The Sacred Tree: Black Elk, Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism

Thesis

Submitted to the College of Arts & Science of the
University of Dayton

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts Degree in the Department of Religious Studies

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October 2003
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ABSTRACT

Black Elk, Oglala holy man and subject of the infamous book *Black Elk Speaks*, was also a convert to the Catholic Church. This study examines the implications of Black Elk's conversion and challenges the assumptions many scholars and popular culture uses to dismiss the significance of his Catholic life. Within the framework of postcolonial theory, this study hopes to deconstruct the modern western assumptions that present Black Elk as a "noble savage" unable to face the ravages of colonialism. In contrast, I argue that Black Elk was an active agent fulfilling his role as a holy man. Black Elk's conversion was in continuity with the dynamics of Lakota culture and provided new power to challenge the dominance of colonialism. Most importantly, this study uses linguistic analysis of the Dakota Bible to argue that Black Elk's great vision is in fact a Christian narrative. As a consequence, the Black Elk described by Neihardt and the Lakota Catechist remembered by the Lakota community are not contradictory but one consistent agent.
Chapter One: Introduction

Lakota History and Culture

In Pre-Columbian times the Lakota inhabited the woodlands east of the Missouri River, in the area west of the Great Lakes. In the sixteenth century, the Iroquois in the New York area obtained European weapons and began a military expansion westward. The Iroquois displaced the tribes of the Great Lakes regions, such as the Ojibway, who in turn gradually pushed against the eastern territory of the Dakota. European and consequent American colonial expansion exacerbated this ripple effect. Over the course of two centuries, western Dakota people migrated from the woodlands to the Midwest plains and became the Lakota. They separated into seven main bands: Oglala, Brule, Hunkpapa, Mnikowoju, Black Foot, Two Kettle and Sans Arcs. The Lakota acquired horses in 1750 and crossed the Missouri River in 1775. Through armed conflict, the Lakota pushed the Kiowa and Crow tribes out of the Black Hills, which became the sacred center of the Lakota world.

The Lakota transformed their semi-sedentary woodland economy to a nomadic culture to match their new environment. The Lakota based this new economy on the buffalo. The buffalo provided all necessities of life not obtained through trade. Even the buffalo hides provided the currency for trade goods. The Lakota spent the summers in nomadic fashion, following the herds across the plains, and the winters in the sheltered valleys of the Black Hills.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the increasing American presence on the plains provoked armed conflict against the Lakota. The U.S. government waged intermittent war with the Lakota from 1855 to 1890, pursuing a policy of reservation confinement. Through much coercion, deception and the complete destruction of the buffalo herds, the U.S. government finally forced...
the Lakota to settle on seven separate reservations in the present day states of North and South Dakota.

**Black Elk’s Life Until Wounded Knee**

Black Elk’s life spans the Lakota change from a plains culture into a reservation culture. Black Elk was born into the Oglala Lakota in December of 1863, on the Powder River, probably within the borders of present day Wyoming. His father was a medicine man and cousin of the great Crazy Horse. When he was nine years old he had a great vision. One night, while settling down for camp, Black Elk heard a voice saying, “It is time, now they are calling you.” The next day, while starting out on horseback, he collapsed with a great sickness. While lying in a tipi, he saw two men coming from the sky saying, “Hurry up, your grandfather is calling you.” He was taken up to the clouds where he visited the spirit world where his “grandfathers [were] having a council.”

During the course of his visit, the six grandfathers brought Black Elk to the different regions of the spirit world: the four directions, the cloud tipi of the six grandfathers, the black sacred road from west to east, the red sacred road from south to north, and the center of the earth. At the center of the nation’s hoop the sacred tree was established. The six grandfathers also gave Black Elk two specific powers: the power to heal and the power to destroy.

I remember that the grandfather of the west had given me a wooden cup of water and a bow and arrow and with this bow and arrow I was going to destroy the enemy with the power of the fearful road. With the wooden cup of water I was to save mankind. This water was clear and with it I was to raise a nation (like medicine).

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4 Ibid., 119.
The vision of the six grandfathers changed Black Elk’s life. The vision was a call to become a wicasa wakan, a “holy man.” This made Black Elk responsible for the survival and prosperity of his people on earth, for “a nation [Black Elk] shall create.” Black Elk believed that he was “appointed by [his] vision to be an intercessor of [his] people with the spirit powers.”

Black Elk was called to create a nation, bring his people on the sacred road into the sacred hoop, and make the sacred tree bloom by using the power he received from the six grandfathers. Black Elk interpreted his life through this message and continually tried to find the way that best corresponded to his vision.

Black Elk grew up during the Lakota Wars. He witnessed the Battle of Little Big Horn and killed an American soldier at the age of thirteen. He was among the last of the Lakota to surrender, living for three years with Sitting Bull’s band in Canada. After Sitting Bull surrendered in 1881, Black Elk settled on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation which became his home for the remainder of his life. The Lakota, separated from the plains economy, were forced to take up ranching and farming.

In 1886, Black Elk took the opportunity to travel with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show with a two-year contract. The show traveled to New York City in the winter of 1886 and then to London in the spring of 1887. Black Elk also visited France, Germany, and Italy with a show run by Mexican Joe. He had gone to explore “the ways of the white men,” and if any of these ways were better, he “would like to see my people live that way.”

During his time in Europe, he encounters Christianity for the first time. While in Europe, Black Elk wrote a letter to the Iapi Oaye (the “Word Carrier”), a monthly newspaper in Lakota under the Indian Mission of the

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5 There are various spellings of Lakota words. I have tried follow the pattern of the most recent scholarship, but some quotations will have variant spellings.
6 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 293.
7 Ibid., 126, 293.
Presbyterian and Congregational Churches, dated February 15, 1888. He wrote of his trip and what he learned of the white man’s customs. “One custom is very good. Whoever believes in God will find good ways – that is what I mean.”

**Black Elk Returns from Europe**

In 1889 Black Elk returned to Pine Ridge. That fall, messengers brought the Lakota news of Wovoka the Messiah. Wovoka was a Paiute from Nevada, who taught that by practicing the Ghost Dance, the whites would disappear, the buffalo would return and all would be like the olden times. After a long period of cautious investigation, Black Elk joined the Ghost Dancers due to the strong connection between the imagery of his vision and the Ghost Dance. The Ghost Dance culminated in the Wounded Knee Massacre, in which American troops killed around 260 Lakota. In the days that followed, Black Elk participated in the battles with the U.S. Army.

After the fighting, Black Elk settled down and married Katie War Bonnet in 1892. For the next fourteen years, Black Elk worked as a store clerk and a *yuwipi* healer. It is likely that his wife became Catholic during this period. Also, his three sons were baptized: William and John in 1895, and Ben in 1899. His role as a *yuwipi* man brought him into conflict with the Catholic presence on the reservation. John Lone Goose, who worked with Black Elk as a catechist, states:

I first met Nick around 1900 - when I was a young boy and he was not a Catholic. I don’t know what they call him in English, but in Indian they call him *yuwipi* man. Sam Kills Brave he’s a Catholic, lived close to him. And before Nick converted, Kills Brave would say, “Why don’t you give up your *yuwipi* and join the Catholic church? You may think it’s best, but the way I look at it, it isn’t right for you to do the *yuwipi*.” Kills Brave kept talking to him that way, and I guess

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8 Ibid., 7.
9 Ibid., 245.
10 Ibid., 8.
13 The fact that Black Elk earned part of his living as *Yuwipi* healer is evidence that the government ban on Native religion was not completely effective.
Nick got those words in his mind. He said that after Kills Brave spoke to him, he wanted to change.15

According to Lone Goose, the urging of Black Elk’s friends set the context for Black Elk’s conversion.

**Conversion and Life as a Catholic**

While the evidence indicates that Black Elk had been exposed to Christianity for some time, and even reacted favorably to it, he had not felt the need to convert. In 1904, he went to administer the *yuwipi* to a small boy in a neighboring community. Here a Jesuit confronted Black Elk and changed the course of his life. His daughter, Lucy Looks Twice tells the story:

When he got there, he found the sick boy lying in a tent. So right away, he prepared to doctor him. My father took his shirt off, put tobacco offerings in the sacred place, and started pounding on his drum. He called on the spirits to heal the boy in a very strong action. Dogs were there and they were barking. My father was really singing away, beating his drum and using his rattle when along came one of the Blackrobes, Fr. Lindebener, Ate Ptecela (short father). At that same time the priests usually traveled by team and buggy throughout the reservation. That’s what Ate Ptecela was driving.

So he went into the tent and saw what my father was doing. Fr. Lindebner had already baptized the boy and had come to give him the last rites. Anyway, he took whatever my father had prepared on the ground and threw it all into the stove. He took the drum and rattle and threw them outside the tent. Then he took my father by the neck and said: “Satan, get out!” My father had been in the IOI [Wild West] show and knew a little English so he walked out. Ate Ptecela then administered the boy communion and the last rites. He also cleaned up the tent and prayed with the boy.

After he got through, he came out and saw my father sitting there downhearted and lonely, as though he lost all his powers. Next thing Fr. Lindebner said was “come on and get in the buggy with me.” My father was willing to go along and so he got in and the two of them went back to Holy Rosary Mission. . . . My father never talked [i.e. normally] about the incident but he felt it was Our Lord that appointed or selected him to do the work of the Blackrobes. You might think he was angry, but he wasn’t bitter at all.

He stayed at Holy Rosary two weeks preparing for baptism and at the end of those two weeks he wanted to be baptized. He gladly accepted the faith on December 6, 1904, which was the feast of St. Nicholas. So they called him Nicholas Black Elk.16

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16 Ibid., 33-35. Steltenkamp reports that Lucy “regarded [Black Elk’s] conversion story as rather amusing and understood the event to be a great occurrence in her father’s life. Moreover, she had difficulty understanding why [Steltenkamp] did not join with the others present, who laughed and smiled in hearing the incident.” Steltenkamp also gives a compelling argument that this story was an oral construct designed to express the meaning of the conversion, rather than present actual occurrences. On page 36 Steltenkamp states, “in the opinion of several Manderson residents who heard Lucy’s account of the story, liberties were taken in telling what probably transpired. Although no one claimed to speak with certitude, it was commonly assumed that medicine men such as Black Elk would not allow themselves to be pushed around in that fashion. Similarly, the priest had a reputation for being very
Whether coercion, a moving emotional experience, the culmination of inquiry, or a combination of all three, were at the root of Black Elk’s conversion, he dedicated himself to his life as a Catholic. He joined the St. Joseph Society, a Catholic men’s society, and quickly impressed the Jesuits. Raymond DeMallie writes that, “in recognition of his zeal and of his excellent memory for Scripture and the teachings of the church, the priests soon appointed him to the position of catechist, an office that usually paid a stipend of $5 per month.”¹⁷ In the vast expanses of the reservation, priests were able to celebrate Mass in isolated communities only about once a month, and the catechists fulfilled the role of modern day permanent deacons. They held Sunday services, led the prayers and hymns, read the Epistle and the Gospel, baptized and prayed for the sick in the absence of a priest, and preached in the Lakota language. The Jesuits had great faith in the abilities of the catechists. In talking about a possible mission trip to the Wind River Reservation in 1907 Fr. Westropp wrote, “I think they [the catechists] could do more good in a way than many a priest.”¹⁸

During the early period of his work as a catechist, Black Elk wrote letters to the Sinasapa Wocekiye Taeyanpaha, or “Catholic Herald,” a Lakota-language newspaper that started on the Devil’s Lake Sioux Reservation in 1892. According to DeMallie, in these letters “Black Elk reported news from Manderson, told of his church activities, and exhorted his people to be faithful to the church.”¹⁹ These letters are also a record of Black Elk’s understanding of the Catholic tradition.

¹⁷ DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 16.
¹⁸ DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 16, 18.
¹⁹ Ibid., 17
The transition from a *yuwipi* man to a Catholic catechist was not without consequences. Black Elk lost an important source of income during the early reservation period. There were social ramifications as well. Lucy Looks Twice recalls the difficult time he had at the beginning of his conversion.

Once, after he retired, my father told me about the years when he first became a catechist. He said the people would scourge him with vicious words and make fun of him, since he had been a *yuwipi* medicine man. The people made a lot of vicious talk concerning him, but he held on and did not go back to his old ways.20

According to Looks Twice, Black Elk adhered to his Catholic life despite social pressure.

During his work as a catechist, Black Elk developed a close relationship with a young priest, Henry I. Westropp. With Westropp’s influence, Black Elk traveled much for the church. In 1907 he went to Indianapolis to a large meeting of white Catholics. He was also sent to other tribes to preach and witness to the gospel. Black Elk spent a month on the Winnebago reservation in Nebraska in 1908, and a short mission to the Sisseton Reservation in 1910. He also spent two months among the Arapaho on the Wind River Reservation. Black Elk had originally planned on staying a year, but deemed the missions successful. In the July 1908 issue of the *Catholic Herald* Black Elk wrote: “Last February 20 we went to the Arapahoe tribe in Wyoming and preached the gospel. . . We asked them to join the holy church of God. . . with all our might we taught them about church work and now about half of the people believe.”21

In 1916 Father Westropp was reassigned to India, which was a great loss for Black Elk. This along with his worsening tuberculosis caused him to cease his missionary work and concentrate on his people at home.22

In 1922, during Holy Week, Father Placidus F. Sialm gave the first annual retreat for the Oglala catechists at Holy Rosary Mission. Sialm told one story from that retreat again and again

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20 Steltenkamp, 89.
throughout his life. "On the third day of that retreat, Nick Black Elk came to me with this very worthy resolution: "We catechists resolve never to commit a mortal sin.""\textsuperscript{23}

Later that year, Father Sialm organized a great procession for Corpus Christi Sunday. Over one thousand Lakota participated in the procession. Four Lakota men held a canopy above Sialm as he carried the consecrated host. Black Elk led the older Lakota who were in their native dress. DeMallie states that, "it was a symbolic union of old and new, to bring the living presence of Christ to bless the Oglala and their country. Black Elk’s own life was fitting testimonial to this union of Christian and native traditions."\textsuperscript{24} It is an image of Black Elk secure in both his Lakota and Catholic identity.

In 1926 Father Buechel built a catechist’s house next to the church in Oglala, a community north of Holy Rosary Mission. He asked Black Elk to live there and assume a pastor-like role. Black Elk’s house became “a kind of mission center, with neighbors often gathering to pray and sing hymns.”\textsuperscript{25} He instructed the children, conducted services on Sundays when the priest was absent, visited the sick, and brought new people into the church with his preaching. Pat Red Elk, a young man when Black Elk was a catechist, remembers Black Elk’s oratory skills: “Nick was a catechist, and when he got up he really preached. People sat there and just listened to him. They could picture what he was talking about.”\textsuperscript{26} Black Elk used this skill to bring people into the Catholic Church. One Jesuit attributed at least four hundred conversions to Black Elk’s work as a catechist.\textsuperscript{27}

In 1931, John G. Neihardt arrived in on the reservation looking for a Lakota to talk to about the Ghost Dance and the Massacre at Wounded Knee. He was directed to Black Elk. With

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 26.
Black Elk’s son Ben as the interpreter, and Neihardt’s daughter Enid as the transcriber, Black Elk told the story of his great vision and his appointment by the Six Grandfathers to “raise a nation.” The interviews lasted three weeks. Although *Black Elk Speaks* received positive reviews and good publicity, it was a financial failure.

According to Raymond DeMallie, the publishing of *Black Elk Speaks* caused a strong reaction on the reservation. The missionaries questioned the presentation of Black Elk, and fellow catechists may have opposed the book out of jealousy. Father Salm, in his diary writes:

The greatest injustice, however, is that Black Elk is left under the impression that now as an old man he is in despair about fulfilling his destiny for his people. He has done wonderful good work for the truth & the way & the light which is Christ, and His one holy catholic apostolic Church. We as missionaries whom Black Elk calls Fathers, are obliged to protest against the injustices done to Black Elk – one of the worst exploitations done to an honest Indian. This book: *Black Elk Speaks* has no “placet” and no “imprimatur” from Black Elk. It could fairly be put into the class of not only exploitation, but what is worse, of stealing – plagiarism – material for a book, cleverly done, a kind of kidnapping the very words of a man. . . and translating them into a new language to disguise the fraud.

In response to the book, Black Elk issued two statements at Holy Rosary Mission, on January 26, 1934 and again on September 20 1934 affirming his belief in the Catholic Church and separating himself from Neihardt’s portrayal of him in *Black Elk Speaks*.

In 1935 Black Elk joined the Duhamel’s Sioux Indian Pageant located on the road between Rapid City and Mt. Rushmore. The pageant intended to portray authentic Lakota cultural and religious life and Black Elk was advertised as the main attraction. As the medicine man, he reenacted various ceremonies of Lakota religion. In return, the Lakotas were “provided

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27 Ibid.
29 Steltenkamp, *Holy Man of the Oglala*, 85. Black Elk states in a letter that Neihardt had originally promised him half of the proceeds of the book. Because there was no profit, Black Elk received no compensation. This will be developed in chapter 6.
30 DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 58, 62. DeMallie’s claim does not take into account the context and is more speculative than factual. I will challenge this in chapter 6.
with wood, water, food, and at the end of the season, a percentage of the pageant profits."^{32}

Black Elk continued to participate in this pageant until near his death and there is no recorded objection from the Jesuits.

As he grew older, his official catechist duties waned, but his spiritual life remained active. Pat Red Elk remembers seeing Black Elk walking the two, three miles to Manderson to go to Mass:

In wintertime he didn’t hardly come – too cold. But summertime, spring, and fall, he’d be walking. He was so old, so he got an early start and wouldn’t catch a ride. And every Sunday, he’d join up with John Lone Goose right around where the store is now, and they’d say the rosary together. . . . By the time they got to church, they had said the whole thing.\(^{33}\)

In 1947 Neihardt directed Joseph Epes Brown to Black Elk. Brown did not visit with the intention of writing a book, but claimed Black Elk wanted to record one more set of teachings. The result was *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk’s Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux*, published in 1953.\(^{34}\) Unlike *Black Elk Speaks*, there was no clerical or local opposition to *The Sacred Pipe*.

On August 19, 1950, Black Elk received last rites for the fourth time and died at his home in Manderson, S.D. Shortly before his death, Black Elk told his daughter Lucy that, “I have a feeling when I die, some sign will be seen. Maybe God will show something. He will be merciful to me and have something shown which will tell of his mercy.”\(^{35}\) Both Lakota and Jesuits observed strange lights in sky the night of his wake.

William Siehr, a Jesuit brother at Holy Rosary Mission since 1938 remembers: The sky was just one bright illumination. I never saw anything so magnificent. I’ve seen a number of flashes of the northern lights here in the early days, but I never saw anything quite so intense as it was that night. . . . It was sort of a celebration. Old Nick had gone to his reward and left some sort of sign to the rest of us.

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\(^{32}\) DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather* 63.

\(^{33}\) Steltenkamp, *Holy Man*, 122.

\(^{34}\) DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather* 68-70.

John Lone Goose remembers: Yes, I remember that night very well, and those bright stars. Everything looked miraculously. I’m not the only one who saw it. Lots of people did. They were kind of afraid, and I was scared a little bit — but I knew it was God’s will. I know God sent those beautiful objects to shine on that old missionary. Maybe the Holy Spirit shined upon him because he was such a holy man.36

Neihardt and Black Elk Speaks

If not for the work of John Neihardt, Nicholas Black Elk most likely would have remained a humble figure, remembered primarily as a Catholic catechist and holy man in the Lakota oral tradition and the Jesuit records. Although originally published in 1932, it was not until the late 1960’s and early 1970’s that Black Elk Speaks gained national attention. The book’s portrayal was uncritically accepted as America’s archetypal Indian.37 The growing counter-cultural movement adopted Black Elk as a figure of environmental concerns and new-age spirituality. The book also profoundly influenced the growing Pan Indian movement. The native intellectual Vine Deloria, Jr., called Black Elk Speaks a “North American bible of all tribes” in the introduction of the 1979 edition.38 Native American activists, many of whom were raised in urban settings and knew little of their religious traditions, turned to Black Elk Speaks and The Sacred Pipe as a source of cultural renewal.39

It wasn’t until 1984 and the publishing of the interview transcripts that Neihardt’s role in shaping the text came to the forefront. It became clear Black Elk Speaks was not an unbiased biography but an artistic interpretation of the interviews shaped by Neihardt’s assumptions.40 Social Darwinism shaped Niehardt’s work, as he emphasized a tragic reading of Lakota history

36 Ibid., 134-135.
38 Ibid., 138.
40 DeMallie, 62. Raymond DeMallie says that there was a fundamental misunderstanding concerning the purpose of the interview; Neihardt conceived the project to be the story of Black Elk’s life, while Black Elk understood it to be a record of Lakota religion.
by addressing only pre-reservation life and the finality of Wounded Knee. In addition, the narrative was shaped to emphasize the mythic nature of Black Elk’s life and the other worldly spiritual nature of his vision and life. The final aspect demonstrates Neihardt’s cultural illiteracy: he misinterprets the ritual despair of Lakota prayer and makes Black Elk’s concluding supplication the dominant theme of the book and the narrator’s basis for self-understanding.

The most glaring omission from *Black Elk Speaks* is Black Elk’s life after Wounded Knee. Scholarship in the 1980’s focused on this era of Black Elk’s life. The testimony of his daughter, Lucy Looks Twice, Lakota elders, Frank Fools Crow, the noted Lakota holy man, and Jesuit records filled in Black Elk’s missing years and an active, positive Black Elk emerged. During his reservation life he became a participant in the new economy and by reservation standards was successful. Most surprisingly, Black Elk lived as a practicing Catholic for 46 years, many of which he worked as a catechist.

Despite the new sources, Neihardt’s image of Black Elk remains influential in most areas of the academic world and popular culture. Those that are aware of Black Elk’s life as a Catholic often dismiss it as unimportant, or simply as a means of survival. The *New Encyclopedia of Native Americans* reads

> During Black Elk’s young adulthood, missionaries attempted to convert the Oglala Lakotas to Christianity, and not many escaped the intense measures inflicted on upon those who resisted. Black Elk was no exception. He attempted to understand Christianity after he was subjugated to it, and was baptized Nicholas Black Elk on December 6, 1904, at the Holy Rosary Mission near present-day Pine Ridge, South Dakota. Although the role of staunch Catholic was forced upon him, he played it well to appease his oppressors.

The new sources about Black Elk’s life continue to be sacrificed to the old stereotype.

As this quote makes clear, missionaries were oppressors, who inflicted Christianity on the

41 Stover, “Post Colonial Reading,” 131-135. Social Darwinism believed that the “European race” was most evolutionary advanced, and that non-Europeans, especially the “Vanishing Americans,” would inevitably decline to extinction.

42 See Stover, “A Post-Colonial Reading of Black Elk.”
Lakota. The Lakota resisted Christianity, but were powerless to stop their subjugation.
Finally, the Christian life of the Lakota was not sincere, but "played" or performed only to appease the oppressors. Christian life made no substantial impact on Black Elk or the Lakota.

While there are many different published positions about the nature of Black Elk's Catholicism, I will not engage individual scholars, but rather challenge the preceding assumptions on which the majority of scholars build their arguments.

The first part of this thesis will argue that these assumptions are not based on the evidence present in the sources or shared by the Lakota of Black Elk's generation. Rather, these assumptions are imposed on the sources by parts of the academy. In the second chapter I will argue that the Catholic missionaries were not merely agents of colonialism, but in fact worked against the forces of colonialism in many ways. In the third chapter I will challenge the stereotype that Christianity is antithetical to Lakota culture, and argue that the Lakota of Black Elk's generation were interested in the content of Christianity. The fourth chapter demonstrates that Black Elk's conversion was not insincere, superficial, or separated from his Lakota thought. Rather, Black Elk re-interpreted Lakota tradition in light of Christianity.

The second part of this thesis is based on the conclusion that Black Elk's conversion was sincere and central to his understanding of Lakota tradition. Using linguistic analysis of Black Elk's texts and the Christian Lakota texts, I will argue in Chapter five that the central images and content of his great vision are in fact Christian. Chapters six and seven will make the claim that Black Elk's conversion was not a passive

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defeat. Black Elk’s conversion instead demonstrates the agency of the Lakota and their selective appropriation of new ideas as they worked to survive in a colonial world.

There are five main areas of primary sources that will be used. Neihardt’s *Black Elk Speaks* will not be used as recent scholarship has shown it to be an artistic interpretation of the interviews. Instead, the transcripts from Black Elk’s interview with Neihardt published in *The Sixth Grandfather* will be used as the first source. While the transcripts are the product of a long translation process - Black Elk would speak, his son Ben would interpret, and Neihardt’s daughter would record his words - they will be taken at face value since it is the closest we can arrive at Black Elk’s words. The second source is *The Sacred Pipe*. This is Black Elk’s teachings about Lakota religion as recorded by Joseph Epes Brown. This source is also removed from Black Elk as it was conducted in the same manner as *The Sixth Grandfather*, only with Brown recording. In addition, there are no original transcripts on which the book was based.

The third source is the testimonies of Black Elk’s daughter Lucy Looks Twice and contemporaries of Black Elk which Michael Steltenkamp recorded in the early 1970’s. The fourth source is surviving Jesuit records. These included letters attributed to Black Elk and written documents by Jesuits that refer to Black Elk or the missions.

The fifth source I will use are texts attributed to what most scholars describe as “traditionals.” Raised in the early reservation period, traditionals have been socialized in the Lakota language and in cultural patterns closest to pre-reservation norms and Black Elk’s cultural formation. Traditionals have participated in Christianity will be used to broaden early reservation responses to Christian tradition. The most important traditional is Frank Fools Crow. Fools Crow was Black Elk’s nephew, a Catholic and fellow holy man. Born around 1890, he was considered the greatest living holy man until his death in 1989. He also served as the
ceremonial chief of the Lakota Nation and represented Lakota land and treaty claims in hearings with the U.S. Government. Fools Crow will serve a central role as he is universally well regarded as an authoritative source for Lakota oral and religious tradition, Lakota political claims, and because the information he provides about Black Elk is unsolicited. While I do not claim that the traditionals speak for Black Elk, I will use them to present the cultural framework in which Black Elk lived. They shall be particularly useful for their understanding of the relationship between Lakota tradition and Christianity.
Chapter 2: Missionaries and Colonialism

My people, the Sioux nation, want a Catholic missionary. They are good men. They are the best servants of the Great Spirit. They know our people well. Let them be agents of the Great Father. They will serve him as well as they serve the Great Spirit.

Sitting Bull, Oglala.¹

The Black Elk debate is underwritten by an assumption that equates Christianity with colonial military force. Russell Means quotes fellow AIM activist Clyde Bellecourt who stated in a 1970 rally that, “The missionaries came with the Bible in one hand and the sword in the other. They had the book and we had the land. Now we’ve got the book – and they’ve got the land.”² Popular imagination and much scholarship conflate Christian missionaries with the forces of colonialism into one unrelenting, destructive force bent solely on the eradication of Native Americans and their culture. Gordon MacGregor writes in 1946 that missionaries tried to “eradicate all the native religion instead of using it as a frame of reference in which to introduce Christianity. . . they tried to drive out indiscriminately Indian ways which had no relation to religion in the Indian mind.”³ Julian Rice writes in 1991:

Black Elk’s power at Pine Ridge was quickly being supplanted by Jesuit missionaries who were changing Lakota land from a visionary matrix to an earthly training ground. During the fourteen year period after his return from Europe, the Jesuits had largely overwhelmed Lakota resistance so that most of the traditional healers like Black Elk had been converted or discredited.⁴

While these conclusions may be drawn in other particular histories of native/missionary interaction, they are not sufficient to describe the Lakota context of Black Elk’s generation. First, I will outline the general practices of Catholic missionaries

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who worked among the Lakota during Black Elk’s life. Second, I will examine in detail the lives of three Catholic missionaries – Fr. Pierre De Smet, S.J., Fr. Francis Craft, and Fr. Eugene Buechel, S.J., who exemplify the Catholic missionary approach. Using this evidence, I will argue that missionaries can neither be equated with colonialism or shown to be outside colonial practices. Rather, they occupied a middle ground. Missionaries engaged the Lakota people, language and culture through long-term commitment to the community that no other outsiders demonstrated. In this engagement, missionaries both participated in as well as challenged colonial practices.

**Beginnings of the Catholic Missions**

The history of Catholicism among the Lakota begins with the appearance of the Jesuit Father De Smet (1801-1873), who traveled and evangelized among many tribes of the Plains and Rocky Mountains. He first encountered the Lakota at the Great Council at Ft. Laramie in 1851. At this gathering of over ten thousand Native Americans, he baptized 239 Oglalas and 280 Brules.5

Father De Smet, along with other wandering missionaries, made favorable impressions on many different groups of Native Americans. When the Yanktonnais Sioux, under Two Bears, were forced to settle on a reservation, Two Bears requested that Father De Smet settle with them and “bring other Black–robes.”6 After the U.S. Government gave the Episcopalians the exclusive right to evangelize the Oglalas and Brules in 1876, many different chiefs, including Red Cloud, successfully lobbied for a

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5 Ross Enochs, *The Jesuit Mission to the Lakota Sioux: Pastoral Theology and Ministry, 1886-1945* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1996), 10. I depend almost exclusively on Enochs work for a number of reasons. There are very few sources that address the history of Catholic missions. Primary sources are rarely published and I do not have the resources or time to investigate multiple archives. Last, and not least in importance, Enochs does an excellent job examining the issues involved and using the primary sources.
Jesuit presence on the reservations. As a result, St. Francis Mission was founded in 1886 on the Rosebud Reservation. A year later, the Jesuits established Holy Rosary Mission on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

Missionary Critique of Lakota Culture

While the Jesuits were establishing their missions, the U.S. government banned the Sun Dance and native medicine practices such as the yuwipi from 1883 to 1934, arguing that the practice of Native religion increased unrest and hostility. Medicinal ceremonies where generally harder to control due to their private nature, but there was no official Sun Dance during this time period. Violations to these policies resulted in the withholding of government rations or possible prison sentences. These policies, called “peace-policies,” were the outcome of lobbying efforts by American Protestant Reformers. They sought to mitigate the army’s “war policy” of extermination, which had culminated in many unprovoked massacres, such as the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864.

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6 Ibid, 19.
8 Holler, Black Elk’s Religion, 13. Arlene Hirschfelder and Paulette Moul, eds., Encyclopedia of Native American Religions, (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2000), 289-292. The Sun Dance was the most important communal Lakota ritual. It was held annually in June or July, over the course of four days. A pole made from cottonwood was erected. Male dancers pierce their chest or back and tie the skewers to the pole with a long piece of leather. While dancing and staring at the sun, they strain against the ropes until they break free. The dancers fast from both food and water for the duration of the Sun Dance. The ceremony is conducted to pray for the renewal of the people and the earth, to give thanks, to protect the people and other religious purposes.

The yuwipi was a ceremony in which spirits where said to be conjured and give messages through lights, explosions, or animal noises. The yuwipi man combined psychological techniques with medicinal plants to produce an effective cure. Some Lakotas say that one of Black Elk’s techniques was to create small explosions by placing small charges of gunpowder in a fire. This once backfired and caused an explosion which left him with permanent damage to his eyesight.

9 While there was no official Sun Dance, numerous sources attest to the continuation of hidden Sun Dance ceremonies.
10 Holler, Black Elk’s Religion, 120. Sentences were ten days for the first offense and up to six months for the second offense.
Colorado. Through Christianization and acculturation, they “proposed to solve the Indian problem not by eliminating Indians. . . but by eliminating Indianness.”

Government policy and Jesuit missionary outlook converged in two areas: the *yuwipi* ceremony and the Sun Dance. The Jesuit critique of the two ceremonies was theological. They opposed the Sun Dance because of the severity of the piercing. This suffering was unnecessary because Christ suffered once for all and no further sacrifice was necessary for salvation. But it appears that the Jesuits did not condemn the form of the dance. In 1941, an American Jesuit John Scott who taught at Holy Rosary Mission School from 1939 to 1941, attended a Sun Dance and wrote about it in the *Jesuit Bulletin*. The government had lifted the ban of the Sun Dance but did not allow piercing. In conclusion of the article he wrote:

> Once more the brother Sioux could lift his head and walk erect, for he was a brother of Christ. Again he could dance and sing, but no longer would he have to scarify his body and subject himself to the long fast of the Sun Dance. This time it was a dance of joy for *wanka tanka* was his father.

The Jesuits also opposed the *yuwipi* ceremony because they interpreted it as a an incantation of spirits and a deviation from orthodox Lakota tradition. Fr. Francis Craft wrote in 1889 about a visit to the home of a dying girl that he had once baptized whose stepfather was a *yuwipi* man:

> I went to see Frances Ihawin in Waga’s camp. . . It is a “devil’s outfit” of the Red Fish type. The stepfather, Sinte-sna-man, is “dead gone” in “devil worship” and “stone-throwing.” The sick girl (age 13) laid on the ground. . . were in that part of the house set apart for sacred things, the orthodox Indian rule would require that all should be clean and disorderly, - all was dirt, darkness, squalor, and disorder.

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11 Ibid., 111-113.
12 Ibid., 123. There is some ambiguity to what degree all Jesuits agreed with the theological critique of the Sun Dance, see subsequent section on Fr. Francis Craft.
13 Enochs, 136.
Craft described the *yuwipi* with harsh language - “devil-worship” conducted in squalor - and makes it explicit that it is contrary to Catholic life. However, his condemnation only includes this ceremony, not the entirety of Lakota tradition. Craft considered “orthodox” Lakota tradition parallel to Catholic worship. This includes the Sun Dance which Craft thought was similar to the Eucharist, and the Ghost Dance which he called, “quite Catholic and even edifying.”

In addition to claiming that the *yuwipi* was a deviation from Lakota tradition, the Jesuits also believed that the ceremony was deceptive. According to Enochs, they believed that the *yuwipi* men (which make up a small percentage of the Lakota population) “were deceptive charlatans who conspired to cheat the Lakotas out of their money and possessions.” The objectionable aspect of the *Yuwipi* practice was what the Jesuits interpreted as the dishonest nature of the ceremony, where the medicine men performed tricks to inspire belief. However, Jesuits did not restrict the use of traditional medicine. Fr. Dingmann wrote c. 1888 that, “We did not forbid them to use their herbs and roots and natural medicines but forbade them the use of all superstitious practices accompanying their conjuration.” For the Jesuits, the practice of healing separated from incantation and deception was acceptable. This indicates that Lakota tradition was not inherently contrary to Catholic life.

The Jesuits considered other Lakota practices contrary to Catholic life. They campaigned against polygamy, violence, revenge, and gambling. Practicing Lakota Catholics were not permitted to participate in these activities.

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15 Ibid., 49.  
16 Ibid., 85.  
18 Ibid., 104, 105.
Missionary Adaptation

While the government viewed missionary work among the Lakota as part of the acculturation process, Catholics groups operated independently of the official “peace policy,” and were more ambiguous in their approach. Individual responses among the Jesuits varied, but the general rule was to present Catholicism in continuity with Lakota religious tradition.

All aspects of Lakota culture tradition that were not considered directly opposed to Catholic teaching were acceptable. The Jesuits retained the use of the Lakota word *Wakan Tanka* as the term for God. The use of Lakota language in preaching, prayer books and scripture made Catholicism readily available to the Lakota people.19

A main theme of the Jesuit evangelization effort was the portrayal of Catholicism as a universal faith for “people of all nations,” stressing its relevance to all peoples of the world. In a sermon written by Father Buechel in 1907:

> Again we see not only old and young people in heaven but also different nations. The color of the face and the strange language do not make a difference with God, if they only love God and serve him.20

The Jesuits also stressed the particular relevance of Catholicism for Native Americans. The example of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Kateri Tekakwitha, and other stories about Native Americans who accepted Catholicism were used in sermons.21

Jesuits were tolerant of many Lakota ceremonies. Although not officially incorporated into Catholic Liturgy, the use of the Sacred Pipe was accepted and even participated in by Jesuits. In Standing Rock, Father Jerome Hunt permitted the Lakota to

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19 Ibid., 153. This is a marked difference from Protestant missionaries, who tended to view Native religion as contrary to Christianity. Although Holler does not make the distinction between Catholics and Protestants, it is evident in the chapter “Sun Dance Under Ban” in Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 110-138.
20 Ibid., 121.
21 Ibid., 121.
come to the altar to light their pipes from the candles during Mass.  

Weasel Bear, a Standing Rock Lakota, remembers the first Masses at Fort Yates:

I recall clearly how we old-time Indians acted when we first attended mass. It was our custom, while assembled in council, to sit on the ground in a circle and pass the pipe. To us, at the time, attendance at Mass was but another council where we came to hear a message for our benefit. So we came into the church and sat down on the floor, while one of the party filled a large, red-stoned pipe, lit it, and sent it around the circle.

Jesuits also participated in the Lakota naming ceremony and the *hunka lowampi* ceremony, the ceremony in which people are adopted into the tribe. Concerning funeral rites, Jesuits accepted the Lakota custom of wailing and also allowed the custom of placing the body on a raised platform. In addition, many Jesuits did anthropological and linguistic work.

Communal practices were an essential part of Lakota Catholic life. The Jesuits incorporated Catholicism into communal events such as festivals and games. The most important were the St. Joseph and St. Mary’s societies. They were Catholic men’s and women’s societies founded around 1887. The societies became a strong part of Lakota life precisely because they were built upon the already existent Lakota organization of okolakiciye. Ben Black Bear, a contemporary Lakota Catholic deacon, says that because of communal practices, “Catholicism grew from within the Lakota way of life among my people.” It worked well because it encouraged Native leadership within the catechist system.

Within the okolakiciye, Christian holidays and feast days were celebrated. Like Lakota ceremonies, these feast days encouraged the traditional activities of gathering in a

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22 Ibid., 138.
23 Ibid., 138-139. The Sacred Pipe is a religious ceremony in which prayers of supplication and communion are combined in a ritual smoking of tobacco. It often proceeds other religious ceremonies.
circle, communal meals, and communal religious ritual (now the Mass). Christmas traditions of present giving coincided with the Lakota *giveaway*. Black Bear remembers that,

> there were a lot of rules attached to these gatherings which were very traditional Lakota. As a child *I didn't make any distinction* . . . rules were rules and it didn’t matter if they were Catholic or Indian or what. Later I began to realize that a lot of the rules were traditional practices carried into the Catholic practices.26

Ben Black Bear emphasizes that the communal Lakota Catholic practices and the inculturation of the Christian story created a world in which it was not natural to separate the two. Catholicism and the Lakota world began to lose their distinct boundaries.

However, certain Catholic practices helped to create new boundaries. The Catholic school system taught in English and followed the government policy on Native language repression. A native clergy did not develop due to the Western system of sacerdotal training. These colonial practices demonstrate the missionaries middle ground, open to many aspects of Lakota culture and life, but unable to extract themselves completely from colonialism. But we will see in the next section that despite this ambiguity, the Lakota world drew in the European missionaries and challenged their connection to colonialism.

**“Lakotization” of the Missionaries**

The Jesuits were explicitly conscious of the importance of conserving and respecting Lakota tradition. Joseph Zimmerman, S.J., who Lakota holy man Pete Catches calls, “a saint who [sic] I pray to,”27 worked among the Lakota from 1922-1954. Writing about Jesuit tradition of adaptation Zimmerman states that,

> The work of the missionary is spiritual. But in order to labor with the maximum efficiency, the missionary must know the customs of the people with whom he works.

26 Ibid., 92.
He must be acquainted with their background, their environment, and heritage. The Church has always emphasized that the missionary should adapt himself to the ways of thinking of his converts, should take what is good and noble in their way of life and preserve it not destroy it. 

According to Zimmerman, it is the missionary that should adapt to the culture of their converts and work to preserve it. William Moore, S.J., a Jesuit scholastic at St. Francis Mission, writes for *The Indian Sentinel* in 1939 echoing this approach to missionary work:

The missionaries of St. Francis Mission on the Rosebud reservation, South Dakota, try to adapt their work to the Indian spirit. They are concerned about instilling the life of grace into the souls of their people, not about imposing alien customs upon a race which clings to its traditional ways.

While laboring to spread the Christian message, Moore makes clear that the Jesuits did not want to impose American culture or values.

This effort not to impose foreign culture on the Lakota is in part due to the Jesuit’s negative interpretation of Anglo-American culture. Cursing, alcohol abuse, and divorce are practices that Jesuits attributed to the influence of American culture. In a sermon he gave in 1912, Buechel said that, “although I know that the Indians have no word for cursing, they will learn it from the wicked white people.” Fr. Charles Weisenhorn, S.J., wrote to his provincial in 1920 that,

No people is more generous than the Indian. . . Reference to good courtesy and good breeding may seem strange in speaking of these so-called savages. Yet I oftentimes feel that the white man may learn a lesson from them in this respect. For the Indians have a rigid etiquette of their own, which is carefully observed, especially among the older generation, who have not been spoiled by too much contact with Protestantism and the van of white civilization. There is no such thing as a curse in the Indian language; the Red man will never take the name of God in vain, unless he has heard the expression from such as are civilized.

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28 Enochs, *Jesuit Mission*, 148. There is no date recorded with this document. Enochs dates it to either the 30’s or 40’s.
29 Ibid., 149.
30 Ibid., 126.
31 Ibid., 126.
32 Ibid., 126-7.
This generosity, from which the white man could learn, was equated with holiness. Fr. Sialm continued this theme a Sentinel article from 1938.

