Indians.⁵²

These passages and their personal and historical contexts reflect yet another variable in incommensurability: the shifting and evolving personality of the individual. Furthermore, peoples' experiences with Black Elk were relative, or situational, and therefore no objective view comes into focus. Black Elk, it seems, knew his audience. Just as he spoke differently to the priests than, for example, to Fools Crow, he adjusted his tone depending on the individual. This is actually a common practice. One does not tell a story in the same way regardless of who is listening (any teenager can vouch for this); we often dress down a story for young children or change our tone depending on our audience. If Black Elk believed that Catholicism would be the most bene-

ficial path for his children, it makes sense that he would describe his conversion to Catholicism more positively to his own children. A comparison between Lucy Looks Twice's and Hilda Neihardt's reception of Black Elk's conversion story illustrates the relativity of storytelling and interpretation.⁵³

As stated above, Black Elk converted to Catholicism in 1904, and his conversion marked a period of transition, which gave him new opportunities to help his people. The general story is that he had gone to "doctor" a boy who was ill. When he arrived, he put tobacco offerings in the sacred place (an altar that he had constructed) and then started beating his drum and calling on the spirits. Apparently, according to Lucy, Father Lindebner, a priest at Holy Rosary Mission, arrived at the tent to give the child the last rites. Lucy explains that Lindebner "took whatever my father had prepared on the ground and threw it all into the stove. He took the drum and the rattle and threw them outside the tent. Then he took my father by the neck and said, 'Satan, get out!'" Lucy then explains that Black Elk went with the priest to Holy Rosary Mission, where the brothers "clean[ed] him up and [gave] him some new clothes," and that "at the end of those two weeks he wanted to be baptized."

Steltenkamp, referring to himself in the third person, tells that Lucy was perplexed by his own serious face as she told the story: "She regarded his conversion story as rather amusing and understood the event to be a great occurrence in her father's life. . . . Here was an amazing story and humorous tale being told (she thought), but he [Steltenkamp] remained expressionless while listening."⁵⁴

Hilda Neihardt, who accompanied her father and older sister on the interviews in the thirties, also heard the story of Black Elk's conversion:

Previously we had been told about something that had happened when he was young and just beginning to use his powers to cure illness.⁵⁵ [He] was praying for a sick person's recovery and using his rattle as part of a healing ceremony when a priest burst into the tepee, grabbed young Black Elk and pulled him rudely outside. Then he took Black Elk's rattle, threw it to the ground, and stamped on it, admonishing the surprised young man that he should never use such "heathen" objects again.

"Heathen" has taken the place of "Satan, get out!", but the basic plot is the same. However, what is distinguishably different is how Hilda interprets Black Elk's feelings about the incident: "Black Elk told my father that later he did join the white church, and we knew he catechized young children. What he did not find necessary to say left us with a strong sense of where his true beliefs remained. Understanding all too well, Neihardt said no more. . . . Leaving that sensitive, vaguely unpleasant subject [Black Elk's Catholicism], we turned to plans for our trip to Harney Peak the next day." Upon Neihardt asking Black Elk why he belonged to a white church, he replied, "Because my children have to live in this world." Hilda comments that she "could never forget those words."⁵⁶ Unfortunately, Neihardt did not probe the subject further.

A second explanation of Lucy's and Hilda's disparate interpretations is that each brought a certain perspective to the telling. Lucy was a rigid

Catholic, while Hilda sympathized with what she viewed as traditional culture. To understand Black Elk's meaning, one must also learn *his* language. Just as cultures are dissociated from one another, so are individuals within the same culture. To tell someone that you "thank creation" he or she is doing well could be interpreted many ways, in a religious or secular sense. Furthermore, as a comparison of Lucy's and Hilda's reactions to Black Elk's conversion story illustrates, our psychological and social history influences our interpretations.

