

Saint Black Elk

Black Elk: Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism. By Damian Costello, C'97. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2005. Reviewed by William J. Collinge, The Henry J. Knott Professor in Theology.

Remember *Black Elk Speaks*? Maybe you had to read it in high school. Or maybe you saw the portraits of Indian sages that are based on it, such as in the movies *Little Big Man* and *Dances with Wolves*. Its haunting words provide America's standard picture of the authentic Plains Indian, whose culture has been vanquished by the white man. Most famous is its conclusion, "And I, to whom so great a vision was given in my youth,—you see me now a pitiful old man who has done nothing, for the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead."

Black Elk (1863?-1950) was an Oglala Lakota (Sioux), who was present at the battle of Little Bighorn (1876) and took part in the fighting after the Wounded Knee Massacre (1890). He was a cousin of Crazy Horse and a member of Sitting Bull's band. His role as a holy man was founded in a great vision he had at the age of nine. In 1931 he gave a series of interviews through an interpreter to the poet John G. Neihardt, and that was the origin of *Black Elk Speaks*, published in 1932.

In the 1980s and '90s, another side of Black Elk appeared. The notes of Neihardt's interviews were published, and it became evident how much Neihardt had shaped the material. The celebrated concluding words, it turned out, were Neihardt's, not Black Elk's. Then Michael F. Steltenkamp, S.J., published *Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala* in 1993, revealing that Black Elk had become a Catholic in 1904 and worked for most of the rest of his life as a catechist, teaching Catholicism on the Pine Ridge Reservation and baptizing numerous Lakota. He had at least 113 godchildren. Since the publication of Steltenkamp's book, scholars of Black Elk have tended to take one of two positions: (1) Black Elk's apparent conversion was insincere, and he remained at heart a traditional Lakota holy man; or (2) Black Elk repudiated his Lakota heritage in adopting the white man's religion.

Damian Costello, a theology and Spanish major in the Mount St. Mary's class of 1997, first encountered Black Elk when Dr. William Portier, then of the Mount's theology department, brought in Steltenkamp as a guest speaker. Costello, dissatisfied with both of the alternatives mentioned above, devoted his senior honors project to Black Elk. After graduation he worked for two years in the Dominican Republic, becoming increasingly aware of how subjugated peoples, such as the indigenous people of the Western Hemisphere, made Christianity their own. Now a doctoral student in theology at the University of Dayton, he returned to the study of Black Elk and has published the results of his research in *Black Elk: Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism*.

In his new book, Costello draws on postcolonial theory to develop an interpretation of Black Elk as at once authentically Lakota and sincerely Catholic. Black Elk's Catholicism, in his own eyes, was a reshaping and development of the Lakota tradition,

rejecting violence and extending the Lakota's relationship with the Great Spirit (*Wakan Tanka*) to the entire human race. From the side of Catholicism, it could be seen as an "inculturation" of Catholic faith, embodying it in the language and forms of a new culture. Neihardt's distorted view of Black Elk's religion came about, Costello argues, through his lack of knowledge of the Lakota language and culture and through his own cultural biases, which included a distaste for Christianity. Black Elk, without falsifying his story, told only as much of it as Neihardt wanted to hear, and Neihardt, relying on a translator, was unable to recognize the Christian language in what Black Elk did say.

Costello makes clear that the Catholic Church often collaborated with the forces that destroyed Native American cultures. But for Black Elk, Catholicism enabled Lakota culture to survive—and not only that, but to challenge the dominant Western culture to be faithful to its proclamation of God's love for all humankind. Black Elk, then, should be seen, Costello says, not as the last of a dying culture, but as "a great saint of the colonial era."