It is an old Indian custom for the more prosperous to share with the needy. “We Indians,” they say, “are not like the white people. We feed our visitors when we have something to eat in our house.” Back of this I seem to hear One who says “give and it shall be given to you.”

According to the Jesuits, Lakota tradition is not just neutral or equal to Anglo-American culture, but in many ways superior to Anglo-American culture. Missionary work was not just the addition of the Gospel, but the retention of Lakota virtue. John Scott, S.J., wrote in 1940 that, “thanks to the untiring efforts of the Black robe, the faith of the Sioux in Wakantanka, the Great Spirit, was not crushed under the wheels of the invading Wasichu [white people].” Despite the missionaries connection to colonial practices, missionary work was often done in conscious opposition to the destructive forces of colonialism.

Through their immersion in Lakota life and culture, the Jesuits, especially the “old-timers,” existed in a unique social class on the reservations. They were obviously not Lakota, but were not like the other white men that lived there. Most of the early Jesuits learned to speak Lakota. Just as they gave the Lakota Christian names at Baptism, the Lakota gave most Jesuits Lakota names in formal ceremonies. They were often times adopted into families and the tribe. They often served as intermediaries between the Lakota and the government, especially in times of war. This blurring of ethnic division and social location was recognized by the Jesuits. Joseph Karol, S.J., in describing Fr. Buechel after his death said:

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33 Ibid., 127.
34 Ibid., 99.
35 Ibid., 141.
Through his missionary work, his language study, and his artifact collection, Fr. Buechel gradually so identified himself with the Sioux that he unconsciously got into the habit of saying, "We Indians would say or do that this way."  

The Lakota also made a conscious distinction between Jesuits and other whites. In 1940, Fr. Goll wrote that, "up to this day the Indians refrain from calling a Catholic priest a white man."  

White settlers also noticed this. In an anonymous letter to the *Daily Inter-Ocean* in 1891 states that,

I have a ranch in this country [Dakotas], and go a good deal among them, and have been at Pine Ridge a good many times this winter, and know that the Catholic priests are worse enemies to the Government than old Sitting Bull was. . . Father Just . . . doesn't believe in the Government or anything else, except to increase the power and influence of his Church. . . The priests hates the Government, and we who live out here have good reason to believe that they put up the Indians to make war so as to get the commissioners and every one else in trouble, and then say that the Catholics are the only ones who have any influence and are the only friends of the Indian.

This blurring of ethnic identity and ambiguous social location is most apparent in the lives of Catholic missionaries Fr. Pierre De Smet, S.J., Fr. Francis Craft, and Fr. Eugene Buechel, S.J. These figures are exemplary, but are not inconsistent with the general Catholic approach and represent the main themes of the missions.

**Fr. Pierre De Smet, S.J.**

Pierre De Smet, a Jesuit from Belgium, was one of the first missionaries to interact with the Lakota. Beginning in 1938, De Smet spent most of his life working throughout the Plains and Rocky Mountains, with the tribes Potawatomi, Yankton Sioux, Osage, Miami, Pend d'Oreilles, Cheyenne, Flathead, Coeur d' Alenes, establishing missions. When he visited the different Teton bands, he did so unarmed, accompanied only with a native translator.  

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36 Ibid., 124.  
37 Ibid., 124.  
38 Foley, *Father Francis Craft*, 96.  
At the Great Council at Ft. Laramie in 1851 De Smet baptized over 500 Lakota.\textsuperscript{40} He acted as an intermediary between the Native Americans and the government. During the eighteen day council, he visited with many groups and attended their feasts and dances, which he described as “perfectly innocent.”\textsuperscript{41}

De Smet challenged the accepted portrayal of native Americans as savages. In describing the mission to the Flathead, he states, “I have often asked myself: ‘Is it these people whom the civilized nations dare to call by the name of savages?’”\textsuperscript{42} In a letter to his Provincial written in 1866, he further challenges the standard stereotype.

By most persons the capacity of the Indians has been greatly underrated. They are generally considered as low in intellect, wild men thirsting after blood, hunting for game or plunder, debased in their habits and groveling in their ideas. Quite the contrary is the case. They show order in their national government, order and dignity in the management of their domestic affairs, zeal in what they believe to be their religious duties, sagacity and shrewdness in their dealings and often a display of reasoning powers far above the medium of uneducated white men or Europeans. Their religion, as a system, is far superior to that of the inhabitants of Hindostan or Japan... All these Indians believe in the existence of a Great Spirit, the creator of all things, and this appears to be an inherent inborn idea.\textsuperscript{43}

Native American religion and politics are well developed. More importantly, De Smet claims that their intelligence is “far above the medium of uneducated white men.”

De Smet participated in Native American religious ritual. He was first given a sacred pipe by the Cheyenne.\textsuperscript{44} De Smet often participated in this religious ritual, which he described as a “sign of good harmony, fraternity and mutual charity, ready to aid one another in case of need.”\textsuperscript{45}

Despite his positive view of Native Americans and their culture, De Smet did not view Native Americans as noble savages. He critiqued many parts of Native American
According to Enochs, he criticized the Sioux, Pawnees, and Snakes for their, "barbarous custom of abandoning the old and sick pitilessly to the ferocious beasts of the desert." De Smet also critiqued the tendency in Native American culture to see revenge as a virtue. He described a "battle" where the Sioux waited for the Omaha men to go hunting. They then slaughtered the women and children and performed the scalp dance.

De Smet embodied this criticism by working for peace among tribes. He often initiated negotiations between traditional enemies. 1839 he worked a peace deal between the Yankton Sioux and the Potawatomi. De Smet also berated Sioux for attacking the Crow in 1849.

De Smet's work for peace was not limited to inter-tribal affairs. He often acted as an intermediary between the government and Native American tribes during times of conflict. In a conflict between the Flatheads, Pend d'Oreilles, Coeur d'Alenes and others he helped broker a peace deal in April, 1859. From 1864 to 1868, he traveled among the Teton Sioux, smoking the pipe with the leaders, trying to establish good relations between the government and the Lakota. In 1868, Sitting Bull, a chief of the Hunkpapa who were at war with the U.S., declared that he would no longer negotiate with whites. De Smet sent a scout to Sitting Bull with a gift of tobacco, and he allowed De Smet to enter the camp. "The scouts told De Smet that Sitting Bull would have killed any other white man who tried to enter their camp at that time."
De Smet's work was not solely for the benefit of Native Americans. He saw his work as part of the American expansion westward.

A colony established in such a neighborhood, and against the will of the numerous warlike tribes in the vicinity of those mountains, would run great dangers and meet heavy obstacles. The influence of religion alone can prepare these parts for such a transformation. The threats and promises of colonists, their guns and sabres, would never effect what can be accomplished by the peaceful word of the Blackgown and the sight of the humanizing sign of cross. 53

In this passage, De Smet views missionary work as a means of effecting a more peaceful expansion of the American population. But De Smet did not condone the practices of American colonialism:

The grievances of the [Sioux] Indians against the whites are very numerous, and the vengeances which they on their side provoke are often most cruel and frightful. Nevertheless, one is compelled to admit that they are less guilty than the whites. Nine times out of ten, the provocations come from the latter – that is to say, from the scum of civilization, who bring to them the lowest and grossest vices, and none of the virtues, of civilized men. 54

According to De Smet, even though the Sioux are not innocent of violence, it is the Americans that are responsible for initiating the conflict.

De Smet also opposed the liquor trade and attributed much of the problems in Native society to Anglos: "whites who, guided by the insatiable thirst for sordid gain, endeavor to corrupt [the Native Americans] and encourage them by their example." 55

According to De Smet, the Anglos consciously manipulate and corrupt Native American society.

Through all this work, De Smet gained the trust of Native Americans. General Stanley wrote in 1868 that De Smet was "the only man for whom I have ever seen Indians evince a real affection. They say in their simple tongue and open language, that

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54 Enochs, Jesuit Mission, 17.
55 Ibid., 9.
he is the only white man who has not a forked tongue.”

J.A. Hearns, the government agent at the Grand River Agency in South Dakota stated in a report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1870 that “Rev. Father De Smet visited the [Sioux] in July, they were all very well pleased to see him. . . the Indians think he is the one white man that does not lie to them.”

This trust was even familial. Two Bears, the Head Chief of the Yankonais Sioux, adopted De Smet as a brother. De Smet referred to Two Bears as his brother, a distinction that Enochs states De Smet “was proud of.”

When the Yankonais were forced to settle on a reservation, Two Bears stated his requests to General Stanley:

> When we are settled down sowing grain, raising cattle and living in houses, we want Father De Smet to come and live with us, and to bring us other Black-Robes to live among us also.

**Fr. Francis Craft**

Craft was born in 1852 in New York City, to an Episcopal family. His paternal great grandmother was a full-blooded daughter of a Mohawk chief. After studying to be a surgeon and fighting in three wars, he converted to Catholicism in the 1870’s. After studying for the Jesuit order, he became a priest for the Diocese of Omaha, Nebraska March 24, 1883. Craft was an imposing figure, who sculptor James Kelley described as, “over six feet tall, and as keen, sinewy and powerful as a stag. . . his voice was clear and cultivated, and his complexion weather-beaten.”

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56 Ibid., 19-20.
57 Ibid., 20.
58 Ibid., 19.
59 Ibid., 19.
60 Foley, *Father Francis Craft*, 1.
61 Ibid., 1.
62 Ibid., 4.
63 Ibid., 16.
64 Ibid., 16.
Craft was the first Catholic priest sent to the Rosebud Reservation. When he arrived, he was viewed as the "fulfillment of their fallen patriarch’s [chief Spotted Tail] prophetic request." Craft was adopted into Spotted Tail’s family in the hukapi rite, and given the name Wabli chica aglahpaya (The Eagle Covers its Young, or Hovering Eagle). Craft wrote about his adoption:

When the Sicangus [Brules] adopted me into their nation & into the family of their head chief, & made me their chief in his place, it seemed to be the will of God that I should be a savage among the savages to win the savages to Christ. . . The Son of God made Himself to save man, & bore the consequences to the death, & still does not desert them. I have become an Indian to save the Indians, & I should stand by the consequences of my act to the end. 

For Craft, being a missionary entailed more than understanding the missionized, a missionary must become the missionized. He became fluent in Lakota, and wore an eagle feather in his hat. Daniel Madlon, O.S.B., recorded the Lakota memory of Craft described by Bull Man in a speech at the Catholic Sioux Congress of 1936

One day [fifty years ago, the Lakotas] had a visitor, Father Craft. He looked like an Indian. He was riding a horse and he had a feather in his hat. He came during the [sun] dance. Afterwards he spoke to the big chief, Spotted Tail, and told him he had respect for the Indians because they worshipped the Great Spirit.

According to Lakota tradition, Craft was remembered for his respect for the Lakota and their religious tradition. Craft wrote about his understanding of Lakota culture:

The time surely has come when they must decide between giving up Indian ways, & adopting civilized habits, or perishing miserably. The Church does not condemn what is either good or indifferent, & when at Rosebud I told them that, though their customs required for their integrity the freedom of the old life, & must necessarily deteriorate when brought into contact, with civilizations, still I would not condemn them in toto, but would encourage what was good, as long as it remained so.

Craft encouraged what was good and saw similar commonalities between Lakota and Catholic sacraments like Black Elk would later see. In addition, he claimed that Lakota

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65 Ibid., 17.
66 Enochs, Jesuit Mission, 28.
67 Ibid., 100.
68 Ibid., 28.
69 Foley, Father Francis Craft, 49.
tradition had some Christian roots. In speaking about the similarity between Lakota and Catholic rites and beliefs concerning the afterlife, he argues that they must have a similar source:

It seems evident that those traditions and customs were taken in part from what was remembered of the instructions of early missionaries. The Indians themselves maintain this, and history seems to confirm their statement. They say that several hundred years ago their ancestors were instructed by a “Chief of the Black Robes,” or Bishop, who came to them from the East.70

There is evidence that Craft did not agree with the Jesuit interpretation of the Sun Dance. Holler quotes a letter dated November 25, 1883, from R.H. Pratt, the superintendent of the Carlisle Indian School, that claims Fr. Francis Craft participated in the Sun Dance:

I had it from a halfbreed [sic] at Rosebud who claimed to be an eyewitness that Father Craft solicited the privilege from the Indians of opening the ceremonies of the Sun Dance last summer with prayer, and from many sources, that he wore eagle feathers in his cap throughout these ceremonies, and entered into them to the full extent allowed by the Indians.71

Craft defended the full humanity of the Lakota. “It must be remembered that that Indians are not fools, but men of keen intelligence.”72 This is demonstrated by his work to establish a Native American order of sisters. “May He establish firmly the religious vocations of all Indian and mixed-blood aspirants, and give them the abundant grace, and final perseverance.”73 In speaking of Native American sisters, Craft wrote:

Another Indian girl, anxious to suffer for vocations’ sake, will soon be here. I have told her all she must expect, but she “don’t scare,” and wonders why I take so much pains to warn her, when I “ought to know that God is more powerful than our enemies.” Indian faith is pretty solid. I wish I had more of it. Perhaps only full-bloods can have it in its fullness. The fact is Indians are logical. “God has said it: therefore it is so,” they say, and they can’t understand why the white man won’t see it in the same light. If it “be

70 Enochs, Jesuit Mission, 110. Interestingly, Eric Upsi, the bishop of Greenland who visited Vinland on the East Coast, allegedly traveled inland until 1121 and may have met inhabitants of the Great Lakes region.
71 Holler, Black Elk’s Religion, 123.
72 Foley, Father Francis Craft, 43.
73 Ibid., 76.
done to them according to their faith,” they will come through safely, though prospects are now rather “shadowy” to say the least.74

Craft claimed that the faith of Native Americans is deeper and stronger than that of Anglos and those of mixed ancestry, which Craft considered himself. In the course of his work, Craft has not only ascribed equal status to Native Americans, but attributes them with possessing greater virtue than Anglos.

Craft was fearless in his work. He attempted to convert Sitting Bull in 1885. He didn’t succeed, but he did get his robe, which Bishop Marty personally delivered to Pope Leo XIII.75 Craft also engaged in physical confrontation.

He once warned Sitting Bull’s son-in-law, Andrew Fox, not to advance toward him beyond a certain fence post, and when Andrew transgressed the limit, he hurled him over the fence into the middle of the road. In another instance he rode a would-be rapist down with his horse, leaving the mark of his quirt across the offender’s shoulder.76

When a petition was circulated to have Craft removed for throwing Sitting Bull’s son-in-law to the ground, “he responded by riding into their camps alone to offer an arrow as an alternative means of removing him.”77

Fr. Craft occasionally participated in negotiation with the government. The Dawes Sioux Bill of 1888 established a commission to purchase the eleven million acres of Sioux land at fifty cents an acre.78 The commission urged Craft to induce the Lakota to support the deal, but he responded that his orders were to stay away from government business “unless in special cases where they could do great good for the Indians.”79 He later participated after it was apparent that Cheyenne River and Pine Ridge were already

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74 Ibid., 104.
75 Ibid., 35.
76 Ibid., 40.
77 Ibid., 43.
78 Ibid., 67.
79 Ibid., 67.
signing the agreement, and “the best they could hope for was to hold off for better terms.”

Despite his eventual capitulation with the Dawes commission, Craft was clear about the source of problems on the reservations. He wrote in 1888 that, “every single trouble I had was started, not by Indians, but by whites on the Agency.” In a letter to Irish World in August of 1890, he wrote:

> These numerous tribes have almost entirely disappeared. In the territory claimed by the United States less than three hundred thousand now remain. What has become of them? Europeans, ignorant of the former and our later policy toward the Indians, very naturally suppose that, like the former barbarians of Europe, they still exist, no longer as savages, but as a civilized people, or have mingled with the white settlers of the country. We know too well that this is not the case. Though we might well desire to forget facts disgraceful to us, history, with cold, truthful, merciless justice, brings them before us, and makes us see that all “Indian Policy” has always been a policy of extermination, and it remains so today. Government civilization of the remnant of the tribes is merely an excuse for the existence of the Indian Department, with its officials and salaries, that politicians and not Indians may live.

Though the United States may wish to ignore the truth, Craft states that U.S. Indian policy is genocide and unjust. In writing about the cause of Wounded Knee, he states:

> Just as the tree can be traced from its smallest branches to its root, just so all this Indian trouble can be traced through its phases to its true cause, starvation, abject misery, and despair, the cause of which is the outrageous conduct of the Indian Department for many years.

Far from being the fault of the Lakota, the cause is the suffering brought about by the injustice of U.S. Government policy.

**Fr. Eugene Buechel, S.J.**

Eugene Buechel was born in Germany and spent most of his life working at the St. Francis Holy Rosary Missions. The Lakota named him *Wanbli Sepa*, or “Black
Eagle.” Buechel became an expert in the Lakota language, who an aged informant described as, “the only man who ever spoke [Lakota] perfect.”


His linguistic work was not restricted to Christian texts. In 1939 Buechel completed A Grammar of Lakota and stated in the preface:

The Indians have again become race-conscious and want to speak the language of their forefathers. But who was to help them? In order to assist them, the author has prepared this book which may aid to preserve their speech for posterity.

His work was not solely for missionary purposes, but to assist the Lakota in retaining their culture.

Buechel also collected tens of thousands of Lakota words and phrases. He was unable to finish a dictionary in his lifetime, but his work was collected and published by Paul Manhart, S.J., in 1970 A Dictionary of the Teton Dakota Sioux Language. He also collected 100 Lakota legends in the Lakota language, which was published in 1978 and called Lakota Tales and Text. Although these stories are central to Lakota religion, “Buechel wanted to preserve them and clearly did not feel that they were a threat to the Catholic faith.”

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85 Ibid., 141.
86 Steltenkamp, Holy Man of the Oglala, 64.
87 Enochs, Jesuit Mission, 91.
88 Ibid., 92.
90 Enochs, Jesuit Mission, 93.
Buechel conducted scientific research. He studied the flora in the Dakotas and collected over 300 specimens. *Lakota Names and Traditional Uses of Native Plants by Sicangu (Brule) People in the Rosebud Area, South Dakota* in 1980. He also recorded medicinal uses of the plants. Even though he rejected the *yuwipi*, he labored to record the knowledge of the medicine men.91

Buechel’s ethnological work included Lakota religious tradition. In a 40 page document titled “Ethnological Notes,” (1915), he records the aspects of Lakota religious ceremonies: pipe smoking ceremony, adoption ceremony, menstrual ceremony, vision quest, and the Sun Dance.92

This work led him to a deeper understanding of the relationship between Lakota and Catholic tradition. Buechel often worked with Black Elk, and Lucy Looks Twice remembers that they would “would talk. . . about my father’s visions. . . and the Sun Dance, and all the Indian ceremonies that my father said were connected to Christianity.”93 She also states that Buechel “accepted the Blessed Virgin as the same one who brought the pipe [White Buffalo Woman], and that was what we always thought.”94 Lakota tradition was explicitly connected to Catholicism.

**Evaluation**

By the standards of contemporary multi-cultural theory, both the summary of the Jesuit approach and the three missionary examples display a certain ambiguity. They implicitly benefited from government policy – the ban of native religion. Catholic missionaries consciously exerted cultural change. They criticized aspects of Lakota

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91 Ibid., 106.
92 Ibid., 130.
94 Ibid., 107.
tradition: polygamy, gambling, the Sun Dance, the *yuwipi*, violence and revenge.

Missionaries also acted in partial conjunction with government military activity. De Smet repeatedly advocated peace to hostile bands that benefited American interests. Craft worked, if somewhat reluctantly, for the Dawes Act. Catholic schools enforced government language repression which helped to undermine a functioning Lakota language. Finally, the actions of individual missionaries were often times affected by the contemporary prejudice. Craft’s sometimes violent tactics are certainly not exemplary of modern liberal tolerance or Black Elk’s Christian pacifism.

What must be recognized first is that the evidence indicates that missionaries were accepted and gained the respect and friendship of the Lakota. William K. Powers, an anthropologist who could never be accused of Christian bias, states that “it cannot be overemphasized that the Oglala have always maintained that the missionaries are basically good people.” The Lakota requested the Jesuits, adopted them, and accepted them when they would deal with no other whites. This blurred social location must be examined further.

In his autobiography, Fools Crow recalls a vision quest that he undertook during the 1930’s, in order to discover the source of Lakota social and economic problems. Before Fools Crow left to pray, he visited an unnamed Jesuit.

I decided to go again to Bear Butte to fast and pray. I would pray for an end to the liquor problem, for a change in the attitudes of the youth, for crops, wild fruits, and for the grass. . . . For some reason I couldn’t pin down, I felt that before leaving I should go and talk to one of the Jesuit Black Robes I had gotten to know well. He was a fine man who seemed to understand the problems of our people. I did so, and when I told him what I had decided to do, the priest replied that he would pray for me while I was on the butte,

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95 I have chosen not to deal with this issue primarily because it is a practice that did not affect people of Black Elk’s generation. However, a work that examines Catholic presence among the Lakota in subsequent generations will need to address the role of the language ban and boarding schools.

96 This will be developed in Chapter Four.

but in his own way, according to the way of the Roman Catholic Church. I really appreciated this, and it gave me added comfort to know that one white man at least would be joining in sincere concern for a just and lasting change for the Sioux.  

According to Fools Crow, this Jesuit was a fine man who he knew well. In a sea of white apathy and hostility, this Jesuit was the lone figure who joined Fools Crow in searching for a justice, and Fools Crow appreciated his presence.

According to the framework of Fools Crow's story, both supporters and critics of missionary activity fail to interpret Jesuit missionary activity with the proper categories. In historical scholarship, both detractors and supporters of missionaries compare them to contemporary ideals of multi-culturalism and liberal toleration. However, this projects current attitudes and culture onto the past and distorts historical interpretation.

A proper examination of history must respect its context. Instead of measuring missionaries against the present, *the Jesuits must be measured against the spectrum of Anglo responses to Native Americans of their time period.* A historical project must examine the Jesuits within their broader cultural context with its given assumptions about race and inter-ethnic interaction. Consequently, the Jesuits must not be thrust into our naïve assumptions about an already realized multicultural utopia, but measured against the cultural factors that produced the Sand Creek Massacre, Wounded Knee, and the annexation of an entire continent.

The framework drastically changes the interpretation of missionary activities. According to Fools Crow and the evidence examined in this chapter, compared to military, government, political, and colonist interaction with the Lakota, the Jesuits demonstrated the most radically open responses. An Oglala, Sitting Bull, makes this clear:

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98 Thomas E. Mails, *Fools Crow*, assisted by Dallas Chief Eagle (Doubleday & Company, Inc: 38
My people, the Sioux nation, want a Catholic missionary. They are good men. They are the best servants of the Great Spirit. They know our people well. Let them be agents of the Great Father. They will serve him as well as they serve the Great Spirit."

Given the choice, the Lakota of the late 1800's would have preferred never to see or be affected by American colonialism. But given this reality, Sitting Bull makes clear that the Catholic missionaries are the best people from among the non-Lakota. While all non-Lakota could not escape their involvement with at least some colonial practices, they are the only group that produced a people who:

1. Proclaimed the humanity of the Lakota
2. Proclaimed the value of Lakota culture
3. Critiqued government policy
4. Engaged the Lakota in their own cultural location
5. Communicated with the Lakota in their language
6. Entered the Lakota world alone at risk (De Smet, Craft)
7. Systematically worked to save Lakota culture
8. Advocated peace
9. Systematically accepted by Lakota as people of good will
10. Worked to place Lakota in positions of leadership

Elizabeth Grobsmith indicates this in her study of the Lakota of the Rosebud Reservation. She states that Christian churches in general were,

the only group continuously offering aid and hope during a period of rapid economic change. . . the Indian people recognized that those missionaries were not themselves to blame for the changes; on the contrary, their sympathetic assistance was deeply appreciated and still is to this day. 99

Not only were they the only group to continuously work for the welfare of the Lakota, it was the only portion of America society where the Lakota interacted on equal terms.

Even MacGregor, cited in the beginning of the chapter for his anti-Christian bias, admits that the Lakota “accepted Christianity because it was the one part of the white man’s life

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Garden City, New York, 1979), 149.
99 Duratschek, Crusading Along Sioux Trails, 26-27.
in which the Indian was accepted as equal."  

It must also be said that the missionaries were the most willing to recognize the equality of the Lakota.

Returning to the context of colonialism, all of American society was at least implicitly involved and affected by its destruction, including missionaries. However, the evidence examined in this chapter indicates that missionaries were the only ones to systematically challenge colonialism. Consequently, we must turn the questions around. What in Catholic culture and ideals challenged missionaries to engage the Lakota in their own culture and language and to see positive things about Lakota people and culture that no one else in American society saw? What in Catholic culture and ideals challenged missionaries to work for peace and publicly challenge American colonialism? What challenged missionaries to "become Indian" and risk death to work for all of these ideals? To what degree did the Jesuits mitigate the destructive forces of colonialism, and in some way contribute to the Lakota tradition? Why did they exhibit the closest to a relationship based on equality, respect, and even love? Regardless of the answers, they were the only group to make a lifetime commitment to do so.

Chapter 3: Anthropological Discrimination

Ms. [Grace] Roderick does not attribute the falling away of Catholic Passamaquoddy to patterns of abuse or an overbearing emphasis on human sinfulness in the Church. To the contrary, she suggests that the Indians avoid institutional Catholicism because “people here have learned the white man’s ways.” Many residents of Pleasant Point have lived in mainstream America and have become “streetwise.” They have picked up secular values of an America in spiritual breakdown. They look askance at going to mass or sending children to religious instruction because they do not want a religion that makes moral demands on them.¹

More than fifty years after Nicholas Black Elk’s death, modern academics struggle to understand Black Elk’s religiosity. DeMallie wrote in 1984 that, “Black Elk’s Catholicism represents the biggest gap in our understanding of him as a whole human being.”² This “gap” assumes that there is a division between Christianity and Native American experience. However, this scholarly assumption has a number of philosophical roots that are foreign to traditional Lakota culture. I intend to show that this gap was born of American secular culture and nourished by modern Western assumptions. These assumptions are thrust on Black Elk in an effort to keep him pure from what many academics consider the contamination of Christianity.

First and foremost, the separation between Native America culture and Christianity is based on the method of the Boasian school of anthropology. Born in Germany and trained as a physicist, Franz Boas became interested in ethnology. He began his ethnological career among the Kwakwaka’wakw communities of British Columbia. According to Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman, Boas characterized Native Americans as people who were “necessarily” falling victim to modernization.³ They

suggest that Boas' work filtered out aspects of the colonial context in both photographs and texts in order to present a pure traditional culture. This mode of inquiry "rested on a principal effort to construct history as a pre-contact, romanticized past."\(^4\)

Boas went on to teach at Columbia University, where he trained most of the important anthropologists of the first half of the 20th century.\(^5\) His approach became the standard perspective in anthropology. The Boasian school conducted their work believing that indigenous tradition was inevitably disappearing. The anthropological task was to record the remnants of a dying culture. This data was then formulated into a system in order to recreate a pure native worldview. According to Richard Handler, any cultural or religious change was ignored, because it "was precisely this change that was destroying the all-important data."\(^6\) One of the biggest changes anthropologists filtered out was the influence of Christianity.

This salvage and systemization approach to anthropology was combined with the stereotype of the destructive missionary, whose main intent was the destruction of Native culture and served only as a pawn of colonizing European and American forces.\(^7\) Consequently, Christianity could only function as a corrupting force in Native societies.

This anthropological perspective is still alive today. Julian Rice asserts the Boasian method today when he states that,

The present study... makes no pretense of presenting purely objective information. ... The following chapters present previously unpublished manuscript material, ethnographic texts little known to the general reader, as well as new interpretations of well-known

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\(^4\) Ibid., 516.
\(^6\) Clyde Holler, "Black Elk's Relationship to Christianity," *The American Indian Quarterly* 8 (no. 1 1984): 37.

\(^7\) I do not want to deny that this portrayal of missionaries is support by evidence from the history of European colonialism. However, as I argued in Chapter 2, this portrayal does not accurately describe the Lakota Catholic missions.
Rice makes clear that in 1998, his role as an ethnographer is to remove cultural change. After filtering, he intends to re-create the Lakota world as it was, before it was lost or corrupted. Consequently, the anthropologist becomes an editor rather than a reporter.

In addition to the Boasian method, many modern scholars embrace the assumption that what Westerners classify as Native religion is foundational for Native American identity. In the same work Rice writes that, "Tim Giago, the Oglala Lakota editor of Indian Country Today (the country's largest Indian newspaper), reminds us that authentic spirituality is the one thing Euro-Americans cannot steal." Lakota religion must be kept pure, as it is the most authentic aspect of Lakota culture. Pure Lakota religion guarantees Lakota identity. This assumes that cultures themselves have permanent, well-defined boundaries that can and must be maintained.

The third assumption used by many scholars is that Christianity threatens the uniqueness of Lakota tradition. Any association of Lakota tradition with Christianity is a threat to its survival.

It may be that these "blenders" wish to avoid having to study Native American cultures in and of themselves. . . The Sioux people that I know have little patience for such a view. They are too busy restoring a unique consciousness that Euro-Americans, using first Christianity and now syncretism, are trying to erase.

Rice sees Christianity as a destructive force that acts only to erase a unique Lakota tradition. He claims that the Lakota he knows share this view of Christianity and are

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9 The term religion is a modern western concept developed during the Enlightenment that is used to separate culture into different spheres of varying degrees of value. This division is not inherent in Lakota culture in the way that modern Western thought uses the term.
10 Rice, Before the Great Spirit, 4.
engaged in reconstructing a pure Lakota worldview. Since Rice does not name who these Lakota are, an examination of Lakota society will be necessary to indicate who shares these assumptions.

**AIM and Urban Lakota**

These modern Western assumptions are not foreign to contemporary Native American thought. They first become evident relatively recently in Lakota society through the American Indian Movement, or AIM. AIM is a pan-Indian political group that advocates a rejection of American culture, Native cultural revival, and an aggressive political action platform. This platform includes political autonomy of tribal groups and just enforcement of treaties signed with the American government. Most importantly, AIM takes a strong stance on many social and economic problems that plague Native America. A major focus of AIM’s platform includes the revival of traditional religion and the rejection of Christianity.¹²

Russell Means was one of the founders of AIM. He is of Lakota descent and one of AIM’s most visible media figures. Means was born November 10, 1939 on Pine Ridge Reservation. Means grew up primarily in California, attending American public schools and socialized in the English language. He became an accountant in Cleveland before founding a chapter of the American Indian Movement in 1970.¹³

Like Rice, Means is clear about his hostility to Christianity. At the funeral of Frank Fools Crow in 1989, Means was one of several people who spoke. “I reminded

¹¹ Ibid., 11-12.
¹² I do not wish to denigrate AIM or its political activism, which seeks to address the many problems facing contemporary Native American communities. I solely wish to show that their understanding of Lakota ceremonial life and tradition is an innovation with its sources in American secular culture and not native to the Lakota of Black Elk’s generation.
everyone that Fools Crow was always a beacon to his people. Never a Christian, he maintained the honorable traditions of our ancestors by living as an example of their beauty.”14 The AIM group that came from different reservations objected to the Christian elements. Means states that, “to [the AIM group], burying Fools Crow with the trappings of Christianity was blasphemous.”15 Mean stresses that Fools Crow “was never a Christian,” and that for AIM, any association of Christianity with Native American tradition is “blasphemous.”

AIM equates Christianity with colonialism. Clyde Bellecourt, a leading member of AIM, summed up AIM’s position at a protest of a Catholic celebration at the Ojibway reservation in Sault Sainte Marie, Michigan: “The missionaries came with the Bible in one hand, and the sword in another.”16 Means agrees with this view of Christianity as a form of colonization: “Christianity serves only to further colonize Indians and rob us of dignity and self-worth.”17

As with Rice, Means views Lakota religion as foundational for native identity. In speaking about a Sun Dance at Pine Ridge in 1971, he stated that AIM leaders decided to return to the reservations in order to better understand Lakota culture. “To set an example for everyone else, we leaders would return to our reservations. We would get involved in Indian ceremonies to find out more about who we are, what we are, and where we are going.”18 For Means, Lakota identity is discovered and understood primarily through Lakota religion.

14 Russell Means, Where White Men Fear to Tread, 534.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 160.
17 Ibid., 78.
18 Ibid., 182.
Means makes the same claims about Lakota religion that Rice does. First, traditional people, such as Fools Crow, are not Christians. Second, Christianity is only a tool of colonization and serves to destroy pure Lakota culture. Third, Lakota religion is the foundation of Lakota identity.

What is important to highlight is that Means’ and Rice’s views are dependent on similar social locations, formation, and time period. Both were raised in secular America, in the English language, and during the mid 20th century. These views are new in the Lakota context. The next section will demonstrate that they are not found in older Lakota generations raised in the Lakota language and cultural context.

**Fools Crow and Other Traditionals**

Frank Fools Crow is perhaps the best representative of the early Lakota reservation period. Born around the time of the Battle of Wounded Knee in 1890, he served as the Ceremonial Chief of the Lakota nation from 1960 until his death in 1989. He represented the Lakota in treaty claims with the U.S. government and was perhaps the most respected holy man of his generation. Russell Means calls him “the most renowned Lakota holy man” and understands him to be a symbol of Lakota tradition and resistance to colonialism.\(^\text{19}\)

However, Fools Crow describes a much different relationship to Christianity than Means attributes to him. He became a Catholic in 1917, ten years after Black Elk converted. Writing in 1979 in his autobiography Fools Crow states:

\begin{quote}
I am still a practicing Roman Catholic. I go to Mass once or twice a month, and I receive Holy Communion whenever I can. My first wife did not attend church. My second wife, Kate, whom I married in 1958, is also a Roman Catholic, and we attend worship services together. At the same time, we live according to the traditional religious beliefs
\end{quote}

\(^{19}\text{Ibid.}, 189.\)
and customs of our people, and we find few problems with the differences between the two.\textsuperscript{20}

According to Fools Crow’s testimony, Means statement that he was “never a Christian” is false. In his own words, Fools Crow states that Christianity is not antithetical to Lakota tradition, does not erase it, and he finds little conflict between the two.

Fools Crow also expresses that traditional Lakotas were sincerely attracted to the Christian message. In explaining his daily life in the 1970’s, he describes entertaining fellow Lakotas who visit his home:

Indian friends often visit us in the early evening, ordinarily staying for only a little while. Sometimes they ask me to tell them a story. The kinds of stories they prefer may surprise you, because many people ask me about this extraordinary holy man who lived way back, Jesus Christ, who did such spectacular things as walking on water and changing a few fish and loaves of bread into enough food to feed thousands. So I tell them stories from the Bible as the priests have told them to me. And these really interest my visitors. Even today, the middle-aged and older Sioux are not able to understand and deal with Bible stories until they hear them told by an Indian and in their own Lakota language. Then they are able to sense the greatness of them and to feel their impact on their personal lives.\textsuperscript{31}

Fools Crow’s story makes clear that traditional Lakota people (at least the ones he knows), speaking their own language, were interested in the stories of Jesus Christ, and prefer them to other stories. Fools Crow, as a holy man and political leader, actively passes on those stories.

Fools Crow is not alone among traditional Lakotas in his participation in Catholicism. Many other important holy men respected as leaders among the Lakota are Catholic, including Edgar Red Cloud, Pete Catches, George Plenty Wolf.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{20} Mails, Fools Crow, 45.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 174.
\textsuperscript{22} See Paul B. Steinmetz, S.J., Pipe, Bible, and Peyote among the Oglala Lakota: A Study in Religious Identity. Rev. ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990). Edgar Red Cloud, Pete Catches and Fools Crow are cited by Means and Matthiessen as important traditional Lakota leaders supporting AIM’s demands in the occupation of Wounded Knee. “To the traditionalists, the real power on Pine Ridge – the supreme spiritual leaders and therefore the moral authorities – lay with our eight traditional chiefs and holy men, all born in the last century... were the legitimate heirs to leadership of the only nation that had ever forced the United States to be for peace – the Lakota.” Russell Means, Where White Men Fear to Tread, 252.
Other Lakota religious groups accept Christian belief and do not see it as contradictory to Lakota identity. In a meeting of the Native American Church of Pine Ridge, Rev. Emerson Spider describes an incident between himself and two boys, in which he responded to the accusation that Christianity is contrary to Native American culture.

They pointed at me and asked: “Do you believe in Christ?” I said: “Yes, I believe in Jesus Christ.” “You must be a white man,” they said. “Once you believe in Jesus Christ, you are a white man.” “No, you got me all wrong,” I said. “I’m a hundred percent Indian. Not one drop of blood in me that is white. . . When one receives Christ, that doesn’t change a person into another one.”

According to Emerson Spider, belief in Jesus Christ in no way compromises Lakota identity. Acceptance of Christ does not erase one’s cultural formation.

Even those Lakota who explicitly reject traditional religion do not see this as compromising their Lakota identity. An interesting case is the Body of Christ Independent Church, a non-denominational church founded by the Lakota in 1958. Membership consists of “full-blooded Lakota who are unacculturated in all areas of their life except religious symbolism.” According to their church’s view, all traditional Lakota religion must be rejected, but they do not see that as “un-Indian.” According to a member, Garfield Good Plume, it is “Indian in membership, language and sharing food.”

These groups of traditional Lakota demonstrate very different understandings of Lakota tradition and Christianity than Means and Rice. Fools Crow and traditional Lakotas are Christian. Christianity does not erase their Lakota cultural formation. They

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23 The Native American Church is based on Christian and Lakota tradition, and is centered around the sacramental use of Peyote. See Steinmetz, Pipe, Bible, and Peyote, 87-151.
24 Ibid., 155.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 176.
27 Ibid., 155.
do not see religion as the exclusive foundation for Lakota identity. Finally, Lakota Christians, even those who reject Lakota religion, claim to be Lakota because of the entirety of their cultural formation.

**Americanization and the Rejection of Christianity**

Along with different understandings of Christianity and Lakota tradition, Fools Crow and other traditionals tell a different story about colonialism and continuing Lakota problems. While many of these traditionals share the political demands of AIM, they do not attribute Lakota societal and cultural problems to Christianity. They attribute Lakota problems and the rejection of Christianity by young militants associated with AIM to the same source: conformity to secular America.

And this boy . . . who was saying that I was a white man, I said: “Do you drink?” “Yes,” he said, “I drink.” “Do you smoke?” “Yes, I smoke.” “You must be a white man,” I said, “because you are using the white man’s things. . . and then you tell me that I am a white man; I’m an Indian. If you don’t like this Christ and you want me to say that I’m a white man, who would I be if I gave Christ back to the white man? Would you come and join me as a good Indian, representing the Indian, being a true Indian? In the early days this white man came and tricked the Indian through this liquor and now we are using and we talk big. If we are going to be Indian, let’s do it the right way."28

In this story, a Lakota (militant) accuses Spider (who rejects Lakota ceremonies as salvific), of compromising his Lakota identity with belief in Christ. Spider responds that it is not religious symbolism that makes a Lakota white, but alcohol consumption. For Spider the opposite is true: belief in Christ helps the Lakota to be a “good” and “true” to their Native American identity. Secular values and lifestyle compromises Lakota identity, not religious symbolism.

Fools Crow’s interpretation of the roots of Lakota problems also matches this view of acculturation to secular American culture. In his autobiography, he traces the roots and development of contemporary social problems. Fools Crow first states that the
early reservation period was not the source of current reservation problems, and in fact was, “in some ways better than the old buffalo-hunting days.”

I recalled that, from 1895 to 1920, we Sioux had learned what unity was; what it was like for a family to work together, and what it was like to co-operate with relatives and neighbors. We had achieved in those days a measure of self-respect, and were able to continue much of our traditional way of life.

While the Lakota had lost their freedom and old economy, they were still free of contemporary social and economic problems.

Fools Crow ascribes the beginning of trouble to interwar years, which culminated in the 1930’s. According to Fools Crow, “The years from 1930 to 1940 rank as the worst ten years I know of, and all the Oglala as old as I am will agree. In that one single period we lost everything we had gained.”

Corrupt BIA programs and the Great Depression reversed the early Lakota success.

According to Fools Crow,

I wanted to know where things had begun to go wrong. Wakan-Tanka answered that. He told me then that it had started when the young men went off to fight in World War I. It had been their first real exposure to the outside world, and to what money could do...the worst damage came with worldly and selfish attitudes the survivors brought back. ...Where money is, liquor follows. Many of our young people were getting drunk and fighting one another. Had I not noticed that now and then cattle and horses were missing from farms, stolen to be sold for whiskey? It was known that one young man had even argued and fought with his father, a thing unheard of in the earlier days.

Fools Crow cites the importation of American secular values learned by Lakota soldiers in WWI. The power of money and alcohol consumption were now important values, which lead to un-traditional behavior. It was this un-traditional behavior that lead to the loss of Lakota culture and identity.

These were the key: money and jealousy. If you can’t control money and the desire for it you can’t control the people. So if we Sioux were going to hold onto our traditional way

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28 Ibid., 135-6.
29 Mails, Fools Crow, 68.
30 Ibid., 109.
31 Ibid., 148.
32 Ibid., 111.
of life, we would have to fight to protect it. We would need to fight against the idea of people becoming more concerned with spending money than they were about their religion, families, homes, and farms. If we did not do this, if happiness was to be based upon having as much money as one could get his hands on, then we Sioux were becoming far less red and far more white.33

Fools Crow explicitly links the loss of Lakota identity and the adoption of American values to money and jealousy. In order to retain Lakota identity it is necessary for the Lakota to fight these values.