The interaction of such a host of complex influences and variables as I have been describing casts doubt on any enterprise, like Steltenkamp's, that seeks for an "empirically verifiable" Black Elk or that seeks for a single explanation, as Holler proposes, which reconciles the apparent contradictions of his actions or his religious "beliefs." Without attempting to relate to Black Elk's meaning, which is inextricably bound up with his actions and their context, one will miss him altogether. In *The Sixth Grandfather* he prayed, "O Great Spirit, accept my offerings. O make me understand that I may know."⁵⁷ And that understanding is nothing less than the meaning and knowledge derived from the reality of experience and from a dynamic response to this story we call life.

Concerning whether or not Black Elk's Catholicism was sincere, in a recent book review William Powers correctly states that nobody will ever know.⁵⁸ But this should not deter us from seeking to gain a better understanding of Black Elk or from studying his life—and the literature that has sprung up around it—to gain a more comprehensive and thorough understanding and appreciation for the complexity and dynamics of culture and individual identity.

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NOTES

1. Raymond J. DeMallie, ed., *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 22, 59.

2. Thomas E. Mails, *Fools Crow* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 45.

3. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 72; and Hilda Neihardt, *Black Elk and Flaming Rainbow* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 119. Neihardt's book is a romanticized memoir of her experience with her father and the Black Elk interviews. Though highly subjective, it does offer some interesting insights into the interviews and the Neihardts' stay with the Black Elks.

4. Clyde Holler, *Black Elk's Religion: The Sundance and Lakota Catholicism* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 22, 216, 36. For a useful and informative review

of Holler's book, see Lee Irwin's in the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 20:4 (1996): 203–207. See also Dale Stover's review/essay, "Eurocentrism and Native Americans," *Cross Currents* (Fall 1997); and DeMallie's review in *Journal of American History* 84:1 (1997): 245. In addition to DeMallie's stages and Holler's explanation that Black Elk saw each religion as a manifestation of the same thing, Powers and Rice offer similar explanations for Black Elk's contradictory beliefs. In his essay, "When Black Elk Speaks Everybody Listens," *Religion in Native North America*, ed. Christopher Vescey (Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1990), Powers argues that most Lakotas could move from one religious system to the other, participating in each on a situational basis, "drawing from each or all those prayers, songs, rituals, histories, myths, and beliefs that satisfied the needs of the particular time and its attendant crises." Similar to Holler, he further contends that the "myth of Black Elk" stems from the Western belief that an individual can only belong to one religion at a time (140). In *Black Elk's Story: Distinguishing Its Lakota Purpose* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1991), Julian Rice explains Black Elk's amorphous teachings in terms of the Lakota worldview, stating that the Lakota world "was especially receptive to vision in symbolic forms because its thinking was, as a rule, more metaphorical"; similar to Powers' pragmatic explanation, Rice rhetorically asks if Black Elk lied and then rationalizes the apparent contradictions with the following explanation: "Drawing on a wide range of religious metaphors, some of them Christian, Black Elk spoke to protect the people" (152–153). DeMallie's explanation of Black Elk's beliefs provides a cogent basis for exploring his way of thinking. In his introduction to *The Sixth Grandfather*, DeMallie explains Black Elk's thought as inclusive and dynamic:

Black Elk, like other Lakotas, could express his firm belief in the truth of the Catholic religion without the necessity of rejecting Indian beliefs. The two systems were not compartmentalized; rather, they were stages in his life. Unlike missionaries, however, Black Elk did not conceive of the two religions as forming a developmental sequence. Both were intimately bound up in his being, and both sets of beliefs molded his character and personality. (66)

Holler, Powers, and Rice present nuances of or explanations for the inclusive and dynamic nature of Black Elk's thought: Holler for its inclusiveness, both religions as manifestations of the sacred; and Powers and Rice for its dynamic aspect, a response (made possible by the metaphorical nature of Lakota thought) to immediate social circumstances. A synthesis of these scholars' various observations is, finally, the most reasonable explanation for Black Elk's shifting beliefs.

