

***The Post-Colonial Imperative of Interreligious Dialogue:  
Translating the missio Dei through Nicholas Black Elk's Multireligious  
Participation***

by

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## **I. Introducing a Conversation on Discerning the *missio Dei* through Dialogue**

The nature of Christian mission has always puzzled me. As a boy, I went with my church youth group to Standing Rock Reservation every summer to help lead vacation bible school and assist with various construction projects. At twelve years old, the concept of driving across the country for a “mission trip” to the Lakota children of Fort Yates, ND, did not seem unusual. It never occurred to me to ask “Why?” It was simply “What we do” as Christians. Besides, my family had been in Montgomery, Alabama for eight generations, an “Old Montgomery” family – for whom the generational wealth was a not-too-distant memory but whose reputation and social status was its real currency – so my grandmother’s maxim, “*Noblesse oblige*,” seemed to suggest that “mission” is what we did as a family to whom much had been given. Indeed, the generations before me (from whom I inherited my name and expectations) had done “mission” in their own, perhaps more sophisticated ways: my father is a lawyer, my grandfather was a federal judge, and my great-grandfather was a long-time United States Senator of some local political renown. Imagine my grandmother’s surprise when, after my own successful careers in law and politics, my family and I were leaving Alabama so I could discern a call to ministry alongside the Indigenous communities that formed me as a young man. Such a “career” path certainly was beyond the scope of her understanding of how “much [was] required” of a family “to whom much has been given.”

As I entered the most prestigious seminaries of one of the most prosperous and privileged denominations, enjoying an education funded by generational wealth built off the backs of stolen people on stolen land, I struggled with what exactly I was being asked to do – what *is* mission, anyway? My sponsoring congregation was not a country-club

Episcopal parish in Montgomery but was a rural Indigenous congregation on Standing Rock Reservation, a community with whom I have been in relationship for twenty-eight years. As a White man from Alabama, I was critically aware of my status as an outsider, both to the community that sent me and to the communities I am called to serve.<sup>1</sup> I recognized, as James W. Perkinson points out, that I bring certain unspoken (perhaps even unconscious) assumptions formed in “cultural habit and social conditioning [that] are equally as determinative for racial domination as overt discourses.”<sup>2</sup>

Like Perkinson, I recognize that a longstanding relationship with an oppressed people does not “qualify” me “for embrace as an ally.”<sup>3</sup> Given the privilege and prosperity that birthed me, it was some surprise that those I was sent to “evangelize” as a young man actually evangelized me.<sup>4</sup> Even so, I concede my embedded biases may be painfully apparent to everyone but me. At best, I can only recognize my status as a guest to the work that God began with God’s people in these communities long before I arrived. But, the question, “What is *mission*?” still dangles. The question of how to be the (White) face of a “Gospel” that stripped a people of their land, their language, their traditions, even their

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<sup>1</sup>As a White man from the dominant culture and religion in the United States, I am more than just an outsider. I occupy the same cultural space as missionaries who stripped the people of Standing Rock of language, cultural identity, and spirituality in full collaboration with a government policy of cultural genocide.

<sup>2</sup>Perkinson, James W. *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 2.

<sup>3</sup>Perkinson, *White Theology*, 9.

<sup>4</sup>What is commonly referred to as evangelism, or the “winning or revival of personal commitments to Christ,” may not be the same thing – although some will disagree – as mission. “Evangelism” in *Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online*, Accessed, March 31, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/evangelism>. The fraughtness of this term is highlighted by the other definition offered: “militant or crusading zeal.” A non-theological perspective, here, is helpful, particularly when those on the giving and receiving end of mission often have no formal theological training. In *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, the editor notes, “A useful distinction between evangelism and mission can be made if evangelism is used (as it sometimes is) to describe methods and techniques of mission.” Richardson, Alan, ed. *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976, 217. If methods of mission have historically colored the understanding of evangelism, the second definition of the word in *Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online* comes as no surprise. Whichever definition of evangelism we choose, they all place the agency with the evangelist, which it is not where the primary agency of mission lies.

children, haunts me. The question of how to join with the Episcopal Church in ministry amongst a people to whom they peddled politically calculated government treaties, guaranteed by a malformed theology of “chosen-ness,” troubles me.<sup>5</sup>

This conversation around the nature of “mission,” the church’s role in it – as well as the role of the “missionary” and the role of the “missionized” – emerges from the complicated context of my own journey. It emerges from a conviction that our Indigenous communities are not the object of our charity, or even our mission. They are our teachers and partners in God’s life of transformation and reconciliation. This conversation is rooted in a sense that mission is not something the church *does*. Mission is something the church *is*. As Darrell Guder describes, “it has taken us decades to realize that mission is not just a program of the church. It defines the church as God’s sent people.”<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, then, “mission is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in God’s purpose to restore and heal creation. ‘Mission’ means ‘sending’ and it is the central biblical theme describing the purpose of God’s action in human history.”<sup>7</sup> This is a conversation grounded in the recognition that, if my tradition, the Episcopal Church, is serious about reimagining itself

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<sup>5</sup> William Benjamin Whipple, the Episcopal Church’s first bishop of Minnesota, whose work with Indigenous peoples was sometimes as hero and sometimes as villain, served as the Episcopal Church’s foremost purveyor and guarantor of one-sided Indigenous treaty. Whipple was a zealous advocate in Congress for removal to reservations, presumably to provide, in his words, “the heathen at my door” with “government ... protection ... personal rights of property” and (naturally) salvation. Anderson, Owanah. *400 Years, Anglican/Episcopal Mission Among American Indians* (Cincinnati, OH: Forward Movement Publications, 1997), 51-52. Whipple was an influential member of the 1876 Sioux Peace Commission, collecting signatures from his parishioners for a government treaty that stole much land from the Great Sioux Reservation, including their sacred Black Hills. Anderson, *400 Years*, 109. Indigenous theologian Tink Tinker, a member of the Osage Nation, recounts that, when the Red Lake Ojibway once accused Whipple of “speak[ing] for the Great Father [the President],” Whipple retorted, “No ... I speak for the Great Spirit.” Tinker, George E. *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 103. Whipple’s successor, Bishop William Hobart Hare, the Episcopal Church’s first “Missionary Bishop,” presided over a missionary committee whose report to the Board of Indian Commissioners in 1883 advocated breaking up the Great Sioux Nation into smaller reservations. Anderson, *400 Years*, 108-09.

<sup>6</sup> Guder, Darrell L, ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998), 6.

<sup>7</sup> Guder, *Missional Church*, 4.



in light of the mission of Christ<sup>8</sup> – to more fully embody the *missio Dei* – we must learn what it means to be a community grounded in and sent by God’s outpouring life of *contestation and restoration* from the very peoples we once sought to evangelize.<sup>9</sup> We must listen and learn how to engage the *missio Dei* through the mode of interreligious dialogue.

### ***Listening for God in the Story of Missionary Christianity in Native America***

The story of Christian mission in North America is complicated. It is a story in which the church has partnered with the U.S. government in its colonial project, as a purveyor and guarantor of one-sided treaties that divested Indigenous peoples of their

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<sup>8</sup> In its enabling resolution creating The Task Force for Reimagining the Episcopal Church (“TREC”), the 77th General Convention of the Episcopal Church of the United States recognized that “the Holy Spirit is urging The Episcopal Church to reimagine itself” in the light of the Five Marks of Mission. Task Force for Reimagining the Episcopal Church. “Engaging God’s Mission in the 21st Century: Final Report of the Task Force for Reimagining the Episcopal Church.” December 31, 2015, attached as Appendix I, 21. TREC was formed and funded to facilitate the “reform[ation of] the Church’s structures, governance, and administration.” TREC Final Report, 22. TREC’s report begins with the ambitious title: “Engaging God’s Mission in the 21st Century” and recognizes the Five Marks of Mission as the “Mission of Christ,” suggesting that they must also become the “Mission of the Church.” TREC, Final Report, p. 1. However, despite a smattering of references to “mission,” the report seems preoccupied with modernizing the institutional structures of the church, perhaps in hopes of reclaiming its lost influence. Indeed, the report recognizes that the “Episcopal Church once held a place of cultural privilege,” becoming the “Church of the white, wealthy, and powerful.” TREC Final Report, 3. It is no surprise, then, that for many reimagining the Episcopal Church means “align[ing] human, financial, and structural resources” to an “adaptive agenda of innovation” to ensure the survival of the institution. TREC Final Report, 3. However much the Episcopal Church might want to focus its mission on the *missio Dei*, the risk looms that the proclamation of God’s reign might only serve as a pretext for modernizing the institutional church. A more textured assessment of the theological underpinnings of mission suggests that the power and privilege of the institutional church may be the primary impediment to the Episcopal Church becoming the “body of Christ” in the world.

<sup>9</sup> It may seem strange to characterize the life of God as a life of contestation. And, yet, to describe the nature of God’s breaking into the world, disrupting the human patterns of power and privilege that by, in, and through creation, God might be encountered, revealed and reconciled to the world, I can find no better word than contestation. Others – myself included – have referred to the outpouring trinitarian life of God as simply the movement towards reconciliation. See Flett, John G. *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 2010), 251 (“The whole being and action of the Christian community rests on ... [t]he reality of reconciliation [as] a life of active participation in Jesus Christ’s own mission by the power of the Spirit.”) (emphasis added). In *The Christian Imagination*, Willie James Jennings writes, “I have purposely stayed away from the theological language of reconciliation because of its terrible misuse in Western Christianity and its tormented deployment in so many theological systems and projects.” Jennings, Willie James. *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 10. I join Jennings, here, using the theological term “reconciliation” sparingly and intentionally.

homelands and facilitated their removal from these ancestral lands to militarized reservations. It is a story in which the church has perpetrated policies of genocide and ethnocide – extermination by assimilation – through government funded boarding schools.<sup>10</sup> The church took Indigenous children from their families and stripped them of language, identity, spirituality, and tradition in an effort to Christianize and Anglicize them. On the other hand, it is also a story in which the church has – perhaps unintentionally – preserved Indigenous language through translations of scripture and hymnody and has preserved Indigenous ancestry through baptismal records. It is a story of missionaries who raised up Indigenous leaders within the church to negotiate the gaps between Christianity and Indigenous traditions. In short, it is a story of both witness and counter-witness.

And, yet, to tell the story of Christian mission in North America with only the church in view (as villain or hero) is to perpetuate the coloniality that undergirds Christian theological and institutional structures. Such a one-sided telling of the story denies any role to the Indigenous peoples the church sought to evangelize other than the role of victim or ward. It also denies the transformative power of language and story and the restorative power of ritual and tradition. In short, such a telling of the story relegates Indigenous Christianity to serving as either a product of colonial domination or colonized accommodation. On the other hand, understanding Indigenous Christianity as only a means of resisting colonialism ignores how, according to Michael McNally, “native

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<sup>10</sup> When the U.S. government’s “Indian policy” of annihilation by military force proved unworkable (e.g., the Battle of Little Bighorn), the government turned to the Episcopal Church, among others, to implement a policy of annihilation by assimilation through government-funded, church-run boarding schools. Those boarding schools were set up to remove Indigenous children from their families by force or coercion and strip them of all language, tradition, and culture, remaking them as White, Christian children. This task fell squarely within the Episcopal Church’s role in civilization and evangelization. The Episcopal Church played a decisive role in the government policy of annihilation by assimilation, running “*at least 18 Native American boarding schools.*” McDonald, G. Jefferey. “A Shocking History,” *The Living Church*, February 28, 2018. Accessed March 31, 2021. <https://livingchurch.org/2018/02/28/a-shocking-history/> (emphasis added).

peoples opted for and molded Christianity in the effort to ‘rebuild their shattered communities and reinforce select elements of their embattled traditional culture.’”<sup>11</sup> Because Indigenous religious traditions have prioritized the lived religious experience of a community over any propositional truth claims that community might put forward, Indigenous religious traditions have remained “remarkably open to the possibilities of new truths, new visions, and new ceremonies [that] could come to them in time.”<sup>12</sup> According to McNally, “native peoples gave audience to the Christian tradition in this spirit ... according to a familiar religious ethos of intertribal exchange,” suggesting that *interreligious dialogue is actually an Indigenous response* to the encounter with and revelation of the divine.<sup>13</sup>

For instance, McNally observes how the tradition of Ojibwe hymn singing created space for something new to emerge from “the tenuous spaces of culture, spaces that move *between* the oral and the written, *between* the Christian and the Ojibwe, *between* accommodation and resistance.”<sup>14</sup> In those in-between spaces, Indigenous Christians rejected the tired colonial binary of accommodation or resistance – not accepting the world as imposed on them, nor rejecting it outright, but recreating it. What McNally describes in the tradition of Ojibwe hymn singing is no isolated occurrence in the story of Christian mission in the United States. Part of the story of Christian mission in North America, then, is this pattern of dialogue between practitioners of Indigenous religious traditions and practitioners of Christianity; the story even includes the dialogue between those traditions

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<sup>11</sup> McNally, Michael D. *Ojibwe Singers: Hymns, Grief, and a Native Culture in Motion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 9.

<sup>12</sup> McNally, *Ojibwe Singers*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> McNally, *Ojibwe Singers*, 11.

<sup>14</sup> McNally, *Ojibwe Singers*, 44 (emphasis original).

within the practitioners themselves. It is an account of mission that is intercontextual and interreligious, an account that moves beyond a Christian hegemony that compels either passive acquiescence or militant resistance. It recognizes a third way of responding to missionary Christianity – an internalizing and indigenizing response that is at the heart of the *missio Dei*.

### ***Whose Mission is it Anyway?***

*Missio Dei* is the theological framework for locating the agency of mission in the very nature of God. David Bosch recognizes in *missio Dei* theology a paradigm shift in understanding the church's role and responsibility to God and the world, representing a "decisive shift toward understanding mission as *God's* mission."<sup>15</sup> Bosch observes that theological understandings of mission have historically centered on the agency of the individual: "saving individuals from eternal damnation;" or, the agency of a culture: "introducing people from the East and South to the blessings and privileges of the Christian West;" or, the agency of a church: "expansion of the church (or of a specific denomination)."<sup>16</sup> At the Brandenburg Conference of 1932, he notes, Karl Barth "became one of the first theologians to articulate mission as an activity of God himself ... a new theological paradigm, which broke radically with an Enlightenment approach to theology."<sup>17</sup> For Bosch, the agency of God is at the heart of the *missio Dei*: "Our mission has no life of its own; only in the hands of a sending God can it truly be called mission, not least since the missionary initiative comes from God alone."<sup>18</sup> If Christian mission springs

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<sup>15</sup> Bosch, David J. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. 20th Ann. Ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011), 398 (emphasis original).

<sup>16</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 399.

<sup>17</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 399.

<sup>18</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 399.

forth from the sending nature of a Trinitarian God, as *missio Dei* theology holds,<sup>19</sup> mission can never be something we *do*. It is only something we join, something we participate in.

Moreover, to participate in the *missio Dei* is to participate in the trinitarian life of God. John G. Flett suggests that participation in the *missio Dei* has dramatic implications for the church and its agency in mission: “God’s sending nature becomes a messianic pattern to be repeated, and it is evident in movements that work to break down the old creation and build up the new, movements devoted to principles of humanization and shalom.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, if the church is to be the church, it can only do so by grounding its very being and doing in the *missio Dei*, the reconciling life of God, “a life of active participation in Jesus Christ’s own mission by the power of the Spirit.”<sup>21</sup> For Flett, the church comes to represent not its own agency in the world but God’s, a sign of God’s “new creation in history” as a “reconciled community [that] moves into the world under the impulsion of the Spirit ... [and] lives as a reconciled and reconciling community.”<sup>22</sup>

Not only does the church’s agency give way in its being and doing; the church surrenders its agency in its very orientation. As a community formed by and for the reconciling life of God, restoration of relationship becomes the animating focus of the church, orienting its members in their relationships with God, each other, and the world. As Catherine LaCugna observes, a community grounded in the reconciling life of God that centers on “right relationship with every creature and with God” and models for us “who

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<sup>19</sup> Bosch suggests that the “classical doctrine on the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and ... sending the Spirit was expanded into yet another ‘movement:’ Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the Church into the world.” Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 399.

<sup>20</sup> Flett, *The Witness of God*, 200.

<sup>21</sup> Flett, *The Witness of God*, 251.

<sup>22</sup> Flett, *The Witness of God*, 293.

and what we are to become.”<sup>23</sup> The church, then, as the “body of Christ” in the world,<sup>24</sup> embodies right relationship between its members, all creation and the Creator, proclaiming, according to LaCugna, that the life of Jesus is our “mission” –“His life of freedom, service ... to others, devotion to those on the margins, his willingness to die for others, is the summit of how we should live.”<sup>25</sup> In becoming the “body of Christ,” the church is an embodied witness to the reconciling life and work of God in the world.<sup>26</sup> By embodying God’s reign in the world as the body of Christ, the church’s own agency is subsumed in this “other-centeredness” at the heart of the *missio Dei*.

If the agency of God is at the heart of the *missio Dei* and “other-centeredness” is the organizing principal for the church, then Christian mission can only ever be an act of discernment, of listening, and of sharing. If the church is to join God’s life of restoration and redemption in the world, we must first discern where God is already present and at work in the world; we must listen to the ways God is already present and at work in and through God’s peoples; and, we must be willing to share with God’s peoples in the life and work of God in their midst. John V. Taylor, onetime General Secretary to the Church Missionary Society and Anglican Bishop of Winchester, observes, “in Christ the word is

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<sup>23</sup> LaCugna, Catherine Mowry. *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 296.

<sup>24</sup> By “church,” here, I do not refer to an institution or a building. I intend to use the term as Paul did in describing a community of believers who seek to embody God’s reign in their time and place (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:12-28; Eph. 3:6, 5:23; Col 1:18, 24 (NRSV)). Paul’s understanding of the church as the “body of Christ” is the ultimate standard to which every Christian institution must hold itself. All scripture citations will be from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

<sup>25</sup> LaCugna, *God For Us*, 296. Flett describes the life and work of a missional community in terms of participation: “Jesus Christ is a story to be told and not a system to be described ... by telling Jesus Christ’s story ... the missionary community becomes part of that story and participates in Christ’s history.” Flett, *The Witness of God*, 234-35.

<sup>26</sup> Embodied witness, according to Michael J. Gorman, is Paul’s vision for the church: “the church is a *living exegesis* of the gospel of God. The church ‘performs the gospel as a living commentary on it ... it lives the story, embodies the story, tells the story’” Gorman, Michael J. *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 43.

whispered that God is inextricably involved in humankind.”<sup>27</sup> As Taylor recognizes, God has always ever been at work amongst God’s peoples, even (and perhaps especially) *before the church arrived*. Our call, then is to “go with Christ as he stands in the midst of Islam, of Hinduism, of the primal world-view, and watch ... as he becomes ... Muslim or Hindu or Animist, as once he became Man, and a Jew.”<sup>28</sup> With God as the agent of reconciliation and the church as a participant in the *missio Dei*, we can only ever “recognize and appreciate our status as guest,” says Taylor – guests to God, God’s work of reconciliation, and to God’s people to whom God is already reconciling Godself.<sup>29</sup> As guests, our role is to create space for “fruitful interaction ... for mutual learning and *conversation*.”<sup>30</sup> From a posture of discernment, then, relationship and dialogue become a mode of mission that inevitably invites the encounter with and revelation of the Living God.

### ***Locating the missio Dei in Native America***

Steven Charleston, an Episcopal Bishop and member of the Choctaw Nation, joins Taylor in recognizing that God was present and active amongst God’s peoples long before Christian missionaries arrived, but for Charleston the Indigenous peoples of North America have “their own original covenant relationship with the Creator and their own original understanding of God prior to the birth of Christ.”<sup>31</sup> Comparing Indigenous nations to the tribes of Israel, he observes, “God was here, on this continent among this people, in covenant, in relationship, in life.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed the “Old Testament of Native America,” as

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<sup>27</sup> Taylor, John V. *The Primal Vision*. (London: SCM, 1963), 80.

<sup>28</sup> Taylor, *The Primal Vision*, 113-14.

<sup>29</sup> Taylor, *The Primal Vision*, 82.

<sup>30</sup> Taylor, *The Primal Vision*, 82 (emphasis added).

<sup>31</sup> Charleston, Steven. “The Old Testament of Native America,” in Treat, James. *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 73.

<sup>32</sup> Charleston, “Old Testament of Native America,” 74.

Charleston calls it, “tells of the active, living, revealing presence of God in relation to Native People through generations of Native life and experience ... It is the living memory, the living tradition of a people’s special encounter with the Creator of life.”<sup>33</sup> This divine encounter and revelation among Indigenous peoples of North America does not discount the encounters and revelations of God among any other peoples but enriches them.<sup>34</sup> The encounters and revelations in these lived traditions, or other “testaments,” according to Charleston, enrich one another as they are in conversation with other traditions and testaments, discerning where and how God is present and at work in and through God’s peoples, “broaden[ing] our *dialogue* about the connections between old testaments” and even broadening our appreciation of the reach of the life and work of God.<sup>35</sup>

Participation in the *missio Dei*, then, necessarily invites dialogue between participants of different traditions through which God is both encountered and revealed. Such an approach to mission rejects the binary of colonizer and colonized, recognizing that the agency of the *missio Dei* lies not with the missionaries who demand conversion, or even with the missionized who resist (or accommodate) it. Instead, it recognizes that the “other-centered” God who calls us to orient ourselves to right relations with one another, with creation, and with our Creator is only ever the agent of the *missio Dei*, revealing Godself to all of God’s peoples and being encountered in and through all of creation. Such an approach to mission is a “third way” between approaches that privilege the agency of the missionaries and approaches that privilege the agency of the missionized. This third

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<sup>33</sup> Charleston, “Old Testament of Native America,” 73-74.

<sup>34</sup> Rather than limiting God’s chosenness to one people or another, or prioritizing one people’s tradition and testament over another, Charleston recognizes that “Christians ... have to make some elbow room at the table for other ‘old testaments.’ Not only from Native America, but from Africa, Asia, and Latin America as well ... Christians must permit the same right for other peoples that they have claimed for themselves.” Charleston, “Old Testament of Native America,” 77-78.

<sup>35</sup> Charleston, “Old Testament of Native America,” 78 (emphasis added).



way of mission moves beyond a theology of chosenness and towards a theology of relatedness. It is a mode of mission that surrenders theological certainty in exchange for theological humility. It is a framework that is inherently intercontextual and interreligious – it invites and empowers a plurality of voices. It creates space for the possibility of mutual learning, mutual transformation, even mutual conversion. And that is the beginning of participation in the divine life of transformation and reconciliation.

This third way of mission as interreligious dialogue may most readily be observed (in the context of Christian mission in North America) in the interreligious engagement of Lakota holy man and Catholic catechist, Nicholas Black Elk. Ironically, the evidence of Black Elk’s negotiation of the space between Lakota traditions and missionary Christianity is recorded not by Black Elk himself but by White men – John G. Neihardt and Joseph Eppes Brown– who attempted to capture Black Elk’s teachings as a means to preserve an essentialist Native American spirituality.<sup>36</sup> Unsurprisingly, then, Black Elk’s words (or those attributed to him) are highly contested, both on a textual level –in light of emerging questions about which words belong to Black Elk and which are editorial embellishments, as well as on a substantive level – what those words actually reveal about Black Elk’s engagement with missionary Christianity.<sup>37</sup> But whatever words Black Elk actually spoke to Neihardt and Brown, and whatever he may have actually intended in speaking them, the words handed down from Nicholas Black Elk continue to reflect an Indigenous negotiation

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<sup>36</sup> Compare, Black Elk, Philip Joseph Deloria, Raymond J DeMallie, A Shahan, and John G Neihardt. *Black Elk Speaks* Complete ed. (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), with Brown, Joseph Epps, *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk’s Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux* (Norman, OK: Univ. of Okla. Press, 1989).

<sup>37</sup> It is not within the scope of this project to fully engage Black Elk’s words on a textual level, but it is enough to recognize that those words reflect something of the dialogic nature of Indigenous engagement with missionary Christianity.

of the gap between missionary Christianity and Indigenous traditions that holds the two traditions in dialogue.

### *The Scope of the Conversation*

This conversation will explore the Indigenous engagement with missionary Christianity in the United States as interreligious dialogue through the multireligious participation of Black Elk as both a Lakota holy man and a Catholic catechist. Black Elk might not agree with the Catholic apologists who argue, on the one hand, that he submitted to the hegemony of Christian mission, or even with postcolonial theologians who argue, on the other, that he defied it. Rather, his teachings, as recorded by Joseph Brown in *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux*, suggest Black Elk did something wholly different. He was neither a convert to the Western colonial paradigm of missionary Christianity, nor was he a dissident. Instead, Black Elk stepped outside that paradigm and recreated his world in the light of an encounter with and revelation of the divine through an ongoing dialogue between Lakota tradition and missionary Christianity, both within his community and within himself. As Black Elk teaches, a model of mission as interreligious dialogue creates space for mutual learning, mutual transformation, even mutual conversion. It is the beginning of reconciliation for a church that bears the marks of mission as both scars and open wounds. It also suggests a means by which the woundedness of missionary Christianity might be transfigured. As such, it is an invitation to participate in the mission of God as we move more fully into the life of the Living God.

A conversation about missionary Christianity cannot begin without accounting for the role of colonialism in the missionary enterprise. Robert Heaney begins his assessment

of post-colonial theology with a somewhat startling proclamation: “The central problem for the church is the church.”<sup>38</sup> As Heaney recognizes, in theology, the testimony of God and the testimony of the church are often at odds. The testimony of God is life; the testimony of the church is sometimes life. But, as Heaney notes, “[t]he claims of God’s people, the witness of opponents, would-be converts, converts, and the ministry of churches, also deal death.”<sup>39</sup> The work of theology, then, is balancing these testimonies, holding the witness and counter-witness in tension. Indeed, it is an exercise in dialogue. The story of missionary Christianity in the United States is nothing if not a story of this witness and counter-witness; it is a story of the dialogue between very different testimonies to the divine life. It is the story of dialogue between the missionaries and the missionized, between the divine encounter and revelation in Christian tradition(s) and Indigenous traditions. It is also the story of dialogue within the traditions’ participants as they discern the presence and action of God with the languages and imagery each tradition holds dear.

