

Nicholas Black Elk, Roman and Lakota:

Catholicism, Colonialism, and Inculturation

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Introduction

Nicholas Black Elk's life spanned from the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, and during this period he was impacted by and influential in some of the most significant events in Native American history. While his story began to be popularized during his lifetime, the earliest Black Elk literature neglected to report on that which was the driving force of the latter half of his life: his Catholic faith. Once his conversion to Roman Catholicism became known, controversy ensued concerning its causes and even its authenticity. As a result, Nicholas Black Elk's Catholicism is often characterized by some as an anomalous product of nineteenth-century colonialism; however, it is best understood as an example of the Catholic religion's universality and as an instance of authentic inculturation. Furthermore, the controversy over his conversion is itself the product of a sort of ideologically colonialist hermeneutic, whereby Black Elk's relationship to white European history becomes more important than the man himself and the value of his faith.

Black Elk Speaks

Black Elk—*Hehaka Sapa*, in Lakota—was born into the Oglala Sioux tribe in the mid-1860s (there is no precise record of his birth date), the son of a medicine man also named Black Elk, and a relative of Crazy Horse, the famous Lakota warrior and hero. One day when he was approximately nine years old, the young Black Elk heard a voice: “It is time; now they are calling you.”¹ Shortly thereafter, Black Elk fell into a fever-induced coma that lasted twelve

¹ John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 21.

days, during which he experienced a mystical vision. The vision was long and consisted mostly of six spirit-beings identified as Grandfathers speaking to Black Elk and revealing to him a sophisticated series of complex symbols, including various flora, fauna, and Lakota ritual objects. Taken as a whole, Black Elk interpreted the vision as a call to be a great leader amongst his people—a vocation that he accepted with the utmost seriousness.

A year later, together with such famous Indians as Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, Black Elk—now only about ten years of age—took part in the Battle of the Little Bighorn (or, as he called it, the Battle of “the Greasy Grass”), where he took his first scalp.² Also known as Custer’s Last Stand, this battle remains one of the most iconic victories in Native American history and is notably perhaps the most devastating loss ever suffered by US forces on American soil.

Black Elk grew to follow in his father’s footsteps as a medicine man. As an adolescent he participated in a series of moving ritual ceremonies and performed several successful healings, thereby gaining a name for himself. During this time, he witnessed the tragic subjugation of his people by the *Wasichus* (essentially, “greedy ones” in Lakota—sometimes simplistically and imprecisely translated “white man”), including the strategic slaughtering of the American bison, a principle means of sustenance for the Lakota, and the establishment of the reservation system.

Despite witnessing said subjugation and against his family’s wishes, when he was in his mid-20s Black Elk—motivated by a desire to learn more about the ways of *Wasichu*—accepted an invitation to join William “Buffalo Bill” Cody’s Wild West show, a circus-esque traveling troop of performers who reenacted various Western scenes before international audiences. Indeed, Black Elk was among the few Indian dancers chosen by Cody to perform at Queen

² Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 95, 99, 125.

Victoria's Golden Jubilee celebration. So impressed was the queen (whom Black Elk referred to as "Grandmother England") by the Native Americans that after their performance she bowed to them, a profound gesture of respect that was not lost on Black Elk.³ (Interestingly, while in London, Black Elk and a few of his friends "got lost" one night and—wandering suspiciously and incapable of speaking English—were arrested during the investigation of a crime that was later attributed to Jack the Ripper, only to be freed after an interpreter could verify they had not been involved in the crime.)⁴

Upon returning home, Black Elk resumed his role as a medicine man, becoming involved with the Ghost Dancers, a Native American messianic movement that sought—through ritual dance—to heal the world of the damage caused by the *Wasichu*. While presiding over one such ceremony, Black Elk had a vision of the Messiah, who spoke to him: "My life is such that all earthly beings and growing things belong to me. Your father, the Great Spirit, has said this. You too must say this."⁵ Although this vision seemed to reinforce the lofty vocation to which Black Elk had been called in previous visions, Black Elk's hope that a messiah could come to rid the world of the *Wasichus* would be dashed later that year when he witnessed the massacre at Wounded Knee, an event that would effectively squash any lingering hope of successful Native American resistance to US subjugation. Black Elk recounts what he saw: "Men and women and children were heaped and scattered all over the flat at the bottom of the little hill where the soldiers had their wagon-guns, and westward up the dry gulch all the way to the high ridge, the dead women and children and babies were scattered."⁶

³ Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 223.

