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Review of Nicholas Black Elk: Medicine Man, Missionary, Mystic by Michael F. Steltenkamp

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In Nicholas Black Elk: Medicine Man, Missionary, Mystic, Michael Steltenkamp explains that because of his chance acquaintance with Black Elk's daughter, Lucy Looks Twice, who “wanted people to know about his [Black Elk’s] life as a catechist, I became the biographer of his life in the twentieth century.” The author claims that his earlier book, Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala (1993), which reports Lucy’s version of her father’s life, “showed how this otherwise stereotypically Plains Indian medicine man assumed a Christian identity, and how this was the religious legacy for which he was most remembered within his reservation community.” He further claims that this earlier book belongs in the company of two other books presenting Black Elk’s “legacy” to the world, Black Elk Speaks and The Sacred Pipe, Black Elk's collaborations with, respectively, John G. Neihardt (1932) and Joseph Epes Brown (1953),
so that his own book in 1993 “completed a trilogy of portraits.”

The author’s statement that with this latest book “a full portrait of Black Elk’s life is accessible in one volume” misleads; it actually represents the author’s attempt to bolster his “trilogy” claim. This claim may appear overreaching since the works of Neihardt and Brown represent intentional communication by Black Elk, whereas the author’s 1993 book offers Lucy’s presentation of her father’s views over against the plain meaning of what must be considered his two published works. What the author fails to acknowledge upfront is that the authenticity of his 1993 book has been seriously challenged by material published in Hilda Neihardt’s 1995 memoir, Black Elk and Flaming Rainbow: Personal Memories of the Lakota Holy Man and John Neihardt and in a 2000 collective memoir by members of Ben Black Elk’s family, Black Elk Lives: Conversations with the Black Elk Family. These two books were published in part as rebuttals to Steltenkamp’s 1993 book, and his 2009 book can be considered in part to be a response, however indirect or inadequate, to those two books which openly contradict his view that Black Elk, the catechist, truly supplants Black Elk, the Lakota Holy Man.

Steltenkamp’s interpretive approach assumes that Black Elk is somehow ineffective in exercising his own agency so that the collaborations with Neihardt and Brown do not express his true view of matters, obscuring or marginalizing his real identity as a Catholic catechist. The author insists that Lucy’s agency rightly remedies her father’s deficiency in this regard. What remains seriously unaddressed by the author is the extent to which the agency of all Lakota people in Black Elk’s generation suffered from the economic and political collapse of the Lakota nation under the onslaught of government-supported violence in the 1870s and 1880s, and how much the colonization policies and practices instituted thereafter restricted the personal agency permitted to a Lakota holy man. Readers who believe that the churches’ ready embrace of government policies was fully benign may be inclined to side with the author’s claim that Black Elk’s personal agency found fulfillment as a Catholic catechist. Others may read Steltenkamp’s efforts to present Black Elk as indubitably Catholic and see yet another priest promoting the collapse of Lakota culture and the loss of personal agency by Lakota holy men.

The author’s failure to include the views of Ben Black Elk’s family members in his 1993 book was regrettable since he claimed to be correcting the record on Black Elk by presenting his daughter’s views, yet omitting her brother’s voice which would have been available to him through Ben’s daughters after Ben’s death in 1973. He does include in the 2009 book the remarks of a priest at Ben’s funeral who claimed Ben had intended to correct the record by writing about his father’s life as a catechist, though Steltenkamp fails to acknowledge Ben’s stout affirmation of his father’s Lakota traditionalism in an audiotape from 1969 which is published in Black Elk Lives: Conversations with the Black Elk Family. Also in that book, the voices of Ben’s family members become public, yet the author pays them almost no notice—after all, they do not report the same story about Black Elk that Steltenkamp is arguing for.

Receiving a sacred vision is the traditional way a Lakota wicasa wakan (holy man) becomes empowered to exercise agency in religious matters, and Black Elk’s vision at nine years of age stands at the center of his agency as a wicasa wakan in Black Elk Speaks. Steltenkamp, however, characterizes this vision as puerile rather than empowering: “As a sickly youth, he endured a fever-induced vision-hallucination.” Instead, Steltenkamp states it was his catechetical training and his adoption of “conventional Catholic practice” that empowered Black Elk to experience “mystical moments.”

Steltenkamp’s book is troubled by an inconsistent polemizing of the record of Black Elk’s life and words in order to portray him as a faithful catechist for whom traditional Lakota ways belonged in the nineteenth century. Emblematic of the author’s obsession with vindicating Black Elk’s Catholicism at the expense of his Lakota traditionalism is his deceptive citation of Black Elk’s words from The Sacred Pipe: “We have been told . . . 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 . . . This I understand and know that it is true.” The italics and the final period were added by Steltenkamp. In the original text there is a comma in place of the period, and Black Elk goes on to say “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 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” (Brown xix–xx). Black Elk here grants the truth of the religion of “the white men,” but insists on an equal granting of the truth of Lakota religion, leaving Steltenkamp’s strained polemic unended.

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