The whites have invaded us and changed our entire culture and life-style, and it has not been for the better... it is the white man with his materialism and capitalism, and his stress upon the total independence of individuals and families, who has made us poor.34

It is essential to highlight that Fools Crow is not ignorant or passive when faced by the problems of the Lakota, and that he attributes them to invading white American culture. While he may implicate missionaries for their complicity with government language policy and education, Fools Crow does not link Lakota problems with the Christian narrative.

For Fools Crow, Christianity is not a major threat to Lakota identity, as he is a practicing Catholic. Rather, Fools Crow explicitly equates the American focus on financial accumulation and alcohol consumption to the loss of Lakota identity and societal problems. Contrary to Means and Rice, American secularism is the major threat, not Christianity.

**Sun Dance**

In addition to different views on the relationship of Christianity to Lakota societal problems, Means and Fools Crow have different understandings of the relationship of Christianity to Lakota religion. In 1971, in the middle of his AIM activism, Means participated in his first Sun Dance. Fools Crow was the intercessor.

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33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 194. Emphasis mine.
In his description Means admits that he does not fully understand the ceremony. "I knew very little about what to do... I was learning and experiencing being an Indian."\(^35\) He was instructed by many people, including "an older man from California, a white who had been adopted by the Red Cloud family. He showed me how to make crown, wrist, and ankle bands from sage... I didn’t have a sunflower, so the old man lent me his. I was grateful to have the correct things to honor my ancestors."\(^36\)

Means’ discussion of the Sun Dance displays a number of contradictory assumptions. While learning about the Sun Dance, he admits to not understanding the procedure of the Sun Dance and needs instruction. In "learning to be an Indian," Means seeks the instruction of a non-Indian.

Means also makes clear his assumption that Christianity dilutes the purity of Lakota tradition.

Before we could start, a Catholic priest, the biggest drunk on the reservation – a remarkable achievement – showed up. Without even removing his shoes, as is customary on the dance circle’s hallowed ground,\(^37\) he started to carry a sacred pipe around the perimeter so our sun dance could begin with the church’s blessing. I was stunned, not quite believing what I was seeing. Ed McGaw, who had grown up in a Catholic boarding school and was decorated for heroism while flying Marine Jets in Vietnam, said “This is bullshit – our sun dance has nothing to do with Catholicism! We can’t let him do this.” He and I stopped the half-pickled priest’s desecration of our holy rites.\(^38\)

While he admits to not understanding the ceremony, Means immediately concludes that Catholicism has nothing to do with the Sun Dance and is in fact a “desecration.”

However, the connection between Catholicism and Fools Crow’s Sun Dance was not new. According to Steinmetz, Jake Herman, a Lakota tribal historian initiated this association. Steinmetz was asked to celebrate Mass on the Sun Dance grounds. This

\(^{35}\) Russell Means, Where White Men Fear to Tread, 189.
\(^{36}\) Ibid.
\(^{37}\) Interestingly, there is a photograph of Fools Crow wearing shoes while leading a dancer into position on the Sun Dance grounds. See Steinmetz, Pipe, Bible, and Peyote.
occurred from 1965-1969. Steinmetz estimates that about 300 people attended Mass, about equal to the number that attended the Sun Dance. Steinmetz describes the Sun Dance:

In 1969, Edgar Red Cloud, the leader of the Sun Dance singers, sang a Sun Dance song, holding the Sacred Pipe during the distribution of Holy Communion. I prayed with the same Pipe during the prayers of petition. Red Cloud, Plenty Wolf, and Fools Crow all received Holy Communion on the Sun Dance Grounds, making a public profession of their Catholic faith. Fools Crow had just pierced a few minutes before.\(^{39}\)

In 1970, Steinmetz was again invited to celebrate Mass, but was prevented by what he describes as a “militant.” In 1971, the year that Means attended his first Sun Dance, Steinmetz was invited to participate in the same Sun Dance run by Fools Crow.\(^{40}\)

The next year Fools Crow asked me to help him pray in the Sun Dance, since he knew I prayed with the Sacred Pipe as a priest. On Sunday morning he painted my face with red paint and put me into the Sun Dance with my Pipe along with three militants. He did this to show that a Catholic priest had a right to participate in the Sun Dance and to pray with the Pipe. He made a public manifestation of what he had repeatedly told me: that the Indian religion and the Catholic Church are one. . . . When one of the militants threatened to throw me out, Fools Crow told me to take a long rest. . . . The militant then proceeded to deliver a long and bitter attack against the Holy Rosary Mission and the Catholic Church. During the rest period I presented my credentials. . . . “Frank Fools Crow had asked me to help him pray in the Sun Dance and I did not feel I could turn down a request to pray.” Afterwards, Lakota people remarked to me that the militant person knew nothing about Indian religion. Otherwise he would not have criticized anyone while the Pipe was in ceremony.\(^{41}\)

According to the evidence, Means’ interprets both Lakota tradition and its relationship to Christianity differently than do the traditional participants. He does not understand the Sun Dance and violates the Sacred Pipe ceremony. Means is also unaware that the presence of Catholicism was not invasive but initiated by Fools Crow, the Sun Dance’s intercessor. He is not familiar enough with traditional Lakota culture to grasp the subtleties of the events.

**Analysis: Socialization and Language**


\(^{40}\) Mails, *Fools Crow*, 134. Fools Crow does not talk about the 1971 Sun Dance. In discussing an incident of the 1974 Sun Dance, Fools Crow states, “A Roman Catholic Priest, who was one of the pledgers, was dancing right beside me.”
Two distinct understandings of Lakota tradition and the relationship with Christianity are relevant for this study. Fools Crow, a native Lakota speaker raised in a traditional environment, as well as holy man and ceremonial chief of the entire Lakota nation, sees no conflict with maintaining active Church membership, and explaining the stories of Jesus. He ascribes much of the Lakota problems to adoption of secular American values. Fools Crow is representative of the early reservation period in which Black Elk lived.

Russell Means, the former head of AIM, raised in an urban environment and an English speaker, sees Christianity as inherently antithetical to Lakota tradition and ascribes much of the Lakota’s problems to Christianity. He is apparently unaware of Fools Crow’s life-long participation in the Catholic Church. Means also misunderstands the dynamics of the 1971 Sun Dance, where Catholicism played an intentional role.

The difference between these two positions in Lakota society can be attributed to socialization. Means and other Lakota raised in urban American environments demonstrate a symbolic understanding of Lakota identity. They follow the categories of symbolic ethnicity described by Herbert J. Gans. According to Gans, people formed in mainstream American culture “without assigned role or groups that anchor ethnicity,”

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42 There are also Lakota raised in a traditional environment that are not against Lakota ceremonies, but do not view them as salvific. Emerson Spider, Sr. writes: “It used to be that when we had the traditional way of worshipping, we believed in earthly life. Now we believe in the second coming of Christ, although we still have our traditional ways. We still believe in them. I believe in the Sun Dance and fasting and all the traditional ways. I believe that they are sacred and I believe that they are good. But they are earthly, so by them alone no man will be saved. The second coming of Christ is the only way to salvation.” Emerson Spider, Sr., “The Native American Church of Jesus Christ,” in *Sioux Indian Religion: Tradition and Innovation*. Eds. with an introduction by Raymond J. DeMallie and Douglas R. Parks; illustrations by Arthur Amiotte (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 208-209
look for symbolic ways to express ethnic identity.\textsuperscript{43} Rather than concerning themselves with,

arduous or time-consuming commitments. . . to a culture that must be practiced constantly. . . they are free to look for ways of expressing that identity which suits them best, thus opening up the possibility of voluntary, diverse, or individualistic ethnicity.\textsuperscript{44}

According to Gans, those formed in secular America do not assert ethnic identity by learning complex communal systems that encompass a way of life, such as language. Rather, they learn expressive behavior usually involving symbols. These symbols are taken from older ethnic culture that may still be practiced, but in which they are not participants. These symbols, “are ‘abstracted’ from that culture and pulled out of its original moorings, so to speak, to become stand-ins for it.”\textsuperscript{45} The symbols are essentialized, but are only added to a pre-existing American cultural formation. Thus, while functioning as Americans, symbols stand for a different ethnic identity.

In this symbolic assertion of Lakota identity, religion becomes foundational because it is the cultural symbol that is most easily appropriated. Bea Medicine recognizes this cultural trend among urban Lakota:

It seems obvious that a major symbolic act of being a “traditional” Native American is “to Sun Dance” and eventually, “to pierce.” Participation in this ritual is rapidly becoming a symbol of traditionality and an ethnic marker for many native peoples of all tribes – those who are affiliated with the American Indian Movement, those who live in urban areas, and those whose quest for identity and individual or social change necessitates the search for a symbolic and ritual system. . . Urban Indians of Lakota heritage return to dance, to observe, and to obtain the benefits which accrue from attendance.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} Bea Medicine, “Native American Resistance to Integration: Contemporary Confrontations and Religious Revitalization.” \textit{Plains Anthropologist} 26 (1981): 281. This trend is not limited to the Lakota. Medicine states that, “Micmacs from New Brunswick, Canada, felt obligated to regain an Indian identity by making a pilgrimage to Pine Ridge – even if they didn’t participate.”
By participating in the Sun Dance, a Lakota participant socialized in American culture is transformed into a “traditional” Lakota, an identity that is held over and against secular America. Piercing gives the benefit of symbolically trumping years of cultural formation.

This understanding of symbolic ethnicity is read back into history. Ward Churchill, an AIM activist who teaches at the University of Colorado at Boulder, quotes researchers Mark Davis and Robert Zannis who state, “If people suddenly lose their ‘prime symbol,’ the basis of their culture, their lives lose meaning. They become disorientated, with no hope. As social organization often follows such a loss, they are often unable to ensure their own survival.”

According to this understanding of ethnicity, the source of Lakota problems is not primarily in the loss family structure, Lakota language, cultural formation or economy. It is reduced to the loss of Lakota religion and the introduction of Christianity.

Means’ return to the Pine Ridge Reservation follows Hans’ description of symbolic ethnicity. Means “had long yearned to feel like [his] ancestors,” and this pursuit of Lakota identity leads him to the Sun Dance. By dancing in the Sun Dance he “[learns] and [experiences] being an Indian.” Rather than cultural formation, the Sun Dance becomes the foundational symbol for establishing his Lakota identity.

This process of symbolic ethnicity leads to insecurity. A symbol is easily appropriated by individuals not socialized in a Lakota environment. Means himself demonstrates this phenomenon by appropriating the symbol of the piercing while never becoming a full participant in the life of the traditional community. If Means can do this, then non-Lakota can as well, as did the Anglo from California in Means autobiography.

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There must be a method of limiting uncontrolled appropriation, lest it become another consumer product in secular America. Constant boundary maintenance is necessary to guard the purity of the symbol from contamination, by either non-Native participants or Christian influence.

Despite this participation in Lakota religion, little of Means’ formation sets him apart from the non-Lakota world. Based on his acculturation and inability to speak Lakota, he views Lakota culture with the lens of an outsider. Fools Crow comments on Lakota youth who do not speak good Lakota: “Besides [drinking], the youth are not able to speak enough Lakota. So when I talk to them they do not understand much of what I am saying. Even if they do catch the meaning they miss its impact.”\(^49\) Those who do not have the linguistic tools cannot adequately understand Lakota tradition.

Because Means lacks this linguistic formation, everything that he knows to exist in American society cannot be an authentic part of Lakota culture. Christianity cannot be Lakota, because it exists in American culture as well. Holler points out that, “for the AIM group, rejection of Christianity is considered absolutely essential for Indian identity.”\(^50\) Christianity can only be a contamination of the prime symbol that Lakota culture and individual Native American identity depends on.

In addition to the desire for symbolic purity, Means’ and the Urban Native American rejection of Christianity can also be attributed to American socialization. As early as 1946, MacGregor reports that: “Christian Churches too appear to be losing some of their former hold as . . . many Indians are now following the trend of the local white

\(^{49}\) Mails, *Fools Crow*, 197.
\(^{50}\) Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 193.
population away from control by the Church.” MacGregor links Lakota separation from Christianity to association with Anglo-American cultural trends. Thus, Means’ aggression is a manifestation of the dominant secular trend in White America.

Fools Crow, along with his generation - those raised before the reservation time and families that retained similar patterns of cultural formation - are not dependent on a symbolic identity, because they operate as Lakota in all facets of life. According to Holler, “Ethnic identity was hardly an issue in the days before the reservation system. In the old days, ethnic identity was not chosen, it was bestowed by birth in the tribe and by language.” Traditionals do not need to consciously filter out cultural influences that are non-Lakota, because there is no way to escape the Lakota worldview embodied by their way of life. Cultural insecurity and identity assertion was not an issue, for they were formed in an exclusively Lakota context. Adoption of new religious thought would not threaten their Lakota identity because there was nothing they could do to escape the fact that they are Lakota.

Fools Crow and those raised in a traditional Lakota environment are both linguistically capable and culturally secure. There is no way of separating new religious thought because they receive and experience it in their own language. Ben Black Bear, a Lakota Catholic raised in the Lakota language states that, “one of the biggest blending points for me... is the Lakota language.” Because the traditional Lakota religious worldview is contained in the language, Catholic teachings done in Lakota inherently meld with that worldview.

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51 Steltenkamp, Holy Man of the Oglala, 166.
52 Holler, Black Elk’s Religion, 194.
53 Marie Therese Archambault, O.S.F., ed., “Ben Black Bear, Jr.: A Lakota Deacon and a ‘Radical Catholic’ Tells His Own Story,” U.S. Catholic Historian, 16(2), 98.
“So the sense of spirituality that I had – sort of meshed traditional Lakota spirituality with Christian/Catholic spirituality – was done in Lakota... It helped me to see Catholicism in Lakota and then a lot of the traditional teachings and beliefs that I learned in Lakota became a part of me. These were brought together by myself into my whole concept of how things ought to be... There is a sense of Catholic... sort of life style that meshes with traditional Lakota ways.”

According to Black Bear, Catholic and Lakota tradition comprise one coherent worldview because they share the same language. Black Bear saw them together in one vision of how the world is.

In addition, the traditionalists’ Lakota formation means that religious symbolism is not foundational for Lakota identity. Holler recognizes this when he comments on the modern traditionalist view of permitting white attendance at the Sun Dance, “The reservation traditionalists are fairly secure in their identity with respect to whites.” In a controversy over allowing white participants, Pete Catches a Lakota Holy Man and former Catholic catechist, says that “friction here is strong against any form of white man coming here... and I am personally very hurt by this.” Both Christianity and outside participation does not pollute or compromise Lakota identity of those formed in the Lakota language and world.

While AIM is a legitimate expression of 20th century Native American experience and seems to get the most publicity in both scholarship and popular imagination, it is not normative in contemporary Lakota society. More importantly, it is not the interpretive lens of Black Elk’s generation but a product of secular 20th century American culture that must be imported into the Black Elk sources if it is to be there at all. But this is exactly what is done. William K. Powers exemplifies this in his work *Oglala Religion*. He observes that it is through Lakota ceremonies “that the Oglalas recognize themselves as

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54 Ibid., 94.  
distinct from the white man and other non-Oglalas...Religion has become an institution which is synonymous with Oglala identity."

The distinction between Oglala social and cultural identity and other possible identities should be regarded as a process rather than a category. The boundary which delineates Oglala society from non-Indians, or even non-Oglalas, ideational. The Oglala is very much aware of the technological environment that surrounds his society. He participates in it. He wears a white man’s clothing, lives in a white man’s house, and works at a white man’s job. But when he seeks to affirm his own identity as an Oglala, he moves along the continuum to the only institution available to him that is distinct from the white man. He seeks identity in a religious system whose structure has remained in many respects constant since European contact.

Powers description of religion as identity may be a contemporary sociological phenomenon. But the example of Fools Crow, other traditional holy men, and Lakota Christians socialized in a traditional environment in the Lakota language, do not demonstrate any evidence that they share this idea of religious symbolism as identity. Ironically, these traditionals with dual religious commitments are the very sources for positions exemplified by Rice and Means and are continually measured by the assumptions they themselves did not share. They do not see Christianity as threatening or erasing the Lakota worldview. Traditionals do not need to assert or create Lakota identity; it is inherent in their cultural formation. Religion is important and central to Lakota communal life, but not foundational for individual identity.

The Sources for Black Elk’s Catholicism

56 Steinmetz, Pipe, Bible and Peyote, 35.
58 Ibid., 204. Compare Powers statement to the views expressed by Fools Crow: “Of course, whenever I speak of customs that might be revived, I mean not only the dances and the ceremonies, but also the manners and morals. Most non-Indians just think in terms of the first two. We could, if we thought it best, revive most of the old dances and ceremonies. But the reasons for our doing many of them are not present anymore, and the attitude of many people about them is not right. The Sun Dance is performed, and we could do again the Ghost Dance and the Buffalo Dance. But Sioux people do not request these, because they figure it is best to leave them alone. The stone and the war-paint powder we once used in the Ghost Dance were taken to the University of South Dakota at Vermillion, and they are on display there. I suppose we could get them back if we wanted them badly enough. But there is no reason to do so.” Mails, Fools Crow, 168-9.
If traditional Lakota society does not share the assumption of AIM and modern academics that Christianity is antithetical to Lakota culture, it is hard to build a case that Black Elk was not a sincere Catholic. There are only four primary sources that question his life as a Catholic: Hilda, the daughter of Neihardt, the Laubin couple who visited him once a year from 1936 until Black Elk’s death, and Charles Hanson.

First, Hilda, the daughter of John Neihardt, states during an interview November 3, 1997, at the University of Sioux Falls: “But let me recall a conversation that Neihardt and Black Elk had. It was during a break in the telling of the Great Vision, and the two were visiting. My father said: ‘Black Elk, when you have such a very beautiful religion, why are you a member of a white church?’ Black Elk thought for a moment, then replied: ‘Because my children have to live in this world.’”

The second also comes from Hilda Neihardt in her book Black Elk and Flaming Rainbow, published in 1995. She refers to Black Elk’s daughter, Lucy, who was the main informant in Michael Steltenkamp’s book, Holy Man of the Oglala. She asserts that Lucy became a pipe carrier, quit her membership in what Neidhart classifies as a “white church,” and regrets telling Steltenkamp, her friend of five years when he lived and worked on the reservation, about Black Elk’s life as a catechist. Neihardt reports that Lucy told her that Black Elk confessed shortly before his death that “the only thing I really believe is the pipe religion.” In a similar manner, Black Elk’s son Ben made a death bed confession which Neihardt interprets as a denial of Christian belief.

60 Hilda Neihardt, Black Elk and Flaming Rainbow: Personal Memories of the Lakota Holy Man and John Neihardt (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 118-9. This is a very doubtful claim. Hilda calls Lucy a “dear friend” but concedes that she does not remember much about Lucy from the interviews and does not seem to have talked to her. Hilda spent much of her free time horseback riding with Leo Looks Twice, Lucy’s husband. Lucy visited Hilda one time before her death in 1978. See
The third comes from Reginald and Gladys Laubin, who met Black Elk in 1936 at the Black Hills pageant. They continued to visit him each year until his death. In a personal communication to Raymond Demallie in 1983, they stated that he never mentioned that aspect of his life. They wrote, “We had the feeling he was interested mainly in early days.”

The fourth comes from Charles Hanson, Jr. of the Museum of the Fur Trade, Chadron, Nebraska, February 1983. Hanson visited Pine Ridge to meet Black Elk. Black Elk was sick and talked to him for a few minutes. Black Elk’s son Ben apologized that the interview couldn’t be longer. Ben went on to say “that many of their conversation then were about the old religion, and that Black Elk now felt he had made a mistake in rejecting it for Christianity.”

While these four sources are given normative status for determining the sincerity of Black Elk’s Catholicism, it is clear that they are even farther removed from the worldview of the generation of Black Elk and Fools Crow than Rice and Means are. All of the informants are outsiders to the Lakota community. They are American, and have no knowledge of Lakota culture or language. They have no long-term experience living with the Lakota, and no commitment to the Lakota community. They are people who did not have long term relationships with Black Elk, but met him for short periods of time. Most importantly, they all share the assumptions of early anthropologists, and Rice and


61 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 71.

Means, who look exclusively for things that were authentically Lakota, and are biased against any cultural change.

On the other hand, all the primary sources that accept the sincerity of Black Elk’s life as a Catholic come from within the Lakota community. In a talk given by his son Ben about Lakota tradition to Pine Ridge Boarding School, he stated that, “my father was a Christian. He died a Catholic; he is buried in a Catholic cemetery.” The main Lakota witnesses are his daughter Lucy Looks Twice, fellow catechists John Lone Goose, Ben Marrowbone, and Pat Red Elk, who was a young man when Black Elk was a catechists. There are also a number of Jesuits that lived and worked in the Lakota culture and community for decades, who describe Black Elk as a faithful Catholic. Fools Crow, nephew of Black Elk, states that,

my uncle, Black Elk, became a Roman Catholic in 1904... [he] was very interested in the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, and spent many hours talking to the priests about it... Black Elk told me that he had decided that the Sioux religious way of life was pretty much the same of that of the Christian churches.

Fools Crow was even surprised to hear that Black Elk Speaks even existed. Even a negative source, John (Fire) Lame Deer, dismisses Black Elk as a “catechism teacher” and a “cigar-store Indian,” but recognizes his life as a Catholic. There is no evidence that they see Black Elk’s Christianity as anything but a typical manifestation of Lakota culture of the early reservation period.

Ironically, those who most adamantly oppose the possibility of a sincere commitment to Catholicism on the part of Black Elk unwittingly interpret the sources

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63 Esther Black Elk Desersa and Olivia Black Elk Pourier, Black Elk Lives: Conversations with the Black Elk Family, eds. Hilda Neihardt and Lori Utecht (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 18. Ben later also says “but he still believed in Indian religion.” This is in no way contradictory to Black Elk’s status as a Catholic and the rest of thesis will clarify this point.

64 Mails, Fools Crow, 45.
with the greatest colonial lens. They assume that the authentic Black Elk was successfully obscured and hidden from his own community, those who spoke his language, his own people the Lakota, and that his true beliefs were communicated to people with which he had short term relationships and who existed completely outside of his language and cultural matrix. Rice comments that, “the possibility that Black Elk could have distinctly remembered and perhaps wished to return to the spirituality he had exclusively lived until the age of thirty-seven is lost on these scholars.” Given the sources, Rice would have more accurately said that this possibility is lost on all the Lakota testimony of the period.

To re-read a contemporary position of a part of Lakota society back into history is bad scholarship. But to privilege the interpretations of cultural outsiders as more accurate and valuable than those living and creating the culture is anthropological discrimination. This completely disregards their communal memory, destroys the agency of Lakota, and borders on racism.

In conclusion, the testimony of traditional Lakota, exemplified by Fools Crow, has demonstrated that the assumptions of modern academics and secular American culture cannot be read back into Black Elk’s life. His life as a Catholic is as real as any other part of his life, and cannot be separated from his Lakota world. The “gap” between Native American culture and Christianity is not a part of Black Elk’s Lakota worldview but merely a reflection of modern academic bias.

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65 Ibid., 5. When told by his potential biographer that Black Elk had described his vision to Neihardt, "Fools Crow was stunned. He knew little if nothing about the content of the famous book."
67 Rice, Before the Great Spirit, 11. Rice appears to mean any scholar who takes Black Elk’s Catholicism seriously.
Chapter 4: Western Systemization and Lakota Agency

Remember the words you have said in making declarations. You speak the words but your lives are lives of the old way. Therefore my relatives unify yourselves. Perhaps you cannot 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. Thus we have three but really we have One – thus he who unifies himself will have victory. So it is; read carefully.1

Black Elk, Letter to Lakota Catholics, November 2, 1911.

In addition to contemporary Native American identity issues, modern conceptual categories of religion also provide reasons to distort and dismiss Black Elk’s Catholicism. Modern academics assume that Black Elk operated with the same conceptual categories as modern western philosophy, where the content of belief is ordered in logical systems. Lakota religion and Christianity are understood as systems, which are mutually exclusive and static. Julian Rice states that,

Though he spent many years after 1904 as a Catholic missionary, [the idea that Black Elk] made a complete transition to twentieth century Catholic consciousness is improbable. Habitual ways of thought would have had to be erased, not simply dismissed as a wrongful creed. Black Elk may not have wished to adopt any aspect of the white man’s culture.2

Rice understands religion as a static, monolithic system of beliefs that does not change or adapt. Catholicism is a generic, abstract, universal “consciousness” that is completely separate from Lakota religious tradition. In addition, Lakota religious belief and Christian belief cannot exist simultaneously. Acceptance of Christian truth claims erases Lakota cultural formation. Consequently, many modern academics view any evidence of Black Elk’s continuing Lakota religious expression or activity as proof that he cannot be Christian.

Anthropologist William K. Powers also uses the modern western definition of religion as an exclusive monolithic system.

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1 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 21.
How do we explain the tendency of native people to participate in two discrete religious systems? Do they in fact ‘adore’ two gods, one represented in the ritual paraphernalia of the Grandfathers, the other in the beaded chasuble, maniple, and stole of the priest? Are there in fact two separate sets of pantheons, cosmologies, and cosmogonies? Are the adepts, participants, or members living a religiously dualistic life; or do, in fact, the two religious systems represent for them two systems of quite different orders?  

In response to his own question, Powers answers that Lakota tradition and Christianity are “best explained as a coexistence of two disparate religious systems.” Because they compete for truth, the native participant cannot believe in both. Both systems compete for the allegiance of the Lakota, but do not overlap. However, one can participate in both, and Powers attempts to resolve this dilemma by focusing on the function of these distinct systems.

The native system satisfies needs we may call religious, in the sense that people require a belief in supraempirical beings and powers whom they call upon in culturally prescribed ways to address epistemological questions unanswerable by purely empirical means. Christianity represents a system that satisfies other kinds of exigencies, needs not normally associated with the supernatural, and provides an infrastructure upon which older, dysfunctional institutions may persist, clothed with the trappings of a new age.

According to Powers’ model, Lakota tradition and Christianity are separate systems that serve different purposes. Lakota tradition serves a religious function, and therefore may be “believed.” Christianity serves a social or economic function, but does not affect dual participants in the realm of “belief.” Lakota tradition survives by inhabiting an external and superficial Christian framework.

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2 Rice, Black Elk’s Story, 10.
4 Ibid., 123.
5 Ibid., 100.
6 Ibid., 123-124.
7 Powers also makes the modern Western assumption that “religious needs” encompasses only inquiry that cannot be answered by empirical needs.
While Western analytical thought may accept this understanding of religion as system, these conceptual categories are foreign to Black Elk. The Lakota culture in which Black Elk was socialized and lived was an oral culture. The work of Walter Ong, S.J. demonstrates that oral cultures have fundamentally different categories of conceptualization and organization of knowledge than literate cultures.

The type of analytical and philosophical categories that Rice and Powers use to structure and systematize knowledge are dependent on writing. In an oral culture, all knowledge must be conserved and passed on by the spoken word. Consequently, oral cultures cannot retain the necessary tools to build and maintain distinct systems of knowledge. Ong states that,

> Oral cultures must conceptualize and verbalize all their knowledge with more or less close reference to the human lifeworld, assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings.  

There can be little room for objective distance that allows the division of knowledge into abstract categories. Knowledge does not exist in separate systems as Powers and Rice propose, but in only one real world.

In oral cultures knowledge that is not often repeated aloud disappears. This fosters a conservative set of mind that tends to inhibit intellectual experimentation. Originality does not come from completely new systems of knowledge, but by incorporating new ideas into the established framework of knowledge. The old formulas and themes are made to interact with new and complicated situations, “but the formulas

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8 While I am restricting the argument to oral cultures, I find both Rice’s and Powers’ understanding of religion to be flawed for people of any culture. Post-modern philosophy has proposed much more holistic theories of epistemology.

and themes are reshuffled rather than supplanted with new materials.¹⁰ This process applies to all aspects of culture. Ong states that,

Religious practices, and with them cosmologies and deep-seated beliefs, also change in oral cultures. Disappointed with the practical results of the cult at a given shrine when cures there are infrequent, vigorous leaders... invent new shrines and with these new conceptual universes. Yet these new universes and the other changes that show a certain originality come into being in an essentially formulaic and thematic noetic economy. They are seldom if ever explicitly touted for their novelty but are presented as fitting the traditions of the ancestors.¹¹

According to Ong, oral cultures must change in order to respond to new challenges, but they must retain the traditional framework of knowledge in order to survive. Any new knowledge must be presented and understood within the traditional framework.

**Black Elk’s Conversion**

In the face of the testimony of the Lakota who universally attest to the sincerity of Black Elk’s conversion, academics categorically deny his conversion with positions exemplified by Rice and Powers. To re-iterate, Rice states that Black Elk’s conversion requires an erasure of his Lakota past. Powers maintains that Lakota tradition and Christianity are separate systems, and that Christianity does not serve a religious purpose. However, these understandings of Black Elk’s religiosity are reflections of modern academic assumptions, not the sources.

The sincerity of Black Elk’s conversion should not be measured by modern assumptions but by the categories of orality. According to orality, cultural innovation should be manifested in the same Lakota formulaic and thematic noetic ecomony. Knowledge is not organized in discreet systems, but reflects the one world that the people of oral cultures inhabit. Consequently, Black Elk’s conversion can be understood as the introduction of new Catholic knowledge within the traditional Lakota framework.

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¹⁰ Ibid.

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Black Elk’s conversion also has implications for Lakota culture. The new knowledge introduced in the traditional framework in turn affects the framework. Black Elk’s conversion must also be understood as a re-centering of the Lakota framework around the new Catholic knowledge. Nothing in Black Elk’s presentation of Lakota tradition should explicitly contradict the new center.

The sources demonstrate that Black Elk re-centered Lakota tradition in six major ways: the modification of the *yuwipi* ceremony, the rejection of violence, the reinterpretation of Lakota tradition as the Old Testament, the adoption of a universal emphasis of Lakota tradition, the re-interpretation of *Wakan Tanka* as the Christian God, and the acceptance of the Son of God.

*Yuwipi*

The *yuwipi* curing ceremony is the first area of Black Elk’s re-centering of Lakota tradition. The *yuwipi* was one aspect of Lakota culture that the Jesuits critiqued, mainly for the alleged duplicity of the healer. During the time of the official ban of Lakota religious ceremonies, the *yuwipi* became the most important ceremony on the Lakota reservations. During this period, Black Elk worked as a medicine man, and made a substantial living from performing the *yuwipi*.

Black Elk appears to have accepted the critique of the *yuwipi* ceremony. The story of his conversion focuses on his rejection of the *yuwipi* in favor of Catholicism. There is no evidence that he continued his *yuwipi* practice. While Black Elk performed many rituals while telling his vision, Neihardt’s daughter Hilda “recalled that her father repeatedly asked Black Elk to perform a *yuwipi* ceremony for him, but the old man

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11 Ibid.
steadfastly refused.”12 More importantly, Black Elk makes no mention of the yuwipi in The Sacred Pipe.

Lucy said her father did not talk about his medicine practice much, but she once asked him if he believed in the yuwipi:

No! That’s all nonsense – just like the magicians you have in the white people. It’s just like that. Praying with the pipe is more of a main thing... But this other one, yuwipi, it’s just like a magician trying to fool. I know because I’ve done it myself.13

According to Lucy, Black Elk claims that the ceremony is duplicitous, and claims that the pipe is the main focus of Lakota tradition.

Black Elk later allows an adapted healing ceremony to be performed. After he had a stroke near the end of his life, his cousin Little Warrior, who was Catholic, offered to do the wanagi wapiya [ghost ceremony of healing]. Lucy said Black Elk didn’t want to, but agreed to out of respect for her and Little Warrior. Little Warrior said: “[Yuwipi men] tell you to take down from the wall the holy pictures [of the Sacred Heart] and rosary. I say no. Those are the ones we are going to pray to... If you have a rosary, you’d better say it while I’m doctoring your father.”14 After the ceremony, Black Elk’s condition improved. This incident illustrates Black Elk’s and other Lakota Catholics’ re-formulation of Lakota tradition. Black Elk, Little Warrior and Lucy view the ceremony as being permissible only if Christ is center of the ceremony.

War and Peace

The second area of Black Elk’s re-interpretation of Lakota tradition is the de-emphasis of war. Black Elk’s interpretation of the Sun Dance illustrates this re-
formulation. Earlier accounts of the Sun Dance ascribe success in war as a primary motive for the Sun Dance.\textsuperscript{15}

Black Elk evacuates this focus on war. Holler states that unlike earlier accounts of the Lakota Sun Dance, Black Elk’s Sun Dance “is generally disassociated from war.”\textsuperscript{16} Black Elk never explicitly links the vow or purpose of the Sun Dance to success in war. The symbolism of the rabbit skin is re-interpreted. While Lakota holy man George Sword states that it is “an emblem of fleetness and endurance,” Black Elk interprets it as representing humility and meekness, which Holler states is “decidedly not the traditional virtues of the Lakota warrior.”\textsuperscript{17}

In addition, the symbolism of the black face paint is re-interpreted. Brown quotes Black Elk explaining that, “by going on the warpath, we know that we have done something bad, and we wish to hide our faces from Wakan-Tanka.”\textsuperscript{18} Unlike earlier Lakota tradition, success in war is negative and contrary to the will of Wakan-Tanka.

Black Elk’s most important critique of war is found in the account of his vision. In it he is given the soldier weed of destruction, which “could be used in war and could destroy a nation.”\textsuperscript{19} Black Elk describes a battle seen in his vision, where he hears rapid gunfire, women and children wailing, horses screaming in fear, and hollering for victory. Black Elk says,

\begin{quote}
I am glad I did not perform this killing, for I would have not only killed the enemy but I would probably have killed the women and children of the enemy, but I am satisfied that I have not been well off. Perhaps I would have been a chief if I had obeyed this, but I am satisfied that I didn’t become a chief. . .war itself is terrible.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{15} For a detailed history of the Sun Dance and its historical change see Holler’s \textit{Black Elk’s Religion}.
\textsuperscript{16} Holler, \textit{Black Elk’s Religion}, 149.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Joseph E. Brown, \textit{The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk’s Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux} (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 92.
\textsuperscript{19} DeMallie, \textit{The Sixth Grandfather}, 135.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 136.
Black Elk sacrifices the opportunity to obtain great power with soldier weed, because “war is terrible.” Shortly after, Neihardt comments in his notes that, “at the age of thirty-seven, Black Elk was to use this herb... at this time he gave it up for the Catholic religion.” Neihardt explicitly links the rejection of war and violence to Black Elk’s conversion. This statement is all the more significant as it is the only reference to Black Elk’s Catholic life in the transcripts.

In *The Sacred Pipe*, Black Elk explicitly links Christ to peace. According to Black Elk, “God sent men His son, who would restore order and peace upon the earth; and we have been told that Jesus the Christ was [his Son].” Black Elk re-centers Lakota tradition around Christ and his restoration of peace. The rejection of war, incorporation of peace, and modification of Lakota tradition demonstrate the processes of innovation within the traditional cultural framework described by Ong.

**Acceptance of Christian Claim of Universality**

In addition to accepting the Christian critique of war and violence, Black Elk re-interprets the object of Lakota ceremonial life. Ceremonies are no longer conducted primarily for personal power for war and survival of the tribe. Instead, they are performed for all nations and people. This modification is demonstrated in Black Elk’s interpretation of the Sun Dance. Holler develops this point by describing the Sun Dance:

> Although the theme of the survival of the people is attested to in the classic period, it is never interpreted as the reason for making a pledge. In the classic period, pledges are made primarily for success in war. Black Elk does not mention this benefit, or the

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21 Ibid., 137.

22 See Holler, Chapter 3: The Classic Sun Dance Remembered, 75-109, for description of the intent of “classic” Lakota religion.
acquisition of shamanic power by the individual pledger, the power acquired by the dance accruing instead to the people as a whole.23

The motivation for involvement in the Sun Dance changes from the acquisition of personal power to the survival of the people as a whole. What Holler does not make clear is that “people” for Black Elk’s is not restricted to the Lakota alone. In addition to the Lakota, Black Elk states that the sacred hoop of his vision is “the continents of the world and the people shall stand as one.”24

Black Elk’s universality is emphasized in his description of hanblecheyapi, or what is typically called the vision quest. He describes the lamenter as seeing the light of wisdom, for “it is Your [Wakan-Tanka’s] will that the peoples of the world do not live in the darkness of ignorance.”25 Wakan Tanka’s will is not for Lakota survival alone, but all peoples.

Fools Crow agrees with this universalist understanding of Black Elk. In his autobiography he says that, “Like myself, Black Elk prayed constantly that all people would live as one and would co-operate with one another. We have both loved the non-Indian races, and we do not turn our back on them to please those of our own people who do not agree.”26 According to Fools Crow, Black Elk extends the boundaries of Lakota tradition to embrace all peoples, regardless of other interpreters of Lakota traditions.

Black Elk’s elimination of the focus on war in Lakota tradition and the insertion of universality into the Lakota framework follows the description of orality provided by Ong. New thought is absorbed by the old culture, which in turn is reinterpreted to be in accord with the new thought.

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23 Holler, Black Elk’s Religion, 150.
24 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 139.
26 Mails, Fools Crow, 45.
Re-interpretation of Lakota Tradition as Old Testament

As we have seen so far, Black Elk eliminates aspects of Lakota tradition that are not consistent with the new center, Christ. In addition, Black Elk re-interprets his understanding of the entire Lakota tradition. He groups Lakota tradition in *The Sacred Pipe* into seven rites, equivalent to the organization of Catholic tradition into seven sacraments. Holler states that, “since there is no mention of a seven-rite Lakota ritual complex in the literature before *The Sacred Pipe*, Black Elk has clearly conformed traditional religion to the Catholic model for the purpose of comparing and equating the two.”

Black Elk makes a more explicit connection between Lakota and Catholic tradition. Lucy Looks Twice, says her father equates the Lakota to the Israelites:

> He and Father Buechel would talk. They talked about my father’s visions... and the Sun Dance, and all the Indian ceremonies that my father said were connected to Christianity. My father said we were like the Israelites, the Jews, waiting for Christ... They knew, somehow, that in the future our Lord Jesus Christ would come one day to his people... And they somehow already practiced it in the Sun Dance.

According to Lucy, Black Elk believes that the Lakota practiced Christianity in their ceremonies. Black Elk states in the interviews recorded in 1944 that, “the peace pipe was the Bible to our tribe.” Black Elk not only re-interpreted the present and future based on religious innovation, but also the past.

This theme is continued by Ben Marrowbone. Marrowbone was a highly respected reservation elder and one of leaders pressing claims to the U.S. government that the Black Hills should be returned to the Lakota. He also worked as a catechist when

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28 Ibid., 102.
29 DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 334.
Black Elk was still an active missionary. Marrowbone claims that Black Elk equates the Lakota framework with the Old Testament.

A heavenly woman once came and gave us a pipe. Every family had to keep a pipe of its own - use it every day, at night too. That woman gave it to us and told us to talk to the Almighty - pray for whatever we need - for rain or good crops. You didn’t have to see any great vision. The almighty hears. Take this pipe. Pray that he hears you. That’s what the holy woman said. That kind of order was given to our grandfathers. So they followed.

Before he converted, Nick Black Elk talked to Almighty God with that pipe. He learned that same god talked to white people. That’s why those catechists believed in the Catholic church. Nobody said: “Oh, you fool you!” No. That’s the great Almighty you are respecting and honoring - in a new way. And just as we were brought the sacred pipe, we now had the sacred bread [i.e. the Eucharist] from heaven.

Nick Black Elk used to use that pipe in his wapiya [curing ceremony], and he believed in it. At that time there weren’t any doctors, so different ceremonies were used for healing. So I think Black Elk worked according to the Almighty. These old people used the pipe and prayed to one Spirit. That was their foundation. That’s what he said.

The catechists would get together, have meetings, encourage each other - show interest in one another. At one such gathering, Nick Black Elk stood up and said: “Yuwipi come from Santee. We have a pipe here. We use that. God gave us that pipe from heaven through a woman. Two young men met her while out hunting. One had bad thoughts about her and was punished. But the other one was a good man. She told him, “I want to explain to the Lakota people how to pray.” She brought that pipe and gave it to an old man - a good man with a good conscience.

That pipe - it’s a road to take - a road of honesty - a road to heaven. It teaches how to lead a good life, like the Ten Commandments. They understood what that woman was saying, and that worship was my formation - my foundation. But my foundation is deepening.

God made me to know him, love him, serve him. To make sure I do this, God sent us his Son. The Old way is good. God prepared us before the missionary came. Our ancestors used the pipe to know God. That’s a foundation! But from the old country came Christ from heaven - a wonderful thing - the Son of God. And the Indian cares about this.

According to Marrowbone, Black Elk understood Lakota tradition, the Pipe, to be good and foundational. Christ is for the Lakota, and to accept Christianity does not erase the foundation or exist separately. Christ is incorporated into Lakota tradition and deepens the foundation.

This clearly follows the categories of oral cultures described by Ong. Cultural innovation (Christ) is incorporated into the old noetic framework (Lakota tradition), and the old framework is interpreted in light of innovation.

