

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

1996

## Review of *Black Elk's Religion: The Sun Dance and Lakota Catholicism* By Clyde Holler

John R. Schneider  
Calvin College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Schneider, John R., "Review of *Black Elk's Religion: The Sun Dance and Lakota Catholicism* By Clyde Holler" (1996). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1123.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1123>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

*Black Elk's Religion: The Sun Dance and Lakota Catholicism.* By Clyde Holler. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995. Glossary, bibliography, index. xxxi + 246 pp. \$16.95 paper.

The unifying purpose of this book (which the title only dimly indicates) is to bring balanced scholarly perspective to debates that presently rage over the dual religious identity of Nicholas Black Elk as both Lakota and Christian. Clyde Holler rightly describes the problem as akin to the "Quest of the Historical Jesus" in biblical research, with a lot "riding on the results."

In the first chapter, Holler gives a valuable summary and critical commentary on four prominent authors (Steltenkamp, Rice, DeMallie and Steinmentz) and judges their proposals wanting, for each in its own way denies what Holler convincingly favors as the best reading of all the evidence—Black Elk was to the end very much *both* Christian *and* Lakota in his convictions. The chapters on the Sun Dance that follow are thus more than history, though fine specimens of that genre. Holler goes on to use them at the end as context for finding the Black Elk of history.

These five chapters comprise superbly informative essays on the history and meaning of the Lakota Sun Dance. Earliest accounts by eyewitnesses of the dance (1866-1882) and then the later remembrances of observers during the first years of the ban (1883-1934) lead into a discussion of the revival of the Sun Dance, which Holler shows must be credited in large part to Black Elk himself. The author carefully marks the ways in which Black Elk ingeniously shaped the underlying *belief system* of his native rituals and (devastatingly for purists) forcefully confirms that Black Elk thoroughly reworked the Sun Dance along lines of harmony with the teachings of Christianity. In this integrative work for peace (without assimilation) Black Elk emerges as "the greatest religious thinker yet produced by native North America."

Regrettably, Holler's own most original theoretical constructions suffer from what

seems, anyway, the too-rigid (although unstated) metaphysics of the professional philosopher he once was. *Black Elk Speaks* gives John Neihardt's perspective, he judges, *not* Black Elk's. The reason? It is a work of *art* and therefore creative rather than faithful to Black Elk's message. The logic suggests that Holler has no available category or place for narrative realism as a means of being both creative and truthful. And at the end, he explains Black Elk's paired religious convictions by attributing to him an apparent non-cognitivist model of religious language. But why not apply the less brittle notion of analogy to Black Elk, especially if one has just stressed (and rightly so) the holy man's deep concern with cognitive truth in reworking the Sun Dance?

Those things said, this book nevertheless greatly advances the lively debate over Black Elk's religious walk.

JOHN R. SCHNEIDER  
Department of Religion and Theology  
Calvin College