5. William K. Powers, *Sacred Language: The Nature of Supernatural Discourse in Lakota* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986), 103–105. For the spelling of Lakota words, I have chosen to follow the method used by most scholars, but I have not included diacritics. As explained by Albert White Hat, Sr., professor of Lakota studies at Sinte Gleska University, Rosebud, South Dakota, Lakota orthography has been a developing area. He explains in his introduction to his Lakota grammar text—in the section entitled "History of a Lakota Developed Orthography"—that in 1995 the South Dakota Association of Bilingual and Bicultural Education voted to create a Lakota dictionary organized thematically, using the new orthography that had been agreed upon in 1982.

Consensus was reached on the alphabet, but a specific letter or diacritic can still be challenged. See Albert White Hat, Sr., *Writing and Reading the Lakota Language (Lakota Iyapi Un Wowapi Nahan Yawapi)*, Unpublished manuscript (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 1999), 3–6. Most scholarly works on Lakota culture include a phonologic key. See Eugene Buechel, *A Dictionary of the Teton Dakota Language*, ed. Paul Manhart (Pine Ridge, SD: Red Cloud Indian School, 1970); Powers', *Sacred Language*.

6. Quoted in Black Elk, *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Sacred Rites of the Oglala Sioux*, recorded and edited by Joseph Epes Brown (New York: Penguin Books, 1953, 1980), 39 n. 1. The extent to which Brown's "editing" of his interviews with Black Elk affects the argumentative thrust of *The Sacred Pipe* is unclear. Like Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks*, the book has a consistent and stylized narrative voice that is inconsistent with the voice (or lack thereof) that comes through in the transcription of the Neihardt interviews presented in *The Sixth Grandfather*. Judging from Brown's copious footnotes, his purpose was clearly to compare Lakota religion with other world religions, and Black Elk probably was aware of this and so shaped his narrative to fit Brown's purpose. Furthermore, in the fifteen years since the last Neihardt interview Black Elk had most likely considered Lakota religion from an increasingly theological perspective; therefore, his descriptions of the various rites include the "basics" of each rite, and—in contrast to his Great Vision (told to Neihardt), which is extremely complex and asymmetrical—the prayers, songs, and actions are all highly structured and follow the same methodical pattern. For a discussion of the theological argument in *The Sacred Pipe*, see Holler's article, "Black Elk's Relationship to Christianity," *American Indian Quarterly* 8:1 (1984): 37–49; and also *Black Elk's Religion*, cited above. For Neihardt's own views on *Black Elk Speaks*, see Sally McCluskey's article, based on interviews with the poet, "Black Elk Speaks: And so does John Neihardt," *Western American Literature* 6 (1972): 231–42. See also Holler's article dealing with Black Elk and Neihardt's disparate purposes in collaborating in "Lakota Religion and Tragedy: The Theology of Black Elk Speaks," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52.1 (1984): 19–45; and Rice's *Black Elk's Story*, cited above. An interesting recent essay concerning Neihardt's spiritual experiences and the way in which they supposedly enabled him to enter into what he called the "pattern of the Indian consciousness" is Reece Pendleton's article, "A Ghostly Splendor: John G. Neihardt's Spiritual Preparation for Entry into Black Elk's World," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 19:4 (1995): 213–228. Where Neihardt is concerned, Pendleton's scholarship is insightful and illuminating, but his treatment of Lakota worldview is nonexistent. Furthermore, he mistakenly attributes, by implication, Neihardt's transcendentalism (a Platonic preoccupation with the "higher values in life") to Black Elk, effectively reducing the Lakota spiritual worldview to a dualistic quasi-Platonism.

7. For an excellent introduction to traditional Lakota religion, see Raymond J. DeMallie, "Lakota Belief and Ritual in the Nineteenth Century," in *Sioux Indian Religion: Tradition and Innovation*, eds. Raymond J. DeMallie and Douglas R. Parks (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 25–43.