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30 Ibid., 52.
Wakan Tanka as the Christian God, the Son of God

Black Elk also modifies the understanding of Wakan Tanka and makes it the center of Lakota tradition. While it is unclear today what the exact nature of Lakota tradition was before contact with Christianity, it is generally agreed upon that it was not monotheistic. Both DeMallie and Lavenda as well as Powers agree that Wakan Tanka “is a single term that refers to sixteen aspects, all of which are related to each other in a special way.” Rice states that DeMallie and Powers agree that Wakan Tanka is an impersonal “animating force” as well as an impersonal creator. Rice also states that Sioux narrators shared “the tolerance of diverse spiritual thought without universal reverence for any one divinity.” Rice refers to Good Seat, born in 1827 and one of oldest Lakota interviewed by James R. Walker as a typical early Lakota understanding: “The white men have made [the Lakota] forget that which their fathers told them…In old times the Indians did not know of a Great Spirit…There is no Nagi Tanka [Great Spirit].”

Because there was no central figure, Lakota tradition employed a great diversity in ritual supplication. Rice writes that “Since there was no consensus of devotion to a single Wakan Tanka (God), adherents of competing spirits like Wakinyan and Unktehi felt no obligation to pray to each other’s several wakan tanka (great spirits).” According to Rice, Lakota tradition did not recognize a single all-powerful god or practice a uniform worship to the same deities.

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31 Steltenkamp, Holy Man of the Oglala, 104-105.
33 Rice, Before the Great Spirit, 152.
34 Ibid., 13.
36 Ibid., 33.
In contrast to earlier Lakota tradition, Black Elk re-interprets the Lakota pantheon and focuses it on a unified *Wakan Tanka*. In the introduction of *The Sacred Pipe*, he declares:

We have been told by the white men, or at least by those who are Christian, that God sent men His son, who would restore order and peace upon the earth; and we have been told that Jesus the Christ was, but that he shall come again at the Last Judgement, the end of this world or cycle. This I understand and know that it is true, but the white men should know that for the red people too, it was the will of *Wankan-Tanka*, the Great Spirit, that an animal turn itself into a two-legged person in order to bring the most holy pipe to His people; and we too were taught that this White Buffalo Cow Woman who brought our sacred pipe will appear again at the end of this “world,” a coming which we Indians know is now not very far off. . . It is my prayer . . .that through this book . . . [the white men] will realize that we Indians know the One true God, and that we pray to Him continually. . . [and] to help my people understand the greatness and truth of our own tradition.\(^{35}\)

Before starting what is understood as an exclusive discussion of Lakota religion, Black Elk makes two innovative claims. First, he explicitly states his belief in Jesus Christ, which he “understand[s] and know[s] that it is true.” Secondly, he directly equates *Wakan Tanka* with the Christian God, which the Lakota “know as the One true God.”

Black Elk consistently describes *Wakan Tanka* as one united being: “Give us the knowledge to understand that they [powers of the universe] are all really one Power.”\(^{38}\)

According to Raymond DeMallie, this association of a unified *Wakan Tanka* has “no parallel in recorded Lakota religious tradition.”\(^{39}\) Black Elk has actively transformed Lakota tradition and united the Lakota pantheon.

Throughout *The Sacred Pipe*, Black Elk also consistently refers to *Wakan Tanka* and his action with Christian metaphors.

As the flames of the sun come to us in the morning, so comes the grace of *Wankan-Tanka*, by which all creatures are enlightened(71). . . It is You who have placed us upon this island; we are the last to be created by You who are first and who always have been. . . remembering the goodness of *Wankan Tanka*, and how it was He made all things(35). . .

\(^{37}\) Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, XX.  
\(^{38}\) Ibid., 37. This last description is almost identical to the Baltimore Catechism.  
\(^{39}\) DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather* 91.
When we do understand all this deeply in our hearts, then we will, fear, and love, and know the Great Spirit, and then we will be and act and live as He intends.\(^{40}\)

*Wakan Tanka* acts within the Lakota story and history, but the language Black Elk uses to describe *Wakan Tanka* is Christian. God creates all, enlightens humanity, is good, eternal, and worthy of our knowledge, fear, and love.

Black Elk’s understanding of divinity has been transformed. Not only does Black Elk unify the previously multifaceted *Wakan Tanka* to one divine being, but he explicitly equates Him to the Christian God. *Wakan Tanka* and God is the same being.

Black Elk also reinterprets his Messiah vision during the Ghost Dance as Christ.

I saw twelve men coming toward me and they stood before me and said: “Our Father, the two legged chief, you shall see.” Then I went to the center of the circle with these men and there again I saw the tree in full bloom. Against the tree I saw a man standing with outstretched arms. As we stood close to him these twelve me said: “Behold him!” 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. He had long hair which was hanging down loose. On the left side of his head was an eagle feather. His body was painted red. (At that time I had never had anything to do with the white man’s religion and I had never seen any picture of Christ.)

This man said to me: “My life is such that all earthly beings that grow belong to me. My father has said this. You must say this.” I stood there gazing at him and tried to recognize him. I could not make him out. He was a nice-looking man. As I looked at him, his body began to transform. His body changed into all colors and it was very beautiful. All around him there was light. Then he disappeared all at once. It seemed as though there were wounds in the palms of his hands.\(^{41}\)

Later in the interview, Black Elk tells Neihardt, “It seems to me on thinking it over that I have seen the son of the Great Spirit himself.”\(^{42}\) Black Elk’s Christian life provides the context to re-interpret this vision as a vision of Christ.

Again we see Black Elk’s innovations inserted into Lakota tradition. Black Elk does not hold the belief in one God and the Son of God over and against Lakota tradition, but in continuity with Ong’s description of orality, Black Elk makes them part of Lakota tradition.

\(^{40}\) Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, xx.

\(^{41}\) DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather* 263.
The Black Elk Tradition Embodied by Fools Crow

Black Elk’s reformulation of Lakota tradition is not only demonstrated in his interviews and recollections of family and contemporaries; they survive in Lakota religious tradition. Fools Crow exemplifies this influence. Black Elk is Fools Crow’s uncle and served as one of Fools Crow’s mentors in becoming a holy man. Holler claims that Fools Crow is the most influential interpreter of the Black Elk tradition. Fools Crow describes his relationship with Black Elk:

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

Fools Crow identifies Black Elk as a mentor who greatly influenced his understanding of Wakan Tanka. Fools Crow’s interpretation embodies the innovations Black Elk made to Lakota tradition. Like Black Elk, he rejects violence and war. Fools Crow cites violent tactics as the reason why traditionalists withdrew their support from AIM. Even the corrupt tribal president knows that “traditionalists do not resort to violence.” War is not emphasized in Fools Crow’s Sun Dance.

Fools Crow accepts the communal focus of the Sun Dance. It is not only the pledgers who participate and benefit, but “everyone is profoundly involved, and because

42 Ibid., 266.
43 Holler, Black Elk’s Religion, 164.
44 Mails, Fools Crow, 53.
of this the Sioux nation and all of the peoples of the world are blessed by \textit{Wakan Tanka}.\textsuperscript{47} The efficacy of the Sun Dance affects the whole world.

Fools Crow also interprets \textit{Wakan-Tanka} as the Christian God.

The primary source of power called upon in the Sun Dance is the same God that Christians worship, and it is not without consequence that the men who lead and pledge in the dances often claim to be both traditionalist and Christian. Fools Crow, whose memory takes him as far back as 1897, declares that his people have always believed in a Supreme Being who is identical with the God of the Bible.\textsuperscript{48}

In the words of Fools Crow, “There is only one true God, and we Sioux have believed this for as far back in time as we can remember,”\textsuperscript{49} and even compares the Lakota understanding of divinity to the Trinity.\textsuperscript{50} Throughout his autobiography, God is used interchangeably with \textit{Wakan-Tanka}.

These innovations are not unique to Fools Crow. Stephen Feraca, writing in 1963, reports that Gilbert Bad Wound considers the Sun Dance a Christian ceremony. Feraca states that “he is by no means alone in this belief.”\textsuperscript{51}


\textsuperscript{45} The only difference between Black Elk’s and Fools Crow’s interpretation of Lakota tradition is the \textit{yuwipi}. Black Elk completely rejected the \textit{yuwipi} while Fools Crow continued to practice it. This discrepancy may have a number of roots. The first is the difference in commitment to Catholic life. Both were sincere, but Black Elk spent over two decades as a leader of the Lakota Catholic Church. Fools Crow never occupied a leadership position. Even though Black Elk rejected the \textit{yuwipi}, he allowed a modified healing ceremony to be conducted on him. Thus, a hard distinction between Black Elk’s and Fools Crow’s interpretation of the \textit{yuwipi} should be avoided.

\textsuperscript{46} Mails, \textit{Fools Crow}, 216.
\textsuperscript{47} Mails, \textit{Sun Dance}, 44.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 193.
\textsuperscript{49} Mails, \textit{Fools Crow}, 119.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 120.
\textsuperscript{51} Holler, \textit{Black Elk’s Religion}, 154.
God in both the non-Indian and Indian ways, because we pray to one and the same God."  

Re-telling the Story: Black Elk’s Agency

The five areas of religious change in Black Elk’s thought – the *yuwipi*, war and peace, universality, Lakota tradition as Old Testament, *Wakan Tanka* as the Christian God and the Son of God – all demonstrate the same pattern of change in an oral culture described by Ong. First, Black Elk incorporated new religious thought into the Lakota framework. Second, Black Elk reinterpreted Lakota framework in light of the new thought, so as to avoid contradiction and unify the new worldview. The third, and most important aspect, is that Black Elk retained the Lakota framework. Innovation does not erase the Lakota world it now inhabits.

Black Elk’s incorporation of religious innovation into Lakota tradition is nothing new or contradictory to Lakota tradition. Lakota plains culture itself was a recent development, as the Dakota fanned out from woodlands and took up the horse to follow the buffalo on the western plains. According to Steltenkamp, “Demographic convulsions of the frontier era created for Plains groups a kind of utilitarian behavioral mode whereby expedience vied equally with convention.” The creation of the Lakota plains tradition is a product of innovation and re-interpretation.

Consequently, Lakota tradition was a changing, evolving body of thought and practice. It was never codified in the way that Christianity has been in the Roman Catholic tradition. The Lakota modified and transformed ceremonies to deal with new

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52 Mails, *Sun Dance*, 152.
problems that the Lakota people encountered. These new problems demanded new answers from holy men. DeMallie explains the role of the holy man in this process:

The holy man has a ‘vision’ of the world – its nature, its history and its destiny – and a sense of humanity’s place within that scheme. Through that vision, the holy man can hope to solve problems for which the tradition offers no ready-made solutions. The *wicasa wakan* is then the theoretician - the theologian - of the Plains religion.54

Thus, agency to enact change, innovation and re-interpretation is the central virtue embodied by the holy man.

Black Elk was explicitly aware of the historical nature of this dynamic process of Lakota change. In *The Sacred Pipe*, Black Elk describes the process of Lakota religious adaptation. *Hunkapi*, or the making of relatives, originated with the Lakota, Matohoshila, who received a vision from *Wakan Tanka*.55 Through the co-operation of the Ree tribe, a traditional enemy with an agricultural economy, a new rite using corn is established to make peace between nations.56 New religious power is actively incorporated using the symbol of another nation.

Black Elk not only reported this change, he also participated as an active agent. After returning from Europe, he heard the stories of the Ghost Dance Messiah, Wovoka. After resisting for a while, he cautiously investigated. Black Elk told Neihardt that he, “wanted to see this man personally and find out.”57 He later went to investigate and watch the dancing. After a period of deliberation, he receives a vision, and joins the Ghost dancers.

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54 Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 181. DeMallie elaborates on the role of the holy man in Lakota religion: “In Lakota culture, the quest for knowledge of the *wakan* was largely a personal enterprise, and it was predominately the work of men... there was no standard theology, no dogmatic body of belief. Fundamental concepts were universally shared, but specific knowledge of the *wakan* beings was not shared beyond a small number of holy men. Through individual experience, every man had the opportunity to contribute to and resynthesize the general body of knowledge that constituted Lakota religion.” DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 82.


56 Ibid., 102-103.
Black Elk follows this model of religious investigation and change with Christianity. After the Lakota first settle on the reservation, Black Elk decides to join Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. He states that he wanted to see the white man’s ways and “if the white man’s ways were better, why I would like to see my people live that way.”

Writing two months after returning from Europe, Black Elk articulates the result of his investigation into the white man’s customs.

So thus all along, of the white man’s customs, only his faith, the white man’s beliefs about God’s will, and how they act according to it, I wanted to understand. I traveled to one city after another, and there were many customs around God’s will. “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing”[1 Cor. 13].

So Lakota people, trust in God! Now all along I trust in God. I work honestly and it is good; I hope the people will do likewise. . . Across the big ocean is where they killed Jesus; again I wished to see it but it was four days on the ocean and there was no railroad. . .[It would require] much money for me to be able to go over there to tell about it myself.”

Black Elk’s quote of Scripture indicates that he actively investigated Christian thought. His desire to see the Holy Land in order “to tell about it” himself is equivalent to his investigation of Wovoka, the Ghost Dance Messiah, that he later joins. Black Elk incorporated innovation into the one life that he lived.

**Responding to Rice and Powers**

Rice states that Black Elk’s conversion requires an erasure of his Lakota past. However, with the categories of orality, I have shown that instead Black Elk reformulated Lakota tradition around the innovation, Christ. Black Elk makes this explicitly clear during his discussion of his investigation into the white world. He concludes that the white man’s beliefs about God’s will are the only customs worthy of understanding. The

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57 DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather* 257.
58 Ibid., 245.
59 Ibid., 10.
claim that, “Black Elk may not have wished to adopt any aspect of the white man’s
culture,”60 is accurate other than the acceptance of Christ. There is no danger of Rice’s
claim that “habitual ways of thought would have had to be erased,”61 because that is not
the result of theological innovation. There is no wholesale adoption or acceptance of the
white world, or separation from the Lakota story. Black Elk was no passive subject
rejecting or erasing his past.

The sources show that Powers’ claim that Lakota tradition and Christianity are
separate systems is not tenable either. Black Elk re-interpreted major areas of Lakota
tradition in light of Christian truth claims, and Powers himself admits that Christianity
was actively modified by Lakota participants according to Lakota tradition.

While Christianity and Lakota tradition continue to exist as separate organizations
on the reservation, this is a sociological division.62 In the world of the believer,
especially in an oral culture, there cannot be two distinct systems, but only one world.
Fools Crow comments “I never talked about the Pipe to a Catholic priest in the early
days, but I brought the two religions together on my own.”63 The sources demonstrate
that Black Elk did exactly that, and clearly brought the two traditions together, despite
external resistance.

Powers’ other claim, that Christianity does not serve a “religious purpose,” is
obviously disproved as well by Black Elk’s own testimony. The understanding of
divinity and the acceptance of universality are central religious themes. Powers himself
admits that, “both the notion of a Supreme God and Son of God are foreign to original

60 Rice, Black Elk’s Story, 10.
61 Ibid., 10.
62 This will be discussed in Chapter 7.
63 Steinmetz, Pipe, Bible, and Peyote among the Oglala Lakota, 191.
Lakota belief.⁶⁴ Yet the testimony of Black Elk, Fools Crow and all that follow this tradition makes clear that these concepts are no longer foreign, but part of the Lakota tradition. Thus, Christian concepts do serve a central religious function.

So rather than starting with modern Western philosophical assumptions and viewing Black Elk’s conversion in opposition to Lakota tradition, Black Elk forces us to see his conversion in continuity with Lakota tradition. The categories of primary orality, Lakota tradition, the role of the wicasa wakan, Black Elk’s understanding of Lakota tradition and the Black Elk’s history of active investigation and incorporation of new religious power all demonstrate that the reformulation of Lakota tradition is only the expected result of economic and demographic change. It is also the only expected results of conversion to Christianity. Christian belief is not a thin illusion of insincere necessity that hides a pure Lakota tradition. Rather, Black Elk incorporates Christian thought into the Lakota framework. To deny this imposes foreign categories on the sources. More importantly, it denies the agency of the Lakota to both live according to their own cultural standards and their agency to confront a changing world.

⁶⁴ William K. Powers, Sacred Language, 118.
Chapter Five: Biblical Imagery in Black Elk’s Vision

And so I say to you, you are Inyan, and upon this rock I will build my church.

James, son of Zebedee, and John the brother of James, whom he named Boanerges, that is, sons of Wakinyan.¹

At the age of nine years, Black Elk had a vision of the six grandfathers. They called the young Lakota boy to “create a nation” and lead his people down the red road into the sacred hoop. Black Elk would be an intercessor for his people and make the sacred tree bloom with the power given to him by the six grandfathers. This vision dominated the rest of Black Elk’s life as he strove to fulfill the call of the six grandfathers.

Academics usually portray Black Elk’s vision as a pure, pre-contact view of Lakota tradition. In addition, they often assume that Black Elk’s conversion to Catholicism was a turning away from the six grandfather’s call. Raymond DeMallie states that, “by accepting Catholicism he at last put himself beyond the onerous obligation of his vision.”² Julian Rice claims that the, “largely ‘pure’ Lakota content of [the Neihardt] interviews may express a desire to wholeheartedly return to traditional religion.”³ Thus, for many academics, Black Elk’s vision represents the antithesis of his life as a Catholic.

¹ Matt 16:18, Mark 3:17. All English biblical citations are taken from the New American Bible. Inyan is rock and wakinyan is thunder that the Riggs Dakota Bible uses in these passages. Dakota Wowapi Wakan: The Holy Bible in the Language of the Dakotas, translated by Tomas S. Williamson and Stephen R. Riggs (New York: American Bible Society, 1880). See note 25 for an explanation of the Riggs Dakota Bible and the significance of the translation. I am indebted to Jan Ullrich, a Lakota linguist, Ph.D. candidate at the University of Indiana, and employee of the American Indian Revitalization Project for assistance with my research. Ullrich provided all of the biblical translations as well as invaluable insight into Lakota culture. He is currently translating Buechel’s Bible History as well as textbooks to teach the Lakota language. His work can be found at: http://www.inext.cz/siouan/
² DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 14.
³ Rice, Before the Great Spirit, 14.
However, this interpretation is challenged by those closest to Black Elk. Black Elk’s daughter, Lucy, states the exact opposite: she maintains that the central symbol of Black Elk’s great vision, the sacred tree, is in fact a Christian symbol.

The Great Spirit has promised one day that the tree of my father’s vision was to root, grow, and blossom – to give out its flourishing sweet scent for everyone, and become a symbol of life. I know this. He meant it’s like the Catholic faith. Our Lord told St. Peter to establish the religion just like that. The Great Spirit gave the Sioux people a knowledge of Christianity through the sacred pipe. But this tree would grow and spread out strong, flowing branches. He had that vision and learned the tree was to be the Christian life of all people.⁴

This chapter will expand Lucy’s claim that the sacred tree is a Christian symbol to make this claim categorical for all the imagery of Black Elk’s great vision. I will do this for two reasons. First, the vision occupies the central role of Black Elk’s narrative and has greatly influenced Lakota culture, Native American cultural revival, American culture, and Native American and Religious studies. Second, most scholars have interpreted it as the antithesis of Black Elk’s Catholicism. Raymond DeMallie, Julian Rice, Clyde Holler, virtually every scholar who writes in the fields of Native American studies, American history, literature, religion, and even the Catholic historian Christopher Vecsey assume that Black Elk’s vision is completely separate from Black Elk’s Catholic life.⁵

Against these interpretations I will first attempt to demonstrate the strong correlation between the language and imagery of Black Elk’s vision and the biblical narrative. After presenting the correlation, I will defend Lucy’s claim and demonstrate

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⁵ DeMallie does nuance this position and describes how Catholicism influence Black Elk’s account of his vision: “there is nothing in Black Elk’s great vision that is foreign to Lakota culture...It is unquestionably reasonable to assert that Black Elk’s teachings represent to a great extent traditional Lakota belief and ritual. But it would not be reasonable to assume that Black Elk’s long active involvement with Roman Catholicism did not influence the way he spoke about traditional religion.” For DeMallie, Catholic influence remains mostly on the level of speech and not content. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 88, 89.
that the vision itself is a Christian narrative due to its strong correlation with biblical imagery.

I will use the rest of the Black Elk corpus - Neihardt's notes, The Sacred Pipe, and Black Elk's letters - to provide greater depth for the symbols of Black Elk's vision. I will compare his discourse to the Dakota Rigg's Bible, which according to Lakota linguist and ethnographer Jan Ullrich, is the biblical text that Black Elk used. I will use other Lakota sources that ascribe similar Christian interpretations to Black Elk or that make similar Christian interpretations independently of Black Elk as evidence. In the end, I argue, that we find Black Elk's vision not to be a "pure" Lakota remnant but rather a Lakota-Catholic narrative of salvation history.

**Multiple Source Evidence of Biblical Themes in the Black Elk Sources**

To argue that Black Elk's vision ought rightly be understood as a Lakota-Catholic narrative challenges most interpretations of Black Elk's corpus. Despite the presence of biblical references at central points of Black Elk's Lakota works, many scholars quickly dismiss their relevance. For unspecified reasons, DeMallie for example assumes that, "such expressions as phrases from the Bible... are readily transparent and not especially

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Michael Steltenkamp is the one notable exception in Black Elk scholarship and claims that Black Elk's vision is based on Catholic content. See below for a discussion of his assertion.

6 In response to my question "Why you are so certain that Black Elk had access to the Riggs Bible?" Jan Ullrich replied in an informal communication: "I have NO DOUBT about it. Riggs's Bible was widely used by all Christian Dakota and Lakota, because there weren't any other biblical texts in dialects of Sioux available until Buechel's Bible History. And that wasn't published until 1924. Black Elk became Catholic in 1904 and soon after that (sometime around 1906) the missionaries appointed him to the position of catechist, because he was extremely familiar with the content of the Bible. He could not speak English, so the only source he could learn from was the Riggs's Dakota Bible. The Dakota and Lakota dialects are perfectly mutually intelligible. Another piece of evidence is Black Elk's vision...by 1917 Black Elk was practically blind so even if he knew how to read, he was not able to read Buechel's Bible History published seven years later. Although he might have had some of his children to read from Buechel's Bible History for him, most of his biblical knowledge must have originated earlier, perhaps in the period of 1904 to 1917. And this means that his source was Riggs!" DeMallie also states that Black Elk used the Rigg's Bible in a letter written about his trip to Europe in 1889. See DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 11n. Also, Buechel's
significant.” However, I will argue that multiple occurrences of the same biblical reference are not incidental but demonstrate the centrality that Catholicism plays in Black Elk’s world. To do so, we must first understand Black Elk’s relationship to the Christian scripture, and second we would need to see similar integration of Lakota and biblical language and images more broadly in his discourse. In this section, I will briefly demonstrate both of these claims.

What, then, was Black Elk’s relationship to the biblical text? First, according to the testimony of his community, Black Elk was known for his knowledge of Christian scripture; he knew the biblical texts very well. His daughter Lucy states that Black Elk, “had poor eyesight, but he learned to read Scripture and prayer books written in the Indian language.” According to Lucy, he was quite proficient: “everything in the Scriptures he understood.” John Lone Goose remembers Black Elk’s dedication to study:

Nick said he wanted to teach God’s word to the people. So he kept on learning, learning, learning. Pretty soon, he learned what the Bible meant, and it was good...All he talked about was the Bible and Christ.

Missionaries also recorded Black Elk’s skill. His companion Father Westropp wrote before 1916 that, “though half blind, [Black Elk] has by some hook or crook learned how to read, and he knows his religion thoroughly.”

Black Elk used this textual knowledge in a particular way. It was his practice to relate scripture to the Lakota experience. Lucy remembers that,

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7 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 89.
8 Ibid., 56.
9 Ibid., 63.
10 Ibid., 54.
11 Ibid., 65.
He related Scripture passages to things around him, and he used examples from nature – making comparison of things in the Bible with flowers, animals, even trees. And when he talked to us about things in creation, he brought up stories in the Bible. That’s why he was a pretty strong Catholic – by reading the Bible.\footnote{Ibid., 47.}

According to Lucy, the Bible was not abstract or separate from Black Elk’s everyday experience. Rather, he connected scripture to the world around him, especially the natural world. In addition, discussions about creation led to connections with biblical tradition.

Finally, Black Elk was known for his ability to accurately remember specific details from scripture. In discussing Black Elk, Pat Red Elk emphasizes the ability of the early converts to remember and quote the Bible.

Even though they didn’t have any formal education, those old converts were really trained to preach. They’d say that Saint John says this here and there, and when I’d get the Bible and read it – they were right! That’s what was written. I read Scripture, but I can’t remember the right words like they used to be able to do.\footnote{Ibid., 120.}

Black Elk not only referred to general ideas or images from the Bible, but he also wove scriptural passages into his speeches and writings.

Such direct biblical references are present in all the known writings attributed to Black Elk. In a letter from Europe, he quotes a passage from 1 Corinthians. His Catholic letters frequently make scriptural allusions. Black Elk’s interviews with Neihardt and \textit{The Sacred Pipe} likewise contain biblical allusions. Relating his vision with the old men and his calling to “help mankind,” Black Elk states that, “many are called, few are chosen,” which is a quotation of Matthew 22:14.

A biblical theme found in diverse Black Elk sources is “love your neighbor.”\footnote{Lv 19:18, Dt 6:5, 10:12, Jos 22:5, Mt 19:19, 22:37-39, Lk 10:27, Rom 13:9, Gal 5:14, Jas 2:8.} 

During the 1944 interviews, Black Elk describes a talk given during the mourning period
after a death. The people are reminded to “love your neighbors.” He also uses this language to describe the defeat of the Lakota in the 1931 interviews. “Here’s where the Indians made their mistake. We should treat our fellowmen 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.” Black Elk takes up this theme in a letter written to the Lakota Catholic community published in Sinasapa Wocekiye Taeyanpaha. Black Elk writes:

In the Bible, Jesus told us that “You should love your neighbor as you love Me.” So remember if you get in trouble with your neighbor, remember that God has said, “Love your neighbor.” So whatever you have said or if you have done some bad thing to them, go over there and please tell them you are sorry.

Black Elk did not only preach this theme to the Lakota community. We also see him using this Scriptural passage to challenge American colonialism. Lucy remembers Black Elk using this theme to preach to whites about the guilt of their participation in colonialism on a trip east with some missionaries:

At one place he said he was up there talking and saying to the audience: ‘You white people, you come to our country. You came to this country, which was ours in the first place. We were the only inhabitants. After we listened to you, we got settled down. But you’re not doing what you’re supposed to do – what our religion and our Bible tells us. I know this. Christ himself preached that we love our neighbors as ourself. Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.’ At that early time, he said those words. He told us that when he was finished speaking, everybody clapped.

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15 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 382.
16 Ibid., 290. While Black Elk’s statement may seem to be a negative judgment against this Christian teaching, it must be read in context. On the preceding page Black Elk clearly states his faith in the Great Spirit and his just judgment. “Now, when I look ahead, we are nothing but prisoners of war, but the Great Spirit has protected us so far, and this Great Spirit takes care of us. . . it is up to the Great Spirit to look upon the white man and they will be sorry and this great thing that happens might be just among themselves.” See also page 127.
17 Black Elk, Letter to friends and relatives and the Lakota Catholic community, no date, published in Sinasapa Wocekiye Taeyanpaha, date unknown, ca. 1907-1908. Translated from Lakota to English under Michael F. Steltenkamp, S.J., in Ivan M. Timonin, Black Elk’s Synthesis: Catholic theology and Oglala Tradition in The Sacred Pipe, Dissertation Proposal. Accessed approximately 11/1/02 from http://www.ustpaul.ca/. See also Matthew 5:23-24: “Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, do first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”
According to Lucy, Black Elk chose the theme “love your neighbor as yourself” to challenge American colonialism. Black Elk’s use of biblical language for postcolonial resistance will be further examined in Chapter eight.

In summary, we find the biblical theme “love your neighbor” in four of the Black Elk sources, three of which scholars usually interpret as having no relation to his life as a Catholic. The diversity and number of sources, as well as its use to discuss key topics (colonialism), suggests that if we re-examine these sources we will find that scriptural themes and passages permeate all aspects of Black Elk’s life and discourse.

 Indeed, this use of Christian Scripture is not unique or sporadic. In *The Sacred Pipe*, Black Elk describes a prayer during the *inipi* (sweat lodge), in which he supplicates, “may we be as children newly born! May we live again, O Wakan-Tanka!” He also describes how often little children poke their heads inside the sweat lodge. Black Elk makes clear that, “we do not chase them away, for we know that little children already have pure hearts.” This easily overlooked passage is in fact a reference to Matthew 18:3.

Lucy states that Black Elk always taught Matthew 18:3. “When [my father] taught, he said, ‘Unless we become as children, become like those little children; -he would point at some- ‘we cannot enter the Kingdom’[Matt. 18:3]. This was his main topic.” In Luke’s version of the story, the disciples chasing away those who brought children to Jesus precede this teaching. The language of Black Elk’s *inipi* prayer and the Dakota Bible are identical as both use the phrase as “new born children.”

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20 Ibid., 43.
In Black Elk’s inipi prayer, he uses the same phrase, “newborn babies” and assures the listener that he, unlike the disciples, does not turn away the children because like Christ he knows they have pure hearts. This phrase demonstrates a three-source correlation: Lucy describes one of Black Elk’s favorite teachings; it is present in a source attributed to Black Elk; and it is present in that source using the same language as the Dakota Bible.

An important example of a Christian reference that Black Elk uses intentionally in his discourse to convey meaning is found in the 1944 interviews with Neihardt. In discussing the origins of the Lakota, Black Elk states that, “the Indian, if we came from Asia, we should have iron, because Christ was nailed on the cross with iron nails. I just cannot believe we came from Asia.”24 What may seem like a tangential or “transparent” remark rather emphasizes what Black Elk holds to be true. He uses the Christian story as a frame of reference by which other truth claims are measured. Native Americans cannot come from Asia, because the truth of the Christian story cannot be contradicted. Black Elk measures the origin of the Lakota against the centrality of Christ.

Black Elk’s understanding of symbols and language reinforces the significance of biblical language. In describing the details of the Sun Dance, Black Elk states, “you see, there is a significance for everything, and these are the things that are good for men

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23 Matthew 18:3. All of the Dakota biblical texts are taken from the Dakota Riggs Bible and translated by Jan Ullrich. The English text given with the Dakota text is the King James Version.

24 Ibid., 318.
to know, and to remember.”25 Black Elk carefully chose what to an outsider might seem trivial or insignificant details to shape his discourse. It would be inconsistent to view biblical references as accidental or foreign since, as we saw in chapter four, Black Elk lived in one Lakota Catholic world. Consequently, I will view biblical allusions, especially at focal points in the text, as an intentional and significant mode of meaning.

Black Elk’s Great Vision

Now that we have clarified Black Elk’s intimate knowledge of Christian scripture and demonstrated its integration in Black Elk’s discourse, I will examine Black Elk’s vision of the six grandfathers for a similar integration of biblical imagery. First, I will demonstrate that there exists a strong correlation with the vision and biblical tradition. Second, I will argue that taken as a whole the vision is a Lakota-Catholic narrative of salvation history.26

Black Elk is Taken Up Into the Clouds

The vision begins when the nine-year old Black Elk falls ill and is laying in his tipi. Two men descend from the sky and say, “Hurry up, your grandfather is calling you.” Black Elk gets up to follow them.

Just as I got out of the tipi I could see the two men going back into the clouds and there was a small cloud coming down toward me at the same time, which stood before me. I got on top of the cloud and was raised up, following the two men.27

The beginning of the vision is similar in structure to Acts 1:9-11.

When [Jesus] had said this, as [the disciples] were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight. While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going, suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven.”28

25 Brown, The Sacred Pipe, 80, emphasis mine.
26 The headings for the different events and symbols from Black Elk’s vision will be italicized.
27 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 114.
Jesus ascends to the clouds, and as the apostles watch the clouds, two men appear and address them. One could imagine a continuation of the story where two men bring a believer to the clouds on the same cloud that “took” Jesus. Christians are urged to expect this. Paul writes in his first letter to the Thessalonians:

Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Thus we shall always be with the Lord.29

According to Paul, believers will be brought to the clouds where they will meet the Lord.

In addition, many biblical call stories include an ascension to the heavens or clouds. In the Revelation, John is called to Heaven to be shown what will happen.

After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."30

A significant point is the translation for Heaven. The Dakota word used is mahpiya, which translates as sky or clouds. Black Elk hears in this passage that John is taken up to the clouds to see Wakan-Tanka. A supporting detail is the translation for angels - mahpiya onihde - cloud messengers.31

Following this trend, the Kingdom of Heaven, an important theme of the gospels, was translated “Kingdom of mahpiya.” The Kingdom of the clouds was a subject in Black Elk’s Catholic teaching. As we saw in the first section, Matt 18:3 was one of Black Elk’s favorite teachings, which says that unless one becomes like a newborn baby, one will not enter the Kingdom of mahpiya. In one of his Catholic letters, Black Elk urges Lakota Catholics to, “Always look towards heaven and prepare yourselves. God has promised the Kingdom of Heaven for us. When we die, if we have faith in God, the

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29 1 Thes 4:17.
31 See Rev 8:3-4, Jan Ullrich, personal communication.
place that we go is the Kingdom of God.”

According to Black Elk, those with faith will one day go to the clouds.

On many levels, then, there is a correlation between Black Elk’s ascension to the clouds and Christian tradition. The Dakota biblical tradition describes Jesus, John of Revelation, and Christians in general ascending to the clouds, or heaven. In the Dakota the both concepts are unified in the one word mahpiya. The particulars of Black Elk’s vision mirror the details of Jesus’ ascension in Acts. Most importantly, Black Elk’s Catholic teaching centers on the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Horses and the Four Directions

On his way to the Grandfathers, Black Elk sees four groups of twelve horses, each group positioned at one of the four directions. They are grouped according to color: black, white, buckskin, and sorrel.

I followed those men on up into the clouds and they showed me a vision of a bay horse standing there in the middle of the clouds. One of the men said: “Behold him, the horse who has four legs, you shall see.”...Then these horses went into formation of twelve abreast in four lines – black, whites, sorrels, buckskins... Then the bay horse said: “Make haste.” The horse began to go beside me and the forty-eight horses followed us.

In the Book of Zechariah, the prophet has an almost identical vision of horses:

Again I raised my eyes and saw four chariots coming out from between two mountains; and the mountains were of bronze. The first chariot had red horses, the second chariot black horses, the third chariot white horses, and the fourth chariot sorrel horses – all of them were strong horses. I asked the angel of the angel who spoke with me, “What are these, my lord?” The angel said to me in reply, “These are the four winds of the heavens, which are coming forth after being reviewed by the Lord of all the earth.”

The horses in Black Elk’s vision are structured similarly to the description in Zechariah.

In both visions the horses appear in groups of the same colors - black, white,
sorrels/spotted – the only difference being the red and buckskin. For both Black Elk and Zechariah the horses represent the four winds or directions.

The Cloud Tipi of the Six Grandfathers

After seeing the horses, the bay horse leads Black Elk to the Cloud Tipi, where inside he meets the six grandfathers.

One of the grandfathers said to me: “Do not fear, come right in” (through the rainbow door). So I went in and stood before them. The horses in the four quarters of the earth all neighed to cheer me as I entered the rainbow door.\(^\text{35}\)

There the grandfathers address Black Elk and tell him that they are having a council.

“Your grandfathers all over the world and the earth are having a council and there you were called, so here you are. Behold then, those where the sun goes down; from thence they shall come, you shall see. From them you shall know the willpower of myself, for they shall take you to the center of the earth, and the nations of all kinds shall tremble.”\(^\text{36}\)

The grandfathers’ declaration to Black Elk contains two biblical themes. The first is willpower of the grandfather. While DeMallie identifies this as a Lakota concept,\(^\text{37}\) it is also a central Christian theme that Black Elk would have used every time he prayed the Our Father:

Dakota Text: Nithókičunžé ú kte; Nitháwačiŋ ečhéŋ ečhíŋpi nuŋwé, maȟpiya kiŋ éŋ iyéčheča, nakúŋ makha akáŋ:

English Gloss: your order (kingdom) / come / will / your will / thus / they do / oh if / sky / the / in / as it is / also / earth / upon

English Text: Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.\(^\text{38}\)

Black Elk then, uses “will” in a Christian context as well. Writing about his trip to Europe two months after his return he states:

So thus all along, of the white man’s customs, only his faith, the white man’s beliefs about God’s will, and how they act according to it, I wanted to understand. I traveled to one city after another, and there were many customs around God’s will.\(^\text{39}\)

\(^{35}\) DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 116.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 116.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 116, note.

\(^{38}\) Matthew 6:10, Jan Ullrich, personal communication.

\(^{39}\) DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather 9-10.
Black Elk states the only good thing about white culture that interested him was their customs about the will of God. As a result of his search, he writes later in the letter that he says he embraces this custom about God’s will: “So Lakota people, trust in God! Now along I trust in God.”

The grandfathers’ declaration that “the nations of all kinds will tremble” is the second biblical theme. Moses and the Israelites sing a song in the book of Exodus after the Lord frees them from the Egyptians and is leading them to the promised-land: “The nations will hear and tremble.”40 This is picked up by the prophets and in the Psalms: “The Lord reigns, let the nations shall tremble.”41 The Book of Revelation associates this theme with Christ, who comes on the clouds:

Dakota Text: Wanyâŋka po, maȟpiya šápa kiŋ akâŋ i; uŋkháŋ wičhišta owâs’iŋ wanyâŋkapi kta, k’a tóna hé čhapápi k’uŋ hená nakúŋ, k’a iyé uŋ oyáte makhá ochnáka kiŋ owâs’iŋ aič’iphapi kta. Hečhetu nunýwé. Amen.

English Gloss: Look / plural imperative / clouds / dark / the / upon / he comes / and then / human eyes / all / they see him / will / and / those / he (him) / they pierced him / the aforesaid / those / also / and / he / on account of (because of) / people / earth / on / the / all / they strike themselves / will / it be so / may / Amen

English Text: Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wait because of him. Even so, Amen.42

The oyáte, or peoples/nations, of the earth will strike themselves upon seeing Christ come upon the clouds.

The setting where Black Elk meets the Grandfathers, cloud tipi, is similar to the heavenly temple described in the Book of Revelation where the Lord calls John.

At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne. Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of

40 Exodus 15:14.
41 Psalm 99:1.
42 Rev 1:7, Jan Ullrich, personal communication.
lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God.43

Like Black Elk’s vision, the temple in Revelation is located in the clouds, or mahpiya. Throughout Revelation, temple is translated as tipi wakan, or sacred/holy tipi, which matches the tipi of the Six Grandfathers.44 Both the tipi wakan of Revelation and the tipi of Black Elk’s vision are associated with a rainbow.45

While both visions place the tipi wakan in the clouds, they are also located on a mountain. As Black Elk is leaving the Grandfathers to return home, he looks back: “I looked back and the cloud house was gone. There was nothing there but a big mountain with a gap in it.”46 In the last part of John’s vision, he is brought to the New Jerusalem, which is the new dwelling of God and his people. “He took me in spirit to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.”47 For both visions, God’s dwelling is associated with a great mountain where there is always light. The cloud tipi “shall be set where the sun shines continually.”48 The New Jerusalem will need no sun or moon, “for the glory of God (Wakan-Tanka) gave it light.”49 This is brought together in The Sacred Pipe, where Black Elk compares anpetu wi (the sun) to the light of Wakan Tanka.50

Returning to Rev 4:2-5, this passage demonstrates that while Christianity is monotheistic, it is metaphorically possible to describe God faithfully in other ways. In Revelation, John sees the seven spirits of God, like Black Elk sees the Six Grandfathers.

43 Rev 4:2-5.
44 Fr. Craft often said mass outdoors with the altar in a tipi. See illustration in Foley, Father Francis Craft, 51.
45 See also Ezekiel’s call story, Ezekiel 1:28-2:10. Here Ezekiel sees the Lord surrounded by a rainbow, filled with the spirit of the Lord, and sent to the Israelites to prophesy.
46 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 141.
48 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 141.
49 Rev 21:23.
However, both interpret divinity monotheistically. While Black Elk sees six grandfathers throughout the vision, he states that, “the fifth grandfather represented the Great Spirit,” This equation of the fifth grandfather with the Great Spirit is consistent with Black Elk’s monotheism discussed in chapter four.51

While Black Elk is in the cloud tipi, the first grandfather tells Black Elk why they called him there:

Take courage and be not afraid, for you will know him. And furthermore, behold him, whom you shall represent. By representing him, you shall be very powerful on earth in medicines and all powers. He is your spirit and you are his body and his name is Eagle Wing Stretches.52

The content of grandfathers’ explanation of Black Elk’s call contains six Christian biblical themes. The first is the command to “be not afraid.” In biblical tradition, God repeatedly tells those He calls or appears to “be not afraid.” In an example from the book of Judges, Gideon sees the Lord and is afraid he will die.

When Gideon realized that it was the angel of the LORD, he exclaimed, "Ah, Sovereign LORD! I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face!" But the LORD said to him, "Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die." 53

This occurs in Revelation when Jesus appears to John:

When I caught sight of him, I fell down at his feet as though dead. He touched me with his right hand and said, “Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, the one who lives.” 54

In the Bible and Black Elk’s vision, the Divine assures those He calls to be not afraid.

Second, Black Elk is told that he will “represent” Eagle Wing Stretches. This command mirrors the sending of the prophets by God who represent the Lord by speaking and acting for Him. Moses is called to represent the Lord:

50 Brown, The Sacred Pipe, 71-72.
51 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 119.
52 Ibid., 116.
Come, now! I will send you to Pharaoh to lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt...thus shall you say to the Israelites: The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.  