Robert J. C. Young suggests that this work of discernment is fundamentally the work of post-colonial theology. For Young, “Postcolonialism ... begins ... from the diversity of its cultural experiences and starts from the premise that those in the West, particularly, both within and outside the academy, should relinquish their monopoly on knowledge, and take other knowledges, other perspectives, as seriously as those of the West.”<sup>40</sup> Young compares the work of post-colonial theology to teaching a child to cross the street: “One place to begin might be with ... *Stop. Look. Listen.* Most of all the last

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<sup>38</sup> Heaney, Robert Stewart. *Post-Colonial Theology: Finding God and Each Other Amidst the Hate* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2019), 1.

<sup>39</sup> Heaney, *Post-Colonial Theology*, 1.

<sup>40</sup> Young, Robert J. C. “What is the Postcolonial?,” *Ariel* 40:1 (2009), 15.

term. For postcolonialism listens.”<sup>41</sup> Listening as a posture of post-colonial theology suggests that it may offer a theological framework within which to discern the *missio Dei* in the midst of contested and contesting narratives. In the context of missionary Christianity in the United States, then, post-colonial theology may provide a language for translating the dialogue between and within the missionaries and the missionized. In the particular case of Nicholas Black Elk, post-colonial theology may provide a vocabulary for translating the dialogue we find between missionary Christianity and Lakota traditional belief and practice.<sup>42</sup>

We will begin our inquiry into the relationship between interreligious dialogue and the *missio Dei* with the story of Nicholas Black Elk. We will examine the particularity of his historical and theological contexts. As Catholic missionaries staked claim to Lakota ancestral lands and their inhabitants in the foothills of the sacred Black Hills in present-day South Dakota, Black Elk did not resist them as he did the 7th U.S. Calvary at the Battle of Little Big Horn and at the Wounded Knee Massacre. Instead, Black Elk embraced them. We will consider why and how Black Elk held the teachings of those Catholic missionaries (and his role as a catechist) in tension with his traditional Lakota belief and practice as a *wicasa wakan*, or holy man. We will also consider how and why Black Elk held his traditional Lakota belief and practice and his Catholic belief and practice in tension with the belief and practice of the Ghost Dance. Through dialogue Black Elk engaged in that

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<sup>41</sup> Young, “What is the Postcolonial?,” 17 (emphasis original).

<sup>42</sup> Clyde Holler points out the difficulties in the use of the word “traditional” to describe Indigenous practice and belief. “[C]autions should be used about the term ‘traditional,’ which is a value-laden term ... [whose] usage signals that an appeal is being made to the authority of the tradition; to call something traditional in a religious context is to say that it is both legitimate and authoritative. As a result, Holler also recognizes a distinction between traditional beliefs and practices and “tribal religion [which] becomes traditional religion only when it is challenged from the outside by another religious system.” Holler, Clyde. *Black Elk’s Religion: The Sun Dance and Lakota Catholicism* (Syracuse: NY: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1995), xxix-xxx.

tension between contested and contesting traditions as he was ever himself the subject of dialogues by others about his practices and identity. Those dialogues continue to this day as post-colonial scholars raise questions over the authenticity of Black Elk's words – which White authors and ethnographers recorded to enshrine them as a sort of Indigenous bible and liturgical manual – and Catholic apologists attempt to tell his story in a way that preserves the Christian commitments of the Catholic Church's "most prominent" Indigenous catechist. We will consider whether something remains of Black Elk's account of divine encounter and revelation between these two traditions. Ultimately, we might find that in these dialogues – between the words and images spoken and recorded, between the transmissions and the translations – Black Elk was ever seeking and discerning the presence and action of the divine, what we might call the *missio Dei*, by engaging his Great Vision in dialogue with multiple traditions at the same time.

Even so, we cannot help but consider how Black Elk's multiple religious identity helped him discern the divine revelation of his Great Vision as he negotiated the power dynamics of a missionary Christianity that was partnered with the United States government in its colonial project of genocide and ethnocide against Black Elk's people. In the middle space between missionary Christianity and Lakota traditional belief and practice, Black Elk's interreligious dialogue might have become something more than simply a means of survival or resistance. Indeed, Black Elk's multireligious participation gives birth to innovation and transformation. Ultimately, for Black Elk, interreligious dialogue becomes the mode in which he translates divine encounter and revelation in the midst of a colonial occupation and oppression. It becomes the posture from which he discerns the *missio Dei* in response to a missionary Christianity that is an agent of the

occupation of his ancestral lands and the oppression of his people. Black Elk's model of interreligious engagement through multireligious participation, then, will offer us a framework within which to consider the post-colonial imperative of interreligious dialogue. We will consider whether an interreligious theology of revelation, which emerges from Black Elk's dialogues, has any implications for post-colonial theology.

From Black Elk's model of multireligious participation, we will consider how Indigenous engagement with missionary Christianity might model a middle way for Christianity that avoids the hegemony of the Western colonial paradigm but also declines to reverse that paradigm in favor of those on the margins of colonial Christianity. In the light of other encounters between Indigenous communities and missionary Christianity, we will consider how Black Elk's interreligious dialogue points to an Indigenous response to the encounter with and revelation of the divine. We listen for any resonance with Black Elk's multireligious participation in the voices Ojibwe Christians of Northern Minnesota or of Tsimshian Christians of Canada's Pacific Northwest. Indeed, if interreligious dialogue can be understood as an Indigenous response to divine encounter and revelation, we will consider what Black Elk's account of that encounter and revelation in Joseph Epps Brown's *The Sacred Pipe* reveals about the middle way of the *missio Dei*, particularly through Black Elk's reimagination and revival of the Lakota Sun Dance.

Finally, we will consider from the perspective of Black Elk's multireligious participation how interreligious dialogue as a mode of the *missio Dei* might call us to a renewed theology of mission. Certainly, the Catholic missionaries who sought to convert Black Elk to Christianity could not imagine interreligious dialogue as a tool for conversion. Rather, it was Black Elk – the target of their conversion tactics – who deployed

interreligious dialogue, not as a means to accommodate missionary Christianity, or even as a manner of resisting it, but as a mode of discerning divine encounter and revelation. How differently might the story of missionary Christianity in the United States read if the missionaries were the ones engaged in the work of listening for the voice of God, rather than speaking for God? How might the model of interreligious dialogue as a mode of “indigenizing” the *missio Dei* offer a framework for a renewed theology of Christian mission? What would it mean for the church to be open to conversion by the very peoples it once sought to convert?

### ***Conversation (Non)Starters***

Before beginning this ambitious, but important, conversation, it is necessary to take note of concepts and ideas that may impede the course of dialogue. For our purposes, three themes will repeatedly arise throughout Black Elk’s teachings (and the theological reflections on them) that, if unaddressed, could unravel the conversation before it ever starts. The risks of the concept “religion” pervades the story of Black Elk. What concept, if any, did he have of religion? Is that term useful to our conversation if the concept, as we understand it today, would have been unrecognizable to him? What risks does a Western post-Enlightenment notion of religion bring into the conversation, and could it also offer any reward? Similarly, the theological obstacle of “syncretism” lurks underneath our accounts of Black Elk’s encounters with Christianity and dialogues with other religious traditions. As a value-laden concept created by Christian scholars and practitioners to privilege certain forms of divine encounter, will the concept of syncretism discount the witness of Black Elk to engagement with different religious traditions from a posture of discernment? Or, can a redeemed understanding of syncretism actually be helpful in

understanding Black Elk's discernment of divine revelation amidst religious mixture? Finally, the "problem" of particularity looms large.<sup>43</sup> Will the particularity of Black Elk, his beliefs, practices, culture, and context qualify his witness? Stated differently, are we able to hear anything of value in the teachings of Black Elk – between his words and actions – that compels us today to rethink our approach to religious many-ness and Christian mission? Equally as problematic, if not more so, is the particularity of this author. Will the particularity of his privilege, position, culture, and context allow him anything meaningful to say about Black Elk? Given the problems of particularity that pervade this conversation, does the particularity of Black Elk, the author, or even the reader hold any real promise for our conversation, here? With those (non)starters named, let us begin the conversation.

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<sup>43</sup> If post-colonial theology has taught us anything, it is that the particularities of our contexts matter. All stories are told within a particular social, political, and cultural location. To ignore the particularities of a story's context is to hear the story only at a surface level – to hear the words but not understand them. Theology is no different. Indeed, the incarnation itself is wholly dependent upon the particularities of context. God made Godself known to the world in the flesh of a first century Palestinian Jew living under occupation of the Roman Empire. Without the particularities of context, there is no "Word Made Flesh;" there is only an idea of the Word. The same holds true for us, here. Theology is done in particular traditions at particular times in particular places by particular people. To not account for the particularities of our context, here, would presuppose that our words somehow transcend time and space, that they are universally true and eternal.



## II. The Interreligious Dialogues of Nicholas Black Elk

Before beginning, it is necessary to note that Nicholas Black Elk, the person at the heart of our conversation about the way the *missio Dei* is encountered and revealed in dialogue between religious traditions, is himself the site of an ongoing and significant dialogue. The man we have come to know as Nicholas Black Elk was a real person whose memory lives on among the family and friends who knew him. He is also a literary figure, a product of the poetic words and literary devices of a White man, John G. Neihardt, the Nebraskan Poet Laureate, amateur historian, and ethnographer, who sought to record in his “Indian tales” the stories of “an ancient people with a rich culture who were dying out,” as Black Elk historian Joe Jackson recounts.<sup>44</sup> Just as the words attributed to Black Elk by Neihardt in *Black Elk Speaks* were contested at the time of their initial publication by the Catholic missionaries who “converted” Black Elk and deployed him as a catechist to convert other Indigenous peoples, those same words are contested today by scholars who seek to extract essentialist, propositional truths from the “historical Black Elk.”<sup>45</sup> The battle for Black Elk’s “authentic” voice is one that has spanned his lifetime and still haunts his legacy.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Jackson, Joe. *Black Elk: The Life of An American Visionary* (New York: Picador, 2016), 404.

<sup>45</sup> Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 3. As Holler rightly concedes, “For us, too, something is riding on the outcome.” (*Black Elk’s Religion*, 4). Indeed, we all bring our bias to the inquiry, which is why naming the particularity of our contexts, as we did in the first section, is a necessary step before beginning the conversation.

<sup>46</sup> It must be noted that the dispute regarding the “authenticity” of Black Elk’s words, itself, is contested. As Cherokee scholar, Brian Burkhart observes, this dispute centers of the issue of “ethnographic containment,” in which “the truth or values of [his] words is determined by ethnographic authenticity rather than truth or value in a broader sense.” In response, Burkhart proposes that Black Elk’s words be engaged with a kind of “ethnographic refusal,” or a “space [in which] the authenticity of [his] words [is not allowed] to be questioned.” Burkhart, Brian. *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land: A Trickster Methodology for Decolonizing Environmental Ethics and Indigenous Futures* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2019), xxi.

And yet, people on all sides of Black Elk's words have something at stake in the meanings, practices, and identities they point to. Comparing the historical wrangling over Black Elk's words with the "competing factions in the Christian community [that] appeal to the Jesus tradition as the ultimate authority," Clyde Holler notes that Black Elk "has been claimed not only by traditionalists and Catholics, but also by anti-traditionalists and anti-Catholics – as well as by admirers of John Neihardt, people who 'want to be' Indians, ... [and] scholars," all of whom are driven by "values, passions, interests, and jealousies."<sup>47</sup> Michael F. Steltenkamp adds to Holler's list of stakeholders in Black Elk's words: "[e]nvironmental activists, Indian militants, anthropologists, historians, religionists, students of Americana" and anyone else who might use those words to "bolster or refute whatever conventional Native theme they choose because, it appears, his representation has become *the* conventional stereotype par excellence."<sup>48</sup> Perhaps the words of Black Elk – and the meanings, practices, and identities they point to – are so hotly contested because, like the first-century Palestinian Jew, the real Black Elk lives somewhere between the historical and the literary.

Perhaps, it is this in-betweenness of Black Elk and his words that Lakota scholar and theologian Vine Deloria points to when he describes *Black Elk Speaks* as "a North American bible of all tribes." Deloria explains, "The very nature of great religious teachings is that they encompass everyone who understands them and personalities become indistinguishable from the transcendent truth that is expressed."<sup>49</sup> Between the spoken and written word, between the intention and the interpretation, between the historical and the

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<sup>47</sup> Holler, *Black Elk's Religion*, 4.

<sup>48</sup> Steltenkamp, Michael F. *Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala* (Norman: Univ. of Okla. Press, 1993), xv (emphasis original).

<sup>49</sup> Deloria, Jr., Vine. "Forward," Black Elk, *et al.*, *Black Elk Speaks*, xiv, xvi.

literary figures, between the identities and the practices, something was (and still is) being born amidst Black Elk's dialogues. Deloria, himself the son of a Lakota Episcopal priest, is describing the nature of religious language. And, as we will see, Black Elk's words certainly conveyed (and still convey) something of his encounter with the divine. The religious nature of Black Elk's words, however, is not the subject of our inquiry, here. Rather, our conversation centers on what we can learn about the nature of the encounter with the divine from the dialogues that gave birth to Black Elk's words.

### *Dialogues Between Contested Words*

Much of the contestation around the words, practices, and identities of Nicholas Black Elk arises from the fact that, contrary to the implications of the title of Neihardt's book, Black Elk did not actually speak the words Neihardt published.<sup>50</sup> In fact, none of the words Neihardt attributes to Black Elk are actually Black Elk's words. They are translations of words given to Neihardt – often, translations of translations of translations. As Jackson describes: “Black Elk made a statement in Lakota; Ben [Black Elk's son] translated it into idiomatic ‘Indian English’; Neihardt repeated Ben's words in Standard English; Ben would sometimes repeat Neihardt's words back to Black Elk in Lakota for clarification. When all were satisfied, Ben said, ‘That's it,’ and Enid [Neihardt's daughter] jotted it down in Gregg shorthand.”<sup>51</sup> And, while the words recorded in Enid's notebooks were “one or two removes from Black Elk's original words,” Jackson points out that, before Neihardt could begin writing, Enid had to edit and transcribe her shorthand into a

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<sup>50</sup> Neihardt's original title for the book was *The Tree That Never Bloomed*. His wife suggested “Black Elk Speaks” as something more marketable after Neihardt's new editor objected to the original title. Jackson, *Black Elk*, 432. Ironically, as Jackson notes, “Neihardt liked the suggestion, thinking it gave proper credit to the old holy man.”

<sup>51</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 415.

set of notes, or a typescript,<sup>52</sup> from which Neihardt actually worked, “add[ing] one more level of interpretation between Black Elk and the reader.”<sup>53</sup> This process describes somewhere between four and seven levels of translation taking place between the words Black Elk actually spoke and the portrait Neihardt painted of Black Elk through words attributed to him.

Even with all these levels of translation between Black Elk and the reader, perhaps the most significant translation occurred in Neihardt’s editorial process. And yet, Black Elk scholar Raymond J. DeMallie observes, “To treat Neihardt as a mere editor to Black Elk ... fails to do justice to Neihardt’s creative skill as a writer.”<sup>54</sup> According to Jackson, Neihardt describes Black Elk’s vision in a letter to Julian House, a friend and English professor, as “a marvelous thing, vast in extent, full of profound significance and perfectly formed. If it were literature instead of a dance ritual, it would be a literary masterpiece!”<sup>55</sup> Neihardt’s own words to a friend and colleague suggest not only that Neihardt lacked a full understanding of what he was translating; he also understood himself as doing more than simply translating. He was transforming Black Elk’s words into literature. Or, as DeMallie describes: “Neihardt envisioned himself as Black Elk’s literary spokesman, an interpreter of the old holy man’s thoughts.”<sup>56</sup> Comparing Neihardt’s text with the actual transcripts

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<sup>52</sup> Holler describes Enid’s typescript as the “first text to result from the [interviews]. For Holler, the “second text” was *Black Elk Speaks* itself, with a “third text” emerging in the “retranscription of Enid’s original shorthand notes.” *Black Elk’s Religion*, 4-5. Holler identifies a “fourth text” in a reconstruction of the original interviews through a comparison of the first and third texts in Raymond DeMallie’s *The Sixth Grandfather*. Holler also identifies a fifth text in Neihardt’s *When the Tree Flowered*, a fictional book based on Lakota histories and stories, and a sixth by Joseph Eppes Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*. We will not consider the dialogues within and between Black Elk and his translators (and appropriators) that occur in and between these texts. It is enough, here, to simply note that they do.

<sup>53</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 429.

<sup>54</sup> DeMallie, Raymond J. *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt* (Lincoln: NE: Bison Books), 1985, xxi.

<sup>55</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 419.

<sup>56</sup> DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, xvii.

of the interviews, DeMallie himself notes the effect of Neihardt's transformation by translation: "it is impossible not to be struck by the brilliance and literary polish of Neihardt's transformation of Black Elk's tales."<sup>57</sup> Neihardt, in a 1972 interview, described his role in the recording of Black Elk's words as more than a stenographer, or even an editor; he was, in his words, a "collaborator ... [whose] function was both creative and editorial ... the translation – or rather that *transformation* – of what was given to me was expressed so that it could be understood by the white world."<sup>58</sup>

Black Elk scholar Clyde Holler recognizes that Neihardt's confidence in his ability to translate Black Elk's words – even his arrogance in proposing to *transform* them – is evident in his literary decision to record account as autobiography, rather than ethnography, poetry (like earlier work), or even narrative history. Indeed, "Neihardt's decision to write in the first person, to tell Black Elk's life story as autobiography ... [renders] reader[s] of *Black Elk Speaks* ... dependent on Neihardt's integrity and cross-cultural sensitivity."<sup>59</sup> As Holler notes, Neihardt demonstrates the degree of confidence he placed in his own cross-cultural competency and his capacity to authentically give voice to Black Elk's stories, teachings, and traditions when, in 1961, he changed the author's credit in *Black Elk Speaks* from "as told to John G. Neihardt" to "as told *through* John G. Neihardt."<sup>60</sup> Neihardt did not see himself as a mere scribe; he was a mouthpiece. But, the question remains: what is lost in translation? Many scholars, beginning with DeMallie wrestle with this very question, each with a particular bias at work and agenda in view. As Holler recognizes,

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<sup>57</sup> DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, xviii.

<sup>58</sup> DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 78.

<sup>59</sup> Holler, Clyde. "Lakota Religion and Tragedy: The Theology of *Black Elk Speaks*," *Journal of American Academy of Religion* 52, no 1 (1984), 29.

<sup>60</sup> Holler, "Lakota Religion and Tragedy," 29 (emphasis added).

the transcript of the interviews and the much later transcript of the transcript call into question Neihardt's decision to position himself as the mouthpiece of Black Elk.

For Holler, Neihardt's "transformation" of Black Elk's words were not merely editorial embellishment. To the contrary, Neihardt had a clear agenda: telling the story of "the desperate resistance of the Indians to the tragic inevitability of the destruction of their traditional culture" in the face U.S. Western expansionism "celebrate[d]" in Neihardt's epic poetry as the "winning of the West [in] an epic advance of human history," according to Holler.<sup>61</sup> Black Elk, on the other hand, offered his story for a very different purpose: "Black Elk hoped that by giving his power vision to Neihardt, the traditional religion and lifeways of the Lakotas [sic] would be respected by all people, and the sacred tree [of his Great Vision] would thus flower in the new context of the world in which both Lakotas [sic] and whites must live together."<sup>62</sup> As Holler details, Black Elk's purpose is evident in the rituals enacted that reflect "his intention to initiate Neihardt into the sacred knowledge that was his as a holy man."<sup>63</sup> Perhaps most importantly, what becomes clear is that Black Elk is acting through a ritual context on behalf of his community; whereas, Neihardt is pursuing largely personal motivations. Neihardt's editorial "transformation[s]", then, are significant – once "Black Elk's words are divorced ... from their communal ritual context ... [he] has already become the subject of a modern autobiography, a (European) 'I.'"<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Holler, "Lakota Religion and Tragedy," 33. Holler notes that these cross-purposes lead Neihardt to (mis)characterize Black Elk's words in significant ways to further his own literary agenda, particularly with respect to the Ghost Dance.

<sup>62</sup> Holler, "Lakota Religion and Tragedy," 28.

<sup>63</sup> Holler, "Lakota Religion and Tragedy," 25. These rituals include the smoking of the sacred pipe, the adoption of Neihardt and his daughters into the tribe and giving them Lakota names, and the conducting of this "sacred instruction" in a public setting in the presence of distinguished elders. *Ibid.* at 24-27.

<sup>64</sup> Holler, "Lakota Religion and Tragedy," 30.

Severing Black Elk from his ritual and communal contexts had far more effect than simply portraying him as a caricature of a Lakota holy man, complete with “a graceful and dignified English idiom ... [that] echoes the King James Version of the Bible;”<sup>65</sup> it changed the content of the sacred knowledge. According to Holler, “Neihardt sacrificed strict reporting of Black Elk’s theological convictions in order to express his own. There is ... a significant difference in the theology of Black Elk and the theology attributed to him in *Black Elk Speaks* ... Black Elk’s theology is expressed as much in ritual as in the words contained in the transcript.”<sup>66</sup> For purposes of our conversation here, this dialogue between theologies in the contested words of Black Elk is perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the debate. If our beliefs, practices, and identities are shaped by the theological convictions we hold, then the contestation over Black Elk’s beliefs, practices, and identities necessarily reflect contested theologies. Still, what emerges in these dialogues of Black Elk’s authentic theology? While Neihardt may insist that “traditional Lakota religion and culture are dead,” as Holler observes, can we see in Black Elk’s dialogues – even in the decision to pass on sacred knowledge to Neihardt (and later to Brown) – an intention to “revive the traditional wisdom and values of the Lakotas [sic], to ‘make the tree flower’ even in the hostile context of the white world”?<sup>67</sup> The question remains, what do these dialogues reveal of the presence and encounter of God in a violently contested Lakota world?

### *Dialogues Between Contested Beliefs and Practices*

The man we now know as Nicholas Black Elk was born in December of 1863 in the Powder River basin near the borders of present-day Wyoming and Montana. He was

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<sup>65</sup> Holler, “Lakota Religion and Tragedy,” 31 (internal citations omitted).

<sup>66</sup> Holler, “Lakota Religion and Tragedy,” 20.

<sup>67</sup> Holler, “Lakota Religion and Tragedy,” 37.

born *Kahnigapi*, or “Chosen” into a family of *wisca wakan*, or Lakota holy men.<sup>68</sup> While his mother, Mary Leggings Down remembers giving birth in the time when “the chokecherries were ripe,” which would have been late June or July, Black Elk tells Neihardt he was born on December 6.<sup>69</sup> It is important to note, as Jackson reminds us, December 6 was the day of his baptism into the Catholic Church in 1904, some 41 years after his birth, and it was also the day he received his English name, Nicholas William Black Elk, signifying his “rebirth” as a Christian convert.<sup>70</sup> Black Elk was the fourth of his name, and with it his identity and vocation were also inherited. Like his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather before him, Black Elk was born to serve his people as a holy man, a *wicasa wakan*, “interpreting and putting to use that which is *wakan* – that which is supernatural, holy, or beyond comprehension. The medicine man served his Lakota kinsmen like Moses did the Israelites: in direct contact with God, he introduced new rites and declared old ones outdated.”<sup>71</sup>

Black Elk was born into a world in which the land and livelihood of the Lakota were under constant siege. With the construction of the Bozeman Trail through the Powder River country – and the U.S. army’s construction and occupation of military forts along the trail in the heart of the Lakota treaty land, guaranteed by the 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty<sup>72</sup> – the *Wasichu* (“Whites”<sup>73</sup>) were continually encroaching threat. Neihardt records Black Elk as recalling, “Wasichus had found much yellow metal that they worship ... and they

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<sup>68</sup> Consistent with traditional Lakota practice, Black Elk was given a childhood name and “earned” his adult name, Black Elk, later in life (Jackson, *Black Elk*, 27).

<sup>69</sup> Compare Jackson, *Black Elk*, 24, with et al., *Black Elk Speaks*, 5.

<sup>70</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 24.

<sup>71</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 25.

<sup>72</sup> This treaty land was ratified and expanded with additional “unceded territories” in the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, following Red Cloud’s War on the U.S. army posts along the Bozeman Trail.

<sup>73</sup> *Wasicu* translates “takes the fat” and was used exclusively to refer to White settlers and soldiers. It has come to refer to all White people and is spelled, variously, *wasicu* and *wasichu*.



wanted a road through our country to the place where the yellow metal was; but my people did not want the road. It would scare the bison and make them go away, and also it would let other Wasichus come in like a river.”<sup>74</sup> As DeMallie describes it, Black Elk was born into “the old Lakota world, as it was before the white men destroyed it – a sacred world in which the Lakota people lived in daily intersection with the seen and unseen spirit[ual] forces that comprised their universe.”<sup>75</sup> It was in this world that Black Elk received his Great Vision at the age of nine,<sup>76</sup> as he lay dying in his parents’ tipi, a vision that, according to DeMallie, “gave Black Elk remarkable prophetic powers that were beyond his control, powers that were manifested spontaneously from time to time as he grew into adulthood.”<sup>77</sup> Following his vision, Black Elk began to live into his name and vocation, becoming, in Jackson’s words, “one of the most prominent medicine men at Pine Ridge [Reservation].”<sup>78</sup>

Just as his people’s land and livelihood were under attack from settlers and soldiers during Black Elk’s childhood, his vocation as a Lakota holy man soon came under attack from Jesuit missionaries on Pine Ridge Reservation. Jackson portrays the atmosphere: “What developed in the 1890s was a war of magicians battling for men’s souls. Whose medicine was stronger? Whose God would prevail? Though the Pine Ridge Jesuits of this period did not seek to eradicate all traces of Sioux [Lakota] culture, they did try to wipe out the medicine men ... [who], they believed, worked in league with the devil.”<sup>79</sup> The Jesuits’ crusade against the Lakota holy men was a “religious war” – seizing and destroying sacred objects and intimidating women and children to learn the identities of Lakota holy

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<sup>74</sup> Black Elk, *et al.*, *Black Elk Speaks*, 6.