8. Good Seat, quoted in James R. Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, eds. Raymond J. DeMallie and Elaine A. Jahner (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 70.

9. John (Fire) Lame Deer and Richard Erdoes, *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions* (New York: Pocket Books, 1972), 103–104. Interestingly, Lame Deer's four great supernaturals correlate with the four substances that constitute the universe: earth and the stone

spirit, air and the moving spirit, water and the water spirit, and fire and the thunder spirit. In fact, when discussing the sacredness of the number four, Lame Deer even comments that the universe is earth, air, water, and fire. This sort of construction causes one to wonder how much Western thought has influenced more contemporary Holy Men who have had books written about them, and surely the ideas of the biographers also have an affect. In either case, Lame Deer is asserting his independence of thought, which is a trademark of Lakota Holy Men. The above discussion is not meant to imply that change or adaptation is bad, but rather to make the reader aware of the influence that Christianity and Western thinking have had on Lakota religion.

10. Albert White Hat, *Lakota*, 204, 10.

11. Raymond DeMallie and Robert Lavenda, "Wakan, Plains Siouan Concepts of Power," in *The Anthropology of Power: Ethnographic Studies from Asia and Oceania, and the New World*, eds. Raymond D. Fogelson and Richard N. Adams (New York: Academic Press, 1977), 155–156. Powers rejects the claim that the various beings and elements are connected by kinship on linguistic grounds, for most of the *wakan* beings are "not addressed by kinship terms with the exception of the Sun sometimes addressed as 'father' and Earth sometimes addressed as 'mother'." However, Powers states that there is "agreement that *Wakantanka* is a single term that refers to sixteen aspects, all of which are related to each other in a special way." See Powers, *Sacred Language*, 119, 120. Also see the chapter "Containing the Sacred," which includes an insightful discussion of *wakan*, *Wakantanka*, the *toptob*, and criticism of DeMallie and Lavenda's observations and of Walker's work. One of Powers' criticisms of Walker is that only one of his informants, Red Hawk, claims to be a holy man (125). However, George Sword, one of Walker's main informants, states, "I know the old customs of the Lakotas, and all their ceremonies, for I was a *wicasa wakan* . . . and I have conducted all the ceremonies." See Sword, quoted in Walker, 74.

12. Lame Deer, *Lame Deer*, 103.

13. DeMallie and Lavenda, "Wakan," 158.

14. *Ibid.*, 158–159, 164. Creation is imbued with this energy. Leroy Meyer and Tony Ramirez further explain that Lakota "[r]eality . . . comprises one integrated, spiritual whole, what might otherwise be regarded as components of that reality are inseparable manifestations of the unified whole [E]verything has a spirit." See Leroy Meyer and Tony Ramirez, "Wakinyan Hotan, The Inscrutability of Lakota/Dakota Metaphysics," in *From Our Eyes, Learning from Indigenous Peoples*, eds. Sylvia O'meara and Douglas A. West (Toronto: Garamond, 1996), 100.

15. Don Doll, *Vision Quest, Men and Women and Sacred Sites of the Sioux Nation* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1994), 53.

16. See DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 260; Thomas Mails, *Fools Crow* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1979), 76; *Sundancing at Rosebud and Pine Ridge* (Sioux Falls, SD: Augustana College, the Center for Western Studies, 1978), 6–7, 10. For a survey of the extant literature pertaining to the Sun Dance's history, ban, and subsequent public rejuvenation, see Holler's *Black Elk's Religion*, cited above.

17. For an engaging discussion of dual participation in the context of reservation life, see William K. Powers, *Beyond the Vision: Essays on American Indian Culture* (Norman: University of Nebraska Press, 1987).

18. Holler, *Black Elk's Religion*, 119–120.

19. Claudia Duratschek, *Crusading along Sioux trails, a History of the Catholic Indian Missions in South Dakota* (Indiana: St. Meirad, 1947), 207–208.