⁴ Michael F. Steltenkamp, *Nicholas Black Elk: Medicine Man, Missionary, Mystic* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 55.

⁵ Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 245.

⁶ *Ibid*, 260.

Black Elk's memories of the massacre at Wounded Knee were the last to be recorded in John G. Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks*, a romantic and highly editorialized partial autobiography based on a series of interviews that took place in the early 1930s. This book, which would become an international best seller, was for decades the primary source of information about Black Elk known to the world. The author's post-script portrays Black Elk as a defeated and destitute old man, who reportedly concluded the interviews by praying thusly: "O Great Spirit, Great Spirit, my Grandfather—with running tears I must say now that the tree has never bloomed. A pitiful old man, you see me here, and I have fallen away and have done nothing."⁷

Such is the impression of Black Elk with which one would be left after reading only Neihardt's work.

Nicholas Black Elk

Although the narrative events of *Black Elk Speaks* end in 1890 with the massacre at Wounded Knee and cover only the first few decades of Black Elk's life, Black Elk himself lived until 1950. After Wounded Knee, Black Elk continued his work as a medicine man on the Pine Ridge Reservation. As a tribal leader, Black Elk worked closely with the Jesuit priests—or "Blackrobes" as the Lakota called them—who ministered there, and was in fact so influenced by them that he was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church on December 6, 1904, thereafter bearing the name of the Saint celebrated on that date: Nicholas. Neihardt not only neglected to report this later conversion, but he also failed to mention even Black Elk's pre-conversion interest in and connection to Catholicism. For example, Black Elk was among the many Native

⁷ *Ibid*, 273.

Americans to sign a petition requesting that a cause for canonization be opened for the now Saint Kateri Tekakwitha.⁸ Furthermore, while traveling in Europe with “Buffalo Bill” Cody, Black Elk wrote home expressing how impressed he was by the cathedrals there and the number of people who would regularly meet to worship within them—writing, “Of the white man’s many customs, only his faith, the white man’s beliefs about God’s will, and how they act according to it, I wanted to understand.”⁹

It was as a Catholic that Nicholas Black Elk would fulfill the vocation of great leader and preacher of the Messiah to which he was called in the visions of his youth. Noted for his zeal and natural didactic abilities, Nicholas was trained to be a lay catechist, an extremely important role in the missionary efforts of that time considering the fact that ordained priests were few and far between. While the Lakota might only see a priest perhaps once a month, they were daily guided by lay catechists who were largely responsible for preaching to the community, instructing them in proper doctrine, guiding them in prayer and devotional exercises, visiting the sick, and presiding over funeral services.¹⁰ The crucial role of native lay catechists in the success of the missions was so apparent that in 1926 Pope Pius XI promulgated the encyclical *Rerum Ecclesiae*, in which he spoke of “the necessity of increasing the number of catechists.”¹¹ In short, “Nicholas Black Elk was exactly what the church was hoping for.”¹²

And he did not disappoint. Nicholas wrote prolifically and traveled extensively to many native communities. The priests who worked with Nick Black Elk often spoke of him as “St.

⁸ Jon M. Sweeney, *Nicholas Black Elk: Medicine Man, Catechist, Saint* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021), 63.

⁹ Steltenkamp, *Nicholas Black Elk*, 57.

¹⁰ Sweeney, *Nicholas Black Elk*, 69.

¹¹ Pius XI, *Rerum Ecclesiae*, February 28, 1926, par. 27, Vatican Website, accessed July 28, 2023, https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_28021926_rerum-ecclesiae.html.

¹² Sweeney, *Nicholas Black Elk*, 71.