<sup>75</sup> DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 3.

<sup>76</sup> Neihardt recounts Black Elk’s Great Vision in *Black Elk Speaks*, 13-29. The Great Vision and Black Elk’s discernment of it is discussed in greater detail in a subsequent chapter.

<sup>77</sup> DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 5-6.

<sup>78</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 354.

<sup>79</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 353.

men – was met with little success at a time. The Ghost Dance was spreading throughout northwestern Indigenous communities and revitalizing traditional religious practices and proved a counter-point to the efforts of the Jesuits.<sup>80</sup> All of that changed after the Wounded Knee Massacre. Nearly three hundred old men and women, mothers and babies, and children of Big Foot’s band, together with members of Sitting Bull’s band fleeing his assassination, were surrounded in camp by the 7th U.S. Calvary (Gen. George Armstrong Custer’s old regiment). Despite the protection they believed their ghost dance shirts would afford them from the soldiers’ guns, they were gunned down by Hotchkiss mountain howitzers.<sup>81</sup> As Jackson observes, the Jesuits understood Wounded Knee as their opportunity to “take out” the medicine men. According to Father Digmann at the Holy Rosary Mission on Pine Ridge, at Wounded Knee, “The devil trimmed his own tail.”<sup>82</sup>

As Jackson observes, “by the turn of the century, Black Elk was targeted by the Black Robes [Jesuits].”<sup>83</sup> His first wife, Katie War Bonnet, converted to Christianity around that time, and she had their three sons baptized. With pressures mounting at home and from the Jesuits and Lakota Catholics in the community, Black Elk converted in 1904. While Jackson attributes his conversion to the death of his wife earlier that year, it is

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<sup>80</sup> The history of the Ghost Dance itself cannot be adequately addressed here. Suffice it to say that the so-called Ghost Dance (better translated as “Spirit” Dance) was a revival movement that, according to Steven Charleston, united the different Indigenous nations in “a vision quest ... made not by an individual, but by a whole community.” Charleston, Steven. *The Four Vision Quests of Jesus* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2015), 64. It “gave Native nations a way to cry before God as they faced genocide ... and gather[ed them] in the sanctuary of sacred space to raise a collective lament to God for justice, hope, and healing.” *Ibid.* As Charleston observes, “the Ghost Dance vision united old enemies ... [and] opened the door for people to put aside old animosities and hurts to come together ... It gave them a new name, not just as individuals, but as nations.” *Ibid.* at 72. Black Elk’s engagement with the Ghost Dance is discussed in more detail in a subsequent chapter.

<sup>81</sup> As Charleston observes, “What the 7th Calvary feared was ... that a vision of hope would unite the poor and oppressed into a community with a shared dream.” Charleston, *The Four Vision Quests of Jesus*, 72.

<sup>82</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 353.

<sup>83</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 356.

important to note that by 1904, the Sun Dance,<sup>84</sup> a ceremony central to traditional Lakota religious practice, had been banned by the U.S. government for ten years.<sup>85</sup> As a *yuwipi*, Black Elk would have been paid in ponies, a traditional measure of wealth for the Lakota, and with the restrictions on traditional Lakota religious practices, Black Elk's livelihood would have suffered. In 1904, the federal government's allotment surveys began on Pine Ridge<sup>86</sup> – a final death blow to the traditional Lakota way of life – and Black Elk began his vocational transition to ranching soon after his conversion, a livelihood he supported through his work as a Catholic catechist. As Jackson notes, in 1909, five years after his conversion, “a Jesuit priest wrote that Black Elk was ‘on his way to prosperity – eighty head of cattle coming to him within a year or so.’”<sup>87</sup> When Neihardt asked Black Elk “why he'd joined ‘the white church,’ the old man paused, then answered, “Because my children have to live in this world.”<sup>88</sup> As DeMallie notes, while Neihardt “was curious about why Black Elk had put aside his old religion ... he seems to have accepted [his] pragmatic explanation at face value.”<sup>89</sup>

From 1906 through the late 1920's, Black Elk served as a Catholic catechist for the Jesuits at the Holy Rosary Mission. He travelled throughout Pine Ridge Reservation – even to other reservations across the western United States – preaching and teaching, essentially serving the Lakota Catholics when the Jesuit priests were unavailable. In exchange, Black Elk was provided a home in Manderson – and later a newer, nicer home

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<sup>84</sup> The Sun Dance will be discussed in greater detail in a subsequent chapter.

<sup>85</sup> Holler, *Black Elk's Religion*, 110. The ban on the Sun Dance officially lasted from 1883 to 1934, but piercing was not permitted until after 1952.

<sup>86</sup> Jackson, 368.

<sup>87</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 366. See also, DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 15 (“It is possible that one of the attractions that led Black Elk to Christianity was the access it provided to the social and material benefits of church life”).

<sup>88</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 363; compare, DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 47.

<sup>89</sup> DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 47.

in Oglala – and between five and fifteen dollars a month in pay, between \$150 and \$450 in today’s currency. He baptized children, presided over funerals, and often accompanied the Jesuit priests on home visits to the sick and dying, serving his people in much the same way as he did as a *yuwipi*. As DeMallie observes, “On the one hand, holding to Christian doctrine, he practiced the virtue of charity to its fullest. On the other hand, he was able at the same time to fulfill the traditional role of a Lakota leader, poor himself but ever generous to his people.”<sup>90</sup> Jackson is less subtle: “He was as fervent a catechist as he had been a medicine man: once he learned the ritual, it is fair to say he merely substituted one ‘church’ for another ... The forms were different, but his trust in the holy had not changed. He’d merely cast his lot with a different group of *wicasa wakan*.”<sup>91</sup> Black Elk’s effectiveness for the Jesuits is not in question; according to one missionary, he was “responsible for at least four hundred conversions,” making him “the most prominent of all” Lakota catechists.<sup>92</sup>

Despite the claims of Black Elk’s Catholic apologists – the foremost of whom is Black Elk’s own daughter, Lucy Looks Twice, herself a staunch Catholic and outspoken defender of her father’s commitment to Catholicism – it is simply not the case that, after his conversion, Black Elk “never practiced the Lakota religious ceremonies again.”<sup>93</sup> To the contrary, as Holler suggests, “It seems ... more plausible ... that Black Elk never ceased to be engaged with traditional religion, perhaps remaining deeply in dialogue with traditional leaders who were not as committed to Catholicism as he was.”<sup>94</sup> Indeed, it

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<sup>90</sup> DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 23.

<sup>91</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 370, 373.

<sup>92</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 370.

<sup>93</sup> DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 14.

<sup>94</sup> Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 10.

strains the imagination that “Black Elk denied traditional religion for twenty-five years and was seized with a sudden impulse to preserve it on Neihardt’s arrival.”<sup>95</sup> The idea that Black Elk took his traditional Lakota belief and practice “underground” is consistent with what Holler observes in how the Sun Dance was observed before the ban, how it continued during the ban,<sup>96</sup> and how it was revived after the ban, including Black Elk’s role in reimagining it, which Holler contends “is as much a product of Black Elk’s engagement with the Ghost Dance as with Catholicism.”<sup>97</sup> Even Jackson recognizes, in the face of oppressive measures from missionaries and the US government, designed to “eradicate the old ways ... [t]he [Lakota’s] response was to go underground.”<sup>98</sup> Not only would a sudden impulse to preserve traditional practices after 25 years of repression be implausible, as Holler suggests, it is inconsistent with the evidence that Black Elk maintained proficiency in the practice of traditional ceremony during that period of repression.

In fact, Black Elk was proficient enough in his traditional practices not only to describe them in great detail to Neihardt in 1931, 1945, and 1956, as well as to Joseph Eppes Brown during the winter of 1947-48 and during the summers of 1948 and 1949, he also was able to re-enact them for White audiences in Rapid City from 1927 through nearly the end of his life. When Black Elk approached his friend Alex Duhamel, an old trader and businessman in Rapid City, SD, about hosting a summer “pageant” that demonstrated traditional Lakota dance and ceremony, he reprised his role as a traditional *wicasa wakan*, orchestrating the liturgical performances, from the pipe ceremony, to the healing ceremony

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<sup>95</sup> Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 11.

<sup>96</sup> Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 136. For purposes of our conversation, here, Indigenous tradition(s) will include their beliefs and practices.

<sup>97</sup> Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 151.

<sup>98</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 351.

he once performed as a *yuwipi*, and even the Sun Dance.<sup>99</sup> When a prairie fire in 1939 spread over 21,857 acres and threatened to consume the sacred Black Hills, Black Elk approached Duhamel and organized a traditional 72-hours Sun Dance that included non-stop dancing, traditional prayers, and even piercing.<sup>100</sup> According to Duhamel, Black Elk was able to accomplish through a Sun Dance what the firefighters could not: a rain storm rolled in from the west and got the fire under control. For Duhamel, Black Elk's traditional practices that he re-enacted were "no fake deal they did just for show,"<sup>101</sup> and according to another participant, "Old Nick was no fake. He was a true medicine man."<sup>102</sup> He was, in DeMallie's words, "publicly performing these sacred rituals ... to teach white audiences that the old-time Lakota religion was a true religion, not devil worship as the missionaries claimed."<sup>103</sup> Indeed, Black Elk had not given up his traditional beliefs and ceremonies, contrary to the contentions of his Catholic apologists; he had only asserted his agency – in direct contravention of the threats of governmental and religious leaders – over when and where to practice them.<sup>104</sup>

### *Dialogues Between Contested Identities*

Unlike the U.S. government – which outlawed Lakota practice of traditional ceremony because of the political threat it might have posed – the missionaries contested Black Elk's personal practice of traditional ceremony because of what it communicated

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<sup>99</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 444.

<sup>100</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 446.

<sup>101</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 446.

<sup>102</sup> Oldmeadow, Harry. *Black Elk, Lakota Visionary: The Oglala Holy Man and Sioux Tradition* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, Inc., 2018), 46.

<sup>103</sup> DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 66.

<sup>104</sup> DeMallie notes that, on August 28, 1936, two days before the dedication of the Mount Rushmore monument – a controversial monument of American presidents blasted into the Lakota sacred mountains, the *Paha Sapa* ("Heart of Everything"), Black Elk requested permission to ascend the mountain and "hold a ceremony of [his] own," in which he would "sing his sacred songs" and offer prayers with his pipe. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 65.

about his identity. Indeed, whereas the agent at Pine Ridge Reservation referred to *Black Elk Speaks* as “a beautiful work ... meeting with distinct favor,” the Jesuit missionaries had a decidedly different response.<sup>105</sup> As DeMallie describes, “For them to accept *Black Elk Speaks* at face value necessarily called into question the genuineness of their success in converting the Lakotas [sic] to Catholicism.”<sup>106</sup> As Jackson observes, “To suggest that one of their most valued catechists – the man they’d paraded to the world as an ‘Indian Saint Paul’ – still practiced the old religion horrified them.”<sup>107</sup> For the Jesuits, belief and practice were not the primary concern; identity was. What mattered was not how many Lakota received the Eucharist on any given Sunday; what was important was how many could be claimed as Christians.<sup>108</sup> The revelations of *Black Elk Speaks* not only called into question the identity of Nicholas Black Elk, they called into question the identities of the hundreds of Lakota he purportedly converted. They may even have called into question the effectiveness of the work of the missionaries themselves. For a vocation whose identity is so closely tied to its effectiveness, the revelations about Black Elk’s religious identity likely called into question the missionaries’ own sense of identity.

Father Placidus Sialam, supervisor of the Jesuits’ missionary efforts and most veteran priest at the Holy Rosary Mission on Pine Ridge, purportedly “felt a real ownership for the souls of the Lakota”<sup>109</sup> and was outraged at the possibility that their prized Lakota catechist may also be “a believing, practicing ‘pagan,’ praying to the six grandfathers when

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<sup>105</sup> DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 58.

<sup>106</sup> DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 58.

<sup>107</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 433.

<sup>108</sup> As Jackson describes, so often did missionaries baptize Lakota at the death-bed – a practice oriented towards converting the *identity* of the Lakota rather than their belief or practice – that “many Oglalas had an absolute horror of the rite, convinced that the sprinkling of the *mniyuwakanpi*, or holy water, would kill them.” *Black Elk*, 358.

<sup>109</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 434.

he knew well that the Christian God was the only source of salvation.”<sup>110</sup> Two years after the initial publication of *Black Elk Speaks*, Black Elk was hospitalized with serious injuries he suffered when thrown from a team of horses. After receiving last rites, Black Elk purportedly authored what has been titled, “Black Elk Speaks Again – A Last Word,” a two-page letter dictated in Lakota, translated into English, and transcribed by Black Elk’s daughter Lucy Looks Twice. The letter was signed by Black Elk, and witnessed by Lucy and Fr. Joseph A. Zimmerman, a Jesuit priest and protégé of Fr. Sialam. Jackson describes the two-page letter as a “death-bed repudiation of *Black Elk Speaks* ... [with] evidence in the text [that] suggests that the statement was composed under the threat of eternal damnation.”<sup>111</sup> Not surprisingly, Fr. Sialam lauded the letter, proudly proclaiming, “This Declaration should stand in every new edition of *Black Elk Speaks*.”<sup>112</sup>

Neihardt returned to Pine Ridge to visit Ben Black Elk in 1934, and the Jesuits sent an “unidentified missionary” out to interrogate Neihardt about his “spiritual welfare.”<sup>113</sup> Black Elk was, apparently, on the dance circuit.<sup>114</sup> Soon after Neihardt left and Black Elk returned from the dance circuit, a second letter appeared, this one unsigned but purportedly written by Black Elk. In this letter, Black Elk not only repudiates *Black Elk Speaks* for its failure to include “an end to this story that I was not a pagan but have converted to the Catholic Church ... I’ve quit all these pagan works.” It also repudiates Neihardt – who Black Elk still referred to as “Dear Son”<sup>115</sup> – for “deceiving me about the whole business”

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<sup>110</sup> DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 58.

<sup>111</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 436.

<sup>112</sup> DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 59.

<sup>113</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 438.

<sup>114</sup> DeMallie observes that, for the Jesuit missionaries, dancing “unequivocally equated with Satan’s influence,” and they believed Black Elk had given it up. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 63. It is notable that he was on the dance circuit, because it indicates that, in fact, Black Elk *had not* given up his traditional practices.

<sup>115</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 447.



and refusing to “pay half of the price of each book.”<sup>116</sup> While this unsigned letter is a “difficult document to assess,” according to DeMallie,<sup>117</sup> what is clear is that, because it was written in English, it was not written by Black Elk. While DeMallie suggests that Lucy Looks Twice wrote the letter and delivered it to the missionaries, Jackson points out that, unlike the first repudiation which was translated into English and transcribed by Lucy, the second letter is “filled with grammatical and factual errors [and] makes accusations that ultimately run counter to the record ... mimick[ing] the unlettered style of [Black Elk],” suggesting that the author “in effect [was] committing outright fraud.”<sup>118</sup> Jackson proposes that, instead of Lucy writing the letter, it was “Father Sialam [who] committed the fraud,” drawing comparisons to the style, idioms, and grammatical mistakes (not to mention the repeated references to paganism) in Sialam’s own writings.<sup>119</sup>

The conflict Black Elk experienced with the Jesuits over his contested identity is well captured in an exchange recorded by Black Elk’s granddaughter, Esther in 1935. Black Elk was preparing his pipe for morning prayers at his cabin when Fr. Sialam knocked on the door. When Fr. Sialam saw Black Elk smoking the pipe he, according to Esther, “grabbed the pipe and said, ‘This is the work of the devil!’ And he took it and threw it out the door on the ground.” Apparently, Black Elk did not say a word in response, but rose and “took the priest’s prayer book and threw it out on the ground.” According to Esther, “they both looked at each other, and nobody said a word that whole time.”<sup>120</sup> As Black Elk’s granddaughter’s account suggests, the contestation over Black Elk’s identity was a

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<sup>116</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 438-39.

<sup>117</sup> DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 63.

<sup>118</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 439.

<sup>119</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 439.

<sup>120</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 440.

conflict that seeped into Black Elk's own family. Jackson describes it as a "philosophical tug-o-war between Ben and Lucy over their father's public identity."<sup>121</sup> The conflict began with the selection of Ben Black Elk as the translator for *Black Elk Speaks*. Lucy preferred her father's fellow Catholic catechist, Emil Afraid of Hawk, because, according to Jackson, she "did not feel that her father's Catholicism would be properly emphasized with Ben at the helm."<sup>122</sup> This was the first fissure in what Jackson calls "a family dispute ... [over] Black Elk's 'true' identity."<sup>123</sup> Later in her life, Lucy would serve as the primary source for Catholic apologists who "translated virtually everything Black Elk experienced in the twentieth century in light of Catholicism."<sup>124</sup>

In fact, Lucy's account of her father's conversion indicates the stake she had in her father's identity: "One day while Black Elk was treating a boy who was seriously ill, Father Joseph Lindebner, S.J., arrived ... to administer the last rites. Father Lindebner entered the tent and at once gathered up Black Elk's sacred objects; he jerked the drum and the rattle from Black Elk's hand and threw them out of the tent. Grasping Black Elk by the neck he intoned: 'Satan get out!'"<sup>125</sup> According to Lucy, after the priest had finished, "he came out and saw my father sitting there looking downhearted and lonely – as though he lost all his powers ... and said, 'Come on and get in the buggy with me.'"<sup>126</sup> According to Lucy, Black Elk "sensed that the priests powers were greater than his own," so he returned with the priest to the Holy Rosary Mission, where he was catechized over the course of two weeks, baptized on the Feast of Saint Nicholas, and given his new "Christian name

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<sup>121</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 437.

<sup>122</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 413.

<sup>123</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 413.

<sup>124</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 361.

<sup>125</sup> DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 14.

<sup>126</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 362.

Nicholas in honor of the saint whose feast day it was.”<sup>127</sup> And, despite the evidence to the contrary, Lucy maintained that her father “never practiced the Lakota religious ceremonies again.”<sup>128</sup>

Whereas Lucy was the daughter of Black Elk’s second wife, Anna Brings White, Ben Black Elk was the youngest son of his first, Katie War Bonnet (the first of the Black Elk family to convert to Catholicism). Black Elk moved in with Ben on the family allotment in 1930, when he began to go blind, and Ben became, according to Jackson, the “backbone of the Black Elk clan and the keeper of his father’s legacy.”<sup>129</sup> During the Neihardt interviews, Ben was clearly moved by what he learned of his father. Not surprisingly, he had heard little during his childhood about his father’s vocation as a *wicasa wakan*. He had heard that his father had experienced visions, but he apparently had not heard them described in such detail as what Black Elk offered in the interviews. His exchange with Neihardt during the interviews is telling: “Ben exclaimed, ‘Isn’t it great? Isn’t it *wonderful*?’ ‘What is wonderful, Ben?’ Neihardt asked. ‘What the old man is a-sayin’. I always knew he has *something*, but I didn’t know what the hell it was!”<sup>130</sup>

In some ways, perhaps, Ben found in his father’s identity as a *wicasa wakan* a way to make sense of the existential crisis he fell into while attending the Carlisle Indian School, which stripped him of his language, culture, and tradition – “‘taking the Indian out of the Indian’ and assimilating the child into the white world” – while leasing him out to nearby farms as “cheap labor”.<sup>131</sup> As Jackson describes it, Ben “straddled two worlds, accepted

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<sup>127</sup> DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 14.

<sup>128</sup> DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 14.

<sup>129</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 395.

<sup>130</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 420.

<sup>131</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 400.

by neither. ‘I led two lives,’ he later said – Christian and Indian – yet inhabited neither comfortably.”<sup>132</sup> Inspired by his father’s life story (and Great Vision), Ben became “the public face of the Oglala in the 1960s,” traveling the world to promote Lakota culture and tradition and becoming a regular presence at Mount Rushmore, earning recognition as the “fifth face of Rushmore.”<sup>133</sup> In some ways, Ben recovered his people’s identity in a country that sought to extinguish it – or worse relegate it to history books – when he uncovered the identity of his father. As Ben testified to the Senate Subcommittee on Indian Education on December 14, 1967, “We who are Indians today live in a world of confusion ... We love Indian ways. But to get along in this world, the white man tells us that we cannot be what we were born to be ... So our young people ... are ashamed of their birthright when they should be proud of it as First Americans.”<sup>134</sup> Whereas, what was at stake for Lucy in her father’s identity was her own identity and standing in the Catholic community on Pine Ridge, what was at stake for Ben was his own identity – and the identity of his people – which for him was inextricably intertwined, in the identity of his father.

With Black Elk’s own children locked in a family dispute over their father’s identity during his lifetime, it is little surprise that scholars who never knew Black Elk might years after his death attempt to reduce his identity to convenient academic categories that seek to define the “historical Black Elk.” As Damien Costello observes, scholars on Black Elk, and Native American studies in general, often fall into two very different camps with respect to Black Elk’s identity. The first is what he calls the “essentialist Black Elk: the proud, defiant, yet vanquished warrior embodying the Lakota defeat;” the second is Black

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<sup>132</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 396.

<sup>133</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 368-69.

<sup>134</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 470.

Elk as the Catholic catechist: “the Catholic agent actively and successfully participating in the new reservation economy.”<sup>135</sup> Costello notes that these divergent portrayals of Black Elk’s identity “create a dissonance in Black Elk studies . . . the image of a proud yet defeated warrior is incompatible with participation in a missionary church.”<sup>136</sup> While Costello considers these two portrayals of Black Elk’s identity as “new themes” that arise out of “new scholarship,” the family dispute over Black Elk’s identity suggests that scholars are just late to the conversation. Holler describes in great detail scholars in both camps and finds them lacking,<sup>137</sup> because they “each in their own way fall prey to the temptation to perceive opposition between Black Elk’s traditionalism and his Christianity, creating an “either/or” that is foreign to Black Elk’s way of thinking and experiencing religion.”<sup>138</sup>

Like Holler, Costello seems to agree that there must be a “third way” for understanding Black Elk’s identity beyond those proposed by Catholic apologists and “essentialists.” Costello agrees that Black Elk does not fit easily into a false binary of Catholic or traditional: “Black Elk is at once a sincere Catholic, a Lakota holy man, and an active agent fighting for survival in a colonial world.”<sup>139</sup> And yet, while Costello frames his approach as post-colonial, it is important to recall Holler’s warning: “historical inquiry cannot be disinterested – there is something ‘riding on the results’ of the inquiry.”<sup>140</sup> For

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<sup>135</sup> Costello, Damian. *Black Elk, Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 13.

<sup>136</sup> Costello, *Black Elk, Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism*, 13.

<sup>137</sup> Holler actually articulates three identities staked out for Black Elk by scholars – “a traditionalist, a Catholic, and a born-again traditionalist.” Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 36.

<sup>138</sup> Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 37.

<sup>139</sup> Costello, *Black Elk, Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism*, 21.

<sup>140</sup> Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 4. Costello makes the disclaimer: “My purpose here is not to provide an apology for Catholic missionaries” (21), but he appears to do just that throughout his argument. *See, e.g.*, Costello, *Black Elk, Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism*, 20 (“While Catholic missionaries to the Lakota may have participated in the vehicles of cultural genocide pursued by the American government and business groups, they were not the primary source of colonialism”).

Costello, “Catholicism offered the Lakota a new power to confront the new world initiated by Western colonialism ... In response to the West’s massive re-ordering of the world, Black Elk ... re-orders the West with the Christian story.”<sup>141</sup> In the end, Costello agrees with the position taken by two scholars, both Jesuit priests and anthropologists from Pine Ridge, that “[Black Elk] did not deny the Lakota tradition but reinterpreted it in light of Catholicism,” or as Costello puts it, he lived in a “Lakota Catholic world by refashioning Lakota tradition in light of the Christian narrative.”<sup>142</sup>

Even in light of Costello’s analysis, it seems the contestation over Black Elk’s identity among scholars still falls primarily into two main camps, Catholic apologists and “traditionalists.”<sup>143</sup> While Costello instrumentalizes post-colonial theology as a means of redeeming Black Elk’s commitments to Catholicism, his analysis may come up short of Robert Young’s “*Stop. Look. Listen.*” prescription for post-colonial analysis.<sup>144</sup> Rather than listening to Black Elk’s description of how the *missio Dei* was at work in the midst of contested and contesting narratives, Costello instrumentalizes the Black Elk debate to show that the “work of the [Catholic] church is to forge this third way [Lakota Catholicism] that allows the Lakota people to survive and to retain their Lakota world.”<sup>145</sup> In the end, rather than create a “third way,” Costello deploys post-colonial theology to promote his preferred option of the two original contested identities of Nicholas Black Elk. For all Costello’s

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<sup>141</sup> Costello, *Black Elk, Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism*, 21.

<sup>142</sup> Costello, *Black Elk, Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism*, 14.

<sup>143</sup> Our intent is not to limit the number of interpretations of Black Elk’s identity. While we have taken the liberty of conflating essentialist and traditionalist readings of Black Elk for the sake of brevity, their primary difference lies in the purposes of the interpreter, rather than the purposes of Black Elk. Both read Black Elk as maintaining his traditional Lakota belief and practice, albeit for different reasons that conform to the scope of the inquiry of each. Our focus here is not on the purpose of our interpretation of Black Elk’s identity but on the impact of his practice.

<sup>144</sup> Young, “What is the Postcolonial?,” 17 (emphasis original).

<sup>145</sup> Costello, *Black Elk, Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism*, 49.

talk of “the Lakota Catholic Church [as] something of a ‘third way,’”<sup>146</sup> it is actually Holler who proposes a third way forward through the dialogue between Black Elk’s Catholic and Lakota identities. He proposes that “[t]he real Black Elk was not either traditionalist or Catholic; he was both at the same time. His conversion was not conversion as understood by the Jesuits ... – the substitution of one religion for another – but ... the acceptance of Christianity as the further extension of his [Great V]ision,” which he describes as a dialogue that is “equal parts traditionalist, Ghost Dance, and Lakota Catholic.”<sup>147</sup> It is to Black Elk’s dialogues with his Great Vision that we now turn.

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<sup>146</sup> Costello, *Black Elk, Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism*, 49.