20. Harvey Markowitz, "The Catholic Mission and the Sioux, a Crisis in the Early Paradigm," *Sioux Indian Religion*, eds. Raymond J. DeMallie and Douglas R. Parks (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1987), 124.

21. Ian Hacking, *Representing and Intervening* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 66, 67.

22. A specific example is given in Powers' *Sacred Language*. In sacred language things are grouped by behavioral traits rather than by morphological traits, which is the Western method. For example, the Western method would be to place west, fall, black, black tail deer, and swallow under separate categories: directions, seasons, colors, animals, and birds, respectively. In contrast, the Lakota would have west, fall, black, black tail deer, and swallow in one category. Thus, as Powers explains, any reference to one member of the set is a reference to all members. See *Sacred Language*, 139–140.

23. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 12.

24. Sword, quoted in Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 80, 81.

25. Mails, *Sundancing*, 201, 199.

26. Fools Crow describes Black Elk, who was his uncle, as "having earned a place above all of the other Teton [Lakota] holy men." See Mails, *Fools Crow*, 53. Taken at face value, this statement seems to contradict the view that the Lakota do not elevate monumental figures. However, Lakota elder Jerome Kills Small, a relative to the Fools Crow family and an instructor of Lakota at the University of South Dakota, explained that the only hierarchy in Lakota culture is that based on age and experience. Since Black Elk was involved in the Custer battle, traveled to Europe, was shot at Wounded Knee, and experienced the transition from traditional life to reservation life, he would be highly respected. Jerome Kills Small, conversation with author, 3 June 1998. On Black Elk being shot at Wounded Knee, see DeMallie, 277–278.

27. I am here borrowing Powers' construction (via Raymond Firth) of two aspects of cultural continuity and change: Social structure, the continuity side of the model, is a deep-level structure and is unconscious; social relations, the change side of the model, allows for adaptation, is conscious, and may be equated with social organization. Powers applies these principles to Oglala cultural continuity and change since the inception of the reservation system. See *Oglala Religion* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), xvii. This work is an excellent introduction to Oglala-Lakota culture and religion.

28. Catholic Two Roads Maps told the history of the church through pictures which were used as teaching tools by priests and catechists on the reservations.

29. Michael F. Steltenkamp, *Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 15.

30. Clyde Holler voices his frustration with Steltenkamp's refusal to engage his critics and to state his thesis, and his "relying instead on oblique suggestions to carry his argument forward." Holler further characterizes him as a frustrated scholar "who believes the truth has not been told, who has labor[ed] for many years to make himself heard over the roar of a popular, romantic stereotype." See Holler, *Black Elk's Religion*, 22. For an extensive list of the uses Black Elk has been put to, see Steltenkamp, 177, n. 5. Holler correctly states that Steltenkamp should add himself to his own list. However, most of the reviews of Steltenkamp's book have been very posi-

tive. One reviewer stated that “Steltenkamp’s book is a refreshing, new portrait of Black Elk. It is a biography, devoid of romantic stereotypes, that fleshes out the life of the famous holy man. . . . [T]he book allows readers to capture the glimpses of the cultural mechanisms many Oglala employed to confront life’s challenges.” See Gregory R. Campbell, rev., *Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala*, by Michael Steltenkamp, *Pacific Historical Review* 1 (1995): 130–131. Despite its faults, the book is a worthwhile and important study because it personalizes—humanizes—Black Elk the man.