Paul among the Indians.”¹³ Indeed, so effective were Nick’s missionary efforts that he “is credited with bringing at least four hundred people into the Roman Catholic Church.”¹⁴ Many Indians in the communities he served continue to practice the Catholic religion to this day. Considering his evident dedication to the Catholic faith and the spread thereof, one can understand why toward the end of his life Nicholas Black Elk wrote somewhat indignantly concerning the manner in which he was portrayed in *Black Elk Speaks*:

For the last thirty years I have lived very differently from what the white man told about me. I am a believer. The Catholic priest Short Father baptized me thirty years ago. From then on they have called me Nick Black Elk. Very many of the Indians know me. Now I have converted and live in the true faith of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, I say in my own Sioux Indian language, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name,” as Christ taught us and instructed us to say. I say the Apostle’s Creed and I believe it all.¹⁵

Indeed, Nicholas Black Elk was a Roman Catholic, and in recognition of the many years he spent serving the Lakota Catholic community, the cause for his canonization was opened by the Diocese of Rapid City on October 21, 2017, and he is now afforded the title Servant of God.

Colonialism, Controversy, and Conclusion

After Nicholas Black Elk’s conversion to Catholicism became more widely known, certain modern academics drew his motivations for doing so into question and argued that one could not be both truly Lakota and truly Catholic. Damian Costello explains the reasoning behind such reactions: “Modern Western assumptions about Native Americans and Christianity

¹³ Ibid, 92.

¹⁴ Ibid, 98.

¹⁵ Ibid, 80.

that strike most Americans as common sense make it impossible for Black Elk's conversion to be sincere. Christianity represents colonialism and a sell-out for Native Americans; missionaries are ruthless colonialists."¹⁶ In short, the romantically victimized Black Elk of *Black Elk Speaks* and the mythologically evil Western Christian colonialist strike many modern Western minds as outright antithetical. Thus, Black Elk must either have converted insincerely with some ulterior motive (perhaps convenience) or else he is surely a victim of unethical proselytization.

However, as Costello demonstrates, such assumptions are rooted in modern secular ideology rather than historical evidence. Rather than being agents of Western colonialist subjugation, "Jesuit missionaries made a radical commitment to Lakota tradition that was directly opposed to colonial ideology."¹⁷ One example of this commitment was the Jesuit dedication to learning and utilizing the Lakota language, a policy that differed from that of certain Protestant denominations and of the US government and which "implicitly legitimated the indigenous cultural framework as an idiom of equal value"¹⁸ and "prevented conversion from being a radical separation from the Lakota tradition."¹⁹ In addition to honoring the Lakota language, the Jesuits also refrained from imposing American culture and values upon the Natives.²⁰ It was due to the Jesuits' unique missionary approach that even the renowned "Sitting Bull stated that the Catholic missionaries were the best people from among the non-Lakota."²¹

Contrary to claims that Black Elk may have converted simply for the sake of convenience, one must remember that alongside Native Americans Catholics themselves were a

¹⁶ Damian Costello, *Black Elk: Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 14.

¹⁷ Damian Costello, *Black Elk*, 31.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 29.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 30.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 35.

²¹ *Ibid*, 48.

highly marginalized group in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America. Thus, as Sweeney observes, “if Black Elk had wanted to walk a path to easy enculturation and acceptance in the country that surrounded his people, he would have converted to Protestantism, not Catholicism.”²² Also, in response to those who wish to paint Native converts simply as victims, Costello points out that “the indigenous had the primary agency in the spread of Christianity.”²³ Nicholas Black Elk’s missionary efforts and those of his fellow lay catechists are prime examples of this reality. Ultimately, as Costello summarizes, rather than being an unfortunate product of nineteenth-century colonialism, “the Lakota Catholic Church was an area where both Lakota and Europeans worked to create a future that challenged colonialism and retained Lakota tradition.”²⁴

The fact that many see Nicholas Black Elk’s conversion as problematic is itself indicative of the fact that the West has largely become divorced from its Christian roots and now prefers rather to read history through a secular revisionist hermeneutic. It was the power of the Christian gospel that allowed two marginalized groups, Catholics and the Lakota, to form a lasting and mutually beneficial bond despite the tumultuous inter-cultural environment of the nineteenth century. Black Elk himself embodied this union, and those who seek to discredit it are representative of the segment of Western society that has lost its faith. As Costello poignantly observes, Black Elk’s conversion should not be criticized by modern Americans but should rather be posed as a question to them: the real issue is not “why is Black Elk Catholic?” but “why is America not Christian?”²⁵

²² Sweeney, *Nicholas Black Elk*, 60.

²³ Costello, *Black Elk*, 17.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 27.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 21.

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