Like Black Elk, Moses is called to lead his people to the promised land. In addition, the calling of Isaiah mirrors Black Elk’s calling. Like Black Elk, Isaiah is called to the tipi wakan of Wakan Tanka and sent to the people to prophesy.

Third, by representing Eagle Wing Stretches, Black Elk will be powerful with “medicines and all powers.” This echoes Jesus who gave his disciples authority over unclean spirits and the power to cure. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus sends the disciples out telling them, “cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons.” To facilitate this Black Elk is given healing herbs throughout his vision. Psalm 147 urges to “sing praise to the Lord with thanksgiving,” for among various other blessings, he also gives “peji [herbs] for the service of men.”

Fourth, Black Elk is told that, “he is your spirit.” In biblical tradition, those who are chosen to go in the name of the Lord are given his Spirit. The messianic prophecy of Isaiah says that, “the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him.” This is taken up in the Gospels where the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus: “On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him.” Later, Paul tells the Galatians that he has been crucified with Christ, “yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me.” In other words, Paul’s spirit is now Christ’s spirit.

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55 Exodus 3:10, 15.  
56 Isaiah 6.  
57 Matt 10:1.  
58 Matt 10:8.  
59 Psalm 147:7,8.  
60 Isaiah 11:2.  
61 Mark 1.10.  
Fifth, the Grandfather tells Black Elk that, “you are his body.” In biblical tradition, baptism incorporates Christians into the body of Christ. Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians, “for in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit.”

Like Black Elk’s description, Paul asserts that the Christian becomes actually becomes that body: “Now you are Christ’s body.”

These two concepts which the Grandfather links together, “he is your spirit and you are his body” are also linked together in biblical tradition.

In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me, because I live and you will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you.

Those who keep [Jesus’] commandments remain in him, and he in them, and the way we know that he remains in us is from the Spirit that he gave us.

The believer and Christ are united in that they are of the same body and spirit, and remain in each other.

Sixth, the one who Black Elk represents is named Eagle Wing Stretches. As the vision progresses, Black Elk becomes identified with the name. In biblical tradition, the eagle is a symbol of God.

In a desert land he found him, in a barren and howling waste. He shielded him and cared for him; he guarded him as the apple of his eye, like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them on its pinions. The LORD alone led him; no foreign god was with him.

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63 1 Cor 12: 13.
64 1 Cor 12:27.
67 Deuteronomy 32:10-12.
In this passage, the author of Deuteronomy describes God as a great eagle, which has
stretched out his wing over his people and led them out of slavery into the promised land.
This theme is also taken up in the Psalms.

> How precious is your kindness, O God! The children of men take refuge in the shadow
> of your wings. 58

Humanity trusts in the shadow of the great eagle, *Wakan Tanka*. Black Elk also used this
this, for you see it is really His own voice.” 69 The voice of the spotted eagle is *Wakan
Tanka*, or God.

While the eagle has always been a symbol of divinity in Lakota tradition, there
are indications that during the early reservation period, it gained a specifically Christian
*Wambli Wankatuya* “High Eagle;” Leo Cunningham *Wambli Makeskan Un* “Eagle of the
Lonely Country;” and William Ketcham *Wambli Wakita* “Watching Eagle.” 70 The
Lakota named diocesan priest of Mohawk descent Francis Craft *Wabli chica aglahpaya*
“The Eagle Covers its Young, or Hovering Eagle.” 71

The three-source connection - biblical tradition, Black Elk’s description of the
eagle, and the frequent association of the name eagle and Catholic missionaries –
indicates a strong correlation between Black Elk’s use of the eagle symbol and Christian
meaning.

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68 Psalm 36:7. See also Psalm 63:8.
70 Enochs, 141.
71 Foley, 17.
Viewed as a whole, then, the concentration of Black Elk’s description of his call by the Grandfathers demonstrates a very strong correlation to biblical imagery.

_The Sacred Road_

The main action of the vision is the walking of the sacred red road. The fourth grandfather tells Black Elk that “he shall make a nation.” Black Elk leads the nation down the road “so that they will all be prosperous. As I walk I am going to pray to the Great Spirit.” He guides them through the difficult ascents.

In _Holy Man of the Oglala_, Michael Steltenkamp claims that the road imagery in Black Elk’s vision is in fact borrowed or influenced by the catechetical teaching aid the Two Roads Map. The map depicted the Catholic story of salvation history. According to Steltenkamp:

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 people’s history, and gaudily portrayed, self-indulgent individuals. Other, more detailed segments of Black Elk’s vision are either explicitly or implicitly present on the Two Roads Map.

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72 DeMallie, _The Sixth Grandfather_, 118.
73 Ibid., 125.
74 Steltenkamp describes the Two Roads Map: “In an attempt to communicate Catholic theology nonabstractly, early missionaries made use of a picture catechism. On a strip of paper about one foot wide and several feet long were contained illustrations depicting what Christians have traditionally called salvation history. Goll described this mandalalike device as follows: ‘Beginning with the Blessed Trinity and Creation at the bottom of the strip, the student follows the connected pictures of God in heaven at the top. The Apostles Creed, the life and death of Christ, the Church, the sacraments, the theological virtues, the capital sins – all are there between two roads, a golden road leading to heaven and a black one ending in hell’ (1940:30). Native catechists were instructed as to the chart’s meaning by means of individual and group lessons conducted by priests, and by written explanations in both English and Lakota...the Two Roads Map (as it was popularly called) in use among the Lakota was a colorful, engaging depiction of human beings and preternatural creatures. The pantheon of Judeo-Christian figures is arresting, as winged angels and bat like demons are pictured fluttering about the course of world history. Crowds of people are variously portrayed – at the mercy of natural disaster, in the clutches of a leviathan monster, under the embrace of a grandfather-creator, and all in seeming constant motion. In short, the Two Roads Map imaginatively captured in picture form the basic worldview of traditional Christian theology.” Steltenkamp, _Holy Man of the Oglala_, 94-5.
75 Ibid., 95.
According to Steltenkamp, Black Elk’s road imagery is connected to the concrete practices of his life as a catechist. No substantial critique of Steltenkamp’s assertion has yet been offered, and the following linguistic evidence reinforces his theory.

The first example comes from Steltenkamp’s interviews with Black Elk’s daughter Lucy Looks Twice. Lucy remembers the first Catholic hymn that her father taught her, which alludes to the gathering of the Lakota nation:

O God (Wakan Tanka) most good, Who wants to make himself known,  
All rejoice rightly, He asks of you your hearts.  
You Lakota are a nation, Quickly may they come together;  
Jesus would have it so, Because he has called you all.76

In the hymn, Jesus calls the Lakota to come together as a nation. As a catechist, Black Elk worked to bring the Lakota together. Thus, both his vision and his Christian work call Black Elk to gather the Lakota nation together and help to make the Lakota sacred.

The second example comes from prayer. Lucy cites a prayer her father used at Thanksgiving, which uses the image of the road in Christian eschatological terms.

One day, we shall go and arrive at the end of the road.  
In that future, we shall be without any sin at all.  
And so it will be in the same manner for my grandchildren and relatives who will follow as well.77

In Black Elk’s prayer, the road is a journey through time that the Lakota and their descendents should travel to the destination where they will be without sin. Black Elk’s description of the road in his vision carries this Christian understanding of a durational quest for holiness: the red road is “a good road for good spirits.”78

Black Elk uses the same metaphor of road as an eschatological journey in a letter written in the summer of 1909 to the Catholic Herald: “We are here on this earth

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76 Ibid., 56-57.  
77 Ibid., 118-9.  
78 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 118.
temporarily and for he who walks the straight path and dies, there is rest waiting for him."79 For Black Elk, the Christian life is the walking of the straight path.

The Dakota Bible strengthens this concrete image of road as journey. The translation for saint in Revelation is "those straight."80 In his Lakota dictionary, Beuchel translates this word concretely first as "straight, not crooked."81 This concept is also used to translated righteousness in 1 Corinthians 1:30. Jan Ullrich writes:

"**Righteousness**" is translated as "wóowothaña" which is a noun formed from the verb owóthaŋña ("straight, frank, honest") used for translating the concept of Saint.82

This translation for righteousness occurs numerous times throughout both testaments of the Dakota Bible.

Road imagery is also central in the call of John the Baptist. In the Gospel of John he tells the priests and Levites: "I am 'the voice crying out in the desert, Make straight the way of the Lord.'" The Dakota Bible translates straight as wóowothaña and way as Čhaŋkú. The Gospel of John later associates Jesus with the road, Čhaŋkú.

Thomas said to him, "Master, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."83

The Dakota Bible translates way with Čhaŋkú, which means "road."84 When Thomas says they do not know on what road Jesus will go, Jesus replies by saying that he himself is the Čhaŋkú. He is the road that must be followed to come to the Father, or Wakan-Tanka.

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79 Ibid., 21.
80 Rev 8:3.
82 Jan Ullrich, personal communication.
83 John 14:5-6.
84 Jan Ullrich, personal communication.
Black Elk’s description of the nation walking down the red road reinforces the connection with Jesus, the Messiah. Four spirit horsemen lead the people who correlate with the four horsemen of Zechariah. The only people from the nation that Black Elk describes are old men with canes and old women with canes. Zechariah says when describing the days of the Messiah and the new Jerusalem, “Thus says the Lord of hosts: Old men and old women, each with staff in hand because of old age, shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem.”

Thus, Black Elk’s description of the road demonstrates a strong correlation to Christian imagery. Steltenkamp’s argument for the catechetical map, Black Elk’s prayer given by Lucy, one of Black Elk’s Catholic letters, the translation of saint, and the words of Jesus all connect Christian ideas to the concrete image of road. The goal of Christianity, holiness, is expressed in terms of the concrete road. To become holy is to follow the road to the end. Black Elk expresses this Christian concept when he attributes the second Grandfather with saying, ““hundreds shall be sacred, hundreds shall be flames.” The journey down the red road ends in sanctification or, alternately, retribution.

Before Black Elk starts on his journey down the road, he is given “sacred relics” by the grandfathers while he is in the Cloud Tipi. These relics – cup of water, bow and arrow, soldier weed, pipe, flowering stick - have power and serve particular purposes. In addition, other symbols – morning star, wind, man painted red, the sacred hoop - appear during the course of the journey. Both the relics and symbols correlate with the biblical narrative.

85 Zec 8:4.
86 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 139.
**Cup of Water**

The first grandfather gives Black Elk a cup of water. He is told, “Behold, take [the cup of water], and with this you shall be great.” Throughout the vision, the purpose of the cup is developed and clarified. Black Elk comments that, “with the wooden cup of water I was to save mankind.”

Black Elk later states that, “this cup will be used for me and my nation – that they will all be relatives to each other, and the water is the power to give them strength and purify them. This water will make them happy.”

The Christian concept of salvation of all humanity is linked to the cup, which we will return to later. One of the aspects of the cup, purification, is directly linked to the Christian concept of sanctification in the Dakota Bible. In 1 Corinthians 1:30 the Dakota word for purification is used to translate sanctification. Jan Ulrich writes:

> The Dakota word used in the Bible translation for sanctification - "wóyuečedanjaŋ" is new for me, I have never encountered it before; Riggs does not give this word in his dictionary, he only gives "yuečedanjaŋ" which he says means "to purify". The prefix wo-forms nouns of verbs, thus "wóyuečedanjaŋ" should mean "purification" or more freely perhaps "purity."  

Thus, for Black Elk, to purify the people with the cup can mean to sanctify the people in Christian terms.

Catholic liturgical language also makes a connection with Black Elk’s description of the cup. While the Dakota Bible uses a Dakotacized version of the Greek, the Catholic context used a word describing the concrete physical action of baptism. Buechel translates “to baptize” in his *Bible History* as mniákaštaŋ = to baptize, one who baptize.

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87 Ibid., 119.  
88 Ibid., 138.  
89 Jan Ulrich, personal communication.
According to Ullrich this translates literally as: mní – water akáštan – to pour upon.90 In Lakota, to baptize is to pour water on.

Lucy alludes to the use of a cup of water in a Christian context. She recalls a story in which she imitates baptism as practiced among the Lakota.

Another time Father Lindebner came over to baptize my grandma and her cousins. . . They were going so slow that I took my fancy little cup. I had it ever since I was a small girl. I took my cup, filled it with water, and went around baptizing my three grandmas. That Father Lindebner – I really liked him. He just stood there looking at me pouring water on each one and said, “Hurry up with the prayers, Lucy has already baptized all the old ladies!”91

Lucy’s story indicates that the use of a cup in Baptism was an accepted, if not standard, practice among the Lakota. This is a concrete link between the imagery of the cup and baptism that would be reinforced every time Black Elk performed or attended Baptism.92

The link is further strengthened by the cup’s absence from sources that record Lakota ceremonial tradition. Black Elk makes no mention of a cup in The Sacred Pipe, where he is ostensibly describing Lakota religious tradition. Because it is not present in discussions of “pure” Lakota tradition, the cup is more clearly a Christian innovation.

Black Elk’s description of water deserves further attention. On Harney Peak Black Elk prays, “you presented to me from where the sun goes down a cup of water – the living water that makes the two-leggeds live. And thus you have said that my people will be saved.”93 According to Black Elk, the cup contains living water that will save his people. The concept of living water is a major theme of Christian tradition, and is described in the two following passages from the Gospel of John:

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91 Steltenkamp, Holy Man of the Oglala, 74.
92 One of the catechists’ responsibilities was to administer the sacrament of Baptism when there was no priest available. Lucy remembers this in Steltenkamp, Holy Man of the Oglala, 50. See also Duratschek, Crusading along Sioux Trails, 206-207.
Whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.⁹⁴

On the last and greatest day of the feast, Jesus stood up and exclaimed, “Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as scripture says, ‘Rivers of living water will flow from within him.’”⁹⁵

According to these two passages, Jesus gives the living water of everlasting life. The water of life is more concretely described in Revelation as a river in the New Jerusalem.

Then the angel showed me the river of life-giving water, sparkling like crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb.⁹⁶

The most explicit indication of the correlation of water as a Christian symbol is found in Black Elk’s vision. Shortly after the establishment of the flowering stick, a cloud rains on the nation, which Black Elk describes as a “christening.”⁹⁷

Again we see a strong correlation between Black Elk’s vision and Christian tradition. Black Elk’s description of the cup of “living water” that “will save mankind” matches Christian description in the Dakota Bible. Black Elk’s description of the cup is concretely embodied in the translation of baptism used by Catholics and in the description of baptism by Lucy.

**Bow and Arrow, Soldier Weed of Destruction**

The six grandfathers also give Black Elk two instruments of war: the bow and arrow and the soldier weed of destruction. During the vision, Black Elk uses the bow and arrow to kill various evil spirits. He interprets this as meaning, “if I had gone to war much, I would have been able to do much damage to the enemy, but the enemy couldn’t fight back.”⁹⁸ Black Elk’s describes being sent to battle:

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⁹⁵ John 7:37-38.
⁹⁷ DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 130.
⁹⁸ Ibid., 132.
I was on the bay horse now that had talked to me at first... Then [the riders on the horses] all hollered: 'He is coming!' and ran. They said: 'Eagle Wing Stretches, make haste, for your nation all over the universe is in fear, make haste.' I could hear, at this time everything in the universe cheering for me. At this time my bow and arrow turned into a big spear.99

In his vision, he is victorious over all his enemies. This imagery is similar to a description of a rider found in Revelation.

I heard one of the four living creatures cry out in a voice like thunder, “Come forward.” I looked, and there was a white horse, and its rider had a bow. He was given a crown, and he rode forth victorious to further his victories.100

Both Black Elk and the rider are called, sent to battle, and are victorious.

Black Elk also states that, “the bow and arrow represent lightning.”101 While DeMallie claims that this represents the destructive power of the Thunder-beings, this is also an intentional biblical reference. Zechariah writes, “the Lord will appear over them, and his arrow shall shoot forth as lightning.”102 Habakkuk also compares lightning to arrows and a spear, which Black Elk’s bow and arrow turn into in his vision.103

Towards the end of his vision, he receives the soldier weed of destruction that is so powerful it kills with only a touch. Black Elk says that, “this medicine belongs only to me.”104 He explains:

I am glad I did not perform this killing, for I would have not only killed the enemy but I would probably have killed the women and children of the enemy, but I am satisfied that I have not been well off. Perhaps I would have been a chief if I had obeyed this, but I am satisfied that I didn’t become a chief.105

Neihardt connects this decision not to kill to Black Elk’s conversion to Christianity: “at the age of thirty-seven, Black Elk was to use this herb. . . at this time he gave it up for the

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99 Ibid., 119,121.  
101 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 131.  
103 Hab 3:11.  
104 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 132.  
105 Ibid.
Catholic religion.” Neihardt’s only explicit reference to Christianity in this case correctly explains how Black Elk interprets the violent aspects of his vision. Consequently, not only is Black Elk’s imagery similar to the apocalyptic battles of Revelation and the prophets, Black Elk’s decision to reject the embodiment of violence on earth — and its potential for power and material reward — because of his Christian faith.

**Morning Star**

Another important symbol is the morning star. The third grandfather first alludes to the morning star. In biblical tradition, the morning star is a symbol of Christ. Balaam’s prophecy in Numbers, “a star shall advance from Jacob,” is interpreted as a messianic prophecy. In the Gospel of Matthew, a star guides the magi to Christ. The book of Revelation associates the morning star to Christ in two ways. First, Christ gives the morning star to the victor, who holds fast to Christ’s ways. Second, Christ declares that he is “the root and offspring of David, the bright morning star.”

Thus, in the last chapter of the Bible, at the end of the apocalyptic battle of Revelation and the establishment of the New Jerusalem, Jesus explicitly calls himself the morning star.

The southern spirit tells Black Elk that from the morning star his nation will have knowledge and wisdom. Paul associates wisdom and knowledge with Jesus in the Letter to the Ephesians:

Dakota Text: Jesus Messiah Ithàngéhan uŋkiyapi Wakhàngthanka tháwa, k’a wówitaŋ Ateyapi kíŋ hê ć wóksape wówiyukčaŋ kʰó oñiya kíŋ níc’úpi kta, hê iyé sdonyáyapi kta ć heuŋ:

106 Ibid., 137.
107 Ibid., 117.
109 Matt 2:2.
110 Rev 2:28
113 Ibid., 129.
The morning star, like Jesus, imparts wisdom and knowledge.

The morning star is explicitly equated with Christ in one strand of Lakota tradition. Bernard Ice, a member of The Native American Church of Pine Ridge, states, “in the Cross Fire they use the star. Jesus Christ, the offspring of David, is the Morning Star.” It is likely that this association with Christ is implicit in Black Elk’s vision as he personifies the Morning Star: “Behold him who shall appear, from him you shall have power.”

Pipe

A very important Lakota symbol, the pipe, also plays a central role in Black Elk’s vision. The third grandfather gives Black Elk a peace pipe.

[The southern?] spirit speaks again: “Behold him they have sent forth to the center of the nation’s hoop.” Then I saw the pipe with the spotted eagle flying to the center of the nation’s hoop. The morning star went along with the pipe. They flew from the east to the center. “With this your nation’s offering as they walk. They will be like unto him. With the pipe they shall have peace in everything. Behold your eagle, for your nation like relatives they shall be. Behold the morning star, relative-like they shall be, from whence they shall have wisdom.” Just then the morning star appeared and all the people looked up to it and the horses neighed and the dogs barked.

While there is no parallel to the pipe in Christian tradition, Black Elk connects it to the biblical tradition as a whole in other sources. Looks Twice and Black Elk’s contemporaries assert that he considered the Pipe to be an “old testament” and foreshadowing of Christ. Black Elk states in the interviews recorded in 1944 that, “the

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114 Ephesians 1:17, Jan Ullrich, personal communication.
115 Steinmetz, Pipe, Bible and Peyote, 103.
116 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 120.
117 Ibid., 129.
118 See chapter four for a more detailed discussion.
peace pipe was the Bible to our tribe."  

Black Elk strengthens the correlation of the pipe with Christian tradition by the positioning of the pipe with the eagle, a Christian symbol for God, and the morning star, a Christian symbol for Christ.

**Wind**

As Black Elk is walking the red sacred road from south to north, a wind starts to blow from the south. He is told by the northern grandfather, “give [your nation] your sacred wind so they shall face the wind with courage. Also they shall walk as a relative of your wind.” Black Elk uses three images to describe the wind in his description of his vision: life, breath, and strength.

The northern grandfather later refers to the wind as “the wind of life.” Black Elk describes the action of the wind:

> Then a little breeze came from the north and I could see that the wind was in the form of a spirit and as it went over the people all the dead things came to life.

This event mirrors the description of valley of the dry bones given in Ezekiel:

> From the four winds come, O spirit, and breathe into these slain that they may come to life. I prophesied as he told me, and the spirit came into them; they came alive and stood upright.

In both stories, the wind, described as spirit, blows over the dead and brings them back to life. Acts 2 explicitly connects the Holy Spirit to wind:

> When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled and the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.

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120 Ibid., 122.
121 Ibid., 139. DeMallie later states that the wind symbolizes life, 286n.
122 Ibid., 129.
123 Ez 37:9-10.
124 Acts 2:1-4
Not only is the wind similar to the Holy Spirit; Acts 2 portrays the wind as the Holy Spirit.

Black Elk’s correlation of the wind of his vision and the Holy Spirit is strengthened by his description of the wind as breath and strength. During his first cure, Black Elk states, “through this wind I shall draw power. The sacred wind, as he passes, the weak shall have strength. Through this wind I will breathe the power on the weak that they may see a happy day.” Black Elk uses this wind to “breathe the power on the weak.” The Gospel of John also uses the image of the Holy Spirit as breath: “And when he had said this, [Jesus] breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the holy Spirit.” Black Elk associates the sacred wind to strength, which Acts associates with the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells his disciples before he ascends that, “you will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you.” The wind as Holy Spirit gives strength.

Black Elk’s descriptions of wind correspond to biblical descriptions of the Holy Spirit. In addition, these three concepts – spirit, breath, and strength - are unified in the definition of Holy Spirit given by Beuchel, Woniya Wakan. The noun woniya translates as “spirit, life and breath.” The verb woniya translates “to resuscitate by blowing.” This is comes from the verb niya “to breathe.” To breathe is to live, as the verb niya(y) expresses: “to cause to life, make life, revive.” Wakan translates as “sacred,” which Ben used to translate his father’s description of wind: “You have given me a sacred wind.” Consequently, when Black Elk spoke or heard the word Woniya Wakan, its

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125 DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 238.
126 John 20:22.
127 Acts 1:8.
129 Ibid., 364.
130 Ibid.
131 DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 238.
connotations would correspond to the images of wind in his vision. As a whole, there is an integral relationship between Black Elk’s sacred wind and the Holy Spirit.

*The Man Painted Red*

Just before the establishment of the sacred stick at the center of the sacred hoop, a man painted in red appears.

As I looked upon the people, there stood on the north side a man painted red all over his body and he had with him a lance (Indian spear) and he walked into the center of the sacred nation’s hoop and lay down and rolled himself on the ground and when he got up he was a buffalo standing there in the center of the nation’s hoop.132

The man painted red later turns into an herb and then wind “in the form of a spirit.”133 The transformation of the red man into a buffalo links him to White Buffalo Woman, the one who brought the Lakota the pipe. Black Elk describes White Buffalo woman in *The Sacred Pipe* undergoing a similar transformation into a buffalo.

The mysterious woman left, but after walking a short distance she looked back towards the people and sat down. When she rose the people were amazed to see that she had become a young red and brown buffalo calf. Then this calf walked farther, lay down, and rolled, looking back at the people, and when she got up she was a white buffalo. Again the white buffalo walked farther and rolled on the ground, becoming now a black buffalo. This buffalo then walked farther away from the people, stopped, and after bowing to each of the four quarters of the universe, disappeared over the hill.134

Catholic Lakota equated White Buffalo Woman with the Virgin Mary. Lucy remembers that, “Father Buechel accepted the Blessed Virgin as the same one who brought the pipe, and that was what we always believed.”135 Similarly, Black Elk’s description associates the red man with Christ.

Black Elk depicts the red man in his later Ghost Dance vision with explicitly Christian language and imagery:

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132 Ibid., 128.
133 Ibid., 129.
135 Steltenkamp, *Holy Man of the Oglala*, 107
I saw twelve men coming toward me and they stood before me and said: “Our Father, the two-legged chief, you shall see.” Then I went to the center of the circle with these men and there again I saw the tree in full bloom. Against the tree I saw a man standing with outstretched arms. As we stood close to him these twelve men said:

“Behold him!” 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. He had long hair which was hanging down loose. On the left side of his head was an eagle feather. His body was painted red. (At that time I had never had anything to do with the white man’s religion and I had never seen any picture of Christ.)

This man said to me: “My life is such that all earthly beings that grow belong to me. My father has said this. You must say this.” I stood there gazing at him and tried to recognize him. I could not make him out. He was a nice-looking man. As I looked at him, his body began to transform. His body changed into all colors and it was very beautiful. All around him there was light. Then he disappeared all at once. It seemed as though there were wounds in the palms of his hands.136

There are twelve men like the apostles, there are wounds on the palms of his hand, and he transforms which DeMallie compares to the transfiguration.137 The man stands with outstretched arms against the blooming tree in the center of the circle. Later in the interview, Black Elk tells Neihardt, “It seems to me on thinking it over that I have seen the son of the Great Spirit himself.”138 The red man of his great vision is also described with Christological language.

Behold you have seen the powers of the north in the forms of man, buffalo, herb and wind. The people shall follow the man’s steps; like him they shall walk and like the buffalo they shall live and with the herb they shall have knowledge. They shall be like relatives to the wind.139

If this red man is interpreted as the red man of the Ghost Dance vision, then Black Elk clearly understands him as the Son of God. The language reinforces this theory. The people are to follow the steps of the Son of the Great Spirit and be like relatives to “the wind.” We have already seen the equation of the wind with Woniya Wakan, or Holy Spirit. To follow the red man’s steps reinforces the earlier equation of Jesus and the red

136 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 263. James R. Walker, Lakota Belief and Ritual, edited by Raymond J. DeMallie and Elaine A. Jahner (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1980; reprint 1991), 197. Little Wound states in his description of the Hunka ceremony that, “red is the most beautiful color. The spirits are pleased with red. Inyan is the Spirit of the Earth that dwells in the stone. It pleases Inyan to have red placed on a stone. When you would please the spirits put red paint on a stone.”
137 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 263n.
138 Ibid., 266.
road. This is strengthened by Jesus often repeated call for people to follow him throughout the Gospels. First, there is the call of the disciples: Matt 4:19, Mark 1:17, Luke 5:27, John 1:43. Second, Jesus calls Christians to pick up the cross (equated to the flowering stick), and follow him: Matt 16:24, Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23. In his vision Black Elk picks up the flowering stick and follows the road.

Black Elk’s use of biblical language, the depiction of red man in his Ghost Dance vision, and his declaration that he saw the son of the Great Spirit strongly indicates that the red man of his vision is a Christ figure. Based on the evidence, it seems likely that just as the Lakota equated White Buffalo Woman with the Virgin Mary, Black Elk interpreted the red man as Christ.

**Flowering Stick**

The most important symbol in Black Elk’s vision is the flowering stick, also called the sacred tree. The fourth grandfather gives it to Black Elk and says, “Behold this, with this to the nation’s center of the earth, many shall you save.” The action of the journey down the sacred road culminates in establishment of the sacred stick at the center of the sacred hoop.

They put the sacred stick into the center of the hoop and you could hear birds singing all kinds of songs by this flowering stick and the people and animals all rejoiced and hollered. The women were sending up their tremolos. The men said: “Behold it; for it is the greatest of the greatest sticks.” This stick will take care of the people at the same time it will multiply. We live under it like chickens under the wing. We live under the flowering stick like under the wing of a hen. Depending on the sacred stick we shall walk and it will be with us always.

This is the tree that Lucy claims is a Christian symbol. We have already seen evidence for this in the previous section, where the red man that Black Elk interprets as the Son of

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139 Ibid., 129.
140 Ibid., 118.
141 Ibid., 129-130.
God is portrayed with outstretched hand in front of a blooming tree. Black Elk’s description of the sacred stick directly supports Lucy’s claim as he uses two biblical references where Jesus is the subject: Matt 23:37 (see also Luke 13:34) and Matt 28:20.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how many times I yearned to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her young under her wings, but you were unwilling!  

In this passage, Jesus is the one who gathers his children under his wing like a mother hen. In the next passage, Jesus is also the subject, and assures his disciples that “I am with you always, until the end of the age.” Like the flowering stick of Black Elk’s vision, Jesus will be with his disciples always. Both references explicitly connect the flowering stick with Christ.

Black Elk continues by stating that this sacred stick is the cottonwood tree. *The Sacred Pipe* and a prayer given during the 1931 Neihardt interviews give more detailed description of the cottonwood tree used in the Sun Dance. They both contain many biblical allusions that connect the tree to Jesus.

... The weak will lean upon you, and for all the people you will be a support.

Oh Great Spirit, Great Spirit, my Grandfather, may my people be likened unto the flowering stick. Your stick of sticks, tree of trees, forest of forests, tree of trees of the earth, trees of all kinds of the earth. Oh, flowering tree, here on earth trees are like unto you; your trees of all kinds are likened unto you, but yet they have chosen you. Oh tree, you are mild, you are likened to the one above. My nation shall depend on you. My nation on you shall bloom.

These two passages taken together describe the tree as mild, likened to the one above, and a support for all peoples, especially the weak. The same concepts are found in a passage from Matthew:

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142 Matt 23:37.
143 Matt 28:20.
Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.\textsuperscript{146}

Like Black Elk's description of the cottonwood, Jesus is meek and supports those who are burdened or weak.

Black Elk calls the flowering stick "tree of trees and forest of forests." This construct is identical to a Christological refrain used in the New Testament. In the book of Revelation, Christ is depicted riding a white horse and is called "King of kings and Lord of lords."\textsuperscript{147}

Black Elk's description of the cottonwood highlights the shelter it provides for birds:

You are a kind and a good-looking tree; upon you the winged peoples have raised their families; from the tip of your lofty branches down to your roots, the winged and four-legged peoples have made their homes.\textsuperscript{148}

This description echoes Ezekiel's passage on the messianic king, a tree that God will plant:

On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it. It shall put forth branches and bear fruit, and become a majestic cedar. Birds of every kind shall dwell beneath it, every winged thing in the shade of its boughs.\textsuperscript{149}

In both Black Elk's description and the passage from Ezekiel, the tree is described as good or kind, sheltering the creatures of the earth.

According to Black Elk, the cottonwood will stand at the center of all peoples.

... May we two-leggeds always follow your sacred example, for we see that you are always looking upwards into the heavens.

Of all the many standing peoples, you O rustling cottonwood have been chosen in a sacred manner; you are about to go to the center of the people's sacred hoop, and there you will represent the people and will help us fulfill the will of Wakan-Tanka... Soon, and

\textsuperscript{146} Matt 11:28-30.
\textsuperscript{147} Rev 19:16, see also Rev 17:14 and 1 Tim 6:15.
\textsuperscript{148} Brown, \textit{The Sacred Pipe}, 74.
\textsuperscript{149} Ez 17:23.
with all the peoples of the world, you will stand at the center; for all beings and all things you will bring that which is good.  

This description evokes the tree of life that God establishes in the New Jerusalem found in Revelation. “On either side of the river grew the tree of life that produces fruit twelve times a year, once each month; the leaves of the trees serve as medicine for the nations.”  

In both Black Elk’s vision and the book of Revelation, the tree is a symbol of unity. It is established in the center and brings goodness to all peoples.

The cottonwood tree and the Sun Dance are linked to the cross in the Black Elk tradition. Fools Crow compares the tree to Jesus on the cross: “So the tree...becomes a living thing for us. It becomes human, and it dies for us like Jesus on the cross for everyone.”  

He also compares the Sun Dance sacrifice to Jesus’ sacrifice.

The Sioux received the Sun Dance from Wakan-Tanka, and we honor him by doing it as he told us to. Since the white man has come to us and explained how God sent his own son to be sacrificed, we realize that our sacrifice is similar to Jesus’ own. As to how the white man feels about what we do, there was a far more terrible thing done by Jesus Christ. He endured more suffering and more pain. He was even stabbed on his side, and he died.

The Indian tribes must speak for themselves, but the Sioux feel a special closeness to God in the dance and in the piercing and flesh offerings. We even duplicate Christ’s crown of thorns in the sage head wreath the pledgers wear.

According to Fools Crow, the Sun Dance brings a special closeness to God (we have already seen that Fools Crow equates Wakan-Tanka and the Christian God) and is similar to the passion of Christ, even to the point that the dancers replicate Christ’s crown of thorns. Other Lakota agree with Fools Crow. Stephen Feraca, writing in 1963, reports

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150 Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, 74. This passage also develops Black Elk’s understanding of will and connects it to the sacrifice of Jesus. See page 11 of this chapter for a discussion of will as a Christian theme.


152 Mails, *Fools Crow*, 133.

153 Ibid., 136.
that one of his informants, Gilbert Bad Wound, considers the Sun Dance a Christian ceremony. Feraca states that “he is by no means alone in this belief.”

Lucy remembers Black Elk viewing the Sun Dance in the same way.

They pray and say to the Great Spirit, ‘Without any sinful thoughts or actions, we’re going to do this for you.’ That’s the way they feel when they do these Sun Dance ceremonies. They purify themselves – that’s why they wear the sage crown, which resembles the crown our Lord wore – and they start dancing. So the Indian, early before sunrise, had to stand there and had to go with the sun – watching it until it went down.

That’s the suffering, you see. And some of them even shed their blood. Christ did that too, before he died on the cross. That was the way he suffered.

According to Lucy, Black Elk ascribes the same Christian interpretation to the Sun Dance.

Black Elk uses the language of the passion to describe the Sun Dance in his description in *The Sacred Pipe*. In preparing for the dance, the dancer echoes the ambivalence of Jesus in the agony in the garden. “All this may be difficult to do, yet for the good of the people it must be done. Help me, O Grandfather, and give to me the courage and strength to stand the sufferings which I am about to undergo!” Later, the dancer says: “I shall offer up my body and soul that my people may live,” as Jesus says in John 6:51: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.” Both Black Elk’s sun dancer and Jesus offer their body for the life of the world.

The culmination of the passion is Jesus’ death on the cross, where he says in the Gospel of John, “it is finished.”

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157 Black Elk uses this in a universal sense.
158 John 6:51.
When Jesus had taken the wine, he said, ‘It is finished.’ And bowing his head, he handed over his spirit.\(^{159}\)

This is a major theme in Black Elk’s vision and Sun Dance. When Black Elk completes his vision, the western grandfather tells him, “all over the universe you have finished.”\(^{160}\)

At the end of the Sun Dance, Kablaya says: “O Wakan Tanka, this sacred place [the Sun Dance grounds] is Yours. Upon it all has been finished. We rejoice.”\(^{161}\) Holler agrees with this reading, and states that Kablaya’s words echo Jesus’ words on the cross in the Gospel of John.\(^{162}\)

The connection between the Sun Dance sacrifice and the passion of Christ was concretely embodied by communal practice. During the summer Catholic conferences, a Sun Dance pole was erected. An altar was constructed underneath it and Mass was then said.\(^{163}\) Like the summer conferences, Black Elk’s account of the Sun Dance has an altar next to the Sun Dance pole.

In addition, missionaries explicitly compared the Sun Dance to the sacrifice of Christ. Ross Enochs cites Florentine Dingman, S.J., who wrote in 1907,

> The late Bishop Martin Marty, O.S.B., then Abbot of St. Meinrad’s was one of the first who preached to the Sioux, taking occasion, from the cruelties they practiced at the Sun Dance to appease the Great Spirit, to point out to them our divine Savior hanging from the tree to atone for our sins.\(^{164}\)

Marty demonstrates that from the beginning, Lakota Catholicism cultivated the association between the Sun Dance and the crucifixion.

Black Elk also uses the image of “root” to describe the sacred tree. In Black Elk’s final prayer, he refers to the sacred tree as a root. “There may be a root that is still alive,

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\(^{159}\) John 19:30.
\(^{160}\) DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 132.
\(^{161}\) Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, 100.
and give this root strength and moisture of your good things. . . I prayed that you may set
the tree to bloom again.”

Lucy also remembers her father saying, “the Great Spirit has
promised one day that the tree of my father’s vision was to root.”

The symbol of root is another biblical symbol. Jesse’s stump, or the root of Jesse, was a messianic prophecy
which foretold the lineage of the messiah.

But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall
blossom...On that day, the root of Jesse, set up as a signal for the nations, the Gentiles
shall seek out, for his dwelling shall be glorious.”

According to Isaiah, a branch will grow from the root of Jesse, and will stand as a sign
for what the Dakota Bible translates Ikcewicasta, Common people, or Indians. Christians interpret this passage as a prophecy for Jesus. This image is taken up in
Revelation, where Jesus calls the “the root and offspring of David, the bright morning
star.”

The most important biblical passages are those that refer to the cross as a tree. In
Acts, Peter tells Cornelius that Jesus was put “to death by hanging him on a tree.”

The first letter of Peter depicts Jesus as a sun dancer: “Jesus bore our sins in his body upon the
cross [in the Dakota Bible can – tree], so that, free from sin, we might live for
righteousness [wóowothanja]. By his wounds you have been healed.”

This important

This important

passage unites all the previous themes of the flowering stick, the red man in front of the
tree, and Black Elk’s portrayal of the Sun Dance in The Sacred Pipe. Jesus is pierced and
hung from the tree, whose wounds are for the healing and life of all the world.

166 Steltenkamp, Holy Man of the Oglala, 109.
167 Isaiah 11:1,11.
168 Jan Ullrich, personal communication.
171 1 Pet 2:24.
In summary, the evidence supports the hypothesis that Black Elk’s sacred tree is a Christian symbol. Black Elk’s description mirrors biblical imagery on many levels: the tree of life, the messianic root, the Sun Dance and the Passion, the use of Christological language, the description of Jesus dying on the tree in the Dakota Bible, and the vision of the Son of God in front of the blooming tree. Missionaries preached this, communal practice embodied it, and Fools Crow and others attested to its persistence in Lakota tradition. Lucy Looks Twice claim must be taken seriously.

*The Sacred Hoop/The Great Multitude*

The destination of the journey down the sacred road is the sacred hoop. This is a symbol for what Black Elk also refers to as the promised land. Black Elk uses three prominent themes to describe the sacred hoop: the universality of the hoop, the end of suffering, and finishing and recreating all things to make them live.

The first major theme, the universality of the hoop, was previously discussed in chapter four. For Black Elk, the hoop includes all peoples:

Behold the circle of the sacred hoop, for the people shall be like unto it; and if they are like unto this, they shall have power, because there is no end to this hoop and in the center of the hoop these raise their children. (The sacred hoop means the continents of the world and people shall stand as one.)

I could see nothing but millions of faces behind the grandfathers. The west spirit said (pointing to all the people trying to see me): “Behold your nation!”

Black Elk’s description is similar to a vision that John has in Revelation:

After this I had a vision of a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people and tongue. They stood before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation comes from our God [Wakantanka], who is seated at the throne, and from the Lamb.”

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172 DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 129.
173 Ibid., 138.
174 Rev 7:9-10.
In both Black Elk’s and John’s vision, an uncountable number of people from all nations stand before divinity in a new creation. Black Elk in his Catholic teaching stressed this concept of unity:

So my friends and relatives, we should stand together and do what is right and be patient. That way God has something good for us all the time.  

Those of us here on earth who are suffering should help one another and have pity. We belong to one family and we have only one faith. Therefore, those who are suffering, my relatives, we should look toward them and pray for them, because our Savior came on this earth and helped all poor people.

According to Black Elk, the savior came for all suffering peoples. All belong to one family and like his vision, all should stand together. This reinforces the reading of the red man as a Christ figure, who tells Black Elk the same thing, that “my life is such that all earthly beings that grow belong to me.” All belong to Christ, who came to help all.

The second theme is the cessation of suffering that all will experience in the promised land. “One of the old men said (showing me the sacred hoop): “Behold a good nation, a sacred nation, again they will walk toward good land, the land of plenty, and no suffering shall there be. A nation you shall create and it shall be a sacred nation.”

Revelation discusses the new creation where God will eliminate all suffering:

Behold, God’s dwelling is with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them [as their God]. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, [for] the old order has passed away.

Once again, this theme of Black Elk’s vision is a theme of Black Elk’s Catholic teaching:

Therefore, those who are suffering, my relatives, we should look toward them and pray for them, because our Savior came on this earth and helped all poor people.

\[\text{175 Black Elk, Letter to friends and relatives written at Pine Ridge Reservation, Manderson, South Dakota, November 12, 1906, published in Sinasapa Wocekiye Taeyanpaha, March 15, 1907, translated from Lakota to English under Michael F. Steltenkamp, S.J., in Timonin, Black Elk’s Synthesis.}\]

\[\text{176 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 19.}\]

\[\text{177 Ibid., 263.}\]

\[\text{178 Ibid., 125-6.}\]

\[\text{179 Rev 21:3-4.}\]

\[\text{180 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 19.}\]
Black Elk explains that the Savior came to earth to help all those who suffer.

The third theme is the renewal of creation, where all is made alive.

