

# **Frithjof Schuon and the American Indian Spirit:**

## **Interview with Michael Fitzgerald**

*Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) was the foremost spokesman of the Perennial Philosophy in the twentieth century and, along with René Guénon, is considered as the most important figure of the Traditionalist or Perennialist school of thought. His interests covered a large range of metaphysical and religious topics, providing insights on Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism but also on the Native American traditions. It is generally recognized that Frithjof Schuon had a special interest in the spiritual traditions of the American Indians, but only some aspects of his relationship with them are well known. Michael Fitzgerald has accepted to answer some of our questions about unpublished aspects of Schuon's relationship with the Plains Indians. Michael Fitzgerald was the neighbor of Frithjof Schuon for 18 years. He has also written and edited six books and produced two films on American Indian spirituality that are used in college classes. He has taught university classes on religious traditions of North American Indians and has attended sacred rites of the Crow, Sioux, Cheyenne, Shoshone, Bannock, and Apache tribes. Fitzgerald is an adopted son of the late Thomas Yellowtail, one of the most honored American Indian spiritual leaders of the last century, and is an adopted member of the Crow tribe.*

*Religioperennis: For readers who are unfamiliar with the topic, could you explain to us what is meant by American Indian traditions and can you remind us in which circumstances Frithjof Schuon discovered the Native American universe?*

The focus of Frithjof Schuon's interest in the American Indians was centered on the spiritual traditions of the pre-reservation nomads who lived on the Plains of the American West—the Plains Indians—and the perpetuation of those ancestral traditions into the present day.

Schuon's affinity with the Plains Indians had begun already in his youth, partly encouraged by his grandmother's fond memories of her close friendship with an

American Indian when she was in Washington D.C. at age 17. This is an excerpt from an October 31, 1947 letter that Schuon wrote to Chief Medicine Robe of the Assiniboine people:

Love of the Indians is a family tradition with us—my brother and me—and this is why: as a young girl, our paternal grandmother lived in Washington where she became acquainted with an Indian chief who loved her and made a marriage proposal to her. He was called “Singing Swan”, and, with many other chiefs, he had come to Washington for a congress. Unfortunately, my grandmother had to go to Europe with her family and could not marry “Singing Swan”. He sent her letters in which he called her “my little child”; he also sent her dried flowers from the prairie. The recollection of “Singing Swan” was so vividly impressed on my grandmother’s mind that at the age of eighty she still remembered her friend as if she had seen him the day before, and shortly before she died she still spoke of him. When my brother and I were children, she used to talk to us about “Singing Swan”; she pictured to us his beautiful long hair and his buckskin dress of light blue tinge.

Thus we were educated in the love of the Indian peoples, and this was a providential disposition in the plan of the Great Spirit.

In a 1992 film interview, one of Schuon’s childhood friends recalled their attempts to play as Indians when they were eleven years old. “We played as Indians, especially in the zoo and in the zoological gardens, where we gathered some friends. His elder brother was there and took the Indian name of ‘Reindeer’. Afterwards we gathered also in the forest in the neighborhood of Basle—that was very serious; we had to practice. Once we had a small battle in the forest” (1992 film interview with Johann Jakob Jenny). When Schuon watched the film interview of his lifelong friend he added that the boys made Indian clothes, practiced Indian dancing, and also read books to learn about the traditional customs of the Plains Indians.

Schuon later described his first memorable encounter with the Red Indian world, “When I was fifteen years old in Alsace there was a big German circus with real Sioux

Indians. It was in 1923, so the Indians were still real old-timers. They were singing and riding on horse back with wonderful costumes. I already knew English and so I went every day to the circus to talk with these wonderful people” (1991 film interview with a journalist).

In later years Schuon said that he had the “character” of a Red Indian. Schuon’s response to a question posed by a journalist in a 1991 film interview helps us to understand this comment. When the reporter asked, “What was it you read and learned about the Indians that fascinated you?”, Schuon responded, “Oh, the Indian character: courage—incredible courage—then self-domination and dignity—the cult of dignity. When I was in the Far West thirty or forty years ago, the old-timers were very dignified; this I like very much—this dignity, generosity, no pettiness, courage, and piety. They are always praying to the Great Spirit.”

