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Review of *Black Elk: Holy Man of the
Oglala* by Michael F. Steltenkamp

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Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala. Michael F. Steltenkamp. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993. Illustrations, preface, epilogue, notes, bibliography, and index. xxiii + 211 pp. \$19.95.

The classic accounts of the Oglala holy man, Nicholas Black Elk, are three: *Black Elk Speaks* (1932) by John Neihardt, *The Sacred Pipe* (1953) by Joseph Epps Brown, and the later re-edited and annotated notes of the original Neihardt and Black Elk interviews published as *The Sixth Grandfather* (1986) by Raymond DeMallie. Michael Steltenkamp's (1993) account of Black Elk's years on the reservation after his conversion to Catholic Christianity is an essential fourth work that completes the circle of Black Elk's remarkable spiritual life. Working with a variety of sources, but primarily his notes and interviews of Lucy Black Elk, the holy man's last surviving child before her death in 1978, Steltenkamp has assembled a compelling narrative of Black

Elk's life as a Catholic catechist, teacher, prayer-leader and spiritual adviser to the Lakota people.

Beyond assembling the collected interviews with Lucy Black Elk and older Lakota contemporaries who were also converts to Christianity, the central premise of this work is Black Elk's continued spiritual leadership during his 60 years of twentieth-century reservation life. The gap, between the portrait of the young, traditional Black Elk of *Black Elk Speaks* and the ailing, elder, retired Black Elk of *The Sacred Pipe* has finally been sketched in the words of his daughter, herself a deeply committed Catholic mother of ten children. Steltenkamp's approach has been to first present a brief chapter on Lakota culture to give readers unfamiliar with nineteenth-century life an introductory ethnographic background representing Black Elk's early life. He then introduces the reader to Lucy Black Elk and her family, including her mother Anna Brings White, and her Catholic half brother, Ben—one of the translators for the Neihardt interviews.

The heart of the book is a narrative by Steltenkamp of Black Elk's conversion and Catholic life on the reservation, interspersed with direct quotes from his interviews with Lucy Black Elk and Lakota elders like John Lone Goose and Ben Marrowbone. Writings from the Jesuit fathers during this period, such as Eugene Buechel, Florentine Digmann, and Joseph Zimmerman, enhance the narrative and provide a lucid image of Black Elk as a Catholic spiritual leader, not only among the Lakota, but on other reservations as well. The formation of the St. Joseph Catholic society for men, and the St. Mary society for women, are presented as replacing the older *okolakiciyapi* organizations as new sources for tribal leadership, in which Black Elk played a prominent and decisive role. Social and religious identity was strengthened through frequent meetings, pray gatherings, communal activities and culminated in the yearly Catholic Sioux Indian Congress. Further, it was the practice of the Jesuit missionaries to focus their conversion efforts on Lakota spiritual leaders and to promote their activities (including a stipend) for promulgating Catholic instruction in indigenous language and concepts. In all this Nick Black Elk appears as a highly successful catechist, well-respected and liked, and, most significantly, as having retained his Lakota identity as a spiritual leader.

The interviews also reveal some interesting additional facts about Black Elk: his interpretation of the pipe as a "pre-Christian" revelation to the Lakota that still retained its spiritual efficacy; his willingness to participate in a *wanagi wapiya* (ghost ceremony) to help cure the results of a seizure; his visions of a *wacasa wakan* "from overseas" who appeared "everyday at three

o'clock" before his death; and the remarkable and strange appearances in the sky during his wake and directly witnessed by a large number of persons. Steltenkamp concludes with a chapter in which he offers comments on the importance of a fully contextual history of Black Elk's life and the important role that Black Elk continued to play in Lakota Christianity during his mature and active years as a catechist. All in all this is a work that helps us to understand the impact and importance of religious transformation and the ways in which one outstanding Lakota leader continued to guide and inspire his people. **Lee Irwin**, *Religious Studies, College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina*.