<sup>147</sup> Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 22, 220.

### III. Dialogues with the Great Vision: Discerning and Enacting the Divine Life

For all the dialogues surrounding Black Elk's beliefs, practices, and identities, those dialogues were (and are) of interest to the White men seeking to instrumentalize Black Elk for their own ends. For them, the dialogues with the Great Vision ended after his conversion. As DeMallie proposes, Black Elk "put behind him [the Great Vision] when he converted to Catholicism," and when he shared the vision with Neihardt, he was simply "sharing in the spiritual burden that had been placed on the Oglala holy man so long before by the six grandfathers"<sup>148</sup> a catharsis of sorts. This understanding of Black Elk's relationship to his Great Vision is consistent with DeMallie's thesis that Black Elk left his traditional beliefs and practices when he converted to Catholicism and only returned to the Great Vision (and its obligations) after Neihardt appeared in 1931. Or, as Holler describes DeMallie's thesis, "DeMallie's picture of Black Elk's religion [is] characterized by stages, so that he turns a traditionalist, a Catholic, and a born-again traditionalist."<sup>149</sup> For DeMallie, "It was as if something long bound up inside the old man had broken free at last, an impulse to save the entire system of knowledge that his vision represented and that for more than twenty-five years he had denied."<sup>150</sup> This position, ironically, silences Black Elk. He only speaks when spoken to, and he only says what he is expected to say.

Indeed, to posit Neihardt as the catalyst of Black Elk's reconciliation of himself to his Great Vision is to deny Black Elk agency in his own spiritual journey, just as much as assuming his conversion to Catholicism necessitated the abandonment of the traditional beliefs and practices that the Great Vision encompassed. Such a view suggests that Black

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<sup>148</sup> DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 31, 37, 41.

<sup>149</sup> Holler, *Black Elk's Religion*, 36.

<sup>150</sup> DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 28.



Elk's words and actions were as self-interested as the men who sought them – i.e., he was furthering an economic or political interest in advancing Catholic or Lakota traditional belief and practice. But what if Black Elk's own dialogues with his Lakota tradition and with the Catholic tradition were not self-interested at all? What if Black Elk's dialogues – with Lakota tradition, with the Ghost Dance, with Catholicism, with the missionaries, even with Neihardt – grew out of his commitments to his Great Vision? Even DeMallie recognizes that the onus of the Great Vision followed Black Elk throughout his life. As Jackson observes, it is evident across all of the Neihardt interviews, “Black Elk absolutely interpreted his life in terms of his Great Vision. All else was secondary.”<sup>151</sup> Or as Black Elk tells Neihardt, “Maybe if I could see the great world of the Wasichu, I could understand how to bring the sacred hoop together and make the tree to bloom again at the center of it.”<sup>152</sup> When the dialogues of Black Elk are understood as dialogues with his Great Vision, it becomes clear that interreligious dialogue was a means by which Black Elk discerned divine encounter and revelation, not just for himself but for his people. Black Elk's multireligious participation, then, provided the ritual space within which Black Elk could enact the eschatological vision of transformation and reconciliation of his Great Vision.

### *Dialogues with Black Elk's Great Vision*

Holler outright contests the dualistic paradigm most scholars place on Black Elk's religious practice and identity, a dualism that “perceive[s] an opposition between Black Elk's traditionalism and his Christianity, creating an ‘either/or’ that is foreign to Black Elk's way of thinking and experiencing religion.”<sup>153</sup> The question, argues Holler, is not

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<sup>151</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 431.

<sup>152</sup> Black Elk, *et al.*, *Black Elk Speaks*, 134.

<sup>153</sup> Holler, “Lakota Religion and Tragedy: The Theology of Black Elk Speaks,” 37.

whether Black Elk was sincere in his Christian beliefs and practices, but the extent to which, as Ben Black Elk suggests, Black Elk understood that “traditional religion and Christianity ‘fulfill each other.’”<sup>154</sup> Unlike Catholic apologists whose interests lie in showing that Black Elk “understood Christianity to be superior to traditional religion, in the sense of a correction, clarification, and fulfillment of what was there only dimly grasped,”<sup>155</sup> Holler rejects any attempt to portray Black Elk the Lakota holy man as an “anonymous Christian.” Instead of describing “Black Elk’s conversion as ‘giving the Lakota tradition a Christian meaning,’” Holler suggests it might be “mutually balanced with the observation that Black Elk also gave Christianity a traditional Lakota meaning – and perhaps a Ghost Dancer’s as well.”<sup>156</sup> Indeed, if a particular religious practice or identity is not the end in itself, it is not hard to imagine that “Black Elk regarded these two traditions as two expressions of the same sacred reality,” *a reality communicated to him through his Great Vision*, and “much of the tension ... perceived in his dual participation is dissipated.”<sup>157</sup>

This perspective is consistent with the curiosity and interest in Christianity Black Elk expressed in letters he wrote from Europe in 1888 and 1889, where he was performing with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. In them, Black Elk writes, “So my relatives, the Lakota people, now I know the white men’s customs well. One custom is very good. Whoever believes in God will find good ways,”<sup>158</sup> and “of the white man’s many customs, only his faith, the white man’s belief about God’s will, and how they act according to it, I wanted to understand.”<sup>159</sup> As Holler notes, “Black Elk was predisposed to see religious

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<sup>154</sup> Holler, “Lakota Religion and Tragedy,” 34.

<sup>155</sup> Holler, “Lakota Religion and Tragedy,” 34.

<sup>156</sup> Holler, “Lakota Religion and Tragedy,” 34.

<sup>157</sup> Holler, “Lakota Religion and Tragedy,” 36.

<sup>158</sup> DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 8.

<sup>159</sup> DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 9-10.

statements as symbolic expressions of truths that could not be fully captured outside the context of religious [experience]. If two holy men have different visions without threatening the Lakota concept of religion, why could not two cultures have different visions of the sacred?”<sup>160</sup> It is Black Elk’s appreciation for the limitation of any one set of beliefs and practices to fully contain the sacred that undergirds his explanation of his conversion to his nephew, Frank Fools Crow – who learned from Black Elk how to be a Lakota holy man and was himself “on his way to becoming a powerful Pine Ridge *wicasa wakan*.”<sup>161</sup> Fools Crow recounts: “Black Elk told me he had decided that the Sioux religious way of life was pretty much the same as that of the Christian churches, and there was no reason to change what the Sioux were doing. 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.”<sup>162</sup>

Holler suggests that through “dialogue with Christianity and with the white world,” Black Elk was able to propose a “creative reconciliation of the two traditions [that] is the basis for much Lakota religiosity today, whether it is styled ‘dual participation’ or ‘dual religious belief.’”<sup>163</sup> What Black Elk modeled, as Holler notes, was much more than “dual” participation – which presupposes two distinct but congruent sets of practices and beliefs. Over the course of his life, Black Elk moves in and out of Lakota tradition, the messianic belief and practice of the Ghost Dance, and Catholicism, modeling a multireligious

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<sup>160</sup> Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 215. Holler observes that that understanding of religions as containing propositional truth that could potentially conflict “appear[s] decisively only as a result of the conflict between science and religion in the Enlightenment.” *Ibid.* at 216.

<sup>161</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 364.

<sup>162</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 364.

<sup>163</sup> Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 186. In addition to Fools Crow, Holler points to Eagle Feather, a Lakota Episcopal lay reader and Sun Dancer who reportedly told a Sun Dance scholar in 1975 that he and his wife “have practiced the Indian religion for the last twenty years.” *Ibid.* at 158-59.

participation that centers on the discernment of divine encounter and revelation. As Holler observes, “A true revision of Black Elk’s religion might see him as equal parts traditionalist, Ghost Dancer, and Lakota Catholic.”<sup>164</sup> The fluidity of Black Elk’s participation in each set of beliefs and practices over the course of his life is not random or haphazard; it is intentional and discerning. It grows out of a space that acknowledges the inability of any one tradition to contain all revelation of the divine – replacing an “either/or” approach to religious tradition as the container for propositional truth with a “both/and” understanding of traditions as offering a set of practices that equip the practitioner to more deeply discern divine encounter and revelation. For Black Elk, a tradition’s beliefs and practices were only ever the space within which he engaged divine encounter and revelation first experienced in his Great Vision.

### *The Great Vision*

Black Elk’s Great Vision was one of renewal, both for his people and for all peoples – even renewal for all creation. As he recounts to Neihardt, the Grandfather took him to the “center of the earth,” where he “was standing on the highest mountain ... [and] beneath me was the whole hoop of the world ... I saw more than I can tell and understood more than I saw, for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shape of all things in the spirit ... as they must live together like one being. And I saw the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle ... and in the circle grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy.”<sup>165</sup> The sacred hoop – here, formed by the sacred hoops of Black Elk’s people *and* the sacred hoops of all peoples on earth – and the flowering tree present an eschatological vision of renewal

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<sup>164</sup> Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 220.

<sup>165</sup> Black Elk, *et al.*, *Black Elk Speaks*, 26.

for Black Elk. As he describes elsewhere in the Great Vision, “I looked down and saw it lying yonder like a hoop of peoples, and in the center bloomed the holy stick that was a tree, and where it stood there crossed two roads, a red one and a black one.”<sup>166</sup> The Grandfather said to him, “where ... the red one goes, the road of good ... on it your nation shall walk. The black road ... [is] a fearful road, a road of troubles and of war.”<sup>167</sup> It was around this Divine vision of renewal for Black Elk’s people and all peoples and creation that Black Elk oriented his beliefs and practices.

### *The Ghost Dance*

Black Elk’s engagement with the Ghost Dance was a means by which he further understood divine encounter and revelation through his Great Vision. As he recounts to Neihardt, the Pine Ridge Oglala had sent three men to the Northern Paiute nation in Nevada to learn more about the Ghost Dance from Wovoka, who “had talked to the Great Spirit in a vision.”<sup>168</sup> When Black Elk heard about Wovoka’s vision, “it made me think hard. I had had a great vision that was to bring the people back into the nation’s hoop and maybe this sacred man had had the same vision and it was going to come true, so the people would get back on the red road.”<sup>169</sup> Black Elk describes how at the heart of the Ghost Dance movement was an understanding that “the son of the Great Spirit” was bringing this vision of renewal, and “that when he came to the Wasichus a long time ago, they had killed him; but he was coming to the Indians this time.”<sup>170</sup> When Black Elk is finally able to join the Ghost Dancers at Wounded Knee Creek, he tells Neihardt, “I was surprised, and could

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<sup>166</sup> Black Elk, *et al.*, *Black Elk Speaks*, 18.

<sup>167</sup> Black Elk, *et al.*, *Black Elk Speaks*, 18.

<sup>168</sup> Black Elk, *et al.*, *Black Elk Speaks*, 146.

<sup>169</sup> Black Elk, *et al.*, *Black Elk Speaks*, 146.

<sup>170</sup> Black Elk, *et al.*, *Black Elk Speaks*, 147.

hardly believe what I saw; because so much of my vision seemed to be in it. The dancers, both women and men, were holding hands in a big circle, and in the center of the circle they had a tree painted red ... This was exactly like the part of my vision ... [and] the circle of men and women holding hands was like the sacred hoop that should have the power to make the tree bloom again.”<sup>171</sup> Black Elk concludes, “I believed my vision was coming true at last, and happiness overcame me.”<sup>172</sup>

Holler observes, “There is a striking continuity between the value of the Ghost Dance ... and the desire of the mature Black Elk to get his people back in the hoop and make the tree of his vision flower.”<sup>173</sup> The “fundamental intention” of the Ghost Dance, according to Holler, was the same as that of Black Elk’s Great Vision.<sup>174</sup> Where Neihardt attempts to downplay Black Elk’s commitments to the Ghost Dance, Holler points to statements (and prayers) made by Black Elk that demonstrate a continuing commitment to the eschatological vision of the Ghost Dance, which Black Elk apparently found consonant with his Great Vision.<sup>175</sup> As Black Elk scholar Harry Oldmeadow observes, “Black Elk retained more faith in the Ghost Dance than Neihardt’s narrative suggests. Some sixty years after Wounded Knee, there were many Lakota Elders, including Black Elk, who believed that the Ghost Dance could and should be revived.”<sup>176</sup> But, Holler understands Black Elk’s engagement with the Ghost Dance from a more anthropological perspective:

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<sup>171</sup> Black Elk, *et al.*, *Black Elk Speaks*, 148.

<sup>172</sup> Black Elk, *et al.*, *Black Elk Speaks*, 149.

<sup>173</sup> Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 219.

<sup>174</sup> Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 219.

<sup>175</sup> Holler notes: “Neihardt’s Black Elk regrets joining the Ghost Dance; the real Black Elk regrets not using a more powerful vision against the whites. Neihardt’s omission of the phrase ‘I have seen the son of the Great Spirit himself’ (the Messiah) is consistent with Neihardt’s omission of Black Elk’s explicit claim to have invented the ghost shirt (‘So I started the ghost shirt’) and to have been the chief ghost dancer.” Holler, “Lakota Religion and Tragedy,” 35.

<sup>176</sup> Oldmeadow, *Black Elk, Lakota Visionary*, 42.

the flowering tree is the “traditional culture” of Black Elk’s people, and the intention of both the Ghost Dance and the Great Vision is “to reinvent and restore traditional culture through religious ritual.”<sup>177</sup> On the other hand, a Black Elk participating in interreligious dialogue might simply be engaging with the eschatological vision of the Ghost Dance in conversation with his Great Vision.

### *Catholicism*

This promise of renewal for his people and for all peoples and creation in Black Elk’s Great Vision guided not only his engagement with the Ghost Dance, as Holler notes; it also guided his engagement with Catholicism. Indeed, for Black Elk, his engagement with Catholicism was always in dialogue with his Great Vision. As Jackson notes, for instance, Black Elk reinterpreted the Jesuit catechetical tool called the Two Roads Map in light of the Great Vision.<sup>178</sup> Black Elk’s “map depicted two roads, a gold one leading to Heaven and a black one leading to Hell, and “[w]here other catechists advised potential converts to follow the ‘yellow’ road to Heaven, Black Elk substituted the ‘good red road’ of his vision.”<sup>179</sup> For Black Elk, according to his daughter Lucy, “he always described the holy road as red.”<sup>180</sup> Of course, as Costello points out, some Catholic scholars contend that Black Elk actually appropriated the Jesuit Two Roads Map in the account of his Great Vision when he shared it with Neihardt. Costello agrees, pointing to a prayer his daughter Lucy recalls Black Elk praying at Thanksgiving, which combines the image of the road

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<sup>177</sup> Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 219. Holler recognizes that “Christianity became a vehicle for the preservation of Oglala institutions and values.” *Ibid.* at 206. While that may be true, the instrumentalization of Christianity by the Lakota as a means of cultural preservation may not tell the entire story of Indigenous engagement with Christianity. We will consider other possible readings of the Indigenous encounter with Christianity in Chapter 4.

<sup>178</sup> Cherokee scholar, Brian Burkhart, agrees. Burkhart, *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land*, 141-42.

<sup>179</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 373-74.

<sup>180</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 374.

with a Christian eschatological vision: “One day, we shall go and arrive at the end of the road. In that future, we shall be without sin at all. And so it will be in the same manner for my grandchildren and relatives who will follow as well.”<sup>181</sup> Costello also relies on a letter Black Elk wrote in 1909 to the *Catholic Herald*: “We are here on this earth temporarily and he who walks the straight path and dies, there is rest waiting for him.”<sup>182</sup> While Costello does not account for Black Elk’s adaptation of the Two Roads Map in accordance with his Great Vision – changing the “gold road” to the “red road” – he maintains that “Black Elk’s description of the road demonstrates a strong correlation to Christian imagery.”<sup>183</sup> For Costello, however, the references to the “red road” in Black Elk’s great Vision are merely appropriations of the “holy” road, a “Christian concept [which] he attributes to the second grandfather ... The journey down the red road ends in sanctification.”<sup>184</sup>

But rather than demonstrate an appropriation of Christian imagery in the recounting his Great Vision to Neihardt, Costello might instead be supporting the conclusion that Black Elk interpreted Christianity in light of his Great Vision. As Costello notes, the gathering of his people – the organizing theme of the Great Vision – is also the central theme in the first Catholic hymn Black Elk taught Lucy, according to Costello, and “as a catechist, Black Elk worked to gather the Lakota nation together and to help make the

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<sup>181</sup> Costello, *Black Elk, Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism*, 106. Costello curiously reads the Christian themes in Black Elk’s post-conversion prayer as influencing his understanding of the Great Vision, not the other way around.

<sup>182</sup> Costello, *Black Elk, Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism*, 107.

<sup>183</sup> Costello, *Black Elk, Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism*, 108. Costello also does not account for Black Elk’s public re-enactment of his Great Vision in the Spring of 1881 at the Horse Dance ceremony, twenty-three years before his conversion to Catholicism. Black Elk tells Neihardt, “Before this the medicine men would not talk to me, but now they would come to me and talk about my vision.” Black Elk, *et al.*, *Black Elk Speaks*, 109. A vision is always communal property, which is why it is said to only be fully transmitted *after* it is shared with the elders.

<sup>184</sup> Costello, *Black Elk, Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism*, 108.



Lakota sacred.”<sup>185</sup> Undoubtedly, Black Elk either understood Christianity in terms of his Great Vision, or he fabricated his Great Vision to recast Christian imagery in terms of Lakota traditional belief and practice. Black Elk is clear that he interpreted the Ghost Dance in terms of his Great Vision. If Black Elk’s words are taken at face value, without any historical revision, then we might recognize that Black Elk adapted his Christian beliefs and practices in dialogue with his Great Vision – reimagining them, just as he did the Ghost Dance, in ways that helped him gather his people in the sacred hoop that the holy tree (of life) might once again flower. Recognizing what Marianne Moyaert describes as a “dialogic openness” in Black Elk’s engagement with the Ghost Dance and Catholicism in light of his Great Vision reveals the lived religious experience behind what Holler describes as Black Elk’s reimagination of the traditional Lakota Sun Dance in conversation with all three traditions.<sup>186</sup>

Black Elk’s dialogues with his Great Vision over the course of his life always included other conversation partners – Lakota traditional religious practice, the Ghost Dance, and Catholicism. These dialogues also included conversation partners in the practitioners of those traditions, Lakota traditional elders, Ghost Dancers, and Jesuit missionaries. Black Elk’s dialogues with his Great Vision would also include his engagements with White men – Neihardt and those who would follow him – who sought to preserve something of “an ancient people with a rich culture that was dying out.”<sup>187</sup> But,

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<sup>185</sup> Costello, *Black Elk, Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism*, 106.

<sup>186</sup> Moyaert, Marianne, “Introduction: Exploring the Phenomenon of Interreligious Ritual Participation,” in Moyaert, Marianne, ed. *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue: Boundaries, Transgressions, and Innovations* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 2 (“There is an understanding that dialogical openness or, if you will, interreligious hospitality, cannot come to full fruition if one is not prepared to receive ‘the other’ in one’s house of worship”).

<sup>187</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 404. Oldmeadow details the efforts of Joseph Eppes Brown and Frithjof Schuon to preserve the “spiritual legacy” of Black Elk, drawing (for the first time) on their personal correspondences,

even Neihardt was only a guest to a larger conversation – a conversation between Black Elk and his Great Vision. As Holler observes, where Neihardt wanted to show that “traditional Lakota religion and culture are dead ... it is precisely Black Elk's intention in collaborating with Neihardt ... to ‘make the tree flower’ even in the hostile context of the white world.”<sup>188</sup> Whatever the dialogue and whatever the conversation partner, the conversation remained the same. Black Elk was ever engaging divine encounter and revelation through his Great Vision in dialogue with those who could help him translate it.

### ***Dialogues with the missio Dei: Discerning Divine Encounter and Revelation***

Steven Charleston describes how, in Indigenous traditions, visions operate as a space of divine encounter and revelation. To have a vision, says Charleston, is “to encounter God,” which itself is not an end but a beginning – “the quest is not about transcendence, but transformation.”<sup>189</sup> For Charleston, “God has not spoken only to a handful of us. God has not spoken only to the few,” but through the mystery of incarnation – something he describes as “a movement of the very substance of human life to the place of [divine] meeting” – “God ... enter[s] the vision quest and speak[s] to us all.”<sup>190</sup> Divine encounter and revelation, then, are two movements in the journey towards reconciliation, which itself is a journey towards restoration of relationship. According to Charleston, the divine revelation of a vision such as Black Elk’s offers “insight into how [people] may reconcile their own life in balance with God that they become a source of healing for

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in addition to their writings and conversations with colleagues. Oldmeadow, *Black Elk, Lakota Visionary*, 89-98; 115-132.

<sup>188</sup> Holler, “Lakota Religion and Tragedy,” 37. As noted elsewhere, Holler understands the holy tree of Black Elk’s Great Vision as Lakota culture and religion, or as he states here, “traditional wisdom and values of the Lakotas [sic].”

<sup>189</sup> Charleston, *The Four Vision Quests of Jesus*, 16, 17.

<sup>190</sup> Charleston, *Four Vision Quests*, 20, 38.

others.”<sup>191</sup> Drawing on Black Elk’s conversations with his Great Vision, Charleston describes how “through the dialogue of visionary experience ... we can discover the deep bonds of our common humanity,”<sup>192</sup> which for him was a conversation with divine vision that guided him on a journey to reconcile his Indigenous and Christian identities. Notably, for purposes of our conversation, here, Charleston (an Episcopal bishop) describes “Black Elk [as] the Native American equivalent of the prophet Daniel or John of Patmos” in that the “visions he recounts ... are visual prophecy ... spiritual ciphers for deeper theological meaning, a grand narrative of cosmic forces, all revolving around the central theme of revelation.”<sup>193</sup>

#### *Encountering the missio Dei*

Within Charleston’s understanding of vision as divine encounter and revelation, we begin to understand why “Black Elk absolutely interpreted his life in terms of his Great Vision.”<sup>194</sup> The Great Vision was the divine narrative in which Black Elk’s life was situated. It was a generative space within which Black Elk could negotiate the policies of genocide and ethnocide perpetrated against his people by both the U.S. government and the Christian missionaries. As Charleston describes, through vision, “We see and hear in a new way. We understand more deeply ... The borders of our sacred space are widened; we open up to an awareness of new possibilities. Vision does not take away [our] struggles ...but it does show us how to cope with [them] ... with confidence and hope.”<sup>195</sup> Like Charleston, Black Elk engaged his Vision with a longing for transformation, not just for

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<sup>191</sup> Charleston, *Four Vision Quests*, 50.

<sup>192</sup> Charleston, *Four Vision Quests*, 48.

<sup>193</sup> Charleston, *Four Vision Quests*, 26.

<sup>194</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 431.

<sup>195</sup> Charleston, *Four Vision Quests*, 38.

himself but for his people, with what Jonathan Lear describes as “radical hope.”<sup>196</sup> His Great Vision offers Black Elk a radical hope in the rebirth of himself and his people in the face of complete cultural collapse. It offers a vision of divine restoration even in the face of death and destruction. It is a vision of a new form of life born out of what remains. As Shelly Rambo describes, this is not the glorified resurrection peddled by the Christian missionaries, a resurrection that conquers and consumes death and destruction; it is a “rebirth ... reconceived through the radical event of death,” a form of life that emerges out of an “encounter with a radical ending and the impossibility of a new beginning.”<sup>197</sup> It is a vision of resurrection that springs from the transformative and reconciling life of God, the *missio Dei*.

Like Charleston, Black Elk engaged the divine encounter and revelation of his Great Vision in dialogue. As Achiel Peelman, a Catholic priest who lived among the Cree of Alberta, Canada, observes, Indigenous peoples “understand[] divine revelation as a dialogue: the ongoing dialogue between God and all the peoples God created, each with their own cultural and religious traditions.”<sup>198</sup> For Peelman, “dialogue [is] a fundamental dimension of the aboriginal ethos” and much like the traditional exchange of gifts, the “North American missionary epoch was never a ‘one way’ experience, but always involved

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<sup>196</sup> Lear, Jonathan. *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 91. Lear describes how Crow Chief Plenty Coups, in the face of complete cultural collapse, offered his people a vision that “did not merely try to predict future events; it gave the tribe imaginative tools with which to endure a conceptual onslaught” (78-79). Plenty Coups, says Lear, “is committed to the bare idea that something good will emerge. But it does so in recognition that one’s thick understandings of the good life are about to disappear ... [This] is basically the hope for revival: for coming back to life in a form that is not yet intelligible” (94-95).

<sup>197</sup> Rambo, Shelly. *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 166-67.

<sup>198</sup> Peelman, Achiel. “Native American Spirituality and Christianity,” in Cornille, Catherine. *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. 2013), 354. With all non-Indigenous “observations” of Indigenous belief and practice, deference must always be given to Indigenous theological self-reflection. As Holler reminds us, “there is something ‘riding on the results’ of the inquiry.” *Black Elk’s Religion*, 4.

cultural transfers and interactions between the [missionaries] and the [Indigenous peoples].”<sup>199</sup> This dialogue of exchange “invit[es] the participants to become ‘risk-takers’ in view of real and mutual transformation.”<sup>200</sup> Such an approach to dialogue, in which assumptions and presuppositions are sacrificed to maintain an openness to divine revelation – and a willingness to offer *and accept* that revelation from other traditions – reflects the nature of Black Elk’s engagement with his Great Vision as a dialogue of exchange, a process of discerning how to participate in the transformative, reconciling life of God – the *missio Dei* – as revealed to him in his Great Vision.

As John Thatamanil recognizes that “different conceptions of ultimacy show up *within* traditions not just *across* them,” rendering discernment an “exercise [that] becomes not just a conversation across traditions but also within them.”<sup>201</sup> Such a process of discernment is grounded in the recognition that “at the heart of various religious traditions are claims to revelation: ultimate reality discloses itself to human beings,” rendering discernment a process of “interreligious learning” rooted in a “hospitality of receiving.”<sup>202</sup> Discerning divine revelation, then, becomes a process of sharing, a give-and-take between and within traditions: “we must be prepared to receive as well as give.”<sup>203</sup> As Thatamanil succinctly states, “There is no moving toward God that is not also a movement towards [our] neighbor and our neighbor’s wisdom ... We must practice the hospitality of receiving

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<sup>199</sup> Peelman, “Native American Spirituality,” 349, 356. This perspective is consistent with Michael McNally’s observation that Indigenous religious traditions have remained “remarkably open to the possibilities of new truths, new visions, and new ceremonies [that] could come to them in time” and that “native peoples gave audience to the Christian tradition in this spirit ... according to a familiar religious ethos of intertribal exchange.” McNally, *Ojibwe Singers*, 11.

