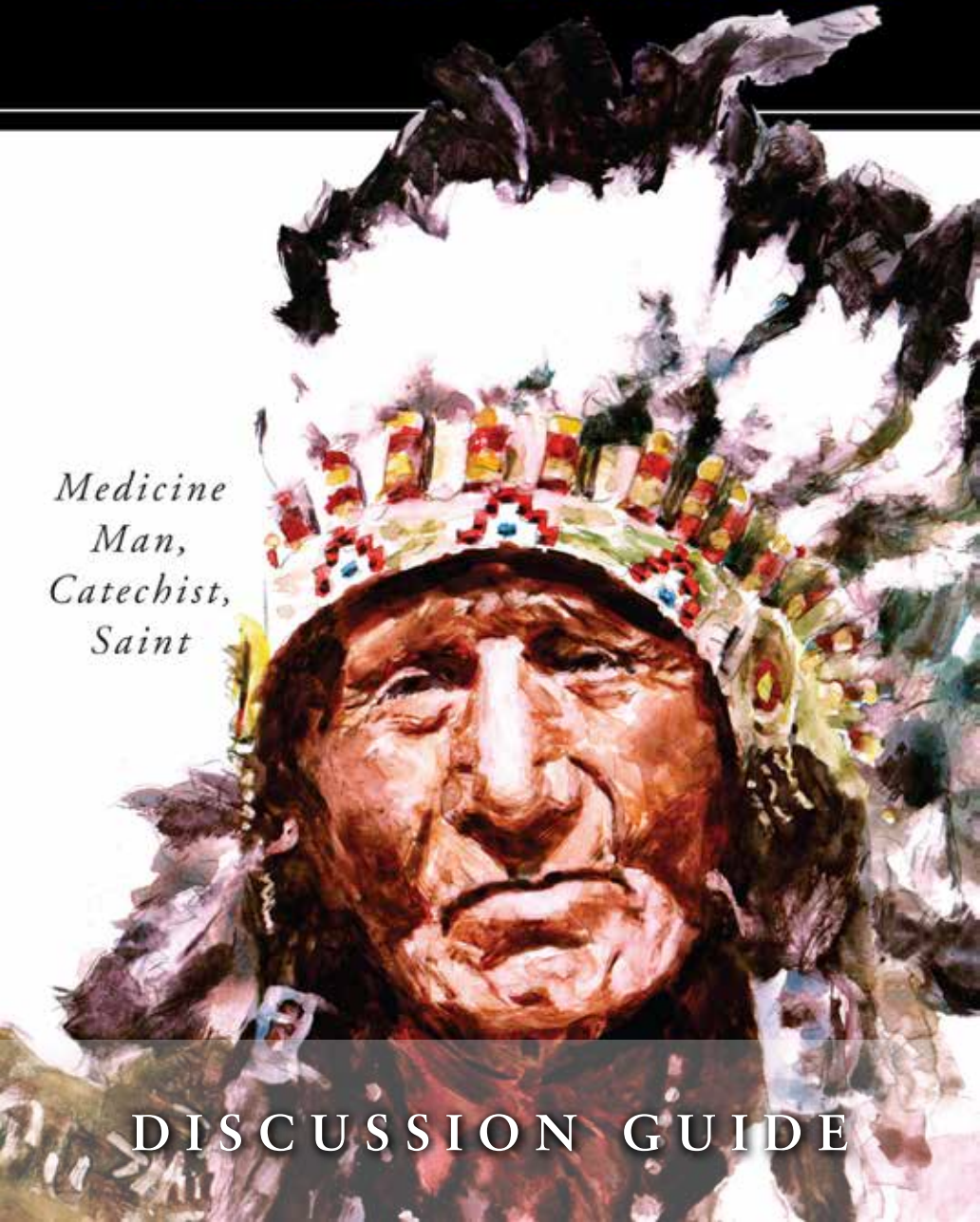


JON M. SWEENEY

NICHOLAS BLACK ELK

*Medicine
Man,
Catechist,
Saint*

DISCUSSION GUIDE



About the Book

Servant of God Nicholas Black Elk (1863–1950) is popularly celebrated for his fascinating spiritual life. How could one man, one deeply spiritual man, serve as both a traditional Oglala Lakota medicine man and a Roman Catholic catechist and mystic? How did these two spiritual and cultural identities enrich his prayer life? How did his commitment to God, understood through his Lakota and Catholic communities, shape his understanding of how to be in the world?

To fully understand the depth of Black Elk's life-long spiritual quest requires a deep appreciation of his life story. He witnessed devastation on the battlefields of Little Bighorn and the Massacre at Wounded Knee, but also extravagance while performing for Queen Victoria as a member of "Buffalo Bill" Cody's Wild West Show. Widowed by his first wife, he remarried and raised eight children. Black Elk's spiritual visions granted him wisdom and healing insight beginning in his childhood, but he grew progressively physically blind in his adult years. These stories, and countless more, offer insight into this extraordinary man whose cause for canonization is now underway at the Vatican.

About the Author

Jon M. Sweeney is an independent scholar and one of religion's most respected writers. His many books include *James Martin, SJ: In the Company of Jesus*, in the "People of God" series; *The Pope Who Quit*, which was optioned by HBO; and *The Pope's Cat*, a popular fiction series for children. He edited *A Course in Christian Mysticism* by Thomas Merton, published by Liturgical Press. Sweeney writes regularly for *America* in the US, and *The Tablet* in the UK. He is the publisher at Paraclete Press in Massachusetts, and lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, with his wife and daughters.