*RP: What was the state of these traditions in the first half of the twentieth century when Frithjof Schuon came into contact with them?*

To provide some history and context, let me quote Joe Medicine Crow, the Crow tribal historian. He explains: “In 1884, the Secretary of Interior issued the so-called ‘Secretary’s Order’ to ‘de-tribalize’ the Indian people and make them into white men as soon as possible—a unilateral cultural assimilation process.” Medicine Crow details the manner in which children were taken from their homes and forced to stay in boarding schools. He goes on to describe the children’s life in boarding school:

[T]hey would become like slaves; they were mistreated and some were even killed there. At the boarding school, the children were also forbidden to speak their native language. If they were caught speaking the Crow language they made the children chew a strong soap—it had a terrible taste. The kids also couldn’t play any Indian games—they were forbidden to follow anything to do with the traditional culture. If they violated any of these rules they were not allowed to visit with their parents on the weekends or to go home for family visits. . . .

Over time almost every Christian denomination opened churches and schools on the reservation; each family was assigned to become a member of one or another of the churches. The government encouraged this process to help assimilate the Indians because the churches actively tried to convert the Indians away from their traditional ceremonies. . . . The government thought that if the Indians became Christians then they would turn away from their Crow traditions, and, of course, some Indians did turn away from the traditions; but most Indians embraced Christianity without abandoning their own cultural traditions. There was no problem in the Indian way; everyone had a little different way to pray but everyone was praying to the same, one God, so there was no problem. . . .

The “Secretary’s Order of 1884” also prohibited the Indians from practicing all activities related to their culture, including all traditional ceremonies. The reservation police had the power to enforce this Order to prevent any traditional singing and dancing. The Crow people were afraid to even put on their native costumes; they were told to wear overalls, white man’s outfits—told to start becoming white men. Our people were forced to become farmers and give up their traditions. For fifty years there was a strict period of cultural transition. However, the government could not take away the intangible things; the Crow people still had their values, their traditional religion, and their philosophy—they kept them. During this time they had to go hide and perform some of their rituals—many families tried to keep their spiritual traditions alive in the secrecy of their homes. And, all of the clan rules were kept intact right up to this day, which is a good thing because those are important rules to follow. So we survived with our values and most of our ceremonials. The tribal culture was kept alive.

In 1934 the Commissioner of Indian Affairs removed those prohibitions in connection with a so-called “Indian Re-organization Act”, so from that time on the people could do their ceremonials. On the Shoshone Reservation they were Sun Dancing right away—I think they were hiding it and doing it all along. The Crow also started to resume some of our traditional ceremonies, but during the fifty year break when the Sun Dance was outlawed, the Crow tribe lost their own

form of the Sun Dance. Because the Crow lost their own tribal Sun Dance . . . the tribe adopted the form of the Shoshone Sun Dance.<sup>1</sup>

During the first half of the twentieth century all American Indians struggled to retain their ancestral spiritual ways in the face of a government bent on their destruction. Fools Crow (1890-1989) was the most well-recognized Lakota Sun Dance chief of the twentieth century. The book *Fools Crow*<sup>2</sup> records his vivid descriptions of the extremely difficult situation on his Pine Ridge reservation: “As we entered the 1930s, we thought conditions were about as bad as they could be. . . .” After 1934 the American Indian tribes were allowed to openly practice their spiritual ceremonies, but many of the ancestral traditions had been lost. Fools Crow continues, “World War II dominated the lives and consciousness of the Sioux from 1940 to 1950. Our sweat lodges at Pine Ridge were overworked during that awful time. . . .”

I offer these accounts from chiefs of two different Plains tribes to demonstrate that while each situation was different, the picture was largely the same—the first half of the twentieth century was an incredibly difficult period for all American Indians and the time immediately after the end of World War II was in many ways a low point for the preservation of the ancestral spiritual traditions of the Plains Indians.

*RP: Could you describe the relationship between Frithjof Schuon, Joseph Epes Brown, and Black Elk?*

Joseph Epes Brown (1920-2000) was one of the most influential scholars of American Indian spirituality in the twentieth century. His first direct contact with Plains Indian spirituality came in 1946 when Frithjof Schuon recommended to Brown that he attempt to find Black Elk, a Lakota holy man and the subject of John Neihardt’s 1932 book, *Black Elk Speaks*. At that time virtually no non-Indians had yet become interested in shamanistic spiritual traditions and Schuon hoped that Brown might be able to record and preserve the wisdom of some of the nomadic old-timers who were still living at that time,

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<sup>1</sup> From the Introduction to Thomas Yellowtail, *Native Spirit: The Sun Dance Way* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Mails, *Fools Crow* (New York: Doubleday, 1979).

particularly Black Elk, thereby stimulating a resurgence of the ancestral traditions. Joseph Brown was successful in his search and for extended periods of time over a two-year period he lived with Black Elk and his family in South Dakota. The book that resulted was *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Sacred Rites of the Ogallala Sioux*, first published in French in 1953. During the preparation and editing of his manuscript, Brown lived in Lausanne, in close proximity to Schuon, and Schuon wrote the introduction to the first French edition of this landmark work.