<sup>200</sup> Peelman, “Native American Spirituality,” 351.

<sup>201</sup> Thatamanil, John J. *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity* (Baltimore, Maryland: Project Muse, 2020), 17.

<sup>202</sup> Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant*, 9.

<sup>203</sup> Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant*, 17.

if we are to understand each other, ourselves, and if we are to move into the very life of God.”<sup>204</sup> In short, Thatamanil describes exactly what Black Elk undertook in his dialogues with other traditions and his discernment of divine encounter and revelation from within them; he was discerning how to move more deeply into the life of God – the *missio Dei* – as revealed to him in his Great Vision, discerning how the sacred hoop might be restored so the holy tree might once again bloom.

### *Fractals of Divine Revelation*

According to Perry Schmidt-Leukel, this kind of dialogue of exchange reflects what he describes as “fractal patterns” across religions.<sup>205</sup> According to Schmidt-Leukel, similarities and differences between religious traditions can be recognized between different traditions, within them, and within their practitioner’s engagement of them. As he describes it, “each religion comprises characteristic features of other religions. Each element or aspect of the religions seems to fit into some kind of fractal configuration. That is, religious diversity is ‘scaling’: its occurrence on the global level is replicated within each of the major religions.”<sup>206</sup> At the practitioner level, “different religious options may co-inhabit the psyche of a single individual person successively [but] they can also do so simultaneously.”<sup>207</sup> In other words, the patterns of similarity and difference observed between religious traditions and within religious traditions can, when observed within practitioners of a particular tradition, lead to the holding together of seemingly incongruent traditions. As Schmidt-Leukel remarks, “in this kind of internalized spiritual dialogue dual

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<sup>204</sup> Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant*, 19.

<sup>205</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, Perry. *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology: The Gifford Lectures – An Extended Edition* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2017), 169.

<sup>206</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology*, 170.

<sup>207</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology*, 170.

belongs ‘become microcosms of the dialogue as a whole,’”<sup>208</sup> reflecting broader patterns of similarity and difference – even similarity within difference. Different religious traditions, then, are similar in their similarities, in their differences, and in the ways that their practitioners engage their similarities and differences. As Schmidt-Leukel describes it, then, “each religion represents the whole of religious experience in a specific form.”<sup>209</sup>

While Schmidt-Leukel’s fractal paradigm offers a phenomenological understanding of religious similarity and difference, the “fractal interpretation” itself offers no explanation for the patterns of similarity and difference between and within religious traditions and within practitioners. At best, he recognizes the implications of the paradigm for approaching theology interreligiously. As Paul Knitter describes those implications, “No religion is sufficient unto itself for carrying on the task of religious understanding. All religions must engage each other if they are to be true to their religious identities and experiences.”<sup>210</sup> The basis for this interreligious engagement is clear, even if Schmidt-Leukel’s paradigm is not. Because, as he notes, “human beings have the potential to become vehicles of divine revelation,”<sup>211</sup> the revelation of the divine is not uniform. Instead, as Alan Race observes, divine revelation contains “different manifestations of different experiences in different cultural terms stemming from the one ultimate transcendent reality.”<sup>212</sup> Or as Thatamanil states more succinctly. “The Real gives itself in

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<sup>208</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology*, 170, quoting Drew, Rose. *Buddhist and Christian?: An Exploration of Dual Belonging* (Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 226.

<sup>209</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology*, 163.

<sup>210</sup> Knitter, Paul. “Exploring What Looks Like ‘A New Paradigm’ for Dealing with Religious Diversity,” Race, Alan, and Paul F Knitter, eds. *New Paths for Interreligious Theology: Perry Schmidt-Leukel’s Fractal Interpretation of Religious Diversity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2019), 6.

<sup>211</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology*, 203.

<sup>212</sup> Race, Alan. “The Fractal Proposal and Its Place in the Christian Theology of Religions,” in Race and Knitter, *New Paths*, 114.

a multiplicity of ways because it is a multiplicity.”<sup>213</sup> Of course, the nature of divine revelation is, for Thatamanil, rooted in the nature of the divine: “The divine is a multiplicity – an enfolding of the one in the many, and the many in the one.”<sup>214</sup> Because the divine is a multiplicity, then, “divine disclosure is never finished and so cannot be contained in any fixed set of metaphysical categories.”<sup>215</sup>

For this reason, Schmidt-Leukel’s paradigm might be subject to criticism – it is simply another metaphysical category with which we might vainly attempt to shackle the divine, a criticism comparative theologian Frank Clooney levels at Schmidt-Leukel’s determination to “stubbornly ... tie up loose ends ... [in] theoriz[ing] the fractal perspective in an effort to bring order to religious diversity ... [despite] those who keep experimenting, finding, and simply enjoying ever new cases of religious learning that do not quickly fit into any desired theoretical frames.”<sup>216</sup> However as long as the paradigm remains descriptive and not prescriptive, it might yet be helpful. As a descriptive category, the fractal interpretation might open up a helpful conversation about the fragmentary nature of divine revelation. If, as Schmidt-Leukel describes, divine revelation is fragmentary – that is, incomplete – then, dialogue between and within religious traditions that hold distinct accounts of divine revelation, in Schmidt-Leukel’s words, “allows and invites processes of mutual learning and reciprocal illumination.”<sup>217</sup> Fundamentally, “fractal theory,”

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<sup>213</sup> Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant*, 82.

<sup>214</sup> Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant*, 103 (emphasis original).

<sup>215</sup> Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant*, 104. According to Burkhart, Black Elk would agree: “Truth, as Black Elk states, comes to the world as a pair. He says that truth has two faces ... [which] are only one aspect of the multiplicity of the faces of truth or one layer of the dynamic layering of the possibilities of truth in the context of locality.” Burkhart, *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land*, 160. Black Elk’s approach to truth, here, seems to mirror the Buddhist notion of “two truths.”

<sup>216</sup> Clooney, Francis X. “Fractal Theory, Fractal Practice: Theology of Religions, Comparative Theology,” in Race and Knitter, *New Paths*, 45.

<sup>217</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, Perry. “A Fractal Interpretation of Religious Diversity,” in Race and Knitter, *New Paths*, 24.



according to Schmidt-Leukel “goes beyond merely recognizing the reality of wide-ranging and thoroughgoing intrareligious diversity. It suggest[s] that this diversity displays discernible patterns and structures” between and within religious traditions and their practitioners.<sup>218</sup> Fractal theory points to an “‘inner logic’ behind the similarities, differences, and similarities in difference that reflect “different but compatible and complementing features or elements within particular clusters of human experience with the divine in the midst of human existence.”<sup>219</sup> In other words, these fractal patterns are a product of the multiplicity of human responses to the multiplicity of divine encounters and revelations of a Divine that is itself a multiplicity, to use Thatamanil’s image.

Divine revelation, Clooney reminds us, is the nature of “a God who is never in the grasp of the concepts and words that theologians expertly use,” but is found “in the particular, each time, over and over, “in ten thousand places.”<sup>220</sup> Stated differently, revelation is not a one-time event. As Cherokee theologian Jace Weaver observes, “revelation is direct and ongoing. It may come bidden or unbidden.”<sup>221</sup> Such is the nature of a God the Lakota call *Wakan Tanka*, which is often translated “Great Spirit” but actually means “great mystery,” or even “great mysterious.”<sup>222</sup> Ultimately, then, what emerges is an understanding of the diversity of religious belief and practice across the world that reflects the diversity of divine revelation. Indeed, it would seem that divine revelation comes in glimpses – or, as Schmidt-Leukel would describe it, in fractals. Each religious

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<sup>218</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, Perry. “Fractal Patterns in Religious Diversity: What to Make of Their Discovery?” in Race and Knitter, *New Paths*, 136-37.

<sup>219</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, “Fractal Patterns in Religious Diversity,” 137.

<sup>220</sup> Clooney, Francis X. “Fractal Theory, Fractal Practice,” 45.

<sup>221</sup> Weaver, Jace. “Revelation and Epistemology – We Know the Land, the Land Knows Us: Places of Revelation, Place as Revelation,” in Charleston, Steven, and Elaine A. Robinson, eds. *Coming Full Circle: Constructing Native Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 43.

<sup>222</sup> Weaver, Jace. “Revelation and Epistemology, 32.

tradition, then, reflects the diversity of human response to the fractal visions of the divine. And, within each tradition, the diversity of human response, likewise, reflects those fractal patterns.

As Bede Griffiths observes from a position of Catholic inclusivism, “in all the “different religious traditions of the world ... the [Christ] ‘mystery’ is gradually unfolded.”<sup>223</sup> For Griffiths, Christ is the “fulfillment of all religion,” echoing an inclusivist “anonymous Christianity;” but unlike other inclusivists,<sup>224</sup> Griffiths recognizes that every religion – including and especially Christianity – must “die that it may be born again in Christ ... a death to all that is imperfect and temporal ... but at the same time a resurrection, in which all that is essential, the eternal reality underlying the temporal forms, is reserved.”<sup>225</sup> It might be said that, in reflecting the fractal patterns of divine revelation, each religion is a fulfillment of the other – something Holler recognized in Black Elk’s own engagement of interreligious dialogue.<sup>226</sup> As Indian theologian K.P. Aleaz recognizes, it may be that the “content of the revelation of God” is available in all the “world’s religious resources,” which themselves are “the common property of humanity,” and because each tradition reflects these fractal patterns of divine revelation, each offers the other “a possible growth in the richness of each of the religious experiences through mutual inter-relation.”<sup>227</sup> This common heritage of the world’s religious traditions as repository of divine revelation suggests, according to Aleaz, that “there is a possibility for the fulfillment

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<sup>223</sup> Griffiths, Bede. *Christ in India* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishing, 1984), 118-20.

<sup>224</sup> Thatamanil recognizes Griffiths is *not* like other inclusivists, but expresses a form of “open inclusivism,” that while “religious traditions are genuinely different but therefore not commensurable,” they are also not “impossible,” or incapable of simultaneous participation, a position Thatamanil holds “may be right *in some cases* but not globally so.” Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant*, 68.

<sup>225</sup> Griffiths, *Christ in India*, 220-21.

<sup>226</sup> Holler, “Lakota Religion and Tragedy,” 34.

<sup>227</sup> Aleaz, K.P., “A Christology from Advaita Vedanta of India” in Marks, Darren C. *Shaping a Global Theological Mind* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Pub, 2008), 9.

of the theological and spiritual contents of one's own faith in and through the contributions of other living faiths."<sup>228</sup> For Aleaz, that possibility of fulfillment is realized in the "fulfilment of the Christian understanding of Christ in and through theological contributions from people of other faiths."<sup>229</sup>

### *Revelation as Polyphonic*

Such a perspective recognizes that, as Thatamanil suggests, religious belief and practice is necessarily polyvocal – of many voices – because it reflects a multiplicity of human responses to the fractal revelations of a divine that is, indeed, multiplicity. John Sheveland describes this interrelation of differing religious traditions in their accounts of divine revelation as polyphonic: "theological speakers are bound together in a common enterprise or symphony *because of* their diversity, which has now become not a problem to be solved or overcome but a richness to be pondered and preserved."<sup>230</sup> Rather than individual voices that compete with one another to be heard, religious traditions as polyphony describes an interplay of traditions that "give[s] rise to a more beautiful emergent structure," creating a melody that "bends back, reflexively, as a movement that now sheds further light on the individual voices comprising it. An individual voice changes while it sounds as a consequence of the movement's other voices."<sup>231</sup> Accordingly, this "emergent structure," or melody,<sup>232</sup> that binds together these differing theological voices

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<sup>228</sup> Aleaz, K.P., "A Christology from Advaita Vedanta of India," 9-10.

<sup>229</sup> Aleaz, K.P., "A Christology from Advaita Vedanta of India," 9.

<sup>230</sup> Sheveland, John N. "Solidarity through Polyphony," in Clooney, Francis X. *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 176 (emphasis original).

<sup>231</sup> Sheveland, "Solidarity through Polyphony," 173.

<sup>232</sup> Resonating with both Thatamanil and Sheveland, Mark S. Heim observes, "The divine life has varied dimensions because of [its] inner complexity. This allows human interaction with the triune God to take different forms. God's channels of relation with creation are open on many frequencies. Human interaction with the divine can 'tune' itself to one or more of these dimensions." Heim, Mark S. "On Doing What Others Do: Intentions and Intuitions in Multiple Religious Practice," in Moyaert, Marianne, ed. *Ritual*

reflects not an “inner logic,” as Schmidt-Leukel describes it, but rather a “consonance” that “thrives on texture and difference as the condition of its possibility.”<sup>233</sup> Religious difference, then, becomes a source of “beauty and reconciliation,” rather than conflict and division.<sup>234</sup>

Certainly, in this view, we can begin to appreciate how Black Elk might have held his Lakota beliefs and practices together with those he found in the Ghost Dance tradition and in Catholicism. Each tradition resonated with the revelation of God he encountered in his Great Vision. Or put differently, Black Elk’s Great Vision held the Lakota religious tradition, the Ghost Dance tradition, and the Catholic tradition all together in a polyphonic consonance. Through Black Elk’s interreligious dialogues, fractals of divine revelation from each of these traditions resonated through his Great Vision, offering, in Sheveland’s words (foreshadowing Schmidt-Leukel’s), “unpredictable development, of reciprocal illumination, and perhaps surprising edification.”<sup>235</sup> In a polyphonic approach to religious diversity, this fractal paradigm for divine revelation points to the interrelatedness and interdependence – even the mutual fulfillment – of differing religious traditions, something Black Elk intuitively understood. As we see in Black Elk’s interreligious dialogues, the fractal revelations of the divine cohere in conversations between the religious traditions that respond to them. In this way, Black Elk demonstrates the fundamental reality of

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*Participation and Interreligious Dialogue: Boundaries, Transgressions, and Innovations* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 30 (emphasis added).

<sup>233</sup> Sheveland, “Solidarity through Polyphony,” 173-74. “Inner logic” suggests that divine revelation can be reduced to comprehensible components. “Consonance” recognizes an inner aesthetic, as Sheveland describes it, that holds the different voices together in a movement. While “inner logic” may be hidden to those without proper training, musical movements may be appreciated by anyone with an ear to hear.

<sup>234</sup> Sheveland, John N. “What Has Renaissance Polyphony to Offer Theological Method?,” in Phan, Peter C, and Jonathan Ray, eds. *Understanding Religious Pluralism: Perspectives from Religious Studies and Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 138.

<sup>235</sup> Sheveland, “Solidarity through Polyphony,” 175.

Fabrice Blée’s somewhat provocative proclamation, “To be religious is necessarily to be interreligious.”<sup>236</sup>

### ***Multireligious Participation as Midwife of the missio Dei?***

If we understand Black Elk’s relationship to the various religious traditions with which he identified and participated over the course of his life as an attempt to hold together fractal revelations of the divine in the polyphonic melody of his Great Vision, we might better understand perhaps the most controversial historical reality of Nicholas Black Elk, his multireligious identity. Interreligious theologian Hans Gustafson proposes multireligious identity as a resolution for the contestation over Black Elk’s words, practices, and identities: “Black Elk was both Lakota and Catholic in a sincere multireligious capacity which may suggest that he found the traditions not at odds, but rather mutually inclusive and complementary within a Lakota context.”<sup>237</sup> Gustafson’s proposal – although organized in service of a larger project on “pansacramentalism” – helps make sense, he says, of Peelman’s assessment of a prevalent “dynamic” (concern) among Indigenous Christians (or their missionaries): “The simultaneous practice of two different religious systems is a widespread phenomenon ... where [I]ndigenous peoples have embraced Christianity in the context of colonialism ... it confronts us, once again, with the meaning of the conversion of Amerindians to Christianity. How can one justify this simultaneous belonging to two religious systems which have practiced mutual exclusion in

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<sup>236</sup> Blée, Fabrice, *The Third Desert: The Story of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue*, trans. William Skudlarek, and Mary Grady (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2011), 1. Blée observes that interreligious dialogue makes us “more open to the unlimited horizons of the divine reality, a mystery that can neither be exhausted nor monopolized by any one theological or philosophical system.” *Ibid.* at 2.

<sup>237</sup> Gustafson, Hans. *Finding All Things in God: Pansacramentalism and Doing Theology Interreligiously* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 163. Thatamanil’s caution is appropriate, here: “one can only affirm the possibility of complementarity if one refuses to posit sameness.” Thatamanil, John J. “Theology Without Walls as the quest for interreligious wisdom,” in Martin, Jerry L, ed. *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 61-62.

the course of history?”<sup>238</sup> For Gustafson, the question is less about the authenticity of conversion and more about the nature of Indigenous religious identity, centering on the oft-repeated Indigenous refrain, “Can I be both Christian and Indian, or must I choose?”<sup>239</sup> – the very question we heard Ben Black Elk asking as he confessed in his old age, “‘I led two lives,’ ... Christian and Indian – yet inhabited neither comfortably.”<sup>240</sup>

### *Dialogue as Participation*

According to Gustafson, Black Elk’s approach to interreligious dialogue honored the differences between the traditions he engaged without rendering them incompatible, or worse reducing their differences to sameness. What is in view, then, is a dialogue of exchange that recognizes “true complementarity,” with interreligious dialogue as a “two-way street; both ... remain open to the other’s bringing something new.”<sup>241</sup> This dialogue of exchange demonstrates how different traditions can “respect one another in their difference, yet complement the other in their mutual theological sharing.”<sup>242</sup> Gustafson describes how a dialogue of exchange helps religious traditions become *living* traditions: “If each religion remains open to an internal dynamism and dialogue” between its religious neighbors *and within itself*, through a dialogue of exchange, “surviving and adapting in light of its encounter with the other.”<sup>243</sup> Certainly, this dynamic of religious “survival and adaptation” is what Holler recognizes in connecting the desire to “reinvent and restore traditional culture through religious ritual ... and the desire of the mature Black Elk to get

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<sup>238</sup> Peelman, Achiel. *Christ Is a Native American* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 80.

<sup>239</sup> Gustafson, *Finding All Things in God*, 154.

<sup>240</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 396.

<sup>241</sup> Gustafson, *Finding All Things in God*, 167.

<sup>242</sup> Gustafson, *Finding All Things in God*, 180.

<sup>243</sup> Gustafson, *Finding All Things in God*, 167.

his people back in the hoop and make the tree of his vision flower.”<sup>244</sup> But, while Holler’s description of Black Elk’s interreligious dialogues provocatively poses the question “What,” it leaves the more theological questions of “How” and “Why” for later conversations.<sup>245</sup>

Gustafson, on the other hand, in his assessment of Black Elk’s multireligious participation,<sup>246</sup> reaches for the “How” of Black Elk’s multiple religious practice and identity, even if he does not quite arrive at the “Why.” Gustafson begins by critiquing Costello’s “heavily syncretized thesis about Black Elk’s spirituality”<sup>247</sup> – suggesting Costello falls prey to the same “Catholic apologist” critique leveled at other Black Elk scholarship<sup>248</sup> – and suggests instead that “Black Elk was both Lakota and Catholic in a sincere multireligious capacity which may suggest he found the traditions not at odds, but rather mutually inclusive and complementary within a Lakota context.”<sup>249</sup> It is important to note, here, that Black Elk’s multireligious participation suggests that religious “traditions

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<sup>244</sup> Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 219.

<sup>245</sup> Certainly, Holler would be right to point out that the questions of “How” and “Why” might not be theological questions at all for Black Elk; they might simply be matters of individual and communal survival, of cultural preservation. Black Elk did not need a bevy of theologians and scholars to engage religious traditions outside his own (even within his own) dialogically. Such dialogic engagement was his natural response to divine encounter and revelation.

<sup>246</sup> It should be noted, interreligious theologians (a term that is, itself contested) fluctuate between the terminology “multiple religious identity,” “multiple belonging,” “multiple participation,” and “multiple practice.” Whatever substantive differences these terms may reflect, for our purposes, here, we are concerned primarily Black Elk’s practice – and, to a lesser extent, the way his practice shaped his identity – not to whom he belonged.

<sup>247</sup> Gustafson, *Finding All Things in God*, 163 (quoting Martinez, David. “Review of Damien Costello, Black Elk: Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74 (2006) 1014-17).

<sup>248</sup> Gustafson notes, “It is unclear, based on his text alone, whether Costello would deem this authentic MRI or an instance of a practicing Catholic who re-appropriated his Lakota worldview to conform to Catholicism, thus negating or amending all incompatible Lakota elements.” Gustafson, *Finding All Things in God*, 173. He recognizes, the latter is incoherent because it “deem[s] Black Elk’s religion as Catholicism and his culture Lakota (which is rather problematic since there is no clear distinction between religion and culture in the Lakota tradition.”

<sup>249</sup> Gustafson, *Finding All Things in God*, 163.

neither corrupted nor negated each other for Black Elk, but rather converged.”<sup>250</sup> Put differently, in the context of Black Elk’s multireligious participation, Catholicism was not contextualized within Lakota culture – a form of Christianity dressed in Indigenous regalia<sup>251</sup> – it was held together with Lakota traditional belief and practice and the Ghost Dance in the consonance of Black Elk’s Great Vision.

Black Elk’s multireligious participation served as a midwife to the *missio Dei*, preparing space for the emergence of the divine life of reconciliation and transformation. It created the space within which the fractal revelations of the divine might come together and be born anew.<sup>252</sup> As we see in Black Elk’s re-enactment of his traditional practices in the yearly Duhamel pageants in Rapid City for over twenty years, Black Elk was bringing traditions together in a reconciling and transformative fashion. Whether through his dialogues with Lakota tradition, the Ghost Dance, Catholicism – or even his conversations with Neihardt and those who followed – Black Elk was ever reaching for the promise of renewal in his Great Vision. His multireligious participation, then, acted as midwife, helping deliver the *missio Dei* by creating a safe, generative space within which the transformative and reconciling life of God might spring forth anew. Black Elk’s

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<sup>250</sup> Gustafson, *Finding All Things in God*, 163.

<sup>251</sup> This is exactly the kind of syncretic appropriation multireligious participation seeks to avoid. As James Farwell notes, “the notion of the “interreligious” itself assumes *some* kind of difference among the religious traditions. Any apparent incoherence of interreligious practice can be minimized or eliminated by perennialist positions of various types that suggest religions are different only at their surface, clothed in cultural distinctives with a similar human orientation at their core.” Farwell, James W. “Theorizing Ritual for Interreligious Practice,” in Moyaert, Marianne, ed. *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue: Boundaries, Transgressions, and Innovations* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 173 (emphasis original).

<sup>252</sup> While Gustafson’s interests do not lie with the role of revelation in Black Elk’s multireligious participation, he recognizes, quoting Keith Ward, that “[i]f faith is response to a disclosure of the divine in this community, then why should there not be different disclosures of the divine in other communities?” Gustafson, *Finding All Things in God*, 175 (quoting Ward, Keith. “The Importance of Liberal Theology,” in Chapman, Mark D. *The Future of Liberal Theology* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2002), 51-52). Gustafson points to the implications of the multiplicity of divine revelation: “Christianity [becomes] one community of discernment among others, not the only source of religious truth.” *Ibid.*



multireligious participation offers the possibility of mutual fulfillment – of his traditions, practices, beliefs, himself, *and* his people. According to Gustafson, “The soil for this impact [mutual fulfillment] becomes fertile ‘when and where a religion [or practitioner] has accepted the complementarity of religions.’”<sup>253</sup> This generative “soil” created by Black Elk’s multireligious participation, then, is the space within which the *missio Dei* is ever birthed anew.

In Schmidt-Leukel’s “fractal paradigm,” Black Elk’s dialogic exchange happens between the traditions, within the traditions themselves, and within Black Elk himself. Gustafson observes in Black Elk’s dialogues between his Great Vision, Lakota tradition, the Ghost Dance, and Catholicism how “genuine *inter*-religious dialogue entails genuine *intra*-religious dialogue ... Both the Christian tradition and Black Elk’s spirituality showcase their convergent dynamism.”<sup>254</sup> Of course, as he participates in these different traditions, engaging in an embodied way with these dialogues, the dynamism of his religious practice gives birth to a dynamism in his religious identity. His identity is not tied to a static and predetermined set of beliefs and practices – and, in the case of Catholicism, an imported identity – but becomes responsive to the fractal revelations of the divine he encounters within the traditions themselves. As Gustafson observes, the natural result of such dialogues of exchange is that Black Elk’s own religious identity comes to

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<sup>253</sup> Gustafson, *Finding All Things in God*, 173 (quoting Cornille, Catherine. “Introduction,” in *Many Mansions?: Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), 4). Gustafson also draws on Cornille to suggest Black Elk’s “[a]uthentic MRI entails that “[he] no longer only understands the other from the perspective of Christianity, but also comes to understand the Christian tradition from the perspective of the other.” *Ibid.* It must be remembered: Black Elk was *always the other* to the missionaries. For him to become Christian, in the first place, was necessarily “to understand the Christian tradition from the perspective of the other.” What is notable in Cornille’s analysis, however, is that through his multireligious participation, Black Elk was able to understand his non-Christian traditions in terms of the fractal revelations offered to him in Christianity.