[The western grandfather] says “all over the universe you have finished.” After singing, the black stallion spoke saying: “All over the universe everything is finished and your nation of nations is rejoicing.” (Meaning that everything is living – trees, flowers, grass, and every animal is living now.) In the vision I was representing the earth and everything was giving me power. I was given power so that all creatures on earth would be happy.\(^\text{181}\)

A similar description is found in Revelation:

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, everything in the universe, cry out: “To the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor, glory and might, forever and ever.”\(^\text{182}\)

Both Black Elk and Revelation describe the setting of divine renewal as the totality of creation.

The previous passage from Black Elk describes the totality of creation being made alive, giving him power, so that all creation would be happy. Earlier in his vision, Black Elk tells of a song that the people sing on their journey down the red road:

May you behold this I have asked to be made over.  
A good nation I have asked to be made over.

In a footnote, DeMallie says, “‘To make over’ implies a spiritual strengthening, the making of new life for the people.”\(^\text{183}\) This newness of life is a major biblical theme.

Isaiah describes the action of God in finishing creation:

Lo, I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; The things of the past shall not be remembered or come to mind. Instead, there shall be rejoicing and happiness in what I create. . . No longer shall the sound of weeping be heard there, or the sound of crying;\(^\text{184}\)

The renewal of all creation is not limited to man alone but includes animals. “Your justice is like the mountains of God; your judgments, like the mighty deep; man and beast

\(^{181}\) Ibid., 132-3.  
\(^{182}\) Rev 5:13.  
\(^{183}\) DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 126.  
\(^{184}\) Isaiah 65:17-19.
you save, O Lord.” Hosea emphasizes this in describing the Messianic covenant that 

Wakan Tanka will make with his people:

I will make a covenant for them on that day, with the beasts of the field, with the birds of the air, and with the things that crawl on the ground...I will espouse you to me forever...and you shall know the Lord.”

In Revelation, Jesus says he is the fulfillment of this process: “The one who sat on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” Through Wakan Tanka in Christ all of creation is renewed and made to live.

In conclusion, it is clear that Black Elk’s eschatological vision parallels the biblical account of God’s action in the redemption of all peoples, elimination of suffering, and the creation of new life.

The Prayer at Harney Peak

After relating his story, Black Elk with Neihardt and their children ascended Harney Peak, which was the setting of Black Elk’s vision. There Black Elk prayed to Wakan Tanka in what is a summation of his vision. In the prayer, the Christian language is even more explicit. First, Black Elk makes no mention of the aspects of his vision and Lakota tradition that do not meet the critique of Christianity. There is no mention of the soldier weed or the bow and arrow. Second, he emphasizes the aspects of his vision that have the most clear Christian meaning: the sacred wind, the cup of water, and the tree. Black Elk prays for the tree that has not bloomed.

But I have fallen away thus causing the tree never to bloom again; but there may be a root that is still alive, and give this root strength and moisture of your good things that you have given to us people and through all the powers of the four quarters.

Black Elk’s description is almost identical to a description of a tree given by Job:

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186 Hosea 2:20-22.
187 Rev 21:5.
188 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 295-6.
For a tree there is hope, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again and that its tender shoots will not cease. Even though its root grow old in the earth, and its stump die in the dust, Yet at the first whiff of water it may flourish again and put forth branches like a young plant.\textsuperscript{189}

Both describe a tree, though cut and old, lives in hope that with water and strength from the Lord, will bloom again.

During the prayer, Black Elk says, “help us and have mercy on us . . . that my people may live.”\textsuperscript{190} This is a constant theme in Black Elk’s interpretation of Lakota tradition. During the Hanblecheyapi (crying for a vision), the lamenter continually cries: “Wakan-Tanka onshima lye oyate wani wachin cha!” (O Great Spirit, be merciful to me that my people may live!\textsuperscript{191} During the Sun Dance this is repeated in song: “Wakan-Tanka, have mercy on us, that our people may live!”\textsuperscript{192} Black Elk’s son, Ben, states in a talk given in 1969 to the students of the Pine Ridge Boarding School, that “there is only one prayer the Indian uses: ‘Oh, Great Spirit, be merciful to me, that my people may live.”\textsuperscript{193}

However, we have already indicated in Chapter four that this was not the only prayer the Lakota used. In early Lakota tradition prayer for personal power and success in war were primary themes. This exclusive emphasis on the life of the people was an innovation by Black Elk. What is striking is the Christian correlation. First, the word that Black Elk uses for mercy in The Sacred Pipe, onshima l, is the same stem that is used to translate both grace and mercy in the Lakota Christian tradition.\textsuperscript{194}

\textsuperscript{189} Job 14:7-9.
\textsuperscript{190} DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 296.
\textsuperscript{191} Brown, The Sacred Pipe, 57.
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid., 70.
\textsuperscript{193} DeSersa and Pourier, Black Elk Lives, 16.
\textsuperscript{194} Jan Ullrich, personal communication.
Second, salvation, the Christian understanding of the primary action of God, is translated “to make live.” According to Ullrich, savior is translated as wanikhiye = ‘one who brings back to life’. The roots of the word make the connection more explicit.

wa- someone (detranzitivizer, forms occupational and other types of nouns)
i – to live
-khiya – to cause to

Consequently, Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, is He who makes live. This same translation is used for salvation. An example from the Dakota Bible is Revelation 7:10:

Dakota Text: K’ a hóthaŋkakíya hóthaŋnpi k’a heyápi, Wakháŋtháŋka uŋkíthawapi oiyotanké kíj akáŋ khiyotanké číŋ hé é, Amnos kíj kíčí, niwičhay e yuhá nujwe.

English Gloss: and / with a loud voice / they proclaimed / and / they said as follows / God / our / seat / the / upon / he sits down / the / that / it is him / Amnos / the / with / making people alive / he has / may it be

English Text: And cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb.

Comment: The Dakota translation of "Salvation" doesn’t seem to relate to the English version closely. While the English seem to mean something like "Let our God be saved" (if I understand it correctly), the Dakota text says "Let it be that he possess something to save the people".

According to Ullrich, the salvation that comes from God and Jesus Christ is expressed in the Dakota language as “to make people alive.” The action of Jesus, the reason for Jesus’ death and resurrection, the reason for the church, the reason to evangelize, is because Jesus makes the people live.

Consequently, Christianity in its Lakota embodiment, a religion that promises mercy, grace, and salvation, is centered on the very things on which Black Elk centers Lakota tradition. When Black Elk said the words, “‘Wakan-Tanka unshimala ye oyate wani wachin cha!’” (O Great Spirit, be merciful to me that my people may live!),” he was saying the same Lakota words used for the central gospel message: Lord, have mercy,

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195 Ibid.
give grace, and give us salvation.”

197 For Black Elk, there is no separation between the central prayer of Lakota tradition or Catholicism because the priest and the sun dancer say the same words.

If this exclusive emphasis on mercy from Wakan Tanka so that all people may live is in fact an innovation by Black Elk, then it is clearly a modification with its source in Christian thought. What has been standardized as the essence of Lakota tradition and spirituality, is in reality the result of Black Elk’s creative re-interpretation. No longer can Black Elk’s vision and interpretation of Lakota tradition be juxtaposed as the antithesis of Catholicism. The question now becomes to what degree is Black Elk’s interpretation an explicit manifestation of Christian thought. If the core message is the same, if there can be no easy division, then it must be viewed as Christian, but in a way that does not diminish or compromise the uniqueness of its Lakota framework.

**Interpretations**

The preceding discussion demonstrates that the action and symbols of Black Elk’s vision have clear links to biblical imagery. 198 It is possible to group these symbols according to their likely source.

A first group of concepts exist independently in Christian tradition. The images most directly associated with biblical imagery are ascension, call, cloud tipi, red road, cup of water, sacred wind, man painted red, and the sacred hoop. Many of these have no known Lakota precedence before Black Elk. Each has clear, multiple correlations in biblical tradition.

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The next is an intermediate level. The flowering stick, morning star, and the clouds are symbols that have more ambivalent identity. While these symbols most likely have Lakota origins, the variety and number of biblical allusions, along with the similarity of language suggests that they carried significant Christian meaning for Black Elk.

The final group is the symbols that are most likely to have independent Lakota origin and meaning: the pipe, eagle, soldier weed, and herbs. The pipe and the eagle have long and prominent positions in Lakota tradition. While herbs may not be prominent in recorded discourse, they occupied an important concrete role in Lakota ceremonial and medicinal practice. What is important for this study is that all of these symbols overlap with Christian tradition. Black Elk equates the pipe to the Old Testament. For both traditions the eagle represents God and achieved a prominent role in the names of missionaries. Black Elk explicitly rejects the soldier weed because of Christian tradition. The healing that goes with the herbs is a major emphasis of Jesus’ ministry.

In looking at the symbols Black Elk’s vision, then, a spectrum can be imagined. On the one end, Black Elk’s vision could be seen to be of independent Lakota origin that he later correlated to Christian tradition. On the other end would be the claim that Black Elk’s vision is completely derived from Christian tradition simply dressed in Lakota guise. Before discussing where on the spectrum Black Elk’s vision lies, it must be recognized that at no point can Black Elk’s vision be separated from Christian tradition.

198 The examples I provide do not exhaust the correlations between the Black Elk corpus and Christian tradition. Space and time have do not allow me to examine the many other Christian allusions and images that permeate Black Elk’s discourse.
Regardless of coincidence or derivation, DeMallie's claim that Black Elk's life as a Catholic was contrary or separate to his vision is not only untenable, it is impossible.

Even the claim that Black Elk's vision is from the Thunder-beings, or Wakinyan, has a strong Christian correlation. James R. Walker's Lakota mythology describes the origin of Wakinyan:

He [Inyan, the Rock] made a shapeless creature and named him Wakinyan (Winged one or Thunderstorm). *Wakinyan* is as shapeless as a cloud and terrifying to behold. He has two wings of many joints, which he can spread afar or make very small; he has neither legs nor feet, but has huge talons that can pierce the hardest of things; he has no mouth, but has a huge beak armed with sharp teeth that can rend and tear the toughest of things; he has no throat, but has one voice that is the thunder; and he has no head, but has one eye, and the glance of that eye is the lightning.\(^{199}\)

In the Riggs Bible, both the terms *Inyan* and *Wakinyan* are given significant Christian meaning. Jesus says that Peter is *Inyan*, the foundation of his church. Jesus calls the brother James and John the sons of *Wakinyan*. Consequently, Black Elk would hear that Jesus' three most important disciples are equated to two of the most powerful Lakota mythical beings. He would hear that Jesus is the source of the power of *Inyan* and *Wakinyan*. The church is built on *Inyan* and to follow Christ is to be a son of *Wakinyan*.

Then what of the question of origin? Is the similarity between Black Elk's vision and Christian tradition coincidental or did Black Elk derive his imagery from biblical imagery? Returning to the categories of orality described by Ong, I would argue that this question is less relevant to Black Elk (or perhaps not relevant at all) than it is to modern interpreters. To review Ong's categories:

1. Knowledge does not live in separate systems but in one real world.
2. New ideas are incorporated into the established conceptual framework.

3. If all knowledge must be based on the real, experienced world, to know something means to have achieved closeness, what Ong calls “Empathetic and Participatory Rather than Objectively Distanced.”

4. In order for oral cultures to incorporate new ideas, newly irrelevant knowledge is discarded. The meanings of words used is the meaning used in the present.

The testimony of his community asserts that Black Elk’s life was dominated by a communal Lakota Catholic life-style. This was his real world. According to Ong, the meaning of his words and discourse must come from here. In this sense, asking which came first is like the chicken and egg debate: in everyday practice, the question is irrelevant. It introduces a dichotomy foreign to Black Elk and thereby produces an interpretation of his vision that he would not recognize. For Black Elk, the Christian Lakota world is real because he lives it and speaks it every day.

If we choose to impose the question, I would argue that the textual evidence demonstrates a correlation too great to be simply coincidental. In light of the claims of the Lakota community discussed at the beginning of this chapter - that Black Elk knew Christian biblical texts very well, connected the biblical text to the world he experienced, especially the natural world, and had the ability to accurately quote specific passages - the connections between his vision and biblical tradition must be intentional. Black Elk intended to talk about the Lakota Catholic tradition. At the focal points of the vision – such as Black Elk’s call and the establishment of the tree – stand central biblical allusions. If Black Elk’s emphasis and Ben Black Elk’s claim are true – that the center of Lakota tradition is “O Great Spirit, be merciful to me, that my people may live - then at the center of Black Elk’s interpretation of Lakota tradition are the two most important teachings of Catholicism: Christ, Lord have mercy, give us salvation, that we may live.
Following Ong, Black Elk innovated within his Lakota conceptual framework. Thus, Black Elk’s vision is the Lakota embodiment of the Christian narrative. Black Elk interpreted his vision based on his present, and new religious thought was incorporated into the Lakota world. In Lucy’s words, her father, “had that vision and learned the tree was to be the Christian life of all people.”

The following map demonstrates the organization of Black Elk’s Lakota Catholic vision. The first column recapitulates the structure that DeMallie uses to organize the events of the vision. The middle column lists biblical references that correlate with Black Elk’s vision and parallel biblical events. The right column contains my proposal for a Catholic reading of Black Elk’s vision.

The Structure of Black Elk’s Vision

| 1. The two men take Black Elk up into the clouds | Ascension of Jesus – Acts Call of John – Rev 4:1 | Ascension 113-4 Call of Black Elk |
| 2. Black Elk is shown the horses of the four directions | Zechariah 6:1-5 | Vision of Tipi-Theophany Prophecy of what will happen in the four ascents 115-9 |
| 3. The bay horse leads Black Elk to the cloud tipi of the six grandfathers Do not fear Willpower of myself Nations shall tremble Cloud Tipi 6 Grandfathers Represent him Powerful in medicines and powers | Vision of Temple – Rev 4:2-6 | Black Elk’s adoption into the Christian narrative |
| Exodus 15:14, Psalm 99:1, Rev 1:7 Temple translated as tipi wakan and is in clouds 7 Spirits of God Go in the name of the Lord | Mt 10:8 Jesus sends disciples |

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The overall structure of the biblical imagery in Black Elk’s vision reveals three themes. First is the striking parallel to the book of Revelation. Black Elk’s vision follows the basic plot of Revelation. Both include a call, ascent to the heavenly temple, great battles and beasts, multiple divine beings that work for or represent Wakan Tanka, the victory of Wakan Tanka over suffering and destruction, and the establishment of universal peace and harmony. Revelation is also complemented by similar apocalyptic imagery from the prophets. Significantly, the references to both Revelation and the prophets are almost identical in language and imagery.

The second theme is the Christological focus of Black Elk’s vision. Black Elk places the establishment of the sacred tree at the center of the broader plot of Revelation.
This is consistent with position of the christological symbol of the lamb at the center of Revelation. As we have seen, most of the symbols of the vision carry significant Christological meaning.

The third theme is the historical nature of the vision. Black Elk organizes the vision in four ascents. The nation walks down the red road and each ascent represents a different generation with different characteristics. In the first ascent the people are happy and well. In the second, conditions begin to deteriorate. In the third the people all follow their own rules and need to be brought back into the sacred hoop. The flowering stick comes at the end of the third ascent. The fourth ascent is in the future. It will be filled with war and suffering, before Wakan Tanka renews creation and ends all suffering.

Taken as a whole, Black Elk’s vision is clearly a Lakota version of what Catholics call Salvation History. The first ascent is the call of Lakota like Israel with an Exodus journey. The second ascent is the failure of the Lakota to keep the covenant with Wakan Tanka. The third ascent is the total failure of the people. This necessitates Wakan Tanka’s intervention. To emphasize this Black Elk echoes Isaiah 53:6 during the third ascent:

Black Elk’s Vision The third ascent represented all kinds of animals and fowls, and from there on every man has his own vision and his own rules.201

Isaiah 53:6 We had all gone astray like sheep [in the Dakota Bible tahinca – the common deer], each following his own way...

In this section of Isaiah, the Hymn to the Suffering Servant 52:13-53:12, Wakan Tanka sends the Messiah to bear the guilt of Israel and redeem them because they are totally lost. In Black Elk’s vision, all of the Christological references now occur and the Flowering Stick is established. According to Black Elk, a cloud rains and “christens” the

201 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 127.
nation with water. The nation responds “Thanks to Eagle Wing Stretches” which means “thanks be to God.”

Black Elk sees ahead to the fourth ascent. This is what has not yet come to pass in Salvation History: the final apocalyptic battles of Revelation, the last judgment, *Wakan Tanka’s* establishment of peace and the renewal of all creation in Christ. Black Elk asserted that this would happen in the last cycle in his preface to the *Sacred Pipe*:

> We have been told by the white men, or at least by those who are Christians, that God sent to men His son, who would restore order and peace upon the earth; and we have been told that Jesus the Christ was crucified, but that he shall come again at the Last Judgment, the end of this world or cycle. This I understand and know that it is true.  

This reading directly coincides with Lakota history. Black Elk laments during the interview about the duplicitous actions of the whites and the suffering they brought to the Lakota. There are only two places where whites appear in Black Elk’s vision. The first is in the third ascent, where the nation has lost its way and the whites have fenced in the Indians and the animals.

> The white people came on this continent and put us Indians in a fence and they put another fence somewhere else and put our game into it. When the buffalo and elk are all gone, the Great Spirit will look upon the whites for this and perhaps something will happen.

Black Elk addresses the same thing in one of his Catholic letters:

> So I will tell you that all of you (and myself, that it or we) are like sheep among wolves ready to be eaten up. And you know when one sheep is surrounded by wolves, it has no place to go. That’s how we are. We are ready to be eaten up.  
> So my friends and relatives, we should stand together and do what is right and be patient. That way God has something good for us all the time.

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203 Ibid.

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Black Elk then states that this will not be forgotten and the Great Spirit will judge the whites. After the whites arrive, the flowering stick is established and the Catholic Church comes to the Lakota.

The second place that whites appear in the vision is at the end after the last judgment. Among the millions of faces in the New Jerusalem and renewed creation an uncertain Black Elk sees that there are whites also.

This description of Lakota Salvation History is placed within the framework of Revelation. Like John, Black Elk is brought to the heavenly tipi and shown what will come to pass, and what role he will play in the great drama. And like John, he returns to tell his people and spread his vision.

In the end, then, Lucy’s claim stands against the readings of modern academics. The words of Black Elk, so long interpreted as a rejection or the antithesis of Christianity, demonstrate that they themselves carry the gospel message. Against DeMallie’s gap, the vision is the best evidence that Catholicism was central to all of Black Elk’s life and thought. For Black Elk, the Sacred Tree was the central symbol for the one Lakota Catholic world that he inhabited and the one language he spoke.
Chapter 6: Misinterpreting the Vision

The years from 1930 to 1940 rank as the worst ten years I know of, and all the Oglala as old as I am will agree. In that one single period we lost everything we had gained... Black Elk gave me my first eagle feather headdress. It was a beautiful head bonnet, and it had thirty or more tail feathers in it... During the depression, and sometime after 1930, I sold it for one hundred and fifty dollars, which was a lot of money in those days. I have many times regretted its sale.¹

Fools Crow.

Neihardt misunderstood Black Elk’s vision. This is downplayed or even dismissed by scholars because they ignore the cultural and historical context of Black Elk’s work with Neihardt and the Duhamel Pageant. I will examine DeMallie’s description of Neihardt’s work in his biography of Black Elk because most consider it to be a fair and well-balanced account.² I hope to show that even his account succumbs to modern Western assumptions and a general romanticism by falsely ascribing Black Elk with three reasons for his collaboration with Neihardt: 1. That Black Elk shares Neihardt’s spiritual quest, 2. That Black Elk’s intentional audience for Native American cultural revival is White America, and 3. That Black Elk is dependent on Neihardt to unburden himself from the burden of his vision.

DeMallie’s claims first that Black Elk decided to collaborate with Neihardt because both were on a quest to teach mystical enlightenment.

In yet another context, therefore, we find Black Elk and Neihardt close to one another in ideas but having arrived there from different premises...[neither] would surrender to mere exigency, and each in his own way strove for the higher understanding that promises to unite all mankind in common effort.³

² Before continuing, I must acknowledge that DeMallie was dependent on the Neihardt family to grant him permission to examine the transcripts. Consequently, the following claims may be influenced by the interests of the Neihardts.
³ DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 66, 67.
Demallie claims that although they started in the different contexts, Black Elk and Neihardt’s motives are the same: an unspecified higher consciousness that unites all humankind despite differences.

Black Elk’s motivation to teach enlightenment is directly subsumed as a subset of Neihardt’s work. DeMallie writes that, “Black Elk undoubtedly saw his own vision as an integral part of Neihardt’s ongoing life work.” In other words, Black Elk saw himself as an actor in Neihardt’s drama.

The next two claims build on the first in that DeMallie portrays Black Elk as sharing the same goals for the project. The second reason DeMallie gives for the collaboration is that Black Elk’s real spiritual motive is to share his Lakota teachings with whites. DeMallie’s description of Black Elk’s participation in the Duhamel Pageant illustrates this concern:

Black Elk’s motivation in publicly performing these sacred rituals appears to have been to teach white audiences that the old-timer Lakota religion was a true religion, not devil-worship as the missionaries claimed...This was the logical extension of Black Elk’s vision to “go out,” to share the traditional ways with the white men.5

According to DeMallie, Black Elk is concerned to see his Lakota vision go out to the white world.

Third, DeMallie maintains that Black Elk needs to be liberated from his great burden by confessing his vision and is dependent on Neihardt to accomplish this. DeMallie sets the scene by emphasizing Black Elk’s long term denial of his vision in favor of Catholicism:

Black Elk, for his part, was tying together the ends of his life. Now, at age sixty-seven, he was returning to the days of his youth to tell about his great vision, and the sacred power from his six grandfathers, which he had put behind him when he converted to Roman Catholicism. Surely the decision to disclose the sacred teachings and preserve

4 Ibid., 37.
5 Ibid., 66.
them for the benefit of posterity – rather than let them die, completely replaced by the white man’s religion – had not been made lightly. Black Elk sensed an interest and a power in Neihardt that was kindred to his own, and he felt compelled to respond to it.\(^6\)

DeMallie portrays Black Elk as suddenly returning through the agency of Neihardt to a past that he had completely rejected since his conversion. This rejection placed an incredible burden on Black Elk, and he “felt compelled” to respond to the opportunity that Neihardt offers to free him. DeMallie continues:

Neihardt was not merely collecting material for his poem or for the book he would write about Black Elk. He was sharing in the spiritual burden that had been placed on the Oglala holy man so long before by the six grandfathers – and that Black Elk had denied for so long – to spread the message of his vision as a means to bring about human happiness and harmony, to better men’s lives. For Black Elk, as for Neihardt, it was a striving after a higher purpose.\(^7\)

According to DeMallie, Neihardt shares and releases Black Elk’s burden while becoming the means to “human happiness and harmony.” For both, it was an identical striving for a higher spiritual purpose. This shared spiritual purpose finally releases Black Elk from his spiritual prison: “With the story completed, Black Elk had finally transferred his spiritual burden to Neihardt: it would never trouble him again.”\(^8\)

Summarizing, DeMallie portrays a Black Elk who, like Neihardt, wants to share enlightenment, is primarily concerned with sharing his teachings with the white world, and dependent on Neihardt to use his power to release him from the burden of his vision. This portrayal is problematic for two reasons. First, it subsumes Black Elk into Western philosophical categories that divide the world two realms: the spiritual and physical, and makes Black Elk, like Neihardt, only concerned with the spiritual aspects of life. Second,

\(^6\) Ibid., 31.
\(^7\) Ibid., 43.
\(^8\) Ibid., 46.
it makes Black Elk inconsistent with the Black Elk that is remembered by the Lakota community.9

**Challenging the Assumptions**

The historical and cultural context challenges DeMallie’s portrayal of Black Elk unrealistic. DeMallie ignores the real life in which the Black Elk – Neihardt interview was embedded in. This context includes four factors: 1. Cultural differences, 2. The specific details of Black Elk and Neihardt’s relationship, 3. The creation of fictional burden, and 4. The economic context. These factors necessitate a new interpretation of Black Elk’s collaboration with Neihardt.

**Imagined Ethnography**

Cultural differences between Neihardt and the Lakota were immense. Neihardt never learned the Lakota language and was dependent on Black Elk’s son Ben as an interpreter. Neihardt was a stranger to the community and did not know Black Elk or any of the informants. This meant that not only was he not a participant in any of the actual day to day communal Lakota practices, he was not familiar with what they were. As a result, he does not operate in or understand the categories of the current Lakota world.

However, scholars most often ignore the fact that Neihardt does not live in or understand the categories of the Catholic world either. Catholic culture consists in more than propositional beliefs. Catholicism is embodied in narratives, rituals, and communal practices. The Mass, retreats, sodalities, conferences, mission trips, biblical reading, and personal devotions permeated all aspects of Lakota Catholic life with particular meaning.

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9 In continuing this study, it is important to remember that DeMallie is fairly realistic. There are much more romantic interpretations of the interviews offered by other scholars. For example, George E. Linden writes, “Nicholas Black Elk and John G. Neihardt were brother-mystics... How fortunate Black Elk
Participants view activities and relationships through the interpretive lens that these Catholic practices form. This is particularly true of Black Elk, who spent decades as a leader of the Lakota Catholic community fostering the creation of its culture and interpretive lens. Consequently, Neihardt is not a participant in either thread of Black Elk’s one integrated Lakota Catholic world.

Neihardt’s specific agenda compounded the problems created by his cultural limitations. Neihardt had already formulated his search parameters before he found Black Elk. He was looking for the dramatic end of his narrative of the West: the “pure” pre-contact Lakota world and its inevitable defeat in the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee. He was not interested in reservation life or adaptations the Lakota made to their way of life in order to survive American colonialism. DeMallie realizes this and writes:

Neihardt perceived Black Elk through the lens of his own lifework, A Cycle of the West. The purpose of this epic poem, Neihardt had written, was ‘to preserve the great race-mood of courage that was developed west of the Missouri River in the 19th century.’ The corollary to the triumph of the ‘westering white men’ was the inevitable defeat of the Plains Indians. It is not that Neihardt misunderstood Black Elk, but that he perceived his life as embodying the whole tragic history of defeat whose emotional tone he was trying to convey in verse in A Cycle.10

DeMallie is correct in emphasizing that Neihardt interpreted Black Elk as the essentialized “other,” important only in its juxtaposition to westward American expansion.

A further part of Neihardt’s specific agenda is his conscious anti-Christian bias. Neihardt views Catholicism as routine and sterile compared to Lakota tradition. According to DeMallie, "for Neihardt, the beauty of Black Elk’s vision made the

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formalism of Christian religion seem all the more stultifying.”¹¹ Not only did Neihardt not understand Catholic culture, he also saw the motivation behind Black Elk’s conversion to be an illogical mystery.

Hilda Neihardt remembers the interviews in her book *Black Elk and Flaming Rainbow*. When the whole Black Elk family other than Black Elk and Ben left for the annual Catholic Conference she writes “that their attendance at the council seemed almost disloyal” to the interview.¹² She proceeds to discuss Black Elk’s membership in what she calls a “white church,” a subject she considered “sensitive” and “vaguely unpleasant.”¹³

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 it necessary to say left us with a strong sense of where his true beliefs remained. Understanding all too well, Neihardt said no more.¹⁴

This interaction is clear evidence of Neihardt’s bias. Hilda makes clear that Neihardt did not feel a need to ask any questions or gather any information about Black Elk’s conversion. Rather, he imposed his own negative impression of Catholicism and his western categories that assume an either/or dichotomy between Lakota and Catholic tradition. Without any evidence, Neihardt completely dismisses Black Elk’s Catholic life and turns it into an “unpleasant subject.” In essence, Hilda Neihardt makes the claim that it is possible to draw clear, definitive, and absolute conclusions about topics in ethnographic proceedings without actually gathering information. The difficulties of

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¹¹ Ibid., 47.
¹² Neihardt, *Black Elk and Flaming Rainbow*, 88. Black Elk and Ben are the only members of the family that are being paid a salary by Neihardt, see section on financial concerns.
¹³ Ibid., 89. There is no source that directly quotes Black Elk ever referring to the Catholic Church (or any church) as a “white church.”
¹⁴ Ibid.
cross-cultural and linguistic communication can be addressed not by more thorough investigation, but avoided by complete silence.

Reviewing these dynamics it is clear that the interviews do not meet even minimal standards of responsible ethnographic investigation. Neihardt does not have the Lakota or Catholic cultural tools to recognize the particular concrete practices of everyday life. He categorically excludes concrete cultural practices among the Lakota of Pine Ridge. He limits his work to a small window of time and interprets it through a “manifest destiny” lens. All of these factors make it impossible for Neihardt to have an adequate framework to understand Black Elk’s vision and his motivation for telling it.

**Black Elk and Neihardt’s Romanticized Relationship**

The second reason why DeMallie’s account is inaccurate is that the historical record of the relationship between Neihardt and Black Elk does not live up to the romanticized version that the Neihardt family promotes. The short duration of their relationship does not justify the claim that Neihardt knew Black Elk as a close personal friend.

Black Elk and Neihardt were strangers before their four and a half hour meeting in August 1930. Their longest time together was during the interviews of 1931, which lasted three weeks. The publishing of the book in 1932 led to some tension between the two. Hilda, Neihardt’s daughter who was present at the interview, admitted this in an interview with R. Todd Wise when she stated that “for a while he denied Neihardt.”

Ben wrote to Neihardt in June 1934 that, “Emil A. [Afraid of] Hawk [Catholic catechist and present at first interview] has been loading the old man about lots of things. The old

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man felt uneasy for a while. But he is perfectly satisfied, very glad to hear you are coming again.”16 Despite this assurance, when Neihardt returned to Pine Ridge in 1934 for part of the summer he stayed on Ben’s land on Wounded Knee Creek. There were no interviews; Neihardt worked on writing *Song of the Messiah*. According to Hilda, Black Elk did not visit the Neihardts.17

Neihardt was away from Pine Ridge for the next decade. Black Elk wrote him a letter in 1940 which said “for 5yrs successive Ive been to the Bl[ack] Hills for the summer & putting up a show for Duhamels so I really forget to write to my friends.”18 This suggests that they had not communicated since Neihardt left Pine Ridge in 1934. Neihardt returned in 1944 for another interview with Black Elk and other Oglala, which lasted seven days.19 In 1945 Neihardt went to Pine Ridge for a day and spoke for the BIA at the great Sioux victory celebration for World War II. Neihardt’s last visit was September 19 – October 11 to work for the BIA. Although DeMallie says he “undoubtedly” visited Black Elk, there is no record of it.20

Many interpretations highlight the numerous ceremonies that Black Elk demonstrated to Neihardt as if he was teaching the whole of Lakota tradition. But other than the naming ceremony, smoking the pipe, and demonstrating the Rabbit Dance,

16 DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 62. Once again DeMallie interprets this as the Lakota getting in the way of the real relationship, Neihardt and Black Elk.

17 Hilda Neihardt, *Black Elk and Flaming Rainbow*, 106. Hilda claims that Black Elk was working in Colorado for the summer. This seems highly unlikely as Black Elk was still recovering from being run over by a wagon in the winter. He received *Extreme Unction* and recovered, but Ben wrote to Neihardt in June 4, 1934, “Father got well but he aint the old man he used to be.” DeMallie suggests that it is possible that Black Elk had already started working for the pageant by now. In any event, he did not return to see the Neihardts nor did they visit him. See DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 59, 63n.


Neihardt saw no other ceremonies. These are hardly the sacred mysteries of the Lakota. Both the naming ceremony and smoking the pipe are used to establish new relationships and are commonly performed with outsiders while the Rabbit Dance serves more of a social function.

Neihardt did not play a major role in Black Elk’s family life or communal memory. When Black Elk’s granddaughter Esther is asked if she remembers hearing Black Elk or Ben talking much about Neihardt or *Black Elk Speaks* she responded “well, every now and then, but not often.”\(^{21}\)

This brief survey mitigates the “adopted spiritual father” aura that many scholars assume about Black Elk and Neihardt’s relationship. Neihardt spent a total of about a month with Black Elk and experienced conflict for at least some time after the first interviews. After the initial interview, Neihardt saw Black Elk two other times. This is not sufficient time to claim that Neihardt and Black Elk had a legitimate father-son relationship.

**The Fictional Burden**

The third reason why DeMallie’s romantic interpretation is inaccurate is the creation of Black Elk’s “burden.” There is no evidence from any Lakota sources that Black Elk was burdened by his vision and experienced a great relief by telling it to Neihardt. If anything, he felt defeated by telling Neihardt, which Neihardt himself records. After a dramatic passage describing the release of Black Elk’s burden, DeMallie writes:

\[
\text{He said while he talked he had the queer feeling that he was giving his power away, and that he would die soon after. Neihardt later wrote his publisher: ‘At various times Black}
\]

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 70.
\(^{21}\) DeSersa and Pourier, *Black Elk Lives*, 133.
Elk would become melancholy over the thought that at last he had given away his great vision...Hilda recalls that Black Elk said to Neihardt: 'I have given you my power, and now I am just a poor old man.'

This is hardly a picture of the relief of having a great burden, carried for decades, finally lifted. Black Elk is sad, powerless, and feels like dying.

This also ignores the fact that Black Elk did tell his vision, which the Lakota community then performed.

[Mother and father] invited a medicine man to come over by the name of Black Road and he came over. My father asked him to ask me if I had a vision and if he could help me out so that I would not be in great fear. So he asked me if I had had a vision and I told him it briefly. He said, 'Ahh!' meaning that he was astonished. He said: 'Nephew, I have been there for a vision but you have not seen my tracks. There I have been and I have seen a boy in a council tipi and I knew that it was you, I now recognize you. The main thing for you to do, and it is your duty to do as the bay horse that you have seen told you, that you should perform that duty on this earth.' (I was to dance the horse dance first.)

If Black Elk has already told and publicly enacted his vision, there must be some other factor contributing the melancholy and defeat that Neihardt describes, other than an imagined "white man’s burden.” Perhaps it is related to the fact he told a white man. Or perhaps it is connected to the economic context discussed in the next two sections.

Financial Concerns

DeMallie’s account gives an extensive account of the financial aspects of the interviews. In a letter Neihardt wrote to Black Elk on November 6, 1930 to arrange the interviews, Neihardt assures Black Elk that “I would, of course, expect to pay you well

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23 This could be related to Lakota tradition which discouraged public arbitrary public disclosure of visions ceremonial practices. These may be the factors that caused Fools Crow great surprise to learn that Black Elk told his vision to an outsider. When told by his potential biographer that Black Elk had described his vision to Neihardt, “Fools Crow was stunned. He knew little if nothing about the content of the famous book.” Mails, Fools Crow, 5.
24 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 214.
for all the time that you would give me.”

Hilda remembers that Black Elk, Ben, and the other storytellers received an unspecified daily wage.

During the three weeks that Neihardt and his daughters stayed with Black Elk, Neihardt covered all of the expenses, particularly food, with the $1,000 advance from the publisher. This covered more than the immediate family:

Hilda remembers that many others came uninvited and that each one sat on the ground a respectful distance from the house with his back to the proceedings. Then Ellen, Black Elk’s wife, would ask Neihardt if the newcomer could be fed. After this invitation had been extended, the man would join the group. The women of Black Elk’s family prepared three meals that day, feeding all who came.

The number of Lakota was so great that Hilda remembers the advance “melting like ice in summertime.” According to Enid Neihardt’s diary written during the interview, “Daddy has to feed the whole Sioux Nation!” This became such a burden that the project was moved ten days later to a more remote location.

On May 15, before much work was done, Neihardt purchased a young Holstein bull from Black Elk’s daughter Lucy. It was butchered, and along with other traditional foods, fed over 200 people from the area.

During this period Black Elk prays for the success of the book. Enid wrote in her diary the day they all visited that Badlands, Black Elk prayed “to the six grandfathers of his vision, wishing that they should help Daddy to make a success of this book.”

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25 Ibid., 29. He also sent Black Elk a seven dollar advance for materials to make the paintings of the Messiah and Wounded Knee. See full transcript of the letter in Holloway, Interpreting the Legacy, 54. It is important to note that economic concerns are not a priority for any of the sources I am using. Since it is tangential for these sources, economic evidence is even more significant. It is likely that interviews and archival research with the goal of examining the financial aspects of the Neihardt interviews, Brown interview, and the Duhamel Pageant would yield more information.

26 Hilda Neihardt, Black Elk and Flaming Rainbow, 19.

27 Ibid., 18.

28 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 32.

29 Hilda Neihardt, Black Elk and Flaming Rainbow, 56.

30 Ibid.

31 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 39.

32 Ibid., 33.
After the interviews were completed, Neihardt wrote to Black Elk on June 27, 1931, assuring him that the book will be a success:

We are going to do something real with this book about ‘The Tree That Never Bloomed;’ and I am sure that you are going to be a good deal happier because of this book. Keep a good heart and be patient until next spring when the book appears. I have to work hard on the book and be patient too, and I can do both with a strong heart because I know that the book is wise and good and that thousands of people will find good in it.  

One would expect that “thousands of people” finding good in the book would imply or be taken by Black Elk to also mean a good financial return.

After Black Elk told Neihardt about his horse dance in the original interview, Neihardt said that he thought it would be a good subject for a movie. DeMallie records that,

Black Elk offered to provide an entire village as a background and to stage the dance if Neihardt could get the backing. The old man saw it as an opportunity to spread the message of his sacred vision on a larger scale than he ever thought possible – and besides, Neihardt held out hope that there would be monetary profit in it with which Black Elk could support his family.

In the same letter from June 27, 1931, Neihardt wrote back with a very positive reply:

You will see that my publisher thinks the best chance is to try to make a picture of the whole book rather than of the Horse Dance alone. I think perhaps this will be the best way, because there will be a story to tell and people like stories. Anyway, you may know that my publisher means business and knows how to do business. If anything comes of this, you can depend upon me to see that you get what is just as your portion.

Financial concerns also played a large role in The Duhamel Sioux Indian Pageant. Native American participants received food, water, wood, and 25 percent of the daily gate. There was additional income from sales of arts and crafts to tourist who visited

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33 Ibid., 44.
34 Ibid., 54.
35 Ibid., 40. Here we find a complete reversal – even though Black Elk offered to provide an entire village for the movie, DeMallie interprets him as an unselfish spiritual being and Neihardt as the noble white man kindly looking to take care of the poor natives who are too concerned with spiritual things to do it themselves.
36 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 50.
37 Born, Black Elk and the Duhamel Sioux Indian Pageant, 26.
the Lakota camps. His daughter Lucy Looks Twice reports that, "the women got a dollar and a quarter, and the men got a dollar and a half." In addition, Black Elk was able to earn more money from photographs that the tourists took of him.

In conclusion, financial aspects underlie all aspects of the interviews. From the beginning, Neihardt was very persistent in promising substantial financial compensation for the book first and then a potential movie. He demonstrated this by substantial support during his stay with Black Elk. The same is true of the pageant, where Black Elk earned $45 a month including expenses. Given his other dealings with white men in the Wild West Shows, it is safe to conclude that Black Elk would be expecting substantial compensation. This expectation would play a major role in Black Elk's decision to collaborate with Neihardt and the pageant, especially given the historical context.

**Historical Context: The Great Depression**

The promise of financial compensation for the interviews did not exist in an economic vacuum. Neihardt arrived at Black Elk's home in the summer of 1931, almost two years into the Great Depression. In the already marginalized reservation economies, Native Americans suffered disproportionately to the rest of America. Ironically, it is DeMallie who describes the desperate conditions on Pine Ridge caused by the Depression:

> With the financial crash of 1929, the short-lived prosperity of the entire region was ruined. The white grain farmers were entirely wiped out, and most of them moved away. The drought, with its hordes of grasshoppers and severe dust storms, ruined the Indian gardens and farms and killed the livestock ... Mekeel found that the average income per family (5.4 persons) in White Clay district in 1930 was $152.80. This income – supplemented with small government rations, chokecherries and other wild foods, and

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38 Ibid., 27.
horsemeat – kept starvation just around the corner. There was no food surplus at all; traditional patterns of sharing leveled everyone to the same state of poverty.\textsuperscript{41}

According to DeMallie, the Great Depression completely destroyed both subsistence patterns and any hope of entering the modern economy on Pine Ridge. Social status offered no protection because the sharing patterns of Lakota tradition demanded that surplus goods be distributed to those with greater need. The danger of starvation was real.

In his autobiography, Fools Crow remembers the 1930’s as a time of great suffering. According to Fools Crow, “The years from 1930 to 1940 rank as the worst ten years I know of, and all the Oglala as old as I am will agree. In that one single period we lost everything we had gained.”\textsuperscript{42} Fools Crow vividly describes the conditions during the drought:

There was no rain at all, and nothing grew – not in the gardens, not the wild fruits, not the crops in the fields. Every year it got worse. The grasshoppers came in swarms, the grass didn’t grow, and tumbleweeds were everywhere. Always the wind blew, and the air was thick with dust. It got through everything, sifting into our homes and even our clothing. Most of the horses and cattle starved to death, and the poultry and the pigs shriveled up and died too.\textsuperscript{43}

We saw in Chapter three how social problems, such as alcoholism, emerged during the 1930’s. The economy was so bad that the Lakota were forced to sell their possessions, even ones necessary for daily survival. According to DeMallie “the Indians sold everything they could, even the dishes in their houses.”\textsuperscript{44}

The numbers that DeMallie gives are important for understanding the context and its probable influence on Black Elk’s decisions. According to DeMallie, the average family on Pine Ridge earned $12.74 a month during the worst of the Depression. Even if

\textsuperscript{42} Mails, \textit{Fools Crow}, 148.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 145.
we allow Black Elk double what the average family earned since he was considered economically successful, he would still earn twice the income per month working for the Pageant. ($1.50 times 30 = $45 + expenses covered + photograph money). Keep in mind that this is only counting Black Elk, not family members who might have worked in the Pageant. Lucy highlights the fact that the money they earned from the Pageant was significant: “It was during the depression, but they made quite a bit of money on his performance.”