31. Hilda Neihardt, *Black Elk and Flaming Rainbow*, 39.

32. As an example of translation difficulties, consider the Lakota word *canku*, which Buechel defines as “road, way, path.” In a review of Steltenkamp’s book, Powers states, “The assumption is that this teaching device [the Two Roads Map] used widely by catechists probably served as a basis for Black Elk’s references to the red and black, or good and bad roads mentioned in *Black Elk Speaks* rather than some Lakota form of teaching. I agree. Black Elk is the only one to make such a reference, and it appears only in Neihardt’s work.” See *Journal of Religion*, 75:2 (1995): 304–305. In light of the various uses of *canku* and the transcription process just described, a reasonable evaluation of Powers’ observation would be tentative at best. Furthermore, the question I am addressing is whether or not Black Elk’s Great Vision reflects a fundamentally Christianized worldview rather than if his thought exhibits shades of syncretism, which it obviously does, his universalistic belief in the equality of all people being the most obvious example. The Sioux traditionally thought of themselves as superior to other groups. See Royal B. Hassrick, *The Sioux: Life and Customs of a Warrior Society* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), 61–75; DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 89–90.

33. Steltenkamp, *Black Elk*, 98, 99, 101.

34. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 122.

35. Steltenkamp, 95.

36. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 128, 116 n. 8, 128, 121, 139, 139. The use of a spirit inside the medicine man is a convention of Lakota healing. See DeMallie, 13–14 and 238–239; Rice, *Black Elk’s Story*, 75–91. Like the “blue man,” the other symbols in Black Elk’s vision place him “firmly within the symbol system of Lakota religious tradition.” See DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 94. For a fuller discussion of Black Elk’s vision in relationship to Lakota tradition, see Rice.

37. Steltenkamp, 97.

38. John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1932, 1979), 49.

39. Steltenkamp, 187 n. 6, 188 n. 6, 173.

40. According to Powers, the Sun Dance pole crucifix is regarded as the nest of the *Wakinyantanka*. See *Oglala Religion*, 97.

41. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 290–291.

42. *Ibid.*, 217.

43. *Lame Deer, Lame Deer*, 100.

44. Paula Gunn Allen, “The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Perspective,” *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986, 1992), 59.

45. Steltenkamp, 97.

46. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 134.

47. *Ibid.*, 263, 233, 266. In the above quote and those following, “had more power”

can be taken to mean “was more *wakan*.” Since no recordings of the Neihardt-Black Elk interviews exist, no one knows what Lakota words Black Elk used. But judging from the context, he clearly means *wakan*.

48. Ibid., 290, 133, 294.

49. Ibid., 59, 124.

50. Ibid., 262, 266.

51. Steltenkamp, 36.

52. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 289–290.

53. In oral traditions, storytellers must know their audience. To teach and transmit cultural values, a storyteller must have a fine feel for his or her listeners. When asked if storytellers make up stories, Henry Black Elk, grandson of Nicholas Black Elk, explained that “storytellers have to fill in part of a story so it’s almost the same. When I tell a story, I’m going to fill in, to interest the people that I’m talking to . . . and if I can’t get them interested in what I am saying, I’m not a good teacher. I have to get their mind into my mind. . . .” See R.D. Theisz, ed., *Buckskin Tokens: Contemporary Oral Narratives of the Lakota* (Rosebud, SD: Sinte Gleska College, 1975), 14. Lakota elder Severt Young Bear, a traditional singer, further emphasizes the creative and instructive aspects of storytelling:

In stories, songs, speeches, jokes, whatever, we take ideas and give them shape, a body through the human voice. Through lively and creative language we give life and color to ideas. Through that language we make those ideas walk and fly and shine; we share our feelings and our knowledge and memories. Our stories and songs, we should remember, also teach us lessons. Sure, dates and facts are often missing, sometimes they’re not accurate the way historians and anthropologists like it, but our oral tradition tells the truth and the heart of the meaning stays alive from mouth to ear.

See Severt Young Bear and R.D. Theisz, *Standing in the Light: A Lakota Way of Seeing* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 17.

54. Steltenkamp, 34, 35.

55. Actually, Black Elk was then around forty and had been practicing “medicine,” or curing, for many years. See DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 235–240.

56. Hilda Neihardt, 88, 89, 88.

57. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 228.

58. William K. Powers, rev., *Black Elk’s Religion: The Sundance and Lakota Catholicism*, by Clyde Holler, *American Anthropologist* 98 (1996): 651–653.