Discussion Guide

Introduction

1. Before beginning this book, how familiar were you with the story of Nicholas Black Elk? What were your impressions of him?
2. Why does Jon Sweeney suggest that adopting or appropriating Native American spirituality might be a problem?
3. To many people, Mount Rushmore is a remarkable accomplishment that honors several great American leaders. Why might some see Mount Rushmore as a “monument to pain”?
4. What does it say about American culture and history that *Black Elk Speaks*, “one of the twentieth century’s most important documents on Native American culture and . . . a classic of world literature,” neglects to mention Black Elk’s deep engagement in his Catholic faith?

Chapter One

1. What does Sweeney suggest the experience of Black Elk's people, at the time of his birth, tells us about the positive and negative aspects of "the American ethos," especially that of "self-reliance"?
2. What would have led early European settlers to think that "God hath cleared our title to this place" (meaning North America)? What does that conviction imply about the land? About the settlers themselves? About the people who were already living there? About God?
3. How did Oglala culture view the land and its animals? How did many of the new European Americans?

Chapter Two

1. How did the Battle of Little Big Horn look from Black Elk's perspective? How might it look in the perspective of the Catholic just war tradition?
2. Did you learn about "manifest destiny" as a child? What was the meaning of the idea as it was presented to you? What assumptions and realities about it went unsaid?
3. How did white Americans make use of the scientific work of Charles Darwin in the way they thought about Native Americans? What is your reaction to this thinking?

Chapter Three

1. There's no "correct" way to understand Black Elk's "Great Vision," of course. What is your impression of it, its source, and/or its meaning?
2. Is there any aspect of Catholic history or spirituality to which you are inclined to relate Black Elk's Great Vision? Is there anything in those that it reminds you of?
3. Is there anything in your own experience to which you relate Black Elk's Great Vision?

Chapter Four

1. How would you explain Black Elk's willingness to join Buffalo Bill Cody's travelling show?
2. What is our impression of the sort of experience Black Elk had during his two years touring the United States and Europe? Why do you think that?
3. What did Black Elk mean when he spoke of wanting to "bring the sacred hoop together and make the tree blossom again at the center of it"?

Chapter Five

1. It's not hard to understand the Ghost Dance from a sociological perspective. How about from a theological one? Or from a spiritual one? What are your thoughts on this?
2. What role, if any, would you ascribe to Christian faith in the exploitation and attempted extermination of Native American peoples by white Europeans? Why? Sweeney mentions that Christianity was, for Black Elk, an *antidote* to this. What does he mean?
3. What was the “dream”—to use Black Elk’s term—that “died” at Wounded Knee? Why?
4. How might the “slaughter at Wounded Knee” look in the perspective of Catholic just war tradition?

Chapter Six

1. Were you aware of Pope Nicholas V's bull authorizing and approving of the enslavement of people (in the case of the document in question, as practiced by the Portuguese), subsequently approved and reiterated by his successor Pope Calixtus III? Consider looking into Nicolas V's 1452 document known as *Dum Diversas*.
2. How can we understand such teaching in the context of a church that claims divine guidance in its moral teachings and that has repeatedly called itself an "expert in humanity"?
3. What are the dangers of confusing culture with Gospel? In what ways did missionaries to Native Americans sometimes make this mistake? Why is it easy to make? Have you seen it made in your own experience?

Chapter Seven

1. Reflect and pray on the Lakota name for Jesus. What meaning does the title evoke for you?
2. Why would Black Elk have seen *continuity* between his medicine man work and his later catechetical work? And why *discontinuity*?
3. Are you familiar with St. Kateri Tekakwitha? What parallels and differences strike you about her experience and that of Black Elk?

Chapter Eight

1. Reflecting on Nicholas Black Elk's faith and the work he undertook as a catechist, write a prayer to him, relating to or drawing on your own faith, experience, and ministry.
2. What is your impression of "The Two Roads" presentation of the Christian faith offered by the OMI catechism?
3. How might the Rosary have been a helpful tool for Nicholas Black Elk in teaching the Catholic faith? How has it helped in developing or shaping your own understanding of your faith?

Chapter Nine

1. What do you think of the injunction that the “missionary must first teach self-contempt”? Is there any sense in which this could be understood well and offered as sound guidance? And how might it be problematic?
2. Sweeney makes an interesting point that “it was mostly in the area of ethics that Black Elk made changes in his life after becoming Catholic.” What does this (explained on page 82) tell us about Christianity?
3. Are you familiar with the teaching of Vatican II’s *Nostra Aetate*, recalled on page 83? Where have you recognized “true and holy” things in other religions?

Chapter Ten

1. Why does Black Elk offer a fine example for lay Catholic men and women seeking to live out their baptismal call to evangelization? How might they take him as an inspiration and guide?
2. How was the virtue of hope operative in Black Elk's life and spirituality?
3. Sweeney writes in this chapter that Black Elk's "devotion to *Wakan Tanka* was not interrupted but expanded when he became a Roman Catholic." Why not interrupted? Why/how expanded?
4. Consider the questions with which Sweeney closes this chapter (in the brief excerpt from the *New Yorker* article). How would you answer them?

Chapter Eleven

1. Consider praying the prayer written by Black Elk that appears on page 100. What strikes you most about the ideas and spirituality expressed in the prayer?
2. Sweeney notes that Bishop Robert Barron has called Black Elk “a real icon for catechists in the Catholic Church.” How is this so? How might church leaders at national, diocesan, and parish levels introduce catechists to his story?
3. If you were able to have a conversation with Black Elk, what would you want to talk about?