David O. Born concludes that this pageant originated with Black Elk with the purpose of employing Indians.

This is compounded by Black Elk’s understanding of work. In a letter published in *The Catholic Herald* July 15, 1909, Black Elk writes: “We must all sweat and tire for our own good – by working for ourselves and making a living. If we don’t sweat and tire, then we cannot live. When God came to this earth, He sweat and He got tired and He brought the good news also.”

Monetary needs played a big role in all Oglala decisions during the Great Depression. Survival was the most important concern. At a time when Oglala were selling their dishes for food, Neihardt was promising a financial return potentially much greater than Black Elk’s Pageant income. Given Black Elk’s age and disabilities, which prevented him from most types of employment, Black Elk’s decision to work with Neihardt had to be motivated at least partially by economic factors.

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45 Olivia remembers staying at the Pageant with Lucy, Leo Looks Twice, George Looks Twice, Ben, one of her brothers, and her sisters Grace, Esther, and Kate with about five other families. DeSersa and Pourier, *Black Elk Lives*, 133-4.
48 Timonin, Letter 7.
49 But curiously, despite the fact that DeMallie wrote the article from which I cite descriptions of the conditions on Pine Ridge during the Great Depression, he makes no mention of its effect on Black Elk.
A New Paradigm: Colonialism, Tourism, and the Dominican Republic

The romantic paradigm that DeMallie offers, and others embellish, is not sufficient given the real-life complexity of the interviews. DeMallie imagines a phenomenological model where Black Elk and Neihardt are two individuals on a quest for mutual enlightenment and the enlightenment of White America. This model bypasses the historical context and cultural limitations of the interviews. A more accurate interpretation needs a paradigm that deals with the context in which Black Elk lived - a people trying to survive American colonialism - and accounts for Neihardt’s inadequate, yet naively confident, ethnography.

A parallel from the contemporary world illustrates the dynamics operating in the Black Elk – Neihardt collaboration as well as the Duhamel Pageant: the third world tourist industry. In this industry, economically powerful foreigners go to what they interpret as an exotic place in search of a different world, an alternative to their world. They bring comparatively great financial resources to local economies. Often times, the local communities are dependent on tourism as the main or exclusive source of capital, and the best source of employment for its people.

Consequently, the local community is forced in varying degrees to accommodate to tourists’ demand for exotic culture, usually based on romanticized symbols. Often times these symbols have little present value in the everyday life of the local culture or no longer function at all. In some cases, they may directly contradict local culture. Yet these symbols must be developed and emphasized to compete in the tourist industry.

He refers to the effect on Neihardt. In discussing why Neihardt is unable to buy land on the reservation as a vacation home, Demallie writes “the Depression and the war years were to be hard ones for the Neihardts.” DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 51.
The industry accomplishes this in resorts, which are isolated from the realities of the third world. Tourists have better living conditions and amenities than in the surrounding community. Most importantly, tourists have much better access to nutrition than the local population. Workers may benefit from these improved conditions since resorts often feed their workers and offer other benefits. Also, resorts must be able to conduct business in the languages of their clients.

A concrete example is from the Dominican Republic. Eric, a Dominican male in his early twenties, recently lost his job at a tourist resort and was looking for a new one. His first choice would be to emigrate to the U.S. in search of economic opportunity, but he did not have the resources, connections, or status to obtain the necessary documentation. Luckily he spoke English and understood some other languages which made him a good applicant.

He described two impediments that hurt his chances at getting a new job in the tourist industry. The first was that did not know folkloric dance, and was trying to find a school that could teach him with the limited resources he had. Eric’s second impediment was that he wasn’t “black” enough. His skin was too light and that his hair wasn’t “hard” enough, or curled tightly enough for certain hairstyles, such as an afro, braids, or dreads.

Eric was anxious to somehow overcome these impediments since he needed the employment for communal survival. With his salary Eric would support his mother and siblings. He also enjoyed better living conditions working in the tourist industry as employees were housed nearby, and had access to much better nutrition and some health care.

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50 This is from the author’s work in the Dominican Republic.
Two significant themes emerge from this account. First, folkloric dance is no longer a functioning part of everyday Dominican society. Virtually the only place that it is practiced is at tourist resorts. In an effort to appear more exotic and “other,” the tourist industry recreates a virtually extinct cultural practice, folkloric dance, to improve its business.

The second theme is the tourist industry’s desire for “blackness.” This emphasis is in fact counter-cultural in the Dominican Republic to a large degree. Due to the Spanish colonial legacy, a history of racist dictatorships, and its juxtaposition to Haiti (its much poorer neighbor whose population is generally darker), there is a strain of Dominican culture that seeks to divorce itself from its African roots. To be “negro” and have “hard” hair in the Dominican Republic is often considered undesirable and these terms are often used as an insult. In this context, the tourist industry reverses Dominican cultural categories and makes blackness a marketable commodity because of the importance that blackness has in the tourists’ imagined Caribbean. In order to compete with the tourist industries of other Caribbean nations where blackness is a positive cultural value, the tourist industry reifies Dominican culture and adopts blackness as a normative cultural value.

However, the tourist industry does not sell only reified culture. The most important commodity given to the tourist is the feeling of authenticity. The tourist must leave convinced that the culture portrayed by the tourist industry is the authentic world of the native community. The success of the tourist industry is predicated on the degree to which the tourist feels he/she has experienced the essence of the “other.”

51 There are other examples: the extensive market for Haitian paintings and the common use of Jamaican Reggae music are a couple, both of which are products of other cultures.
From this discussion, a number of themes arise. First, the unequal economic system developed and maintained by colonialism serves as the background for the creation of the tourist industry. Second, this industry must create an island of comfort within a sea of poverty. On this island a better lifestyle is maintained, primarily for the tourists but also to a lesser extent the workers. Despite its exotic image, this island operates in the cultural categories and language of the tourist. Third, culture becomes a commodity in places where there are few other resources. Fourth, the culture that is marketed is not the lived culture of communities. Rather, it is shaped and even created by the imagination of the tourist outsiders and reified by the industry. Fifth, to participate in the tourist industry, local communities are forced to compromise if they wish to compete. Unsatisfied tourists are always at liberty to go somewhere else and find a product that better suits their demand. Consequently, the sixth theme is that tourists need to feel that they have had an authentic experience of the imagined world of the native that is different from their own in order to continue spending their money.

**Black Elk, Neihardt and the New Paradigm**

The six themes from the third world tourist industry world are present in the context of the Black Elk – Neihardt interviews. First, Pine Ridge Reservation has the same economic conditions. It has no resources and in the 1930’s an economy destroyed by the Great Depression. Cultural and economic factors prevent most residents from relocating in search of economic opportunity elsewhere. Black Elk calls the Lakota “prisoners of war.”

Second, there is a similar creation of a resort-like compound:
Then they drove north, toward Manderson, where they met two of Black Elk’s sons, who were borrowing beds for their visitor’s use. As the Neihardts followed the boys to Black Elk’s house in the hills beyond the town, Hilda noticed men busily hauling barrels of water from the creek. On a knoll in front of the house a large new tipi [for the Neihardts to stay in] of white duck had had been erected, with the flaming rainbow of Black Elk’s vision painted above the doorway and the vision power symbols painted on the sides…Nearby, the Neihardts noticed a startlingly new privy, obviously constructed for their convenience. Around the house and the tipi a circle of freshly cut pine trees, uniformly small, had been thrust into the ground. Partway down the slope in front of the tipi was a small circular dance bower, also constructed of fresh pine boughs.53

DeMallie’s description emphasizes the cultural novelty of the setting that Black Elk’s family created for the Neihardt’s family. However, Black Elk is working to ensure that the Neihardt’s lifestyle is accommodated with plenty of water, beds, and a new privy. Significantly, the Neihardts stay in a new tipi, a dwelling no longer used for housing in Pine Ridge in the 1930’s. The Black Elk’s and other Lakota live in wood houses.

Although Neihardt goes to investigate a different culture, the investigation is conducted in his own cultural medium, the English language. The lifestyle enjoyed by the Neihardts and Black Elk’s family was certainly much higher than average on the Depression ravaged reservation, most significantly in nutrition. Neihardt’s activity makes a significant economic impact on Black Elk’s extended family and friends.

Third, the commodity that Neihardt was looking for and “buying” was culture.

52 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 289. In Black Elk Lives, Black Elk’s granddaughters make numerous allusions to their family’s poverty: not getting enough food (30), family too poor to get them from school during Christmas (37-8), too poor to buy presents for Christmas (24-5).

53 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 30-1. Holloway provides an interesting, spiritual, “white focused” interpretation: “First, note the way in which Black Elk and his family and friends established a communal context, a teaching arena, for the 1931 narrative work with Neihardt that produced Black Elk Speaks…Black Elk organized dances and feasts, decorated his home with pines, and supervised the creation of a special tipi with visionary symbols, including a flaming rainbow. He provided John, Enid, and Hilda Neihardts with a total cultural and communal immersion in which the visitors were active, physical participants. Informal interaction and traditional ceremony taught the visitors both intellectually and spiritually. The learning did not take place in the sterile classroom of the dominant culture’s academe but was an experience activating senses and intuitions so the visitors would learn about culture, tradition, and the ‘outer world.”’ This description would not be out of place in an article describing the authentic experience that a particular third world resort provides tourists in a contemporary travel magazine marketed to upper-class Americans. Notice that the focus of this description is what Black Elk provides Neihardt and how he is affected by the experience. Brian Holloway, Interpreting the Legacy: John Neihardt and Black Elk Speaks (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2003), 66.
Fourth, the culture that Black Elk and the other Lakota demonstrated did not reflect the totality of cultural practices of the current reservation life, but catered to Neihardt’s preconceived agenda that emphasized what was totality different from white America. There was no discussion of the current state of the BIA and allotments, the cattle industry, agriculture, educational system, or current religious practices. The interview focused solely on the cultural practices of the pre-reservation era and their demise.

Fifth, Neihardt was at liberty to conclude that Black Elk did not provide the commodity he was looking for and find someone else. Consequently, Black Elk was at least implicitly under pressure to supply Neihardt’s demand.

Sixth, Neihardt very quickly buys into all the cultural trappings, yet does not participate in any of the day to day activities that were currently being practiced. Neihardt is certain that his search for the authentic Native American is over. He wants to continue working with Black Elk, which means future investment in the community. Practices such as adopting him into the tribe and calling him “son” would serve to heighten Neihardt’s emotional commitment to Black Elk and his community.

The third world tourist industry was not a new phenomenon to Black Elk or the Lakota. The first manifestation of this was the Wild West Shows, which recruited Native Americans to travel the United States and Europe exhibiting cultural practices for white audiences. Black Elk spent more than two years in Wild West shows. While he describes his motivation in terms of investigation of the white world, financial concerns would have been a factor, maybe even a decisive factor, for the decision of many of the participants. All participants received $25 a month including travel, food, clothing,
medical attention, and incidentals.\textsuperscript{54} It also meant that the participant did not have to run from the army or deal with the poverty and social upheaval of the new reservation system.

This dynamic matched the industry described above: reified culture for sale in the consumer’s own cultural context. In the more than two years that Black Elk spent as a travelling tourist attraction, he learned well what white people were looking for when they (often sympathetically) interact with Native Americans. Even the Queen of the largest colonial empire that the world has ever known recognized the dynamics of the industry at work in the Wild West Show. Black Elk described a speech that Queen Victoria gave to the Native Americans of the Wild West Show:

\begin{quote}
America is a good country and I have seen all kinds of people, but today I have seen the best looking people – the Indians...If I owned you Indians, you good-looking people, I would never take you around in a show like this. You have a Grandfather over there who takes care of you over there, but he shouldn’t allow this, for he owns you, for the white people to take you around as beasts to show to the people.\textsuperscript{55}
\end{quote}

According to Black Elk, the Queen declared that she would not allow the conditions to exist that force Native Americans to participate in the third world tourist industry. Black Elk and the other participants certainly supported her speech as they all “hollered and gave cheers” to the Queen’s speech.\textsuperscript{56}

The second example is the Pageant. Tourists come to the compound which operates in their idiom, sells them reified culture, and provides the Lakota with a means of survival during the Depression.

Contrary to DeMallie’s spiritual interpretation, Black Elk’s granddaughter Olivia asserts that the ceremonies performed where not actual ceremonies. She claims that, “It

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\textsuperscript{54} DeMallie, \textit{The Sixth Grandfather}, 8.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 249-50.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 250.
was a pageant for tourists. We performed, and we did the acting.” When the interviewer asks if they were actual sacred ceremonies Olivia responds “No, [Black Elk and other performers] would never do that.”

The memory of Black Elk’s family also describes their family’s involvement with outsiders as tourism. Olivia describes Ben’s work at Mount Rushmore:

At Mount Rushmore, the tourists started taking pictures of him. They asked him if he could stand there with his regalia. And he said he would, and so they said they’d pay him. Well, he came back all excited so we moved to Keystone and they started taking pictures. He was up there twenty-seven years. According to Olivia, it was the income that motivated Ben’s move to Keystone and work with tourists. Ben’s grandson Aaron, remembers working with Ben at Mount Rushmore:

He was the one that taught us, him and Uncle Henry, how to dance, up at Mount Rushmore…we used to go to Keystone all the time, every summer, and dance with them…we were making money to survive; we were being taught our traditions…Grandpa would go to Mount Rushmore, and then he’d come back. He used to carry his pouch with a whole bunch of change; all of us used to sit there and count it all the time.

While Ben used the work at Mount Rushmore to teach the children about Lakota tradition, Aaron highlights the fact that the work for tourists was an opportunity to make money to survive. Aaron’s brother, Clifton, remembers working in tourism:

All summer long he and my Uncle Hank used to sing for us while we danced and performed. It was a way of showing the tourists the different styles of dances that we dance, and it was just another way of making money. We just passed the hat, and they’d give us money – donations and stuff for our performing.

Again, Clifton emphasizes that tourism was a way of making money.

Even the last communication from Black Elk to Neihardt gives evidence to this dynamic. Black Elk wrote Neihardt a letter October 11, 1945 after a speech Neihardt

57 DeSersa and Pourier, Black Elk Lives, 135. The interviews in this book are an important source as the interviewers are consciously promoting a more “spiritual” interpretation of the interviews than the one offered by DeMallie that I examined in the beginning of the chapter. In other words, they are not looking for evidence of tourism or Catholicism, but trying to separate Black Elk from those aspects of reservation culture.

58 DeSersa and Pourier, Black Elk Lives, 41.

59 Ibid., 25-6.
gave at a victory celebration at Pine Ridge: “The Sioux’s[sic] sure liked the way you
gave that speech at that celebration. They sure felt a lot of encouragement by you & wish
you could help them more in the future.” To the end, Black Elk views his relationship
with Neihardt as in part an opportunity to secure economic investment in his community.

In conclusion, the dynamics of the Black Elk – Neihardt interviews match the
dynamics that operate in the third world tourist industry. This context must be
understood as the foundation for interpreting Black Elk and Neihardt’s relationship and
Neihardt’s artistic interpretation of it.

**Black Elk’s Speaks to Black Elk Speaks: The Two Letters**

With the third world tourist paradigm as the foundation for the collaboration,
Black Elk’s reaction to the publishing of *Black Elk Speaks* becomes more consistent with
Black Elk’s Catholicism of Lakota memory. In 1933 he dictated his first letter in
response to the book. DeMallie writes that, “whether this was his own idea or that of
the priests is not entirely certain, but the resulting document has all the indications of
sincerity.”

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60 Ibid., 63.
61 DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 70. Holloway writes about this letter: “not humble but
affectionate and a bit remonstrative at times, such a correspondence befits a man in the role of father and
grandfather, an elder dispensing love and advice.” Again, Black Elk is reduced to support role in
Neihardt’s larger drama.
62 Vecsey’s interpretation of this letter deserves attention: “It would appear that when Black Elk
was faced with possible death in the wagon accident, he promised to recant the book if the priest would
give him last rites: ‘I called my priest to pray for me and so he gave me Extreme Unction and Holy
Eucharist. Therefore I will tell you the truth.’ Just how much pressure was applied, we shall never know;
however, it is clear that a quid pro quo took place. The recantation was apparently payment for Extreme
Unction.” Vecsey offers no evidence for this claim. In order to make this claim he must assume two
things. First, Black Elk has no problem with the manner in which Neihardt portrayed him in *Black Elk
Speaks*. Both letters make it clear that he does have a problem with Neihardt. Second, missionaries are
manipulative and considered Black Elk’s interview with Neihardt to be contrary to Catholic faith (DeMallie
gives no evidence of this either). What Vecsey and other scholars ignore is that even if the first two points
could be demonstrated with evidence, it would only support the fact that Black Elk valued the Catholic
sacraments more than his work with Neihardt.
Without denying the validity of his story, Black Elk faults Neihardt for ignoring the "current ways." He proceeds to describe the particularities of his Catholic life and asserts that before his conversion he considered himself to be a proud, brave, and good Indian, "but now think I am better." He boasts that he knows more about Catholicism "than many white men."

Black Elk highlights the communal significance of his faith: reception of six of the seven sacraments, eight years in retreats, missionary work, twenty years as a catechist in several communities. Because of this, "very many of the Indians know me."

Again we see a correlation with the description of Catholicism and the vision. He repeatedly uses the road metaphor to describe Christianity. Black Elk wishes to be "straight in the righteous way" so that he will reach "the clouds." He states that "all my children and grandchildren belong to the Catholic Church and I am glad of that and wish very much they will always follow the holy road." Later he writes, "I send my people on the straight road that Christ's church taught us about. While I live I will never fall from faith in Christ." Black Elk directly equates the sacred road with Christ and his church and directs his people to always follow it.

Black Elk also quotes 2 Peter 2:20-22 which describes those who have known Christ and then return to former ways are worse than those who never known "the way of justice," or Wóowotȟaŋna Chaŋkú. They are like dog returned to his vomit, or the washed sow again wallowing in the mire. This is again consistent with Black Elk's use

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64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 60.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid., 59.
68 Ibid., 60.
69 Ibid.
of biblical passages: it contains the road image and concrete examples, the dog and sow, directly related to the Lakota world.

This document is important for two reasons. First, it is consistent with the Black Elk that is remembered by the Lakota. Second, its language and imagery matches the interpretation of Black Elk’s vision as a Lakota version of Catholic salvation history offered in Chapter 5.

On September 20, 1934, Black Elk wrote a second letter, after Neihardt returned and stayed part of the summer on Ben’s land.

Dear Friends:
Three years ago in 1932 a white man named John G. Neihardt came up to my place whom I have never met before and asked me to make a story book with him. I don’t know whether he took out a permit from the agent or not. He promised me that if he completed and publish [sic] this book he was to pay half of the price of each book. I trusted him and finished the story of my life for him. After he published the book I wrote to him and ask [sic] him about the price which he promised me on the books he sold. He answered my letter and told me that there was another white man who has asked him to make this book so he himself hasn’t seen a cent of from the book which we made. By this I know he was deceiving me about the whole business. I also asked to put at the end of this story that I was not a pagan but have been converted into the Catholic Church in which I work as a catechist for more than 25 years. I’ve quit all these pagan works. But he didn’t mention this. Cash talks. So if they can’t put this religion life in the last part of that book, also if he can’t pay what he promised, I ask you my dear friends that this book of my life will be null and void because I value my soul more than my body. I’m awful sorry for the mistake I made. I also have this witnesses [sic] to stand by me.
I’m yours truly
Nick Black Elk
My name is not Amerdian [but] he is lying about my name.

The second letter is also consistent with the paradigm and the interpretation of Black Elk offered earlier. Black Elk highlights three things about the encounter with Neihardt. First, Black Elk emphasizes that Neihardt did not listen to his initial desire to deal with his whole life. We know from Neihardt that is exactly what Black Elk

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70 Steltenkamp, *Holy Man of the Oglala*, 85. DeMallie dismisses the letter: “this is a difficult document to assess; it is not signed by Black Elk, and the motive for writing it is not clear” and speculates that Lucy was the actual author. However, there are many factors that point to its authenticity. There is the same line about the soul being more important than the body. Second, his desire to be portrayed beyond the *yuwipi* is consistent with his rejection of it. Third, Black Elk accurately reports the book’s failure, even if he doesn’t understand the publishing business. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 62.
envisioned from the beginning. After the book was published, Black Elk asked him (probably on his return visit) to put an addition in which included his Catholic life, but Neihardt rejected the request.

Second, he distances himself from his “pagan” life, which both the missionaries and Black Elk equated primarily with the Yuwipi practice. Black Elk Speaks focuses much of its material on his yuwipi practice so it is not surprising that Black Elk is upset that the reader is left with the impression that he is still a yuwipi man.

In the first letter, Black Elk primarily discusses giving medicine. He states that “medicine men sought only glory and presents from their curing,” which is consistent with the Lucy’s memory of Black Elk. Lucy said her father did not talk about his medicine practice much, but she once asked him if he believed in the yuwipi:

No! That’s all nonsense – just like the magicians you have in the white people. It’s just like that. Praying with the pipe is more of a main thing. . . But this other one, yuwipi, it’s just like a magician trying to fool. I know because I’ve done it myself.71

This is reinforced by the fact that Black Elk refused to demonstrate the yuwipi for Neihardt, and has no qualms recording Lakota tradition, minus the yuwipi, in the Sacred Pipe with no reaction from the missionaries.

Most importantly, Black Elk highlights the financial arrangements as the source of his collaboration with Neihardt. Black Elk is upset that Neihardt has not come through with his promises of financial compensation. The fact that there may be legitimate reasons would not have meant anything to Black Elk due to the foreign nature of book production. According to DeMallie, “as Neihardt later wrote, Black Elk ‘was utterly

71 Steltenkamp, Holy Man of the Oglala, 26.
unaware of the existence of literature’ – nor did he understand it.” Neihardt’s repeated promises would have meant more to Black Elk than Neihardt’s unintelligible explanation.

Black Elk is clear about his anger over the financial outcome. However, the idea that Black Elk could be infuriated for having trusted Neihardt and receiving no financial return for his work and sharing his vision to an outsider is lost on many romantic interpreters of Black Elk. Holloway writes that, “like Black Elk, Neihardt worked to disperse his message in fulfillment of a spiritual, not monetary, motivation.”

When Neihardt was fighting with publishers, Holloway makes the totally unsupported claim that: “soon Black Elk will direct events and open Neihardt’s eyes to his view of the higher perceptions.” In other words, Black Elk teaches Neihardt to move beyond concerns for the problems of physical reality. But it is the actions of the white in the “physical” world that makes Black Elk so mad about colonialism:

Today I feel very sorry – I could just cry – to see my people in a muddy water, dirty with the bad acts of the white people...white men have a way of living and also we have our way of living and we had plenty before we had money and now it is hard to get money and live that way...They take everything we have just gradually until we won’t have anything left...But now we see that the white race has done great wrong to the Indians.

Even given the context of the Great Depression and Black Elk’s claim that the Lakota are prisoners of war in place where it’s “hard to get money,” romantic interpreters can’t imagine Black Elk being upset with his “brother mystic” for doing “great wrong to the Indians” by taking “everything we have and just gradually until we won’t have anything left.”

72 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 37.
73 Holloway, Interpreting the Vision, 64. In his entire book on the collaboration between Black Elk and Neihardt, Holloway never once raises the question of Black Elk’s economic situation, nor does he wonder if Black Elk ever received any compensation. For that matter, I have never read anything in the extensive literature about Black Elk dealing with this question. Did Black Elk ever receive any financial compensation?
74 Ibid., 56.
An example that Fools Crow gives in his autobiography sheds some light on the interviews. The poverty of the Great Depression forced Fools Crow to compromise tradition for survival and sell something valuable: a headdress given to him by Black Elk.

Black Elk gave me my first eagle feather headdress. It was a beautiful head bonnet, and it had thirty or more tail feathers in it. . . During the depression, and sometime after 1930, I sold it for one hundred and fifty dollars, which was a lot of money in those days. I have many times regretted its sale.\(^{76}\)

Fools Crow earned more than the average yearly Oglala family income in exchange for Black Elk’s headdress. The Depression enabled a decision that Fools Crow’s later regretted.

The evidence of this chapter makes it likely that Black Elk made, like Fools Crow, a “Great Depression compromise.” Black Elk decided to adapt cultural precedents to the current need and tell his vision to an outsider. He later regretted his decision, especially when Neihardt did not come through with his promises.

Ironically, it seems unlikely that any academics would react in the same way that they seem to think Black Elk did. Would an academic be satisfied with losing the profit from a project that entailed major personal sacrifice and commitment? What if the academic lived in Pine Ridge during the Great Depression whose family of 5.4 earned less than $15 a month and was deceived by the same people who took away one’s land and way of life, in the same way (constant reassurances of lucrative contracts that are renegotiated after agreement) and perhaps compromised some important beliefs of one’s community?

In interpreting the Black Elk – Neihardt collaboration, it is necessary to keep the economic considerations at the foundation. This is not too say that Black Elk did not ascribe any spiritual significance to what happened. He probably did wish to challenge
the ignorance that caused much of the American colonial injustice. There is no reason to think that Black Elk did not consider Neihardt a friend in the beginning and later reconciled their differences. But it is essential to recognize that in a context of dire poverty, these concerns are secondary to survival. Thus, the Spiritual interpretation offered by DeMallie is to some degree true, but it is only built on the foundation of survival necessitated by the historical and cultural dynamics.

**Interpretations: Why Neihardt Misunderstood the Vision**

According to the tourism paradigm, a more accurate understanding of the collaboration comes to light. Neihardt arrived in Pine Ridge with no cultural framework to understand Black Elk (Lakota or Catholic) or the Lakota language. He had a specific agenda that categorically excluded more than half of Black Elk’s life and the cultural practices in which he now lived. Neihardt stayed a short time and left convinced he had captured the authentic native experience. According to Neihardt, “this is going to be the first absolutely Indian book thus far written. It is all out of the Indian consciousness.”

Black Elk’s initial decision was based on telling his whole life story. This soon changed to fit what Neihardt was expecting. He has lines that he cannot cross because there is always the potential that Neihardt can go find someone else better. So he shapes his story for his audience, not deceiving or by being dishonest, but sincerely telling the aspects of his life that Neihardt is interested in. He may have also been unclear about what exactly Neihardt was understanding about his vision.

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78 Ibid., 27, letter from Neihardt to Julius T. House, August 10, 1930, that says Black Elk wants “to tell his whole story.”
One last characteristic of the Black Elk – Neihardt collaboration must be developed for a more accurate interpretation. The collaboration was not the dictation of a standard text, but rather a dynamic storytelling event. In this event, a skilled storyteller tells his/her story to an eager audience, sees the reactions of his audience, and shapes his narrative for his audience. Thus, the story telling event is dialectic in which the reaction of the audience influences how the story is told: what is emphasized and what is left out. The current understanding of the role of ethnographic informants would support this reading.

After giving the interview, Black Elk no longer had any control in the direction of the project. Neihardt wrote his work from the transcripts shaping it as he wished without any further consultation with Black Elk. Black Elk did not see the final draft and certainly was unable to read *Black Elk Speaks* for himself. It must be remembered that the differences between the transcripts and Neihardt’s *Black Elk Speaks* were so great that DeMallie decided to publish the original transcripts.

Consequently, a mutually reinforcing dialectic works to ensure that Neihardt fails to understand Black Elk’s message. Neihardt arrives with preconceived notions of what Indians are all about and without the cultural tools to interpret Black Elk’s discourse, while Black Elk’s dependency on Neihardt for the realization of the project made him acutely aware of the boundaries that should not be crossed. Louis Owens borrows the term “mask” from Fanon to describe this phenomenon:

The mask is one realized over centuries through Euro-America’s construction of the ‘Indian’ Other. In order to be recognized, and to thus have a voice that is heard by those in control of power, the Native must step into the mask and be the Indian constructed by white America. Paradoxically, of course, like the mirror, the mask merely shows the Euro-American to himself, since the masked Indian arises out of the European consciousness, leaving the Native behind the mask unseen, unrecognized for himself or herself. In short, to be seen and heard at all by the center – to not share the fate of Ralph
Ellison's Invisible Man – the Native must pose as the absolute fake, the fabricated 'Indian,' like the dancing puppets in Ellison's novel.79

According to Owens, it is easy to see why Neihardt misunderstood Black Elk. For Neihardt to hear Black Elk, Black Elk must don the mask of the imagined Indian. But the imagined Indian only reveals what the Euro-American expects. Given this context, the question is not "how could Neihardt misinterpret Black Elk's vision," but becomes "how could Neihardt correctly understand Black Elk's vision?" That Neihardt misinterpreted Black Elk must be the expected result of a cultural outsider with a priori assumptions that categorically deny the validity of an informant's concrete way of life, especially when the informant is not explicit.

Yet Neihardt was still able to gather some ethnographic data. He was fairly accurate in recording what his categorically limited field-work allowed him to see. The vision, read as a Lakota Catholic narrative, is consistent with the Black Elk of Lakota tradition, the devout Catholic, even derided as a "catechism teacher" and "cigar store Indian." But what Neihardt does inaccurately is to rip the narrative out of its context and insert it in his own imagined context. This is consistent with Black Elk's ambiguity. Black Elk is not explicit in saying what exactly the vision means. DeMallie is correct in saying that, "Black Elk never stated succinctly what he considered the meaning of the vision to be; he left this for Neihardt to interpret."80 Thus Neihardt's mistake was not in

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80 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 52-3. Curiously, DeMallie then takes a very Western phenomenological approach: "These powers were not simply replaced by the Christian God whom Black Elk came to accept: instead, they represented an alternative approach to the unknowable, another path to the "other world." We have already seen in Chapter 4 that there is only one real world, that is knowable, not an abstract spiritual realm reachable by two distinct systems.
gathering the information he recorded, but his reading of the transcripts and the
composition of his art. \(^{81}\)

This is also consistent with Black Elk’s reaction to the publication of *Black Elk
Speaks*. It also effectively deals with the other modern Western assumptions that scholars
import into the Black Elk debate dealt with in the preceding chapters:

1. In the spectrum of non-Lakota, missionaries were the most open to Lakota culture and the most accepted by the Lakota community
2. Christianity is not antithetical to Lakota tradition as demonstrated by Fools Crow and other traditionalists
3. According to Lakota community, Black Elk was a sincere and dedicated Catholic
4. Due to the nature of oral cultures, religious thought for “dual participants” is made one on the level of belief, or in worldview

Finally, the interpretation offered here is necessary to the degree it avoids the cultural imperialism of the strictly spiritual approaches. If the spiritual approaches are true, then there is no inherent significance to the Lakota language, no substance to Lakota culture that cannot be grasped by an outsider with preconceived agenda in a three week visit. Neihardt can get to the essence of everything by bypassing everything that makes Lakota who they are.

Both Neihardt and Black Elk were sincere in their endeavors. The evidence does not suggest that Neihardt intentionally deceived or manipulated Black Elk or the Lakota. For his part, Black Elk used the dynamics sincerely and creatively for the survival of his family and people. While the historical and cultural dynamics limited an accurate sharing, and later telling, of Black Elk’s sacred vision, Neihardt enabled his vision to survive.

\(^{81}\) Powers seems to agree with this reading: “Did Black Elk enjoy dictating his teachings to men who mysteriously had been ‘sent’ to him? Or were his teachings carefully edited to conform to the white man’s expectations of his life? In believing that Black Elk was indeed an honorable man, one possessing the charisma that attracted these authors, I opt for the latter.” William K. Powers, “When Black Elk
Chapter 7: Colonialism, the Holy Man, and Christianity

At one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong.

She taught me this above all else: things which don’t shift and grow are dead things. They are things the witchery people want. Witchery works to scare people, to make them fear growth. But it has always been necessary, and more than ever now, it is. Otherwise we won’t make it. We won’t survive. That’s what the witchery is counting on: that we will cling to the ceremonies the way they were, and then their power will triumph, and the people will be no more.”

Old Betonie speaking to Tayo.1

Black Elk’s Despair and the Tree not Blooming

If the tree is the Catholic Church, what did Black Elk’s ritual despair mean? Why did he say that the tree “never bloomed”? There are two reasons. The first is again found in the historical and cultural context. Lakota Catholicism was declining in the face of the societal problems of the 1930’s: the Great Depression, alcoholism, increasing secularization, and the erosion of Lakota culture and language. As we saw in Chapter 3, proficiency in the Lakota language was necessary to experience an integral Catholicism/Christianity. Proficiency allows for the incorporation of new thought into the Lakota framework and also provides a secure Lakota identity. The loss of Lakota language and fluency in English leads to the adoption of American secular categories and a symbolic assertion of Lakota identity.

Thus in the context of increasing secularization and language loss it is not surprising that Black Elk voiced concern over the Church. In an earlier letter to Lakota Catholics he discussed the changing context:

God the Father, and Jesus Christ – I pray to them often that St. Joseph’s and St. Mary’s Society will never fade away. Some day this is going to happen: because the present generation is beginning to turn. But let us train our younger ones to continue on the work that we’ve been doing. I’m very old now, and my days are numbered.2

2 Timonin, Letter 4.
Black Elk sees the changes in the next generation of Lakota as early as early as 1908. They are turning away, and Black Elk is getting old, losing his power to change the situation. Black Elk indicated his personal suffering and powerlessness in another letter to Lakota Catholics.

I spoke mainly on Jesus – when he was on earth, the teaching and his sufferings. I myself do a lot of these things. I suffer and I try to teach my people the things that I wanted them to learn, but its never done.

In my sufferings, my eyes are failing, and also my health is failing. So I will tell you that all of you (and myself, that it or we) are like sheep among wolves ready to be eaten up. And you know when one sheep is surrounded by wolves, it has no place to go. That's how we are. We are ready to be eaten up.

So my friends and relatives, we should stand together and do what is right and be patient. That way God has something good for us all the time.1

In this letter, Black Elk highlighted his age, poor health and suffering. Despite these challenges he continued on, but there was always more work. A member of this generation, Pat Red Elk, remembers Black Elk addressing the Church in a manner similar to his prayer on Harney Peak:

I remember one time when he was pretty old, he really bore down on them. He said: "The older people who constructed and kept up the church are all fading away…and the new generation isn’t continuing the work that the people did. When I come to church in wintertime, there’s no firewood in that little box there [he’d point to the woodbox], and tears come to my eyes."4

Pat Red Elk remembers Black Elk crying because the young people were not continuing the Catholic tradition given to them by the older generation.

In his last vision, Black Elk lamented the tree that never bloomed. A Lakota from the Devil’s Lake Reservation used this image for the Church in a similar fashion during a Catholic conference in the 1890’s. He appeals to have the next conference at Devil’s Lake because Lakota interest in Catholicism is waning there.

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1 Ibid., Letter 2.
I see a beautiful tree growing up that spreads its branches all over the country. But its root in the ground is now despised. It is eaten by worms and should be strengthened again so we wish to have the congress on Devil’s Lake.\(^5\)

In imagery almost identical to Black Elk’s prayer on Harney Peak, the delegate described the tree as the Church. It is meant to bloom over the whole country but it is only a root. Like Black Elk, he hopes that it will bloom again.

These examples provide strong textual evidence that Black Elk’s prayer for the tree is for the renewal of Lakota Catholicism. In addition, the tension between Lakota tradition and Lakota Catholicism is another aspect of Black Elk’s despair. Despite their more ambiguous social location, the Catholic missionaries also misinterpreted Black Elk’s vision of an integral Lakota Catholicism. Three other Lakota Catholics lamented this same lack of integration between Catholicism and Lakota ceremonies. The first is Fools Crow. He states that,

> Many of the things we believe about God are the same [in Lakota tradition and Catholicism]. Today, most other Sioux feel as we do, but it was not always this way. Some of the things the new faiths said were hard to take, especially their belief that we did not know the true God and that Sioux medicine and ceremonies were things of the Devil. So we rejected these views until their positions began to change.\(^6\)

According to Fools Crow, Catholicism and Lakota tradition believe similar things about God. However, missionary interpretation of Lakota tradition was too harsh in its judgment of Lakota ceremonies.

The second is Black Elk’s son, Ben. He echoes the same theme in a speech to Lakota high school students about Lakota tradition:

> We became Christians. We wanted to keep some of our old ceremonies. When we pray, we don’t read from a book. It comes from our hearts. But the government outlawed some of our worship, like the sun dance, so we had to do our ceremonies secretly – where


\(^6\) Mails, *Fools Crow*, 151.
we would not be caught. That made us feel bad. It was like the early Christians who had
to worship secretly.7

Ben identifies government ban on certain Lakota ceremonies as the factor that prevented
a true integration of Lakota tradition and Catholicism.

The third, and more contemporary example, is Ben Black Bear. He explains that
a majority of Lakota rejected the standard missionary interpretation of Lakota tradition.
The Lakota realized that if you consciously rejected a lot of the traditional ceremonies,
you would reject “your whole outlook on life.”8 Black Bear states that,

They were willing to accept explanation of doctrine of what the Catholic Church is. They
were willing to listen and accept that but when the missionaries started giving their
opinion and say... ‘Now, you’ve got to do things this way.’ Then they said [quietly]
‘Wait a minute, let me look at it from another angle.’9

According to Black Bear, the Lakota accepted Catholic doctrine. However, they rejected
what the missionaries said about Lakota tradition and had their own perspective.

Fools Crow, Ben Black Elk, and Ben Black Bear all make consistent claims.
First, they insist that the missionaries misinterpreted the aspects of Lakota tradition.
Their critique of Lakota ceremonial life was too extensive in their rejection of Sun
Dance.

Second, all three emphasize that the Lakota did not find it necessary to reject
Catholicism or leave the Church. They remained active participants despite the
missionary misinterpretation and the tension it created.

Third, they demonstrate that the agents in this process are the Lakota. Black Elk
and Fools Crow are evidence that the Lakota accepted the Christian story’s critique of
Lakota culture and adapted it to bring the two together. They continued to participate in

7 DeSersa and Pourier, Black Elk Lives, 8-9.
8 Ibid., 97.
9 Ibid.
Lakota ceremonies. However, the ceremonies are adapted to Catholicism. Black Elk’s description of Lakota tradition shows that it does not contradict the essential themes of the Christian story: monotheism, love, nonviolence, and the universal brotherhood of humanity. The Lakota are not powerless victims to religious change, but have agency and work out theological problems themselves.

However, this interpretation never gained normative status in the Lakota Catholic Church. The types of processes which allowed the development of Easter and Christmas traditions and other now normative practices in the Roman Catholic Church had been largely prevented/eliminated by modern ecclesiology.

What is important for this study is that any compartmentalization of religious thought and practice would not be an inherent personal internal problem of the Lakota. Rather, it comes from an external source (missionaries) that does not fully understand Lakota tradition and controls the power of interpretation. According to Black Bear, the majority of people are still waiting for “a sort of blending where you establish a basically Lakota Catholic Church.”

This does not mean that Black Elk, Fools Crow, Ben Black Elk and Ben Black Bear are not sincere Catholics. Scholars often assume that the Lakota must think exactly like the missionaries in every way, and if there is evidence that they didn’t, then the Lakota must have just been playing the game. In Black Elk’s case, to be a sincere

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10 Lucy alludes to many ways in which Black Elk continued participating in Lakota ceremonial life. She remembers him praying and crying on a hill for his brother(17), doing the inipi(60), dancing(67), having a pipe(107), attending a Sun Dance(107), meeting the keeper of the Sacred Calf Pipe(107), stopping a tornado(117). Her husband was one of the men responsible for finding and setting up the tree for the Sun Dance at Pine Ridge(188n). These references are casually discussed despite her adamant insistence that Black Elk was a sincere Catholic. For Lucy, this participation is not an issue, which she makes clear with her discussion of Black Elk’s conversion, “After he became a convert and started working for the missionaries, he put all his medicine practice away. He never took it up again”(34). The yuwipi, not Lakota tradition in general, conflicts with Christianity and must be rejected.
Catholic, Black Elk had to remain a member of the Catholic community (which he did) and make sure all aspects of his life were consistent with the Christian narrative (which every source consistently shows).

Also important is that Black Elk, Fools Crow, and their generation’s critique of Catholicism’s embodiment in Lakota culture was independent of their acceptance of the Christian story. It is not because the missionaries are white, or that Christianity was forced on them. Their critique was that control of theological interpretations of Lakota culture was not in their hands but the missionaries. This prevented a concrete expression of what missionaries later came to see in the reforms of the 60’s and 70’s, and what Fools Crow and Lucy and other Lakota Catholic informants of Black Elk’s generation “always believed.” It was this one world that Black Elk urged Lakota Catholics to live in:

I am engaged in difficult work which is good onto death; let us not talk of our ways of the past, but think about the new ways our Savior has given to us. If you do this there will be peace and kindness. So it is.

Remember the words you have said in making declarations. You speak the works but your lives are lives of the old way. Therefore my relatives unify yourselves. Perhaps you cannot 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. Thus we have three but really we have One – thus he who unifies himself will have victory. So it is; read carefully. 12

Black Elk and Fools Crow lived in one world because their agency made it one, but existed in a world that was externally divided. But his son, Ben Black Elk, says that he is happy, because it is now one, he is now unified as his father had taught for so long.