<sup>254</sup> Gustafson, *Finding All Things in God*, 176.

reflect the “convergent dynamism” of the traditions in which he participates, becoming ““a fluid and dynamic process that defines itself in reaction to concrete challenges that present themselves in changing circumstances.””<sup>255</sup> Black Elk’s multireligious participation is necessarily predicated, then, on his “understanding of religions as dynamic and open to new expressions of the divine.”<sup>256</sup>

### *Practice as Enacted Lifeworld*

In his “dialogic openness” of multireligious participation – particularly in his engagement with the practices of these different traditions<sup>257</sup> – we see Black Elk himself becoming the site of transformation and reconciliation. It is in the practices themselves that the fractal revelations of divine encounter actually begin to coalesce in Black Elk himself, reshaping his lifeworld.<sup>258</sup> As James Farwell notes in his own biographical account of multireligious participation, “Religions do not exist ... separate from the people who bring them to flesh in their own practice. Religious traditions are not simply disinterested descriptions of the universe; they are performances, ways of inhabiting the universe ... Everything about a religion ... is bent toward norming certain ways of *being toward the world*.”<sup>259</sup> Black Elk’s multireligious participation, then, demonstrates an

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<sup>255</sup> Gustafson, *Finding All Things in God*, 176 (quoting Cornille, “Introduction,” 6).

<sup>256</sup> Gustafson, *Finding All Things in God*, 175.

<sup>257</sup> While it is important to note the “What” of Black Elk’s engagement in religious practice across tradition as part of his multireligious participation, the “How” of his inter-riting is not within the scope of this conversation. More fruitful are the inquiries into the “Why” of his multireligious ritual participation – the role religious practice across traditions played in the discernment and enactment of divine revelation as “an expression of [his] ongoing personal spiritual journey.” Moyaert, “Introduction,” 11.

<sup>258</sup> As Farwell observes, “rituals ... are not simply *expressing* a lifeworld but *performing* it – performing the metaphysics and enacting the ends of that lifeworld, of what counts as flourishing within it ... in ritual on is *intending* the world, practicing the end that one seeks and seeks to be.” Farwell, James W. “Taking the Liturgical Turn in Comparative Theology: Monastic Interfaith Dialogue as a Supporting Case,” in Moyaert, Marianne, ed. *Interreligious Relations and the Negotiation of Ritual Boundaries: Explorations of Interrituality* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 165.

<sup>259</sup> Farwell, James W. “On Whether Christians Should Participate in Buddhist Practice: A Critical Autobiographical Reflection,” in *Ritualizing Interreligious Encounters: Mapping the Field of Interrituality*. *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology*, no. 2 (2017), 246.

embodied way of knowing between the traditions themselves, beyond the traditions themselves.<sup>260</sup> Farwell observes, “one cannot give a general assessment of a religious encounter between two traditions; one can only give an account of the way specific threads of two traditions meet, provoke, complement, critique and supplement one another as they intersect in the formation of a particular individual, facing particular challenges.”<sup>261</sup> While we never hear Black Elk describe this process in his own words, we have heard his nephew, Frank Fools Crow’s recount Black Elk’s experience. “Black Elk told me he had decided that the Sioux religious way of life was pretty much the same as that of the Christian churches, and there was no reason to change what the Sioux were doing. 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.”<sup>262</sup> This description of reconciling the practices with which he engaged necessarily reflect the way Black Elk understood himself in relation to his world – and more specifically, to his Great Vision.<sup>263</sup>

We see that reconciling work in Black Elk’s account of the seven Lakota rituals in Joseph Epps Brown’s *The Sacred Pipe* – even if we cannot physically witness it in Black Elk’s re-enactment of Lakota ceremony at the Duhamel pageants, or even in present-day Lakota ceremony. Unlike Neihardt’s work with *Black Elk Speaks*, Brown seems to have gone to great lengths to preserve Black Elk’s authentic voice in the text,<sup>264</sup> even designating

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<sup>260</sup> To this end, Moyaert observes, “to engage in the worship practice of another tradition thus becomes a means to encounter the divine anew or to discover hidden or forgotten dimensions of the divine. From this perspective ritual participation may be an expression of the ongoing journey that religious life really is.” Moyaert, “Introduction,” 5.

<sup>261</sup> Farwell, “On Whether Christians Should Participate,” 250.

<sup>262</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 364.

<sup>263</sup> This process of reconciling (and transforming) traditional Indigenous belief and practice in conversation with Christianity through multireligious participation seems to have been (and perhaps still is) common in some Indigenous communities.

<sup>264</sup> While there is scholarly debate over the extent to which Brown, like Neihardt, embellished Black Elk’s accounts of Lakota ritual in *The Sacred Pipe* (see, Oldmeadow, *Black Elk, Lakota Visionary*, 89-98),

Black Elk as the author of the Forward so he could articulate his “desires” in “mak[ing] this book.”<sup>265</sup> In *The Sacred Pipe*, Black Elk describes seven Lakota rituals that seem to parallel Catholic ritual. For Costello, this correlation suggests that “Black Elk absorbs new Christian thought within the old culture, which in turn is reinterpreted to be in continuity with the new thought.”<sup>266</sup> Costello describes this reinterpretation of Lakota tradition as an exercise in Black Elk’s agency as the “[I]ndigenous agent [that] reformulates the [I]ndigenous cultural framework around the Christian story.”<sup>267</sup> But, what if the agency for transformation and reconciliation does not lie with Black Elk any more than it lies with the Catholic missionaries who instrumentalized his conversion for the purpose of turning more than 400 of his people away from their traditional belief and ceremony? What if Costello, in a post-colonial effort to return theological agency to Black Elk – instead of with the missionaries, where the Catholic apologists often place it – ignores a source of agency that springs up in the middle space?<sup>268</sup> What if Black Elk is simply describing the practices that enact a lifeworld shaped by the fractals of divine revelation from different traditions that coalesced around the polyphonic melody of the *missio Dei*, as revealed in

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according to a former student and friend, Brown’s transcription process differed significantly from Neihardt’s in at least two significant ways. First, Brown wrote the transcriptions directly from Ben Black Elk’s translation, and second, “he read back a rough draft manuscript for approval as part of the recording process.” Fitzgerald, Michael. “New Light on Black Elk and *The Sacred Pipe*,” in *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 41 no. 4 (2017), 80-81. Additionally, Brown “stressed ... the importance of word-for-word transcriptions without the editor adding anything to the narrative” and only made insubstantial grammatical corrections. *Ibid.* at 81. This process led one of the early readers of *The Sacred Pipe* to describe it as “strictly faithful, word for word, to the account given by the Indian author.” *Ibid.* Oldmeadow further dismisses charges of editorial syncretism, noting that “similarities of Lakota rituals and Christian sacraments ... would strike any religiously literate observer.” Oldmeadow, *Black Elk, Lakota Visionary*, 94.

<sup>265</sup> Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, xx.

<sup>266</sup> Costello, *Black Elk, Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism*, 83.

<sup>267</sup> Costello, *Black Elk, Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism*, 82.

<sup>268</sup> This question of the agency at work in Black Elk’s interreligious dialogues and multireligious participation moves past the questions of “What,” and “How,” and “Why,” to consider the question of “Who.” We will consider in a subsequent chapter this question of “Who” and the agency at work in Black Elk’s interreligious dialogues and multireligious participation.

his Great Vision? Holler seems to recognize the source of Black Elk's "creative reconciliation of the two traditions" as something beyond Black Elk himself, noting that "*The Sacred Pipe* ... intends to assert the validity of traditional religion to both [insiders and outsiders], *daring to compare it directly with Christian revelation.*"<sup>269</sup>

*The Sun Dance: A Case Study*

There is no clearer example of the fruits of Black Elk's multireligious participation than Black Elk's revival of the Sun Dance, the central religious ceremony of Black Elk's people.<sup>270</sup> Holler describes the Sun Dance ban as a measure aimed at the "destruction of the entire native priesthood ... disenfranchising the holy men, the leaders best equipped to deal with change"<sup>271</sup> If Holler is right in describing the Sun Dance as "a canvas on which the intercessor paints, in dialogue with the tradition and the needs of his community,"<sup>272</sup> then the Sun Dance becomes the canvas on which Black Elk painted his dialogues with the Ghost Dance tradition and the Catholic tradition in light of the needs of his community, which he recognized and responded to through the lens of his Great Vision. Black Elk's participation in the Ghost Dance tradition and in the Catholic tradition, both of which he engaged as a means of enacting his Great Vision, guided his revival of the Sun Dance

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<sup>269</sup> Holler, *Black Elk's Religion*, 151, 186, emphasis added).

<sup>270</sup> While Black Elk recounts the Sun Dance to Neihardt in narrative form in *Black Elk Speaks*, he describes it to Brown in ritual form in *The Sacred Pipe*, which becomes the basis for its present practice. A sacred tree is selected and cut down by a "war party" and placed at the "center of the people's sacred hoop ... When [the pole] stand[s] at the center of the sacred hoop [it] will be as the people, and [it] will be as the pipe, stretching from heaven to earth. The weak will lean on [it], and for all the people [it] will be a support ... Soon, and with all the peoples of the world, [it] will stand at the center; for all beings and all things [it] will bring that which it good." To this pole dancers attach themselves by leather thongs tied to wooden or bone seton (or peg) which is passed through incisions cut through the chest or back of the dancer. The dancers dance around the pole until they break loose, as the community sings and prays around them. Sometimes, the dances can last all day, or even all night, and they are preceded by fasting and purification by the dancers and (often) members of their families, who sometimes offer pieces of their flesh on an altar at the foot of the pole to satisfy the dancer's vow to *Wakan Tanka*. Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, 74-92.

<sup>271</sup> Holler, *Black Elk's Religion*, 113, 134.

<sup>272</sup> Holler, *Black Elk's Religion*, xxiii.

ceremony amongst his people after the ban was lifted. As Holler notes, “No Sun Dance in the literature resembles Black Elk’s dance in its emphasis on the theme that ‘the people shall live.’”<sup>273</sup> Indeed, the heart of Black Elk’s Great Vision – restoring the sacred hoop that the holy tree (of life) might flower – becomes the heart of Black Elk’s own religious practice. Black Elk’s Sun Dance enacts his Great Vision.<sup>274</sup> The Sun Dance lodge becomes the sacred hoop in which all creation is related, “the whole circle is the entire creation” that “this offering [may] help make all things and all beings as relatives to us.”<sup>275</sup> The Sun Dance pole becomes the “tree of the people, which we pray will bear much fruit.”<sup>276</sup> The prayers and offerings of the dancers invoke the eschatological vision of Black Elk’s Great Vision – “O *Wakan-Tanka*, be merciful to me, that my people may live! It is for this reason that I am sacrificing myself.”<sup>277</sup>

However, this “reinterpretation,” as Costello describes it, is not the result of Black Elk’s “absorption” of Christianity. It reflects a ritual translation of the fractal revelations he encountered in his multireligious practice that found consonance in his Great Vision. Black Elk translated his vision of transformation and reconciliation through a religious practice that enacts it. From Farwell’s perspective on ritual theory, Black Elk’s practices

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<sup>273</sup> Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 141 (quoting Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, 87).

<sup>274</sup> In his account to Brown, Black Elk connects the Sun Dance with his Great Vision: “O Grandfather, *Wakan-Tanka* ... You have taught us a way of prayer with the pipe which You have given us; and now through a vision You have shown to me a sacred dance which I must teach to my people.” Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, 76.

<sup>275</sup> Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, 80, 88.

<sup>276</sup> Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, 79.

<sup>277</sup> Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, 87. Holler points out that the Sun Dance, is fundamentally centered on preserving the life of the community. “[T]he classic Sun Dance was a major mechanism for the redistribution of wealth ... [because] giveaways take place at these ceremonies and [] ‘a vast amount of possessions changes hands.’” Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 70-71 (internal citation omitted). This “give-away” aspect of the Sun Dance highlights its emphasis on *sacrifice as an expression of thanksgiving*. Chase by Bears, a leader of the 1882 Sun Dance on Standing Rock, observes, “A man’s body is his own, and when he gives his body or his flesh he is giving the only thing which really belongs to him ... if a man says he will give a horse to Wakantanka, he is only giving to Wakantanka that which already belongs to him.” Holler, *Black Elk’s Religion*, 107 (internal citation omitted).

“do not just reflect the worldviews of a religion; they also play an important role in actually giving rise to and reinforcing the particular religious worldview in which they are enmeshed.”<sup>278</sup> As Farwell describes elsewhere, “religion is not just a response to the world;” rather, “the world arises from it ... not so much as ‘doctrine’ received, but as worldview ritually enacted.”<sup>279</sup> Stated differently, Black Elk begins to shape a lifeworld through practices developed in multireligious participation that reflects the fractal revelations of his Great Vision. As Farwell puts it, Black Elk “evo[kes], through performance, a universe to inhabit.”<sup>280</sup> The Sun Dance provided Black Elk the ritual space within which he (and his people) could enact the eschatological vision of transformation and reconciliation of his Great Vision, “that [his] people might live.”<sup>281</sup> As Steven Charleston observes, through Black Elk’s Sun Dance, dancers “make a sacrifice of their own bodies, accepting the pain of piercing and torn flesh, in order to offer a blessing to their people ... In the theology of the Sun Dance this noble gesture of love releases the power of healing into the whole nation ... [and] allows the people to live and prosper.”<sup>282</sup> In Black Elk’s Sun Dance, then, the promise of the Great Vision is enacted and realized.

### ***Black Elk’s Multireligious Participation: the Fruits of Dialogue and Practice***

Once we recognize Black Elk’s practices as arising out of the lifeworld shaped by the fractal revelations of the divine discerned through his multireligious participation – and themselves shaping that lifeworld – we might have to actually take Black Elk at his word when he wrote in the Forward to *The Sacred Pipe*, “I have wished to write this book through

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<sup>278</sup> Farwell, “Theorizing Ritual for Interreligious Practice,” 167-68.

<sup>279</sup> Farwell, “On Whether Christians Should Participate,” 247.

<sup>280</sup> Farwell, “Theorizing Ritual for Interreligious Practice,” 167.

<sup>281</sup> Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, 87.

<sup>282</sup> Charleston, *Four Vision Quests*, 132.

no other desire that to help my people in understanding the greatness and truth of own tradition, and also to help in bringing peace upon earth, not only among men, but within men and between the whole of creation.”<sup>283</sup> We might have to believe Black Elk when he writes, “we Indians know the One true God, and [] we pray to him continually.”<sup>284</sup> We might just have to recognize that through the practices of his multireligious participation, Black Elk encountered a lived religious experience of the divine that could not be fully contained within any one religious tradition.<sup>285</sup> As Jackson describes it, “[A] lifetime spent pursuing and comparing different religions finally gave [Black Elk] the insight that the Sioux, Americans, and Europeans were all children of God. *Wakan Tanka* had sent incarnations of holiness to each people ... and with *The Sacred Pipe* he sought to define the Lakota sphere.”<sup>286</sup> Black Elk’s translation of divine encounter and revelation between different traditions in *The Sacred Pipe* seems to resonate with Farwell’s description of practicing (at least) two traditions simultaneously: “I sit at the intersection point of two different traditions, both of which shape me, complement and critique one another at the intersection of my own heart and mind, and demand something from me.”<sup>287</sup> What Black

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<sup>283</sup> Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, xx. Black Elk is still reaching for the realization of his Great Vision – the restoration of the sacred hoop and the blossoming of the holy tree.

<sup>284</sup> Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, xx.

<sup>285</sup> Burkhart describes this lived religious experience this way: “Black Elk is describing [] a way of coming to know that is centered in a kind of lived experience, a being in relationship with one’s locality that is characterized by epistemological and ontological kinship ... [such that] knowing is bound up in experience in a very intimate way ... The way Black Elk states it, knowing is not something that can be extended or even shared beyond lived experience.” Burkhart, *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land*, 113-14.

<sup>286</sup> Jackson, *Black Elk*, 460. Jackson’s this assessment of Black Elk’s multireligious participation resonates with Black Elk’s own description of the fruits of his interreligious dialogue in his Forward to *The Sacred Pipe*: “We have been told by the white men ... that God sent to men His son, who would restore order and peace upon the earth ... 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 *Wakan-Tanka*, the Great Spirit, that an animal turn[ed] itself into a two-legged person in order to bring the most holy pipe to His people,” through which “peace may come to those people who can understand.” Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, xix-xx.

<sup>287</sup> Farwell, “On Whether Christians Should Participate,” 251.



Elk's traditions demanded of him was that he respond to divine encounter and revelation, something he did through dialogue and practice.

If we take seriously the understanding that Black Elk's interreligious dialogue was his attempt to hold together fractals of divine revelation through the polyphonic consonance (melody) of his Great Vision, then the idea of his multireligious participation should come as no surprise. As Schmidt-Leukel recognizes, "different religious options may co-inhabit the psyche of a single individual person successively [but] they can also do so simultaneously. This takes us to the phenomenon of multireligious identity and multireligious belonging."<sup>288</sup> For Schmidt-Leukel, multireligious identity, then, represents a "kind of internalized spiritual dialogue [of] dual belongs [that] 'become[s] a] microcosm[] of the dialogue as a whole.'"<sup>289</sup> In Black Elk's case, we might find that his multiple participation was, actually, a posture of discernment from which he discerned fractals of divine revelation in dialogue.<sup>290</sup> While we have no record from Black Elk himself of his internal dialogues with these fractal revelations, we certainly see how he engaged them through his practices. As a *wicasa wakan*, he drew upon the beliefs and practices available to him to restore the sacred hoop and make the holy tree (of life) flower again. He seems to have done the same in his participation in the Ghost Dance, and his work as a Catholic catechist reflects his efforts to draw upon Christian resources to gather his people and help them discover life in the midst of genocide and ethnocide, the complete

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<sup>288</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology*, 170.

<sup>289</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology*, 170, quoting Drew, Rose. *Buddhist and Christian?: An Exploration of Dual Belonging* (Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 226.

<sup>290</sup> Thatamanil connects the practice of multireligious participation with the encounter of the divine available across religious traditions: "If you want to know as Buddhists know, you must do as Buddhists do," which is why "multiple religious participation is necessary for ... interreligious wisdom" – or divine revelation – what Thatamanil calls the "first-order knowledge of ultimate reality" that is "inscribed into the[] bodies" of multireligious participants." Thatamanil, "Theology Without Walls," 59.

cultural devastation achieved by policies of extermination by assimilation. His multireligious practice and identity was not simply an historical reality, or even a problem to be solved. It seems to have been the means by which he drew out musical lines of divine revelation to give voice to the melody of his Great Vision. Black Elk's multireligious participation was the instrument with which he made his Great Vision sing.

As Clooney observes in his reflections on a poem about a ninth-century Hindu saint: “[W]e construct a path of religious belonging that suits our own spiritual imagination; we do this according to our traditions but also the possibilities available in our time and place. In all this God agrees to meet us there; if our contemplation happens to cross religious boundaries, God agrees to meet us there too.”<sup>291</sup> As we have seen, God met Black Elk in the different religious traditions he engaged across boundaries through fractals of divine revelation. As Black Elk, himself, describes, “We should understand well that all things are the work of the Great Spirit. We should know that He is in all things.”<sup>292</sup> For Black Elk, different religious traditions are not, themselves, containers of the divine, much less of propositional truth,<sup>293</sup> rather, they are a human response to divine encounter and revelation, in which fractal revelations are experienced and made known.<sup>294</sup> It is Black Elk's divine encounter in and through and across the boundaries of religious traditions that Vine Deloria acknowledges when describing *Black Elk Speaks* as “a North American bible

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<sup>291</sup> Clooney, Francis X. *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 130.

<sup>292</sup> Brown, Joseph Epps, *The Sacred Pipe*, xx.

<sup>293</sup> Burkhart describes Black Elk's epistemology as “lived, experiential, and embodied knowledge achieved through kinship.” Such “[l]ived knowledge is ... a part of the movement and dynamic changeability of the journey of our lives through kinship within a dynamic and ever-changing locality.” Burkhart, *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land*, 116.

<sup>294</sup> As Moyaert recognizes, “many regard ritual participation as an expression of an ongoing spiritual journey which does not allow itself to be fixed in bounded traditions. After all, what is ultimate transcends all human comprehension, and it may even be called a form of idolatry to try to capture the Ineffable in one ritual tradition.” Moyaert “Introduction,” 11.

of all tribes.”<sup>295</sup> But, it is Black Elk’s translation of the fractals of divine revelation through interreligious dialogue that have become the “great religious teachings” that render the Black Elk’s translations “indistinguishable from the transcendent truth that is expressed.”<sup>296</sup> It is to Black Elk’s work of translating divine encounter and revelation that we now turn.

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<sup>295</sup> Deloria, Jr., Vine. “Forward,” Black Elk, *et al. Black Elk Speaks*, xiv, xvi.

<sup>296</sup> Deloria, Jr., Vine. “Forward,” Black Elk, *et al. Black Elk Speaks*, xiv, xvi.

## VI. (In)Conclusion: Beginning a Conversation Post Colonial(ism)

### *Translating Divine Revelation Through Dialogue*

Black Elk's multireligious participation – and the dialogues and practices that constituted it – reflect his desire to commit himself fully to the divine encounter and revelation of his Great Vision. Certainly, not everyone experiences the divine with such a profound vision,<sup>297</sup> but what Black Elk demonstrates is a fundamentally human process of translating divine encounter and revelation in a way that shapes our individual lives – and our relationships with ourselves, our neighbors, with all of creation, and our Creator – in light of our encounters with the divine. Black Elk's work of translating divine encounter and revelation models what it might look like to discern the *missio Dei* beyond the institutional and theological hegemony of colonial Christianity. It models for us the post-colonial imperative of an interreligious theology of revelation. It also turns us to a Christian theology of mission that moves the church beyond its privilege and prosperity, built on the backs of stolen people forced to work stolen land – privilege and prosperity it now protects in its institutional and theological structures – and grounds it, instead, in the transformative and reconciling life of God, the *missio Dei*.

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<sup>297</sup> Charleston's encounter was through a black crow on the rooftop of a seminary apartment in Cambridge, MA. Despite the "ordinary" nature of Charleston's encounter, when that "simple encounter is placed ... into the intentional intersection between the sacred and the finite, it begins to look, and sound, and feel much different." Charleston, *Four Vision Quests*, 32. When he recounts how the crow told him, "Do not be afraid. There are two paths to follow, but one to find. Be patient," Charleston acknowledges, "My vision of the crow is as beyond logic as Black Elk's sky full of dancing ponies. I cannot prove the truth of what he said any more than any Christian mystic or Native American medicine man. I can only tell my story and, by doing so, invite my listeners to step over into ...a place of mystery that the human quest for divine understanding must always inhabit." *Ibid* at 32-33.

## *Discernment as Dialogue*

What Black Elk has modeled is a posture of discerning divine encounter and revelation through dialogue. We have seen how his dialogues with his own tradition as a Lakota *wicasa wakan*, with Ghost Dance belief and practice, with Catholicism, and even with those in the outside these traditions who desperately sought to understand his place in them, all sought to make sense of divine encounter and revelation of his Great Vision. As Catherine Cornille observes, dialogue is a mode of discernment. The question remains, however, what exactly are we discerning? If we are discerning propositional truths, “[a]ny dialogue between religions [will] involve[] some degree of judgment of what is true or false, interesting or banal, valuable or futile, admirable or repulsive, appealing or strange in the other religion.”<sup>298</sup> And, certainly, in a search for propositional truths amongst differing accounts of divine encounter and revelation, what appears banal, futile, repulsive, or strange might necessarily be rejected in what Cornille describes as “criteria of discernment.”<sup>299</sup> However, if the discernment of the lived experience of the divine is the objective of dialogue – and not propositional truth – then, perhaps the banal might also become interesting; what seems futile might also become valuable; what feels repulsive might become admirable; and, what is strange might just be recognized as appealing. As Schmidt-Leukel’s fractal paradigm suggests, it is in the differences that consonance is

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<sup>298</sup> Cornille, Catherine. *Criteria of Discernment in Interreligious Dialogue* (Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books, 2009), 6.

<sup>299</sup> Cornille, *Criteria of Discernment*, 6. It is not entirely clear whether by “criteria” Cornille implies a standard of value with which to judge discernment – even as she recognizes that “criteria ... thought to be neutral or common to all religious traditions” are still subject to questions of “validity,” creating standards that “may even provide a ranking of religions.”<sup>299</sup> On the whole, rather than propose a value-laden criteria of discernment as normative, Cornille’s project seems to be more descriptive, recognizing of a diversity of criteria of discernment. *Ibid.*

found.<sup>300</sup> It is from within the divergent lines of belief and practice within traditions that the melody emerges. Even Cornille recognizes that, in dialogue, any criteria of discernment “are unlikely to ... take precedence over those criteria derived from divine revelation or ultimate spiritual realization.”<sup>301</sup>

Importantly, Cornille recognizes that the work of dialogue cannot focus on texts alone. While texts “facilitate the dissemination and translation of the teachings of a religion” and offer stability to a tradition, they tend to convey bounded meaning, rather than invite a posture of openness that is at the heart of discernment.<sup>302</sup> Text-bound traditions often tend to invite an understanding of the divine that is neatly contained within the boundaries of the text itself, which, as Cornille recognizes, can lead to an understanding of dialogue with other traditions or their texts “as sacrilege” and “experienced as a threat.”<sup>303</sup> Discernment, she suggests, ought to include dialogue with oral traditions *and* with the lived experience of those traditions in their practice, which can illuminate hidden revelations in the texts themselves.<sup>304</sup> In this way, dialogue as discernment is necessarily

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<sup>300</sup> Even Cornille draws on Schmidt-Leukel’s fractal paradigm to suggest that the work of dialogue is, fundamentally, the work of “discernment of fractal patterns in religious diversity.” Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2020), 110 n.44, quoting Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism*, 232.

<sup>301</sup> Cornille, *Criteria of Discernment*, 6.

<sup>302</sup> Cornille, C. *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*. Hoboken: Wiley, 2020, 93-94.

<sup>303</sup> Cornille, *Meaning and Method*, 88.

<sup>304</sup> Cornille recognizes that text-bound traditions, often, tend to invite an understanding of the divine that is neatly contained within the boundaries of the text itself, which leads to an understanding of dialogue with other traditions or their texts “as sacrilege” and “experienced as a threat.” Cornille, *Meaning and Method*, 88. She suggests Laurel Schneider raises these concerns and points to a resolution of them from within the context of Indigenous religious traditions (itself an exercise in interreligious dialogue). Schneider contends that text-based traditions “miss[] the entire epistemological presupposition of what stories are – ‘stories that are written down no longer have the life that makes them stories worthy to be considered in a theological sense’” (25:28). Schneider proposes that Indigenous traditions offer an emphasis on “orality of stories and also their agency [that] is critical to thinking about how ... comparative theology ... [might] learn from that ... stepping away from the normal habits of comparison” (28:59). In her words, a dissected frog no longer maintains its “frog-ness” A story is no different. As Frank Clooney observed in response to Schneider, “attention to Native American traditions prompts us to think different[ly] about how we do our theological reflection. When the book is a coyote — or a bear or a raven or the stone we stumble upon in the path – we need to learn to stop and listen, stay local, and resist the temptation too quickly to generalize or universalize.

an embodied engagement with another tradition that “support[s], correct[s] or strengthen[s] the understanding of sacred texts [through] participation in the religious life of the other ... generat[ing] a level and type of understanding that simply cannot emerge from the reading of texts.”<sup>305</sup> Such “participation may generate nonverbal and experiential forms of understanding that may themselves also inform” the work of discernment.<sup>306</sup> While Cornille never outright identifies the object of discernment as divine encounter and revelation – and such discernment does itself invite dialogue and discernment of texts, traditions, and practices – the process she identifies for discernment certainly seems to align with the discernment Black Elk engaged through dialogue with the different traditions he encountered.

Black Elk’s dialogues, as we have seen, were ultimately part of a “process of discernment of truth ... [that] involves a complex procedure combining faithfulness to one’s own tradition and openness to the other, critical self-awareness and serious engagement with the teachings and practices of others, daring judgment and continuous openness to correction.”<sup>307</sup> His was a process that, as Cornille suggests, resists normative value judgments, because it orients us to a divine beyond our judgments, our categories, and even our criteria. And, as Black Elk’s dialogues demonstrate that discernment depends on what Cornille emphasizes as “a ‘surplus of seeing,’”<sup>308</sup> or put differently, what is to be

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Our ordinary scholarly habits ... may have to defer to a kind of waiting and watching.” Clooney, Francis X. “When the Book Is a Coyote: Some Challenges and Possibilities for Comparative Theology from the Study of Native American Traditions,” *Center for the Study of World Religions*, last accessed March 28, 2021, at <https://cswr.hds.harvard.edu/news/when-book-coyote-some-challenges-and-possibilities-comparative-theology-study-native>.

<sup>305</sup> Cornille, *Meaning and Method*, 94.

<sup>306</sup> Cornille, *Meaning and Method*, 95.

<sup>307</sup> Cornille, *Criteria of Discernment*, 10.

<sup>308</sup> Cornille, *Meaning and Method*, 87 (quoting Holquist, Michael. *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London: Routledge, 1990), 36.

discerned is beyond what any one person, community, or tradition could possibly offer to be experienced. To echo Thatamanil, the experience of the divine is itself multiplicity. Because the divine offers itself as multiplicity, the surplus of divine experience is itself an invitation to discernment and dialogue. Black Elk's own dialogue and discernment was driven by this understanding of the multiplicity of the divine: "We have been told by the white men ... that God sent to men His son, who would restore order and peace upon the earth ... 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 *Wakan-Tanka*, the Great Spirit, that an animal turn[ed] itself into a two-legged person in order to bring the most holy pipe to His people," through which "peace may come to those people who can understand."<sup>309</sup> As Cornille recognizes, this "surplus of insight and experience in the other religion[is]," in his case Christianity and the Ghost Dance, "that also opens up new possibilities" for Black Elk's own tradition.<sup>310</sup>

### *Translating the Divine*

Marianne Moyaert develops an approach to discernment as translation of the divine, charting a middle way between two different approaches to discernment across religious traditions – pluralism, which "presents religious traditions as different *dialects* of one and the same ultimate reality," and particularism, which "depicts various religions as incommensurate and untranslatable."<sup>311</sup> Ultimately, she concludes that "religious languages are *not* untranslatable and that interreligious dialogue is possible, provided that the ethical posture of hermeneutical hospitality" – what Thatamanil has described as a

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<sup>309</sup> Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, xix-xx.

<sup>310</sup> Cornille, *Meaning and Method*, 89.

<sup>311</sup> Moyaert, Marianne. *In Response to the Religious Other: Ricoeur and the Fragility of Interreligious Encounters* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2014), 124 (emphasis original). Although she does not herself draw such an analogy, it might be helpful to consider how Moyaert's critiques of both pluralism and post-liberalism might be applied to theologies of religious diversity and post-colonial theology.



“hospitality of receiving”<sup>312</sup> – is maintained “for the religious other.”<sup>313</sup> Moyaert recognizes what is implicit in Cornille’s analysis of the criteria of discernment, that “[i]n translation, too, the tension between openness and identity is at stake.”<sup>314</sup> That tension, she suggests, is rooted in different ways of approaching the religious other: “Both approaches see the religious other as a problem that can be solved, either by retreating to the security of sameness (pluralism) or by distancing otherness (particularity).”<sup>315</sup> Instead of problems to be overcome, religious others might be seen as different “*expressions* of the[ir] believers ‘inner’ religious experiences of the Transcendent.”<sup>316</sup> In other words, the diversity of religious traditions reflect the diversity of human responses to divine encounter, which in turn invites dialogue between religious traditions as the work of discernment, specifically, *the discernment of divine revelation reflected in the diversity of lived religious experience.*

Drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur, Moyaert recognizes that translation is ultimately an “exchange of narratives” that invites multiple religious readings. It is an undertaking that “break[s] open reiterated narratives by welcoming strangers and adversaries and allowing for a plurality of narrative perspectives ... [N]ew and unexpected readings coming from unusual readers liberate[d] narratives from repetition and may help to overcome ideological othering.”<sup>317</sup> Indeed, Moyaert offers an explanation for the fluidity of Black Elk’s own religious identity: “in view of [Ricoeur’s] dynamic understanding of identity, such an exchange of narratives is not a threat.”<sup>318</sup> From Black Elk’s posture of hospitality, translation of the divine becomes “a reciprocal process ... ‘a

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<sup>312</sup> Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant*, 9.

<sup>313</sup> Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 125 (emphasis original).

<sup>314</sup> Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 125.

<sup>315</sup> Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 136-37.

<sup>316</sup> Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 137.

<sup>317</sup> Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 143.

<sup>318</sup> Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 143.

matter of living with the other in order to take that other to one's home as a guest' ... express[ing] a willingness to be interrupted and challenged ... [and] draw[ing] ... [him]self away from what is known and given, encouraging ... what is unknown and possible."<sup>319</sup> As Moyaert quotes Ricoeur, Black Elk "let [him]self be narrated by the other,"<sup>320</sup> that is he let his story be told as part of the story of the divine life of transformation and reconciliation, the *missio Dei*.

In this light, interreligious dialogue is not simply the work of translating the beliefs or practices of another religious tradition into the language of the translator's "home tradition." Dialogue as discernment translates divine encounter and revelation across religious and cultural boundaries.<sup>321</sup> For purposes of our conversation, Moyaert would disagree with Costello that "Black Elk absorbs new Christian thought within the old culture, which in turn is reinterpreted to be in continuity with the new thought"<sup>322</sup> and might, instead, suggest that Black Elk's participation in Catholicism was as much a part of his discernment of divine encounter as revelation as was his participation in the Ghost Dance, or in his beliefs and practices as a Lakota *wicasa wakan*. What Costello describes as "reinterpretation" of his beliefs and practices, Moyaert might call reimagination and revision in light of newly discerned divine revelation in other traditions. Through Black Elk's dialogues, he engaged in a "creative encounter between two worlds," discovered "new semantic resonances ... unexpected allusions ... [and] surprising new possibilities," and "expand[ed] the horizon of meaning," through dialogue, "a fecund exchange

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<sup>319</sup> Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 144.

<sup>320</sup> Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 144.

<sup>321</sup> Certainly, there are those who critique the idea of religious and cultural boundaries. We need not, here, debate the porosity of boundaries. It is enough to recognize that, whether or not cultural boundaries are artificially imposed on religious traditions, practitioners of those traditions recognize them and defend them, often violently.

<sup>322</sup> Costello, *Black Elk, Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism*, 83.

occur[ed]”<sup>323</sup> – something new was born out of his translations of divine encounter and revelation. Through his translation of the divine through interreligious dialogue and multireligious participation, Moyaert might even agree that Black Elk acted as midwife of the *missio Dei*.

*A Post-Colonial Imperative: Indigenizing the missio Dei through Dialogue*

As Cornille observes, the work of interreligious dialogue and multireligious participation depends on a “framework of a postcolonial theology of religious difference.”<sup>324</sup> Quoting post-colonial scholar Kwok Pui-lan, Cornille observes that “the question before us is not religious diversity, but religious difference as it is constituted and produced in concrete situations, often with significant power differentials.”<sup>325</sup> In other words, religious difference is often complicated (and sometimes even created) by coloniality. We cannot, then, do the work of interreligious theology without implicating the work of post-colonial theology. Cornille observes that a post-colonial theology of religious difference offers “a critique of such power differentials” through a “focus[] on lived experiences and on the social and cultural dimensions of religion,” which in turn “attend[s] to the transformation of religious symbols and institutions in migration, exile, diaspora and transnationalism.”<sup>326</sup> Ultimately, post-colonial theology, as the theological ground for interreligious dialogue and multireligious participation, moves us beyond the distractions of “institutional questions of religious identity and belonging or doctrinal

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<sup>323</sup> Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 152.

<sup>324</sup> Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, 66.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, quoting Kwok, Pui-lan. *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 205.

<sup>326</sup> Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, 66-67, quoting Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 206.

questions of truth,” and “takes seriously the reality of hybrid religious identities as resource for theological reflection.”<sup>327</sup>

Black Elk’s interreligious dialogues and multiple religious participation are, therefore, grounded in (or the ground of) post-colonial theology. In fact, Black Elk’s model of interreligious dialogue as discernment of the divine points to an agency beyond the agency of the missionaries, or even the agency of the missionized. This posture of discernment with which he engaged the various religious traditions he encountered suggests that the agent of his interreligious dialogues is actually the subject of his discernment, the divine revealed in his Great Vision. As we have seen, Black Elk responded to the divine initiative in his multireligious participation. He embodied the divine vision in his practice. As we see in Black Elk’s re-enactment of the Sun Dance in the Duhamel pageants, he was enacting the divine revelation of his Great Vision, enacting its promise of restoration as he led a 72-hour traditional Sun Dance that, according to observers, deterred a prairie fire that consumed over 21,857 acres and threatened to consume all of the Black Hills. In his reimagination and revival of the Sun Dance through his work with Joseph Eppes Brown, Black Elk was translating the divine promise of his Great Vision so his community might participate in it. Through Black Elk’s work of translating divine encounter and revelation, he indigenized the transformative and reconciling divine life – the *missio Dei*.

#### *Dialogue and Translation in the Missionary Encounter*

Lamin Sanneh grapples with the theological implications of translation in colonial contexts, recognizing an imperative both for post-colonialism and for Christian mission in

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<sup>327</sup> Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, 67

what he calls “mission by *translation*,” or “institut[ing] the recipient culture as a valid and necessary locus of the proclamation, allowing the religion to arrive without the requirement of deference to the originating culture.”<sup>328</sup> While mission by translation assumes a power dynamic in the giving and the receiving of the divine message, it recognizes in the receiving community the agency for translation in the “need for indigenous theological inquiry, which arises as a necessary stage in the process of reception and adaptation.”<sup>329</sup> Sanneh’s proposal, here, is an inherently post-colonial one: “it assumes a relative, secondary status for the culture of the message bearer.”<sup>330</sup> Sanneh emphasizes the divine agency in the work of translation. “By drawing a distinction between the message and its cultural carriage, mission as translation affirms the *missio Dei* as the hidden light of its work. It is the *missio Dei* that allowed translation to enlarge the boundaries of the new Christian audience.”<sup>331</sup>

Sanneh, here, is concerned with the hegemony of Christian mission and the stripping of agency from Indigenous communities in the missionary encounter. For him, translation becomes a means by which to restore agency and creates space for mutual exchange and reciprocity, leading to renewal and revitalization of Indigenous religious traditions. Sanneh recognizes this relational dynamic as inherent in the “‘syncretic’ process” of early Christianity, which “conferred a universal character on the religion, even though ... it retained a profound antipathy toward ‘syncretistic’ compromise,”<sup>332</sup> and for Sanneh it suggests the “primacy of indigenization.”<sup>333</sup> Elsewhere, Sanneh describes it as

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<sup>328</sup> Sanneh, Lamin O. *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. Second ed., revised and expanded (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 33.

<sup>329</sup> Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 34.

<sup>330</sup> Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 34.

<sup>331</sup> Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 37.

<sup>332</sup> Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 41.

<sup>333</sup> Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 216. What Sanneh calls the “primacy of indigenization” Walls describes as “an indigenizing principle, a homing instinct, which creates in diverse communities a sense that the Church belongs there, that it is ‘ours’” (Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 53).

“priorit[izing] ... indigenous response and local appropriation over against missionary transmission and direction ... by speaking of the *indigenous discovery of Christianity* rather than the *Christian discovery of indigenous societies*.”<sup>334</sup> In other words, translation is fundamentally an Indigenous response to the work of the *missio Dei* in the midst of colonized communities, locating the principal agency of mission not in the missionaries or the missionized but in the *missio Dei*.

Divine agency, too, is at the heart of Andrew Wall’s understanding of translation as revelation. “God chose translation as his mode of action for the salvation of humanity. Christian faith rests on a divine act of translation: ‘the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us’ (John 1:14). Any confidence we have in the translatability of the Bible rests on that prior act of translation.”<sup>335</sup> In other words, divine revelation is nothing more than divine translation, the rendering of the divine through the material, the manifestation of the transcendent in and through the immanent. It is no surprise, then, that divine translation is also incarnational. As Walls observes, “Incarnation is translation ... The translation of God into humanity, whereby the sense and meaning of God was transferred, was effected under very culture-specific conditions.”<sup>336</sup> For Walls, God’s Incarnation is an historical event in the person of Jesus, but due to the “culture-specific conditions” of that historic

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<sup>334</sup> Sanneh, Lamin O. *Whose Religion Is Christianity?: The Gospel Beyond the West*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 2003 10 (emphasis original).

<sup>335</sup> Walls, Andrew F. *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 26.

<sup>336</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 27. Walls is right that, for many in the Christian tradition, the “Christ event” is an historical event, but Christ is also the *ongoing* action of God – perhaps offering a thicker description of Edward Schillebeeckx’s understanding of Christ as the “primordial sacrament ... the actuality of redemption.” Schillebeeckx, Edward. *Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 15. Christ, then, is not a proper noun; it is not even a title. Christ is a verb, an action word. Christ is God’s encounter with creation, God’s movement of Godself to God’s creation. Christ is the revelation of Godself by, in, and through creation in an outpouring of the trinitarian life that draws all of creation up into the divine life. Christ, finally, is reconciliation, so that, in Christ, the binaries between Creator and creature, sacred and profane, divine and material fall away (See e.g., Col. 1:15-20; 2 Cor 5:18-19).

event of incarnation – in the person of a 1st Century Palestinian Jew – “[t]he first divine act of translation into humanity ... gives rise to a constant succession of new translations. Christian diversity is the necessary product of the Incarnation.”<sup>337</sup> But, if Thatamanil is right that the divine is multiplicity, revealing itself in multiplicity, and inviting a multiplicity of human responses, then translation is inherently an ongoing process and *religious diversity* is a necessary product of incarnation as divine translation.

In focusing their consideration of translation on the agency of God – or the *missio Dei* – Sanneh and Walls seem to echo Moyaert’s acknowledgement of the ultimate untranslatability of the go-between Divine that initiates the work of translation and keeps it going.<sup>338</sup> The character of translation is also the character of incarnation. It is the act of divine translation by way of encounter and revelation in and through the material world that invites a human response, what Walls refers to as “retranslations,” or “[t]he translations of Christ that take place as believers within different cultures respond to him ... incarnations of Christ ... [that] can always be compared, not only with the original, but with other translations made from the same original ... each act of translation ... takes the original into new territory and potentially expands it.”<sup>339</sup> For Walls, translation is not the mere rendering of a written word but the incarnation of the divine word. Or as Moyaert states differently, “a translated ‘text’ has a life of its own.”<sup>340</sup> In translation, as with incarnation, “what drives the foreign and the familiar apart also drives them toward each

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<sup>337</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 27-28.

<sup>338</sup> Compare, Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 153.

<sup>339</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 29. Indeed, Christ is the action word that signifies the encounter of the Creator in the creaturely. Christ is the process by which – through ongoing, incarnational encounter, revelation, and reconciliation – God and all creation are made “not one but not two.” Christ is the nature of God. Christ is also the promise of humankind and the promise of all creation.

<sup>340</sup> Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 152.

other.”<sup>341</sup> So, where Black Elk found difference in the Sun Dance, the Ghost Dance, and the Eucharist, the same Great Vision of transformation and reconciliation that animated them all in their difference also drew them together within Black Elk’s own multireligious practice. His work of translation, then, was also the work of incarnation – the embodiment of divine revelation in his Great Vision.

It is no wonder Black Elk continues to baffle post-colonial scholars. He is not easily located in the post-colonial categories of accommodation and resistance. He neither ceded agency to the Jesuit missionaries, nor did he assert it on his own behalf. Instead, he responded to the agency of the divine. As he encountered divine translation in his Great Vision, he accepted the invitation to respond in kind, working to translate that divine encounter and revelation through the different religious traditions with which he engaged. His work of *(re)translation* took the form of interreligious dialogue and multireligious participation, the fruits of which can be seen in his reimagination and revival of the Sun Dance. As Sanneh suggests, Black Elk’s work of *(re)translation* reflected the “primacy of indigenization.” It restored Lakota agency lost in the colonial enterprise of missionary Christianity; it created space for mutual exchange and reciprocity; and it led to a renewal and revitalization of Lakota religious traditions. In short, Black Elk demonstrates through his *(re)translation* of divine encounter and revelation the post-colonial imperative of interreligious dialogue.

As has become apparent, the “object” of our translation determines what might be born out of it. If we are merely translating a text, or a ritual, or a theological principal, then (at best) we can only hope to re-situate the object of our translation within another cultural

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<sup>341</sup> Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 153.



context. This, some post-colonial scholars might argue, is the necessary work of contextualization. And yet, uncritical contextualization raises the question of misplaced agency.<sup>342</sup> If translation is only contextualization, then agency lies with the translator – in Black Elk’s case, the Jesuit missionaries. If, on the other hand, agency lies with the practitioner of the object of translation (the text or tradition itself), as Costello might argue, then the work of translation is subsumed in the post-colonial work of subversion, and the interreligious encounter becomes yet another site for the contestation of the colonizer and the colonized.<sup>343</sup> If, however, the object of translation is neither the substance of religious practice nor the practitioner but the impetus for both – the divine – the theological implications of interreligious dialogue and multireligious participation begin to take shape as a post-colonial imperative. Interreligious encounters would cease to become significant as *only* the site of colonial contestation, becoming, instead, a site of something new birthed between the colonizer and the colonized, something born out of the agency of the divine.<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> Unquestioned, contextualization may look no different from the theological concept of inculturation. Peelman notes that terms like “indigenization, acculturation, enculturation, [and] contextualization” are all “borrowed from anthropology” but ultimately mean the same thing theologically: “To become truly universal and supra-regional, the church must adapt itself to the different cultures of its members, implant itself locally to form truly indigenous communities, speak the language of its members and construct itself from the grassroots up.” Peelman, *Christ Is a Native American*, 84. For Peelman, then, whether understood as contextualization or inculturation, the process is “*something that happens between the gospel itself (the seed) and the receiving culture (the soil)*.” The role of the sower, the missionary church, remains very important, but is secondary. *Ibid* at 92. Peelman’s emphasis on the agency of “Christ ... the main actor in the inculturation process” is an important shift in theologies of mission, but it mistakenly presumes that Christ – or the self-revelatory divine – did not precede the missionaries.

<sup>343</sup> Some post-colonial scholars might argue that translation as subversion has its own theological implications, which are significant.

<sup>344</sup> As Cherokee theologian William Baldrige observes, “the very act of fighting the missionary system concedes too much to colonialism ... because it accepts the premise that our dignity must be granted to us rather than recognized in us ... Fighting the oppression of the missionary system is a struggle for justice that unavoidably becomes a struggle for power ... refusing the terms of the struggle is an essential first step in regaining the spiritual perspective of Native America.” Baldrige, William. “Reclaiming our Histories,” in Treat, James. *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 86-87.

*Does Black Elk Speak? Translating the missio Dei in Indigenous Voice*

The fruits of Black Elk's interreligious dialogue and multireligious practice – the birth of a new form of Lakota traditional belief and practice – sprang from the space between Lakota traditional belief and practice and missionary Christianity, from the space between accommodation and resistance. From that in-between space, Black Elk did not accept the world as imposed upon him, nor did he outright reject it. Rather, he recreated it. And yet, the post-colonial imperative of Black Elk's interreligious dialogue may be questioned by some through a post-colonial lens. After all, how much agency could Black Elk have actually asserted when his people, their way of life, and their traditional beliefs and practices were under constant siege from the U.S. government and the Christian missionaries? Critics might ask, "*Does Black Elk speak?*" After all, the words we have from Black Elk today – the very ones that form the basis of this analysis – did not come directly from Black Elk. They were mediated by biased White men who sought Black Elk's words for purposes that were not of Black Elk's choosing or initiative. Even so, in Black Elk's interreligious dialogues and multireligious participation, we begin to see a pattern of dialogue that has been replicated between practitioners of Indigenous religious traditions and practitioners of Christianity. A pattern of dialogue takes shape that appears to represent an Indigenous response to divine encounter and revelation.

It is exactly that pattern of dialogue we see in the Indigenous response to missionary Christianity in the experiences of Ojibwe Christians of Northern Minnesota and Tsimshian Christians of Canada's Pacific Northwest. Michael McNally describes the role of dialogue and translation in the Ojibwe encounter with Christianity, as that band of Anishinaabe peoples in Minnesota preserved traditional practices and beliefs through the Christian

practice of hymn singing and, in the process, gave birth to something new between the colonizer and the colonized. McNally suggests that Indigenous language serves as a conduit through which “Native American religious traditions ... [become] resources that mediate the tensions between continuity and change rather than as mere bulwarks against change.”<sup>345</sup> Nowhere is the transformative role of translation more apparent for McNally than in Ojibwe songs, which were “a principal medium for ceremonial innovation ... [which] enabled the cultural and social negotiations necessary for survival under colonialism ... Such ceremonial innovations did not simply *mark* or provide the cultural trappings for social change ... they made these changes possible in the first place.”<sup>346</sup> If recognizing the power of language to negotiate change in the face of cultural devastation seems a more nuanced understanding of the role of language than merely facilitating survival and resistance, it is decidedly so; it is also, perhaps, a more empowering understanding of the role of translation.<sup>347</sup> For McNally, the innovative and transformative power of translation is on full display in Ojibwe hymn singing, a tradition that develops within “the tenuous spaces of culture, spaces that move *between* the oral and the written, *between* the Christian and the Ojibwe, *between* accommodation and resistance.”<sup>348</sup> As Black Elk teaches, it is there, in those in-between spaces, that Indigenous survivance might

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<sup>345</sup> McNally, Michael D. *Ojibwe Singers: Hymns, Grief, and a Native Culture in Motion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 6. This description of the interplay between Native traditional religion and Christianity stands in stark contrast to the one-directional model proposed by Damian Costello in *Black Elk, Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism*. There Costello argues that “Black Elk has clearly conformed traditional religion to the Catholic model.” Costello, *Black Elk*, 85. McNally, on the other hand, understands the outcome of the dialogue between Native traditional religion and Christianity as one rooted in the mutuality of transformation. “[I]f we were to reorient our interpretations in terms of *practice* rather than *belief*,” we can see “how Christianity came to change native traditions and how native traditions came to change the Christianity that the missionaries brought to them.” McNally, *Ojibwe Singers*, 10.

<sup>346</sup> McNally, *Ojibwe Singers*, 28.

<sup>347</sup> McNally recognizes that “Christianity [is], on the one hand, part of the equation of domination of native peoples and, on the other, an important religious resource in native struggles to act as agents in a history conditioned by that very domination.” McNally, *Ojibwe Singers*, 6.

<sup>348</sup> McNally, *Ojibwe Singers*, 44 (emphasis original).

become something more than simply survival or resistance.<sup>349</sup> It is in those in-between spaces that it becomes innovation and transformation – perhaps even reconciliation.

Through their work of dialogue and translation, Ojibwe translators reimagined their world in light of divine encounter and revelation between their Ojibwe beliefs and practices and the Christian tradition.<sup>350</sup> As McNally observes, “native traditions have largely ... [been] concerned less with the falsehood of other traditions,” and are, instead, oriented towards “the truth that the sacred cannot be exhausted by any particular comprehension of it.”<sup>351</sup> An Ojibwe “view of sacred language,” says McNally, “recognized that words *never simply describe the world. They [can] in certain circumstances reconstitute it.*”<sup>352</sup> There is no better example of how the Ojibwe (*re*)translated their world through their interreligious dialogues with Christianity than in their reimagination of the Christian concept of “religion,” as *Bimaadiziwin*, which directly translates as “the Circle of Life ...encompass[ing] notions of well-being, balance, profound interdependence, and right relations.”<sup>353</sup> Rather than a systematic framework of coherent beliefs, *Bimaadiziwin* encompasses an interconnectedness of relationships. It is practice-oriented, rather than

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<sup>349</sup> The Indigenous struggle against colonial powers for self-determination and sovereignty is a struggle characterized by some Indigenous scholars as “survance,” a “compound of ‘survival’ and resistance.” Kelley, Klara B, and Harris Francis. *A Diné History of Navajoland* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 7-8, quoting Viznor, Gerald. *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2009), 24, 102-03.

<sup>350</sup> it is important to note that in Ojibwe communities, it was Ojibwe Christians, according to McNally, who did the translation of Christian terminology into their people’s language. Whether it was George Kahgegahbowh Copway, an Ojibwe Methodist preacher who was “a prolific interpreter of his people’s culture to a nonnative audience and a vocal advocate of native interests,” or Ojibwe Episcopal deacon and priest John Johnson Enmegabowh, “[m]any of the more important original translations, after all, were made by bicultural native clergy.” McNally, *Ojibwe Singers*, 43-44, 48, 51. Ojibwe Methodist preacher Peter Jones translated hymns, prayers, and scriptures for Christian missionaries, beginning in 1827, after recognizing that indigenized Christianity “bridged the ‘divisions between Christianity and their old Indian faith, drawing out the similarities between the two religions.’” McNally, *Ojibwe Singers*, 51.