So I used to live two lives: one, Indian religion, and one as a Christian. To us, the Indian pipe is sacred; it has meaning for us. It used be that when I would speak about the pipe, when I used the pipe, it seemed to me that it clashed with Christianity. But now, I know they come together in our Church. Behind the altar, we have the tipi design. In our Christian ceremonials, we use the pipe. We see that there is no clash. After these years it comes together. Now, I live only one way.13

11 Ibid., 99.
12 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 21.
Fulfilling Black Elk’s Vision: What Power Does This Bring?

There remains only one question. Why would Black Elk find Christianity compelling enough to join the church, evangelize its message, and make major modifications to the central themes of Lakota tradition? We can still ask the question that Neihardt did during his interviews: “Black Elk, when you have such a very beautiful religion, why are you a member of a white church?” Why did Black Elk convert?

The first possible reason, government repression of Lakota ceremonial life, probably played a role, but does not seem to be foundational. Black Elk held out for a long time after its ban, and many Lakota never converted at all. Also, the early revitalization movement of the 30’s that Fools Crow describes never caused him to leave the Church. This is best demonstrated in Fools Crow and Ben. Both lived to see the full-scale revitalization movements of the 70’s, but never accepted AIM’s critique of Christianity and never left the Church. They were happy that a fuller communal realization of the one Lakota Catholic world was embodied.

Another reason proposed by those who discard Black Elk’s Catholicism is that Black Elk saw the white man’s religion as more powerful. They see this dynamic present in George Sword, one of J.R. Walker’s informants on Lakota tradition and a deacon in the Episcopal Church.

When I served the Lakota Wakan Tanka, I did so with all my power. When I went on the warpath I always did all the ceremonies to gain the favor of the Lakota Wakan Tanka. But when the Lakotas fought with the white soldiers, the white people always won the victory. I went to Washington and to other large cities, and that showed me that the white people dug in the ground and built houses that could not be moved. Then I knew that when they came they could not be driven away. For this reason I took a new name, the name of Sword, because the leaders of the white soldiers wore swords. I determined to adopt the customs of the white people, and to persuade my people to do so.

I became the first leader of the U.S. Indian Police among the Oglalas, and was their captain until the Oglalas ceased to think of fighting the white people. Then I became a deacon in the Christian church, and am so now, and will be until my death.\footnote{Walker, \textit{Lakota Belief and Ritual}, 74-5.}

Academics argue that like Sword, Black Elk was attracted to Christianity because the whites were stronger, and thus their god must be stronger. However, while this may be a factor in his conversion, it cannot be the foundational reason. According to Black Elk, during his two-year journey through the white world, he saw nothing good about the white world, except some religious customs, which will be examined below. Black Elk did not give in as Sword did, but fought in the aftermath of Wounded Knee. His conversion did not occur for another fifteen years. Most importantly, this ignores the fact that Black Elk’s first involvement in Christianity was with the Ghost Dance, a pan-Indian movement based on the Christian narrative.

The most influential argument proposed by academics is that Black Elk’s most important motivation for conversion was significant economic gain. Given the historical context outlined in the previous chapter, it is likely that economic concerns played at least some role in Black Elk’s Catholic life.

From a Christian perspective, economic motivation is acceptable to a certain extent, because Christianity is supposed to be about communal economic sharing.\footnote{This is interesting given their lack of attention to economic considerations in the Black Elk – Neihardt collaboration.} If Black Elk saw the Catholic Church as a source of stability in the early reservation period, it would be evidence that the Church was living up to its call.

However, the evidence does not support the claim that Black Elk’s conversion was first and foremost an economic decision for a number of reasons. First, Black Elk’s conversion entailed a significant economic sacrifice from the start. When he converted,
Black Elk gave up his *yuwipi* practice, which was an important source of income during the early reservation period.

Second, the Jesuits did not offer catechist positions to non-Catholic Lakota, which then influences one to convert.\(^\text{17}\) The Jesuits recruited Black Elk for the position of catechist because of his exemplary Catholic life. It seems that about three years passed between his conversion in 1904 and beginning his work as a catechist. During this time he acquired a thorough knowledge of scripture and Catholic tradition. Thus, his dedication preceded his employment.

Third, Black Elk claims that initially he did not even want the catechist position. Black Elk wrote in 1909 that “When I was given this job I did not want it, but you people have encouraged me to take on this job. So that’s why I’m doing this – for your own good.”\(^\text{18}\) Whether it was too much work, not enough compensation, or he was not interested, Black Elk did not want the catechist position. Because of the encouragement of the Lakota Catholic community and for their benefit he decided to accept the position.

Fourth, this fails to explain why Black Elk retired from his catechist position when he did. It is at this point that the argument for Black Elk’s economic motivation totally breaks down. Black Elk stopped working as a catechist in the early 1930’s. Consequently, it is precisely *at the worst point of the Depression* that Black Elk stops

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\(^{17}\) Holler, who is sympathetic to Black Elk’s Catholic life, still falls into this trap. He writes that, “Black Elk clearly stood to benefit by accepting Christianity, since his income as a catechist was considerable. Since Black Elk subsequently made his living as a catechist, it could be said that the material benefits of his acceptance of Christianity point to the possibility of insincerity.” Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 210.

\(^{18}\) Timonin, Letter 8.
working as a catechist. If his motivation was strictly the $5 or $10 a month, he never would have left during the most difficult economic period of the reservation period.\textsuperscript{19}

This line of argument also imports colonial assumptions that damage both Black Elk and the Lakota. Implicit - and often explicit - in this argument for economic motivation is the idea that Black Elk was deceiving the missionaries.\textsuperscript{20} One may argue that if Black Elk told his story the way Neihardt wanted to hear it, it is even more likely that he did the same thing with Catholicism. Black Elk must have just told the missionaries what they wanted to hear for the sake of material benefit.

In order for this to be true, we must forget (in addition to the conclusions of Chapter 3) what most scholars and interpreters of the Black Elk tradition forget: Black Elk’s audience during his Catholic life was not primarily white missionaries. Black Elk spoke to and worked for the Lakota and other Native American tribes, and gained over 400 converts. So in order for us to understand Black Elk as acting the role of a Catholic, we must see him as deceiving the Lakota. He ends up not primarily fooling the white man, but \emph{fooling his own community and people}. He may have deceived 20 or 30 Jesuits, but then he deceived hundreds of Lakota and other Native Americans to change their lives, and thousands of Lakota to continue to do so, including his children and

\textsuperscript{19} Vescey brings up that he never worked again as a catechist after the Neihardt interviews that his commitment to Catholicism was waning. This ignores the fact that he was now 67 (during interviews), had progressive tuberculosis, and was run over by a wagon and almost died. See Christopher Vescey, “A Century of Lakota Catholicism at Pine Ridge,” in \textit{Religious Diversity and American Religious History: Studies in Traditions and Cultures}, edited by Walter H. Conser, Jr. and Sumner B. Twiss (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 263-295.

\textsuperscript{20} Rice suggests that “he may have ‘lied.’” Rice describes Black Elk’s conversion as a “warrior reason.” Lying to one’s community over a forty year period hardly seems to a warrior’s reason. See Rice, \textit{Black Elk’s Story}, xii.
grandchildren. Ultimately, this argument turns Black Elk into an agent of colonialism, precisely the force that he is combating.

It also denies the dynamics of Lakota culture. DeMallie describes the role that ritual plays in Lakota life:

For the Lakotas, belief and ritual were completely intertwined. Belief formed the intellectual and emotional underpinnings of religion, a system of knowledge representing mankind in relation to the universe. Belief made men’s lives and the world in which men lived intelligible and acceptable, and it defined the moral structure for society. Ritual provided the means for actualizing religious power and for expressing belief. The Lakotas spoke of the purpose of ritual in terms of “pleasing” the wakan beings, which they believed formed the structure and substance of their world. But ritual was no mere reflection of belief; it was also the means to further belief, for through ritual people came to expand their knowledge.

DeMallie emphasizes that, for the Lakota, ritual is not a mechanical process separate from belief. Ritual and belief are a mutually reinforcing dialectic that defined the structure of the universe and increased belief. Consequently, Black Elk’s and the Lakota’s participation in Catholic rituals, such as the mass, could not be empty or duplicitous. In a Lakota context, Catholic rituals helped to define the world and reinforced and expanded belief.

In conclusion, it is only bad scholarship and modern western assumptions that are capable of supporting the claim that Black Elk’s conversion and Catholic life were based primarily on economic motivation. The evidence demonstrates that there must be something more. Catholicism must have provided something new for Lakota tradition in the changing Lakota world.

Colonialism and the Role of the Holy Man

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21 Black Elk is attributed with being responsible for 400 conversions and was a godfather for at least 134 people. See Powers, “When Black Elk Speaks,” 429.

22 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 82.

23 This section is heavily indebted to Steltenkamp’s conclusion in Holy Man of the Oglala that claims Black Elk’s conversion is a natural result of the dynamic nature of Lakota tradition and the role of the holy man. I only hope to develop the content of the process that Steltenkamp describes.
Colonialism imposed two major changes in Lakota life. The first is economic. Buffalo hunters and the encroaching America nation destroyed the old buffalo economy. Despite much ongoing suffering, the Lakota survived the transition to the reservation economy. Black Elk is an example of their survival.

The second major change was the dramatic change in worldview. Black Elk grew up in the "old" nomadic buffalo-hunting world. As a young adult, he experienced the defeat of the Lakota and their confinement to the reservation system. As a traveler in the white world, he came to realize that the world was a much larger place than that of his own Lakota perspective, of his people and the neighboring tribes. Black Elk describes the new world in a letter from England: "Many of the ways of the white men follow are hard to endure. Whoever has no country will die in the wilderness. And although the country is large it is always full of white men. . . .Here the country is different; the days are all dark. It is always smoky so we never see the sun clearly."24 As a world traveler, he saw the vastness of the whites, and lived in London, the center of the incredible horrors of the Industrial Revolution. Surrounded by it, this incomprehensible world dwarfed the Lakota universe. Black Elk said that during his travels in Europe "the spirits altogether forgot me and I felt like a dead man going around - I was actually dead at this time."25 Living in the midst of this new world provoked a spiritual crisis. The world was now a place that was large and powerful, a place where Lakota power did not exist.

This change in worldview led to a new recognition of the human condition. Suffering was no longer seen in the context of the misfortune of defeat in war, but an

25 Ibid., 294.
immense reality that defied traditional Lakota explanation. In a letter in the *The Catholic Herald*, July 15, 1909, Black Elk writes about his travels:

I have seen a number of different people – the ordinary people living on this earth – the Arapaho, the Soshone, the Omaha, the tribe living in California and Florida, the Rosebud, the Cheyenne River Sioux tribe, the Standing Rock, and our own, the Oglalas. The white men living in all these places – I have said prayers for their tribe. I’m really moved that I was able to travel to these places and meet people that are very friendly. . . In all these, good things come from God because of your faith. The United States – all the people – should have faith in God. We all suffer on this land. But let me tell you, God has a special place for us when our time has come.26

Black Elk’s understanding of white men and Native Americans in this context is that of a parallel nature. They are friendly and he has prayed for them. Most importantly, all people should have faith in God, because all suffer.

Those of us here on earth who are suffering should help one another and have pity. We belong to one family and we have only one faith. Therefore, those who are suffering, my relatives, we should look toward them and pray for them, because our Savior came on this earth and helped all poor people.27

Suffering is not just associated with the defeat of the Lakota, but inherent to the human condition; all are united in their suffering; all who suffer are the recipients of the Savior’s help.

One factor in Black Elk’s decision to join Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show was his role as a holy man. He wanted to see the white man’s ways and “if the white man’s ways were better, why I would like to see my people live that way.”28 Writing two months after returning from Europe, Black Elk articulates the result of his investigation into the white man’s customs.

So thus all along, of the white man’s customs, only his faith, the white man’s beliefs about God’s will, and how they act according to it, I wanted to understand. I traveled to one city after another, and there were many customs around God’s will. “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy,

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27 DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather* 19. Part of a letter written to by Black Elk to the Catholic Herald in July 1908.
28 Ibid., 245.
and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing" [1 cor. 13].

So Lakota people, trust in God! Now along I trust in God. I work honestly and it is good; I hope the people will do likewise. . . Across the big ocean is where they killed Jesus; again I wished to see it but it was four days on the ocean and there was no railroad. . . [It would require] much money for me to be able to go over there to tell about it myself."

Black Elk quotes Paul’s famous passage on love to explain the result of his search. The only custom that is worthwhile is selfless love. As a consequence, Black Elk was inspired to investigate Jesus further and adopt the Christian understanding of love.

In chapter 5 we saw that “love your neighbor” was a biblical theme found in all of the Black Elk’s sources. Black Elk connects this theme to colonialism. The Great Spirit will judge the white man, because he did not return the love the Lakota showed for them. According to Lucy, Black Elk used this theme to challenge colonialism in a speech to a white crowd. Christian love gave Black Elk the means of challenging the white world on its own terms, with its own language. Fools Crow also uses the Christian narrative in the same way:

To avoid more tragic times than those that already beset us today, and to avoid economic disaster in the United States and the world, the government must purify its conscience by recognizing the 1868 treaty that was made with us in the name of God. Its provisions must be met. And there are incredibly bad times coming upon us, coming fast like an angry charging buffalo, because they have not been met, and because far too many people do not believe in God. Therefore, people do not understand that treaties made in His name are not to be violated. Although the 1868 treaty has been ruthlessly violated, many of the current and future problems of this country could be solved if the federal government made things right with us today, and made it possible at last for us to life as brothers under God. But if the white leaders do not follow the pathway set forth by God and that leads to Him, and if they do not chose to honor their promises, then the godly people will soon disappear, and the entire earth will need to be purified by a great catastrophe.30

Like Black Elk, Fools Crow bases his anti-colonial discourse on the real presence of Christianized Wakan Tanka. God is greater then the power of western colonialism and

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29 Ibid., 10.
will judge its lies and destruction. The only way to avoid this judgment is repentance and restitution so that all may live in love as brothers and sisters under God.

Black Elk’s involvement with the Ghost Dance follows this same theme. Christ, who has this time come to the Indians, will judge the whites and renew creation by instituting the promised land. Black Elk told Neihardt about the Lakota who had visited Wovoka, the Paiute Messiah:

These people told me that these men had actually seen the Messiah and that he had given them these things. They should put this paint on and have a ghost dance, and in doing this they would save themselves, that there is another world coming – a world just for Indians, that in time the world would come and crush out all the whites.31

The divine judgment and retribution for American colonialism promised by the Messiah is a Christian concept.32 Native Americans appropriated the Christian narrative as a radical critique of colonialism. God, made known through Christ, would intervene and rectify the sin of American Colonialism.

But love for Black Elk developed to include more than just a standard to challenge colonialism and hold the white world accountable to God’s judgment. It provided Black Elk with a way to recognize the humanity and equality of the white world. In a letter to Lakota Catholics, Black Elk writes that, “God did not come to the

30 Mails, Fools Crow, 195. Fools Crow’s whole discussion of justice and his understanding of the apocalypse occupies 195-197.
31 DeMallie, The Sixth Grandfather, 257.
32 Steltenkamp describes the Christian source of the Ghost Dance: “Theologically, the Ghost Dance was a non-mainstream version of Christianity that joined Lakota tradition. Its Christian content was so apparent that one of the priests [Fr. Craft] who visited Ghost Dancers at the peak of their activity was of the opinion it was ‘quite Catholic, and even edifying.’” Michael F. Steltenkamp, S.J., Contemporary American Indian Religious Thinking and Its Relationship to the Christianity of Black Elk, Holy Man of the Oglala,” in American Catholic Traditions: Resources for Renewal, edited by Sandra Yocum Mize and William Portier (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 40. Powers emphasizes that, according to informants, Black Elk’s preaching of the Ghost Dance was “decidedly Christian.” Powers, “When Black Elk Speaks,” 427.
rich, but he came to the poor people. Not only Indians, but all of the poor people.”

According to Black Elk, Jesus came for all people, even the whites.

Black Elk’s spiritual crisis in Europe and the new recognition of the grand scale of human suffering requires a new power, a new understanding, and it is during this time that he first refers to the one good custom of the white men. This new power is the universal redemption through Christ. It is through Him that this new, chaotic world made sense. It is a vision that not only applied to his people, but to all nations, and the suffering that all people experience.

Black Elk’s vision makes this clear. There are two points where white people are present. The first the beginning of the third ascent where conditions start to get really bad for the nation. Black Elk says that despite the bad acts of the whites, the Great Spirit will judge them and hold them accountable for their actions.

Immediately after, Christ comes and the Church is established. After the final war of the fourth ascent, creation is renewed and all the people are happy. Among the millions of faces, there are even whites.

So Jesus Christ makes room for the Lakota world in the chaos of the white world and makes room for the suffering white world in the Lakota story. Fools Crow supports this reading of Black Elk’s understanding of Lakota tradition and Christianity:

[Black Elk thought] 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. Like myself, Black Elk prayed constantly that all people would live as one and would cooperate with one another. We have both loved the non-Indian races, and we do not turn our backs on them to please even those of our own people who do not agree.”

According to Fools Crow, it is the Christian teaching of universal love that was the new teaching Black Elk incorporated into Lakota tradition. Black Elk fulfilled his role of the

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33 Timonin, Letter 3.
holy man like the holy man in Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony*. Black Elk did what Old Betonie tells Tayo to do in a world dominated by colonialism: change in order to survive in a changing world.

**The New Paradigm: The Lakota World and the Christian Narrative**

We now return to Neihardt’s question. After he asked the question, “Black Elk thought for a moment, then replied: ‘Because my children have to live in this world.’”  

This is usually interpreted as a pragmatic response to the realities of reservation life: it provided a source of income and helped the Lakota to understand the white world. While I do not deny these benefits, it is also interpreted to support the theory that Black Elk was not sincere or did not really believe Christianity. This interpretation presupposes that Black Elk was a passive subject and a member of an essentialized static culture, and that despite the evidence, we academics know better. The pure, Native American “other” cannot possibly be attracted to any new cultural influence.

But if he lived like Old Betonie, an active agent of a dynamic culture, fighting for survival, the evidence indicates that Black Elk was stating that the white world and colonialism is real and here to stay. Participation in the church was not a show, but provided the holy man with new power to help the Lakota live in the new world, because the Christian story is a story bigger than the story of white colonialism.

This paradigm would allow modern interpreters to see why Black Elk remained an active Catholic and participant in Lakota ceremonial life despite the divided Lakota Catholic Church. Lakota ceremonies did not cease to be relevant to his people, his own sacred hoop. Black Elk realized that the new world was here to stay, but the Lakota still

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had meaning as a people. Lakota religion still interceded with *Wakan Tanka* and helped the Lakota get back into the sacred hoop. Black Elk’s long formation in Lakota tradition story validated its power.

This paradigm would also provide a better understanding of missionaries and the Catholic Church among the Lakota. It demonstrates that among the spectrum of white responses to American colonialism, missionaries were most able to transcend white prejudice, interact with the Lakota on the most equal basis, most vocally challenge American colonialism, and most practically mitigate the suffering inflicted by American colonialism. It also explains the tragic aspects of the missionary presence - the inability to relinquish the power over theological interpretation, its inability to completely escape its relationship with colonialism, and its participation in educational programs that eroded a functioning Lakota language and contributed to the advancing American secular culture - all which prevented an integral Lakota Catholic Church.

This paradigm also gives us the ability to understand Black Elk’s vision. It explains why he broke with Lakota tradition and told his vision, especially to an outsider. He told it because it was his vision of the Lakota Christ, teaching the world of the oneness of all people, and the beauty of the Lakota place in it.

Then the Lord answered me and said: Write down the vision clearly upon the tablets, so that one can read it readily. For the vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint.” Habakkuk 2:2-3.

The vision of mine ought to go out, I feel, but somehow I couldn’t get anyone to do it. I would think about it and get sad. I wanted the world to know about it. It seems that your ghostly brother has sent you here to do this for me. You are here and have the vision just the way I wanted, and then the tree will bloom again and the people will know the true facts. We want the tree to bloom again in the world of true that doesn’t judge.”

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36 DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 43.
Like the prophet Habakkuk and the visionary John, Black Elk declares that the sacred vision will go out, so that the tree will bloom, in a world of truth, justice and love.

This tension was heightened for three reasons: the Depression, growth of social problems such as alcoholism, and the gradual secularization and erosion of the Lakota youth. In the face of these problems Fools Crow went on a vision quest for answers:

[same answer: go back and revive good things of the past] Our only hope was to fall back on our traditional way of life. It was the only foundation that would give meaning and purpose to us. I brought this message back to the elders, and we all went to work on it by improving our ceremonial life and daily productivity. We started to live the traditional life again, and not long after that some things at least began to change for the better. I am sorry to say that the drinking problem was not one of these. That has gotten worse with each passing year. Whiskey and wine are the most terrible things the white man ever brought to the Indian people. Alcohol is the bitterest curse we have, and it has done more to weaken and destroy us than anything else.37

Despite the return to a more traditional lifestyle, Fools Crow remained a faithful Catholic and continued to ascribe Christianity with equal status. In writing about the recovery from the depression years, Fools Crow states that, “as our outlook for the future became brighter, more people began to attend the mission churches, and men and women also prayed more with their pipes.”38 Both traditional ceremonies and Catholicism are important for the future of the Lakota.

Black Elk echoes the same equal status in *The Sacred Pipe*. In the intro he specifically states his purpose for giving his teachings to Brown:

We have been told by the white men, or at least those who are Christian, that God sent to men His son, who would restore order and peace upon the earth; and we have been told that Jesus the Christ was crucified, but that the shall come again at the Last Judgment, the end of this world or cycle. This I understand know that it is true, but the white men should know that for the red people too, it was the will of Wakan-Tanka, the Great Spirit, that an animal turn itself into a two-legged person in order to bring the most holy pipe to His people; and we too were taught that this White Buffalo Woman who brought our sacred pipe will appear again at the end of this “world,” a coming which we Indians know is now not very far off...I have wished to make this book through no other desire than to help my people in understanding the greatness and truth of our own tradition, and

37 Mails, *Fools Crow*, 149.
38 Ibid., 151.
also to help bring peace upon the earth, not only among men, but within men and between the whole of creation.

Near the end of his life, Black Elk explicitly states that he believes in Christianity, and is only writing so white men and Lakota may understand that they’ve always worshipped the Christian God. The adoption of new thought does not necessitate a rejection of the old. Lakota tradition is valid and beautiful, but this does not imply a rejection of Christianity, which Black Elk and Fools Crow both demonstrate with their lives.
Chapter 8: Postcolonialism, The End of Western Romanticism, and One Black Elk

We must return to the point from which we started. Diversion is not a useful ploy unless it is nourished by reversion: not a return to the longing for origins, to some immutable state of Being, but a return to the point of entanglement, from which we were forcefully turned away; that is where we must ultimately put to work the forces of creolization, or perish.

-Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*

To finish my argument I must return to the non-Christian pure Lakota Black Elk promoted by so much of the academy. Julian Rice’s interpretation of Black Elk, written in 1991, typifies this approach. Rice shrouds Black Elk in the image of the mythical Native American warrior fighting for cultural purity on all fronts. His conversion is a mere diversion to deceive outside observers. Black Elk “apparently compromise[s] his own beliefs” and “assume[s] a mantle of Christianity.” This mantle allows Black Elk to deceive observers but prevents him from “compromising” what Rice assumes to be his unsaid intentions to protect an unchanging, pure Lakota tradition.

Rice writes again in 1998, defending his stance against a growing trend to interpret Black Elk’s Catholicism as at least partially sincere, by staking out what amounts to a last stand:

Just as missionaries used the Sioux to do the Lord’s work, so a particular faction of the academic community now uses Native America culture to define itself favorably. Today “cosmopolitan” and “sacred” describe the going, postmodern gospels. In the interest of social tolerance and intellectual complexity Native Americans have become brave denizens of the “liminal” divide. Black Elk, for example, cannot really be understood as a traditional Lakota because he had already been a Christian “for decades” when John Nethardt interviewed him in 1931 (see Couser 281 and Holler 204-23).

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2 Rice, *Black Elk’s Story*, 104.

3 Rice, *Before the Great Spirit*, 11. Rice cannot understand that the issue is not whether Black Elk was a “traditional” Lakota. “Traditional” is a modern category measuring acculturated Lakota’s view of Lakota ceremonial life and Rice’s use of the term for Black Elk is anachronistic. In Black Elk’s generation, all Lakota were traditional because they were socialized in pre-reservation culture and spoke Lakota. The issue at hand is to what degree did the “traditional” Black Elk participate in and was formed by the Christian narrative and Catholic tradition.
For Rice, any suggestion that Black Elk’s sincerely participated in Christianity sacrifices the purity of Native American culture. He sees the suggestion that creative Native involvement in non-Native cultural practices as an imposition of a colonial academy using Native America for its own benefit. In opposition, Rice reasserts his pure warrior Black Elk:

"The possibility that Black Elk could have distinctly remembered and perhaps wished to return to the spirituality he had exclusively lived until the age of thirty-seven is lost on these scholars. They make much of the collaborative nature of published writings and throw up their hands at the possibility of receiving an authentic Indian voice in any ethnographic text."  

Categorically dismissing biblical exploration in Europe, Christian influence in the Ghost Dance, and over forty years of Catholic life, Rice conjectures a defiant warrior desperately and secretly clinging to an “exclusive spirituality.” Rice creates the “authentic Indian,” fighting to remain “pure” from impure outside cultural influences.

**The Rise of Postcolonialism**

Until now, I have challenged interpretations like Rice’s on the grounds that this view imposes contemporary modern Western and secular American assumptions on Black Elk and Lakota tradition. In opposition, I have argued over the course of this work that the sincerity and centrality of Black Elk’s Catholicism is in continuity with the dynamics of Lakota tradition. On these grounds alone Black Elk’s Catholicism must be recognized as legitimate and sincere.

However, to restrict the debate to America alone is a myopic distortion of Black Elk’s location. The Black Elk debate inhabits a much larger context. To be properly

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5 Again, another anachronistic term imposed on Black Elk. This time he uses a secular American term, which describes religious beliefs separated from any communal cultural practices, free to be chosen and invested with meaning based on the individual consumers whom, decidedly not “traditional” Lakota values.
interpreted, Black Elk must be seen within the global context of colonialism. A postcolonial movement from the once colonized peoples of Africa, Asia, the Americas and the Pacific contests Western control of the academy and its interpretation and essentialization of the non-Western Native. Ironically, Rice’s dismissal of the “going, postmodern gospels” is not a product of the West, but “Native” voices from across the globe, including Native Americans.

Rice’s stereotype is not solely a phenomenon of interpreters of the Lakota or even Native American studies, but a theme present in colonialism throughout the world. The defiant warrior and his imagined cultural purity is not native, but is a creation of Western outsiders. Edward Said first described this as a form of orientalism in 1978. R. S. Sugirtharajah describes the orientalism that Rice so quintessentially demonstrates:

Behind the hunt for the authentic Indian or African lies the notion that, in spite of the long history of Western colonization, non-Western cultural productions should remain pure, original, truly indigenous and totally untainted by the impact of older and newer forms of colonialism.  

According to Sugirtharajah, characterizations of the authentic native like Rice’s depend on an a priori assumption that despite long histories of colonialism, natives should not change.

Philip J. Deloria, son of the famous Dakota writer Vine Deloria, Jr., accepts this reading of the West’s native. In Playing Indian, Deloria argues that “Indian” identity is the cultural construction of the “other” in American colonialism.

The authentic, as numerous scholars have pointed out, is a culturally constructed category created in opposition to a perceived state of inauthenticity. The authentic serves as a way to imagine and idealize the real, the traditional, and the organic in opposition to the less satisfying qualities of everyday life. The ways people construct authenticity depend upon the traumas that defined the authentic in the past. Because those seeking authenticity have already defined their own state as inauthentic, they easily locate authenticity in the

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6 An interesting battle since most Lakota in this era were primarily fighting to eat.
figure of the Other. This Other can be coded in terms of time (nostalgia or archaism), place (the small town), or culture (Indianness). The quest for such an authentic Other is a characteristically modern phenomenon, one that has often been played out in the contradictions surrounding America’s long and ambivalent engagement with Indianness.  

Deloria locates the construction of the essentialized native in Western modernity’s feeling of inauthenticity. This produces a desire for unchanging authenticity.

Sugirtharajah cites an article from the Liverpool Post of 20th July 1920 to illustrate this tendency:

We of the West do not want from the East poetic edifices built upon a foundation of Yeats and Shelley and Walt Whitman. We want to hear the flute of Krishna as Radha heard of it, to fall under the spell of the blue God in the lotus-heart of dreams.

Rice’s desperate plea for “authentic purity” voiced in 1998 is virtually identical to the passage from 1920. The only value in different people is the “difference” they can provide for Western consumption. Sugirtharajah describes this Western consumption as a product of a Western cultural need:

Such a search envisages the task of interpretation as establishment of an identity rather than as a process in which identity, context and texts constantly evolve in response to new demands. Rey Chow refers to those who yearn for the past as ‘root searchers’ because roots signify a nostalgic return to the past so that the plurality of the present can be reduced to ‘a long-lost origin.’ Behind the post-imperial quest by Western interpreters for an authentic Thirdworldness there lurks a feeling of homesickness for traditional culture and values, which once they controlled and which now are not within their reach.

Sugirtharajah, like Deloria, suggests that this quest is a product of the emptiness of the modern West, searching to fill its rootlessness. This reinforces the conclusions of chapter three, where we saw that Lakota of Black Elk’s generation raised in the Lakota language did not demonstrate the need to assert or create identity by denying cultural change.

Rice’s project imports a Western nostalgia to establish and protect a Lakota identity.

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9 Sugirtharajah, The Bible and the Third World, 279-80.
10 Sugirtharajah, The Bible and the Third World, 279-80.
However, this Western nostalgia is foreign to the early reservation period and Black Elk.¹¹

Voices across the globe are challenging this Western approach that creates the essentialized noble savage. Sugirtharajah describes the new postcolonial enterprise that emphasizes the complexity and agency of Native responses to colonialism:

What is distinctive about the current enterprise, however, is that far from being locked into the colonial paradigm where colonists set the ground rules, it concedes more importantly, the complexity of contact between the invader and the invaded. It goes beyond the binary notions of colonized and colonizer and lays weighty emphasis on critical exchanges and mutual transformation between the two. Postcolonialism does not mean that the colonized are innocent, generous and principled, whereas the former colonizers, and now the new colonizers, are all innately culpable, greedy and responsible for all social evils. Not only is such a notion an inverted form of colonialism but it also absolves the Third World elite from their patriarchal and vassalizing tendencies. The current postcolonialism tries to emphasize that this relationship between the ruler and the ruled is complex, full of cross-trading and mutual appropriation and confrontation.¹²

Postcolonialism rejects Rice’s binary approach. According to Sugirtharajah, this binary understanding is an inverted form of colonialism. He stresses a postcolonialism that textures history, acknowledging the complexity and agency of the colonized and colonizers. Deloria also highlights the agency of the colonized to use Western culture to challenge colonialism. By adopting American images of the essentialized Indian, Native Americans used the image for social and political advantage:

If being a survivor of the pure, primitive old days meant authenticity, and if that in turn meant cultural power that might be translated to social ends, it made sense for a Seneca man to put on a Plains headdress, white America’s marker of that archaic brand of authority.¹³

¹¹ Postcolonialism also explains dynamics that contribute to tourist/seeker quests like Neihardt’s. Edouard, the postcolonial writer from Martinique, writes: “We cannot underestimate the universal malaise that drives Europeans, dissatisfied with their world, toward those ‘warm lands’ that are deserted by unemployment as well as subjected to intolerable pressures of survival, to seek in the Other’s World a temporary respite.” Edouard Glissant, Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays, translated with introduction by J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 23. Deloria describes this phenomenon also with hobbyist groups and New Age seekers. See Philip Deloria, Playing Indian.

¹² Sugirtharajah, The Bible and the Third World, 250.

¹³ Deloria, Playing Indian, 189.
According to Deloria, even an activity as ambiguous and potentially damaging as mimicking the noble savage provided a means of confronting colonialism. Ironically, “playing Indian” was a hybrid innovation for survival.

**Postcolonialism and Christianity**

Sugirtharajah emphasizes the particular role that Christianity plays in postcolonialism. In this context, Christianity is no longer interpreted as an exclusively destructive force, but an area where both the colonized and the colonizer challenged the unmitigated forces of colonialism through the exercise of their agency.

Sugirtharajah outlines how agents, both the colonized and the colonizer, used the Christian narrative in the context of colonialism. Like the Jesuits addressed in chapter two, Sugirtharajah describes how missionaries often occupied an ambivalent social location in a colonial situation. They participated in colonial practice and often shared the Western view of the essentialized native. But their work put them into close communal contact with the colonized. This contact often influenced or required missionaries to engage in native culture and language and see the colonized as human beings. It also led missionaries to critique colonialism, despite their inability to completely extract themselves from colonial practices. Sugirtharajah calls this phenomenon “dissidence,” where the Christian narrative is used by missionaries to challenge colonialism from within the system.

Lammin Sanneh develops this point further. He claims that the very use of vernacular language to translate the biblical text ran counter to the colonial enterprise.

That some missionaries wanted to dismantle the older indigenous cultural dispensation, to subvert the native genius, is without question, but employing mother tongues in their
Scriptural translation is a tacit surrender to indigenous primacy, and complicates the arguments of Western cultural superiority.\(^{14}\)

According to Sanneh, missionary use of vernacular language challenged colonial assumption of Western superiority.

Sugirtharajah explains how the colonized exercised their agency in the processes of appropriation and confrontation. Natives appropriated new colonial cultural practices and transformed them to confront colonialism. Natives used this process in their encounter with the Christian narrative. A communal example of this phenomenon is Ras Tafarians, a Black Nationalist movement that appropriated the Christian narrative. Marcus Garvey had prophesied the crowning of a black king: "Look to Africa, when a black king shall be crowned, for the day of deliverance is near."\(^{15}\) In 1930 the Ethiopian nobleman Ras Tafari was crowned emperor, and took the name Haile Selassie. The effect in Jamaica was powerful:

Many Jamaicans looked in awe at the photographs in the Kingston papers showing European leaders respectfully bowing down to this new African leader. Prophets began to preach the divinity of Ras Tafari. Leonard Howell was one of several people to proclaim that Christ had returned and now the white race would bow down to the black race. Europeans who called themselves Jews and Christians had distorted the biblical teachings and appropriated the place of God's chosen people, guardians of the Ark of the Covenant, the black race. The Messiah would come to redeem his people from the land of colonialism and slavery and lead them out of Babylon into the promised land, Ethiopia (Barret 1988:80-84).\(^{16}\)

The Lakota use of the Christian narrative in the Ghost Dance is strikingly similar. A far off prophet inspires a pan-Indian/African movement that teaches the Messianic restoration of an colonized people. The adherents embody a distinct community and way of life.


\(^{15}\) Taylor, 72.

\(^{16}\) Taylor, 72.
Sugirtharajah gives many other examples where active "native" agents appropriate Christianity and confront Western colonialism with its narrative. These examples are more inclusive than the Ras Tafarians and the Ghost Dance:

...the invaded, often caricatured as abused victims or grateful beneficiaries, transcend these images and wrested interpretation from the invaders, starting a process of self-discovery, appropriation and subversion. The reading practices of William Apes, Equiano, Shembe, Ramabai and Banerjea, recounted here, are examples of such an enterprise. Although they were incorporated into colonial ideologies, nonetheless they resisted them with the very tools provided by colonialism. 17

William Apes (1798-1839) provides a significant example of a parallel postcolonial appropriation and confrontation of the Christian narrative in a Native American context. Apes was a Pequot and Methodist minister active in the political struggles of the Mashpee. He used the Christian narrative to argue the common ancestry of both Native Americans and Europeans and their equality before God in order to establish greater Mashpee independence. 18

Irene S. Vernon demonstrates that this is not an isolated example by providing four other examples of Native American postcolonial use of the Christian narrative. 19 She states that, "In Native Christian writings, and through the lens of postcoloniality, Christianity is presented as a means of survival and as a vehicle of adaptation, reflecting considerable choices which do not necessarily imply rejection of Native spirituality or 'Indianness.'" 20 Viewed from postcolonialism, the use of the Christian narrative does not compromise identity, but can be an exercise of Native Americans' agency in confronting colonialism.

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17 Sugirtharajah, The Bible and the Third World, 257.
18 Sugirtharajah, The Bible and the Third World, 90.
As we saw in chapter 7, Black Elk’s use of the Christian narrative mirrors this same appropriation and confrontation. He calls the colonizer to the Christian standards of love and justice, enforced by a God bigger than the story of colonialism. Black Elk also incorporates a more inclusive interpretation than the Ras Tafarians or Ghost Dancers, exemplified by Equiano and Apes. The eschatological renewal of creation and end of suffering includes not only the colonized, but all peoples of the world, even the whites.

**Modern Western Assumptions and the Implications of Postcolonialism**

The implications of the essentialist positions exemplified by Rice not only damage Black Elk and the Lakota. If taken to their logical conclusions they invalidate all extant cultures that exist today, particularly ones that these positions essentialize. According to their categories, there can be no such things as African American Christianity, Rastafarians, Santeria, Jazz, Mexican culture – a few examples of a list that could be as long as this entire work - because all of these things arose in a colonial context. They are sell-outs and impure, hopelessly compromised with the integration of Western concepts and culture. No culture in the Americas would meet their standards, including contemporary Lakota culture.

Even the pre-reservation Lakota cultural purity that Rice romanticizes is logically impossible because it was born of the adoption of the gun and the horse, and spread in a colonial conquest of the Black Hills and the surrounding plains. The “warrior” image of the Lakota depends on their historic rise to power over their neighboring tribes. If Rice is consistent, the Lakota appropriation of European technology and cultural practices of conquered and friendly tribes that Black Elk himself records should be relegated to the trash heap of cultural impurity.
Even when scholars recognize the postcolonial practices of hybridity and creolization, scholars erect a barricade around "religion." William K. Powers describes Oglala adaption:

The traditional Oglalas, despite their superiority, are not oblivious to the predominance of the white man's technology on the reservation and off. Many are anxious to receive new housing and new meeting places for their communities. When lease money comes due, the old people buy new cars for themselves or finance cars for their children and grandchildren. At small feasts and larger celebrations, participants are harangued by the elders about the necessity of education for the younger generation. Light industry is welcome because it means the young people will not have to leave the reservation for employment. A high priority is placed on buying new clothing - straw hats and Stetsons, boots, flashy shirts and Levis, leather belts with western buckles - all in anticipation of entering school, participating in a powwow or rodeo, or taking an off-reservation trip to visit urban relatives and friends.²¹

Power goes on to say that these cultural innovations are "Indianized," or incorporated into the Oglala value system. They do not make the Oglala less Oglala. But he cannot accept this about Christianity. Christianity, despite real participation, cultural adaptation, and professed belief is not sincere but only instrumental.

**The West's/Rice's Last Stand**

Last stands such as Rice's, a shrinking island of Western modernity in a rising sea of postcolonial voices, should not be surprising. The stakes are high. The academy will not relinquish its child, the essentialized other, its "noble savage," because the noble savage stands at the heart of so much of the academic study of indigenous culture, and the new age spirituality from which Rice seeks to separate himself. To acknowledge that Black Elk was fundamentally influenced by Christianity undermines the foundational assumptions of the fields of Native American Studies and Religious Studies. Black Elk is a foundational source for the reconstruction of authentic Lakota religion. For example, Rice liberally cites Black Elk, Fools Crow, and other Lakota Catholics as authentic

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voices. But to cite Black Elk is to use a Christian narrative, the very content that Rice seeks to separate himself and the Lakota from.

For other scholars, the Black Elk sources have become a new Native American canon. Vine Deloria writes that, “To [young Indians Black Elk Speaks] has become a North American bible of all tribes,” which clarifies those beliefs that are “truly Indian.”

He juxtaposes the Black Elk tradition over and against Christianity:

Neihardt’s Black Elk Speaks and When the Tree Flowered, and The Sacred Pipe by Joseph Epes Brown, the basic works of the Black Elk theological tradition, now bid fair to become the canon or at least the central core of a North American Indian theological canon which will someday challenge the Eastern and Western traditions as a way of looking at the world.

Ironically, Deloria is not aware that he was correct in calling Black Elk Speaks a Bible of Native America. It is the story of Lakota salvation history, with Christ and the Church at its center. The love, universalism, monotheism, and salvation that have become the mantra of Lakota tradition and new age duplications are Black Elk’s incorporation of Christianity. In the greatest of all ironies, Black Elk, the quintessential White man’s noble savage, and his message are Christian. The most important contemporary themes in Lakota tradition: “Wakan-Tanka onshima1a ye oyate wani wachin cha!” (O Great Spirit, be merciful to me that my people may live!),” essentialized by many academics and popular culture, are the Christian modifications that Black Elk made.

The last stand of colonial voices clamoring for the noble savage will continue. They will continue to bail their sinking ship, while the masts of modern Western assumptions collapse under the weight of the sea of postcolonial voices, heralding the redemption of colonized people as human agents who faced the dangerous new Western

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world head on. Black Elk's vision will rise, released from its bondage, proclaiming the humanity of the Lakota and all nations in the story of *Wakan Tanka* and His Lakota Son, calling the world to justice.
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