<sup>351</sup> McNally, *Ojibwe Singers*, 11.

<sup>352</sup> McNally, *Ojibwe Singers*, 29, emphasis added.

<sup>353</sup> McNally, *Ojibwe Singers*, 24.

concept-driven, practices that point to balancing relationship. The gaps, then, between Indigenous and Christian theological concepts – in, for instance the concepts of sin<sup>354</sup> and salvation<sup>355</sup> – became a generative space from within which Ojibwe responded to missionary Christianity, a response that became a “third way” of neither accommodation nor resistance, but perhaps both.

From within this generative space of translation between traditional Ojibwe belief and practice and Christianity, the practice of Ojibwe hymn singing became a distinctively Ojibwe religious practice, with a “fundamental commitment, consistent ... with Anishinaabe spirituality, ... to the irreducible mystery of the divine ... [which] carried [practitioners] more deeply into both Christian and Ojibwe traditions.”<sup>356</sup> As with Black Elk’s (*re*)translation of divine encounter and revelation in the Sun Dance through his interreligious dialogues, “[t]hrough the ritualization of hymn singing n performance, the Anami’aajig<sup>[357]</sup> made room for the integrity of their fundamental values and way of life,

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<sup>354</sup> McNally recognizes that the Western concept of “Original Sin” had no corollary in the Ojibwe context: “Ojibwe tradition ... taught no such drastic state of fallenness or tragic struggle within the state of nature.” *Ojibwe Singers*, 55. Instead, in an Ojibwe lifeway that centers on *Bimaadiziwin*, or “notions of well-being, balance, profound interdependence, and right relations,” any concept of sin must be that which creates imbalance or disrupts relationship (*Ojibwe Singers*, 24). As McNally observes, “If something is amiss in *bimaadiziwin*, it becomes a matter of imbalance inviting restoration, not fallenness requiring redemption.” *Ojibwe Singers*, 55. Unsurprisingly, the Ojibwe word for sin, *Baataaziwin*, “is a substantive formed from the verb ‘to wrong’ or to transgress the natural order ... [but] is better translated as ‘that which is done wrong.’” *Ojibwe Singers*, 63. McNally readily acknowledges that the translation ambiguities frustrated the Christian missionaries, “who considered it among their principal tasks to promote a heartfelt conviction of sin.” *Ojibwe Singers*, 63.

<sup>355</sup> As McNally notes, the Ojibwe word for salvation, *bimaaj’iwewin*, comes from the same root as *bimaadiziwin*. “For the many Ojibwes who still maintained that *bimaadiziwin* was the good life lived well in proper relationship to human and nonhuman persons,” observes McNally, “there was nothing in this world to be radically saved from. Ojibwe tradition values the cultivation of an awareness of one’s interdependence in the web of life.” *Ojibwe Singers*, 61-62. An Ojibwe understanding of salvation, then, must be understood within the context of restoring the balance of the harmony way, *bimaadiziwin*.

<sup>356</sup> McNally, *Ojibwe Singers*, 153. McNally’s reflections on the practice of Ojibwe hymn singing are based on the teachings he received from Larry Cloud Morgan, one of the hymn singers responsible for the revival of the tradition.

<sup>357</sup> Anami’aajig is rendered “Christians” but is directly translated as “those who pray.” McNally, *Ojibwe Singers*, 15.

and the intoned the fit between those values and the Christian message.”<sup>358</sup> As we have seen with Black Elk’s interreligious dialogues, the Ojibwe work of *retranslating* the divine through their practice of hymn singing offered a response to missionary Christianity from a generative, middle space. They did not need to accept the world as imposed on them, nor reject it outright. In that middle space, they recreated it through the transformative power of translation.

Similarly, the Tsimshian people of the Pacific Northwest engaged missionary Christianity in dialogic fashion, *retranslating* their experience of the divine from within the gaps between their Indigenous traditions and the Christian tradition. In her account of the Anglican missionizing of the Tsimshian, Susan Neylan notes the “active and frequently willing participation of First Nations.”<sup>359</sup> For the Tsimshian, she says, “[t]he relationship forged was *dialogic* – a ‘clearing out of space of mutual intelligibility,’ [a] ‘constant negotiation and change of the meaning elements in discourse,’ in which “conversion to Christianity did not constitute a replacement of pre-existing spiritual beliefs.”<sup>360</sup> Neylan recounts the story of an early Anglican missionary who was surprised when the Tsimshian, which he referred to as a “‘very heathen tribe’ ... began a dialogue with [him] to discuss the changing heavens. The dance of ‘barbarism’ expected by [the missionary] was instead [recognized as] a prayer and a hymn. The identities and meanings exchanged in this communication between ‘Native’ and ‘Missionary’ may not have been mutually understood, but it was an emotionally charged encounter nonetheless.”<sup>361</sup> As with the

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<sup>358</sup> McNally, *Ojibwe Singers*, 101.

<sup>359</sup> Neylan, Susan. *The Heavens Are Changing: Nineteenth Century Protestant Missions and Tsimshian Christianity* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s Univ. Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>360</sup> Neylan, *The Heavens Are Changing*, 5-6 (emphasis original).

<sup>361</sup> Neylan, *The Heavens Are Changing*, 266.

Ojibwe, these dialogues of exchange by the Tsimshian were not a passive acceptance of Christianity, nor were they an outright rejection. Rather, they were the beginning of a generative process of reimagining their world in the light of the divine they encountered between their traditions and the Christian tradition.

And like Black Elk's encounters with the Jesuit missionaries, the Tsimshian's response was neither one of accommodation nor resistance. Neylan describes how the Tsimshian inhabited "both 'traditional' and Christian expressions of spirituality simultaneously ... [through] the concurrence of spiritual beliefs ... [that] blended or combined both pre-Christian and Christian systems within one individual."<sup>362</sup> From their dialogic encounters with Christianity, Neylan proposes "the possibilities of new religious identities arising from that contact."<sup>363</sup> For Neylan, the fruits of these dialogic encounters can be measured not by the number of Tsimshian converts to Christianity but the extent to which Tsimshian Christians "interpret[ed] ... both the Word and the missionary for Native peoples enable[ing] an indigenous expression of Christianity rarely acknowledged in the historical literature."<sup>364</sup> As with the Ojibwe, the practice of translation, itself became the means by which the Tsimshian negotiated divine revelation between the traditions.<sup>365</sup> As with Black Elk, their translation of divine encounter and revelation – across their own oral

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<sup>362</sup> Neylan, *The Heavens Are Changing*, 14. Following Sanneh and Walls, Neylan describes this process as "indigenization," but not as "a process of cultural adaptation, in which fundamental meanings of a cultural system are retained ... but are expressed in the symbolic forms of another non-native culture." Rather, Neylan describes this process of indigenization as the dialogic "influence of Native cultural practices, interpretations, and behaviours upon Christianity." *Ibid.* at 17-18 (internal citations omitted).

<sup>363</sup> Neylan, *The Heavens Are Changing*, 17.

<sup>364</sup> Neylan, *The Heavens Are Changing*, 143.

<sup>365</sup> Neylan notes that some "translations often [took] as long as the original sermon. There were some skeptics [the missionaries, perhaps] who held that [the] translations reflected more of what the [translator] felt her people needed to hear than what the missionary had said." Neylan, *The Heavens Are Changing*, 144. In light of Black Elk's model of discernment through dialogue, such a criticism might actually reflect, not the translator's understanding of the people's needs, but a divine response to the people's needs.

traditions, in the received Christian stories, and in their encounters with the missionaries – was fundamentally the work of discerning the divine life through dialogue and *(re)*translating it in an authentic, Indigenous voice.

The fruits of Black Elk’s interreligious dialogue, then, are not singular to Black Elk or his context. Rather, they can also be seen in the Ojibwe and Tsimshian encounters with missionary Christianity.<sup>366</sup> As we have seen, Black Elk’s work of discerning the divine through dialogue and *re*translating it through practices that shaped his community according to the divine revelation resonates with the Indigenous response to missionary Christianity in both Ojibwe communities of Minnesota and Tsimshian communities of the Pacific Northwest. In each community’s response to missionary Christianity, we find an openness to new divine revelations, a commitment to discern those new revelations in dialogue with their traditional revelations, and a *(re)*translation of the divine through embodied practice. Some new divine translation, then, emerges from within the fragile space between Indigenous traditions and Christian traditions, between the space between colonizer and colonized, between the space between accommodation and resistance. Each time, the *(re)*translation is seeded not with the agency of the missionary, or even the missionized, but the divine. To ask the question, “*Does Black Elk speak,*” then, may be misleading. It was never Black Elk who spoke. It was Black Elk who translated. And, in his divine *(re)*translations, Black Elk models a third way of response to missionary Christianity – an inherently Indigenous response to the encounter and revelation of the divine that is at the heart of the *missio Dei* – a response that continues to speak to this day.

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<sup>366</sup> There is neither time nor space in this conversation to survey all Indigenous responses to missionary Christianity but, based on those surveyed here,



### *Implications for Mission: Towards an Interreligious Theology of Revelation*

Black Elk has offered a model of interreligious dialogue and multireligious participation as a mode of discerning divine revelation between religious traditions. As Cornille recognizes, it is a model that reflects (or informs) a “postcolonial theology of religious difference,” in that it “critique[s] ... power differentials,” it “focuses on lived [religious] experiences and on the social and cultural dimensions of religion,” and it “attend[s] to the transformation of religious symbols and institutions” caught in the hegemonic grip of colonialism.<sup>367</sup> Black Elk’s model is also significant in that it seems to reflect something of the nature of an Indigenous response, not just to missionary Christianity, but to the *missio Dei*. If Robert Heaney is right that the work of post-colonial theology is ultimately a “conversional process ... [of] turning away from the imperial anti-Christ toward the Christ crucified by empire,” the question becomes whether Black Elk’s model of discernment through dialogue can be heard by the Christian church as a call to conversion.<sup>368</sup> But, make no mistake, the call to repentance and conversion “is a long and slow turning that will be led by those marginalized by dominant cultures and theologies,”<sup>369</sup> by the witness of people like Nicholas Black Elk. As Indigenous theologian Clara Sue Kidwell, a White Earth Ojibwe and Choctaw, notes, “our [Indigenous] cultures have much to teach Europeans and North Americans about the world and human relationships in the world ... the spiritual foundations of Indian cultural values ... can become a source of healing and reconciliation for all Creation.”<sup>370</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, 66-67, quoting Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 206.

<sup>368</sup> Heaney, *Post-Colonial Theology*, 83-84.

<sup>369</sup> Heaney, *Post-Colonial Theology*, 142.

<sup>370</sup> Kidwell, Clara Sue, Homer Noley, and George E Tinker. *A Native American Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001), 4.

*Towards an Interreligious Theology of Revelation*

Black Elk's teachings do not just articulate a Lakota expression of divine encounter and revelation. Nor do they only describe his process of translating the divine experience through deep dialogue and participation in the midst of what Moyaert calls the "fragile hermeneutical space," that, while fraught, holds the promise of mutual learning, mutual transformation, even mutual conversion in the midst of a "constellation of meaning."<sup>371</sup> His teachings even point beyond Black Elk's role as translator of that divine experience – what Moyaert describes as a committed and discerning "go-between ... who moves between different worlds ... who in the process of his mediation is drawn in contrary directions ... caught up in conflicting loyalties and double commitments."<sup>372</sup> They point not only to the nature of the translator as a go-between, but also to the nature of the divine as what John V. Taylor calls the Go-Between God. For Taylor, "the gift of the Go-Between God [is] the Spirit ... [that] opens my eyes in recognition of some other being and generates a current of communication between us" giving birth to a "sudden recognition in a single vision of what is and what might be [which] ... is the gift he imparts to the prophet."<sup>373</sup>

It is this go-between nature of the divine that compels the go-between nature of the response. As the divine reveals itself as multiplicity between a multiplicity of human responses, we are invited to go between those responses to discern how we are to join the divine life. As we go between the multiplicity of response to discern the go-between divine, we might recognize the divine as not fully translatable. But, it is divine

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<sup>371</sup> Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 149-50.

<sup>372</sup> Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 148.

<sup>373</sup> Taylor, John V. *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 31.

untranslatability that also “keeps the translation going,” according to Moyaert.<sup>374</sup> Put differently, the agent of revelation is the same as the agent of encounter, the divine. The agent of dialogue is the same as the agent of discernment, the divine. Black Elk certainly engaged in the work of discernment and dialogue, but it was the divine that initiated the impulse to translate. Black Elk simply responded. Because all religious activity is necessarily a human response to a divine initiative in encounter and revelation, it is no surprise that Black Elk’s responses, whether in dialogue with Lakota tradition, the Ghost Dance, or Catholicism, take a multiplicity of forms, each corresponding both to the multiplicity of human responses to the multiplicity of revelations of a divine that is itself multiplicity. As we have seen, Black Elk’s response was to discern the melody that held these polyphonic fractals of revelation together. For him, that melody was most clear in his Great Vision, and around it all divine revelation was organized. In that melody, the notes *not* sounded were the ones that drove Black Elk to seek them elsewhere, suggesting divine transcendence cannot be contained in its immanence. In other words, the fact that divine encounter and revelation occurs in and through the material world does not exhaust the possibilities of revelation, much less limit them to the sites of revelation. Instead, it recognizes that no revelation is complete, because the divine cannot be contained wholly within any single revelation.

As Black Elk teaches, the go-between nature of the divine invites a go-between character in our human response. It invites a go-between dialogue with fractal revelations in the multiplicity of human responses they compel.<sup>375</sup> It invites a go-between participation

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<sup>374</sup> Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 153.

<sup>375</sup> Keith Ward draws from Paul Tillich in his observation, “biblical revelation is not the sole means to or expression of an interactive relationship between God and a particular community, in which God acts in personal encounter, in providential action, and in inspirational guidance. It is this interaction which enables

in the practices that shape those responses. It invites a go-between commitment to our practices, as well as a willingness to reimagine and revise them in the light of new encounters and revelations. This go-between nature of the divine invites a go-between identity that is rooted in “dialogical openness, or ... interreligious hospitality”<sup>376</sup> – what Thatamanil has called a “hospitality of receiving”<sup>377</sup> – that is characteristic of a posture of discernment, a posture that we have seen Black Elk embody in his own response to the divine experience in his Great Vision. This posture of dialogic openness, in turn, invites the work of translation – translation of the divine *and* translation of the human response to it. In Black Elk’s engagement with his own tradition as a *wicasa wakan*, with the Ghost Dance, and with Catholicism, we see his discernment of divine revelation through interreligious dialogue and multireligious participation, and we see his (*re*)translation of the divine in his revision of his belief and practice. Black Elk’s interreligious dialogues and his multireligious participation, then, begin to give shape to an interreligious theology of revelation that recognizes the emergence of the divine life of transformation and reconciliation from the space between. Because Black Elk’s interreligious dialogue and multireligious participation are the work of (*re*)translating the transformative and reconciling divine life at the heart of the *missio Dei*, this interreligious theology of revelation necessarily has implications for a renewed theology of Christian mission.

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the inner experience of the believer to be justifiably interrupted as experience of a self-revealing and redeeming God.” Ward, Keith. *Religion and Revelation: A Theology of Revelation in the World's Religions*. Gifford Lectures, 1993-1994 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 230.

<sup>376</sup> Moyaert, “Introduction: Exploring the Phenomenon,” 2.

<sup>377</sup> Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant*, 9.

## *Mission in the Mode of Dialogue*

Black Elk's engagement with different religious traditions, including missionary Christianity, from a posture of discernment confirms what has long been known: the divine life of transformation and reconciliation is the agent of mission. Indeed, mission in the mode of conversion to a particular set of beliefs and practices (and the identity they shape) is a far cry from the good news proclaimed by Jesus of Nazareth in the tribal settlements of first century Palestine. Muscogee theologian Rosemary McCombs Maxey makes the point painfully clear: "The belief that Jesus came 'that all may have life' and the actual practices of genocide to indigenous peoples are strange bedfellows indeed."<sup>378</sup> Even so, Christian mission has remained peculiarly committed to a theology rooted in conversion, particularly in Western Christianity.<sup>379</sup> There seems to be much reluctance to integrate our learnings from interreligious dialogue and multireligious practice with our theology of mission. At best, we find gestures towards dialogue as a means by which to discover how so-called "anonymous Christians" have come to locate the "Word of God" in their own cultures. Or, as Roger Schroeder puts it, mission through the mode of interreligious dialogue "approaches the 'other' with an initial attitude of discerning of how God is already present (dialogue) and then eventually, together *with* the people, after developing respectful and mutual relationships, confronts the 'weeds' with the 'good news' (prophecy)," and, ultimately, "announcing the vision of the life of God that is unrecognized."<sup>380</sup> As welcome

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<sup>378</sup> Maxey, Rosemary McCombs. "Who Can Sit at the Lord's Table: the Experience of Indigenous Peoples," in Treat, James. *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 43.

<sup>379</sup> Peter Phan recognizes a theology and practice of mission as dialogue in Asia. Phan, Peter C. "Doing Theology in World Christianity: New Paths, Different Themes, Strange Locations," in Irvin, Dale T and Peter C Phan. *Christian Mission, Contextual Theology, Prophetic Dialogue: Essays in Honor of Stephen B. Bevans, Svd* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2018), 90-93.

<sup>380</sup> Schroeder, Roger P. "Proclamation and Interreligious Dialogue as Prophetic Dialogue," in *Missiology: An International Review* 41, no. 1 (2015), 52, internal citations omitted.

as Schroeder’s approach to the relationship between interreligious dialogue and mission may be – recognizing mission in the mode of dialogue rather than conversion – it still leaves little room for mutual learning and transformation. It may risk (even if unintentionally) instrumentalizing interreligious dialogue for the purpose of conversion.<sup>381</sup>

Even so, Schroeder emphasizes the role of interreligious dialogue in the work of the *missio Dei*. As he concludes, “The treatment of the relationship between proclamation and interreligious dialogue, as ‘prophetic dialogue,’ points to the potential of holding this diversity in unity for the sake of God’s mission.”<sup>382</sup> Even if we cannot abide by the agency questions raised in coupling interreligious dialogue to proclamation, it is enough to acknowledge that Schroeder has identified the heart of Black Elk’s teachings. The role of dialogue is rooted in discernment: “dialogue is related to identifying and nurturing the ‘seeds[]’ ... [of] the vision of the life of God.”<sup>383</sup> It is this vision of interreligious dialogue as a mode of mission that Peter Phan describes as “ha[ving] the potential to be the most revolutionary trend, shaking Christianity to its foundations.”<sup>384</sup> For Phan, implicit in interreligious dialogue as a mode of mission is “a theology of revelation and inspiration

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<sup>381</sup> If the purpose of interreligious dialogue is to recognize where the life of God in Christ goes unrecognized – a claim Schroeder does not explicitly make, but other Catholic theologians (like Rahner) have – then identifying the “anonymous Christ” to the “anonymous Christian” can quickly take a subtle shift, becoming the work of conversion. Perhaps, for this reason (and others), Schroeder notes, “many Asian theologians and missionaries are not comfortable with the “prophetic” dimension of interreligious dialogue.” Schroeder, “Proclamation and Interreligious Dialogue,” 57.

<sup>382</sup> Schroeder, “Proclamation and Interreligious Dialogue,” 59.

<sup>383</sup> Schroeder, “Proclamation and Interreligious Dialogue,” 52.

<sup>384</sup> Phan, Peter C. “Doing Theology in World Christianity: New Paths, Different Themes, Strange Locations,” in Irvin, Dale T and Peter C Phan. *Christian Mission, Contextual Theology, Prophetic Dialogue: Essays in Honor of Stephen B. Bevans, Svd.* Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2018, 93. Phan points out that an “interreligious Christology” challenges the problems of Christian supersessionism and exclusivism by “affirm[ing] the uniqueness of Christ ... [in] Acts 4:12; 1 Timothy 2:5; and John 14:6 ... [while] contextualizing [it] within an all-inclusive and universalistic orientation of the whole biblical tradition, expressed powerfully, for example, in John 1:9.” *Ibid.*

that acknowledges the activity of the Holy Spirit,”<sup>385</sup> or as John V. Taylor describes it, “the gift of the Go-Between God [is] the Spirit.”<sup>386</sup> Black Elk’s discernment of the transforming, reconciling divine life through interreligious dialogue suggests that mission in the mode of dialogue may well ensure the primacy of the *missio Dei* in the church’s theology of mission.

Because mission in the mode of dialogue is grounded in the *missio Dei*, it also protects against the hegemonic impulses of a colonial Christianity by containing the agency of the missionaries and protecting the agency of the missionized. From her observations on mission as dialogue in Asia, Anh Q. Tran acknowledges that where “the Holy Spirit underwrites the whole process of reception and transmission of the individual experience of the Holy One, the shift from a ‘theology from above’ to a ‘theology from below’ ... is an inevitable development.”<sup>387</sup> As Black Elk teaches us, when mission is entered from a posture of discernment, we are open to divine revelation, however (and wherever) we may encounter it. Black Elk’s interreligious theology of revelation suggests that, rather than seeking to gain membership (converts) for one religious tradition at the expense of another – in a cosmic zero-sum game – mission from the mode of dialogue becomes a process of moving deeper into the divine life with the help of others who are already participating in it – even if in different contexts and traditions. Such an approach to mission recognizes the possibility (if not probability) of mutual learning, mutual transformation, even mutual

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<sup>385</sup> Phan, “Doing Theology in World Christianity,” 93. We do not, here, have the space to fully consider Phan’s proposal for an “interreligious Christology,” but to the extent Phan develops it, such an approach seems consistent with the notion of Christ as the on-going self-revelatory nature of the divine, noted above.

<sup>386</sup> Taylor, *The Go-Between God*, 31.

<sup>387</sup> Tran, Anh Q. “Experience Seeking Faith: From Theology of Religions to Interreligious Theology,” in Irvin, Dale T and Peter C Phan. *Christian Mission, Contextual Theology, Prophetic Dialogue: Essays in Honor of Stephen B. Bevans, Svd* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2018), 116.

conversion, as all parties to the missionary encounter journey deeper *together* into the transforming and reconciling life of the *missio Dei*.

These possibilities (and probabilities) reflect the relational character of divine encounter that characterizes missional encounters centered in the agency of the *missio Dei* and engaged in the mode of interreligious dialogue. Indeed, mutual learning, mutual transformation, and mutual conversion are the fruits of what Tran describes as the three principles of interreligious dialogue: the principal of mutual truth; the principal of focused inquiry; and the principal of interreligious friendship.<sup>388</sup> In the light of these principals, Tran observes, “In dialogue one is not to vanquish the partners or to impose one’s view on them, but to respect the differences of opinion ... [leading to] meaningful exchange of opinions or even conversion to the other person’s view ... a genuine interreligious dialogue includes the possibility of conversion, a change of heart in the biblical meaning of metanoia.”<sup>389</sup> Trans’ description of mission in the mode of interreligious dialogue certainly maps on to the model we have seen emerge from Black Elk’s engagements with Lakota traditions, the Ghost Dance, and Catholicism through dialogue in discernment of the divine revelation of his Great Vision. We might just say Black Elk pursued his Great Vision as a *wicasa wakan* in the Powder River basin before he enacted it through the Ghost Dance on Pine Ridge, after which he proclaimed it across Indigenous Reservations in the Western United States before returning to Pine Ridge to embody it in the Sun Dance as a *wicasa wakan*, and throughout it all, Black Elk never wavered in his commitment to the Great

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<sup>388</sup> Tran, “Experience Seeking Faith,” 121.

<sup>389</sup> Tran, “Experience Seeking Faith,” 117.



Vision.<sup>390</sup> Each tradition only seemed to deepen his commitment, *(re)*converting him to the divine life again and again.

Reimagining mission in the mode of interreligious dialogue is not a new concept, nor is it a Western concept. To the contrary, just as it arose out of Black Elk's interreligious engagements – and, as it has characterized the response of other Indigenous communities to both missionary Christianity and the *missio Dei* – so has the theological turn from mission in the mode of conversion to mission in the mode of dialogue been an Indigenous initiative. Cheyenne theologian James L. West states it plainly: “mission must be defined in a way that the Christian Church reaches out in dialogue with ... other religions and spiritual ways-of-life, instead of seeking new ways to conquer.”<sup>391</sup> As Cree theologian Stan McKay suggests, this dialogic approach to mission is inherent in the teachings of Jesus: “In Christian teachings the word ... love ... allows for diversity within the unity of the Creator. The dialogue can then take place in a global community which does not develop defensive arguments to protect some truth,” but creates space for “sharing stories instead of dogmatic statements ... [for] listening as well as talking.”<sup>392</sup> Cherokee theologian William Baldrige prophetically proclaims, “For five hundred years the missionaries have been trying to save us. Look at the water, look at the sky, look at all the hungry children, look at all the machines of war. Brothers and sisters, it is now time for us

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<sup>390</sup> Black Elk's journey seems to mirror that of Raimundo Panikkar, who famously said, “said “I left Europe [for India] as a Christian, discovered myself a Hindu, returned to Europe as a Buddhist, without having ceased being a Christian.” Grimes, William. “Raimon Panikkar, Catholic Theologian, Is Dead at 91,” *The New York Times*, September 10, 2010, last accessed on April 30, 2021, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/05/us/05panikkar.html>.

<sup>391</sup> West, James L. “Indian Spirituality, Another vision,” in Treat, James. *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 35.

<sup>392</sup> McKay, Stan. “An Aboriginal Perspective on the Integrity of Creation,” in Treat, James. *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 54.

to save the missionaries; it is time for us to return to sharing.”<sup>393</sup> Indeed, it is time to return to dialogue.

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<sup>393</sup> Baldrige, “Reclaiming our Histories,” 89.

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**Appendix I: Final Report of the Task Force for Reimagining the Episcopal Church**