While Brown was living with Black Elk, there was an ongoing correspondence between Brown and Schuon, including two letters that Schuon sent to the venerable Lakota that were translated by his son, Benjamin Black Elk. Brown wrote:

[Black Elk] said that he had told as yet no one [about the sacred rites of the Lakota], but was telling me because he believed it was connected with my being there and with the Holy Man who had sent me. Black Elk had been having a dream, in which he saw an Ancient Man Above, old with gray hair, whose eyes were always open, and who was constantly looking, looking everywhere. . . . The letter from [Schuon] has had a tremendous impact on him. His son translated the whole letter to him; he is excellent at this, and you should also know that he is responding and awakening extremely well. (Letter dated October 28, 1947)

For the rest of his life, Joseph Brown remained in contact with Black Elk's family and other Indian leaders, while maintaining correspondence with and periodically visiting Schuon both in Switzerland and later in Indiana. When Joseph Brown returned to visit Black Elk's family in 1954, Lucy Looks Twice, Black Elk's daughter, told Brown about her father's recurring dream visions during the final weeks of his life in 1951. Brown wrote to Schuon:

Finally she explained that before his death they had been worried about Black Elk. Every afternoon at about the same time he would go into something of a trance as if he were talking with some unseen person. Once he scolded his daughter-in-law for entering the house at that time, for he said that she had made

the man leave. When they asked him who it was who came to talk with him, (more precisely this person came to pray for Black Elk, saying that he knew that he was soon to die, and he wished to help him in his suffering), he said that it was “a holy man from Europe”. His relatives were frightened by these experiences so Mrs. Looks Twice noticed a large wooden rosary which always hung over his bed—a Moroccan one that I had given him because of his fondness for its *barakah*—and took this away from him. According to her after this he did not talk anymore with the “strange man”. At Black Elk’s death, possibly thinking that it had not been right to do this, she saw that this rosary was buried in the coffin with him.” (Letter dated October 8, 1954)<sup>3</sup>

During Black Elk’s final illness, Joseph Brown had informed Schuon that the aged Lakota holy man was suffering intensely and approaching death. For the last month of Black Elk’s life, Schuon and his wife recited special prayers of Divine Mercy for Black Elk on Moroccan rosaries in their home in Lausanne. The Schuons followed this practice every evening, which corresponds to the afternoon in South Dakota, and thus the same time that Black Elk experienced the dream visions of the “holy man from Europe”. It is almost certainly not a coincidence that Black Elk’s visions of a visiting holy man came at the same moment that Schuon was reciting a rosary for the venerable Lakota sage.

*RP: Did Joseph Brown’s work with Black Elk and the Lakota achieve the goals Schuon had in mind when he suggested to Brown that he find Black Elk?*

The publication of *The Sacred Pipe* achieved one part of Schuon’s intention—the preservation and dissemination of sacred wisdom. Schuon also hoped to stimulate resurgence in traditional spiritual practices. Joseph Brown’s letters to Lausanne while he was living with Black Elk detail the Lakota holy man’s efforts to perpetuate the living tradition in the hearts of the people. Schuon collected and preserved Brown’s letters and

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<sup>3</sup> Portions of Lucy Looks Twice’s account are also recorded in Michael F. Steltenkamp, *Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993).

excerpts are contained in the Appendix to *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian: Commemorative Edition*.<sup>4</sup> This is an excerpt from my Preface to this book:

These letters also provide a final chapter to Black Elk's life because of their sharp contrast to the despair in Black Elk's closing words in *Black Elk Speaks*, ". . . you see me now a pitiful old man who has done nothing, for the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead." These words were spoken at a time when most American Indian traditional ceremonies were still outlawed by the U.S. Government and the majority of Lakota youth were not aware of their ancestral spiritual traditions. Joseph Brown's arrival in 1947 was a catalyst that provided Black Elk the practical support to work toward perpetuating his ancestral spiritual traditions, both through the recording of his account of the seven sacred rites of the Lakota and through Black Elk's efforts to reestablish an "Order of the Pipe" for his tribe. History records the successful reemergence of the Lakota spiritual traditions, which are vibrant today on every Lakota reservation. This achievement was the result of efforts by many Lakota spiritual leaders, but there is no doubt that Black Elk's work with Joseph Brown was an integral part of the overall success of this reemergence. The importance of *The Sacred Pipe* to the resurrection and perpetuation of these ancestral traditions is well known. This Appendix of letters clearly documents a largely unrecognized effort by Black Elk to meet with many tribal elders in order to actively stimulate the process of spiritual renewal for the Lakota people. Black Elk recognized Joseph Brown's integral role in facilitating his work when the Lakota holy man said to Brown at the time of his arrival in 1947 that his coming was a "Godsend". *The Sacred Pipe* and these letters therefore document a final chapter in Black Elk's life that fulfilled the great vision of his youth and helped make the sacred tree of the Lakota people bloom again.

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<sup>4</sup> Edited by Elenita Brown, Marina Brown Weatherly, and Michael Oren Fitzgerald (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2007).



*RP: Following the work of Michael Steltenkamp,<sup>5</sup> some scholars have argued that Black Elk was not a valid informant about the Native American traditions. In their view, his beliefs would have been much colored by Christian doctrines. What would be your answer to these criticisms?*

Let us first review some general principles before we examine Black Elk's personal beliefs. There are finally only three fundamental ways to view the phenomenon of religion: first, there is no God and thus all religion is the result of wishful human imagining; second, God exists but He has revealed only one valid religion; or third, one God exists and He has revealed each of the world's major religions—resulting in what Schuon termed a “transcendent unity of religions”.

American Indian spirituality is perhaps the most “inclusive” form of spirituality—multiple forms of revelation and inspiration are accepted as self-evident reality. Christianity is one of the most “exclusivist” religions, rejecting other forms of revelation and salvation as a general principle. And, a large percentage of scholars today are either atheists or agnostics. This raises a series of questions that put into perspective the issue of whether Black Elk is a valid informant on Lakota spirituality: Is a person who believes there is no God more qualified to opine about religion? Is a person who believes only one religion is true and all other religions are false more qualified to opine about religion? Does the fact that someone believes in a transcendent unity of religions disqualify that person from being a valid interlocutor about a particular religion?

Now let us consider certain beliefs of most Plains Indians tribes. It is evident that the many variations among the tribes are too vast and diverse to create a definitive statement about what it entails; but few would deny that there are unifying themes, including the sacred quality of virgin Nature, the Directions of Space, the use of the Sacred Pipe, and above all the idea of a Supreme Being who revealed multiple spiritual paths to return to Him. Because American Indians accept multiple revelations, they looked at the spiritual teachings of Christianity and found them identical to their own traditional teachings. Then they looked at the life of Christ and saw many parallels. For example, Frithjof Schuon recorded this conversation with a traditional Lakota: “Christ

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Steltenkamp, *Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala*.

had been crucified, but the Indians crucified themselves on the cottonwood tree; the cross of Christ had been of oak, whereas the Sun Dance Tree was, precisely, the cottonwood; a cross section through any branch of this tree always showed a golden star” (“1959 Travel Journal”).<sup>6</sup> It is also evident that Christ and the early Christians were persecuted and martyred by the government. Based on the truth of its teachings and the compelling life story of Christ, how could many American Indians not believe in Christianity?

Many American Indians believe that their understanding of transcendent Reality is enriched when they consider the different views of the same one Reality that are presented by each of the diverse revelations. Thomas Yellowtail (1903-1993), the most renowned Crow Sun Dance chief of the twentieth century, provided this insight into Native belief in a prayer to the Maker of All Things Above:<sup>7</sup>

All the people should unite and pray together, regardless of their beliefs. You have given different ways to different people all over the world. As we know, this earth is round like a wagon wheel. In a wagon wheel, all the spokes are set into the center. The circle of the wheel is round and all spokes come from the center and the center is You, *Acbadadea*, the Maker of All Things Above. Each spoke can be considered as a different religion of the world which has been given by You to different people and different races. All of the people of the world are on the rim of the wheel and they must follow one of the spokes to the center. The different paths have been given to us but they all lead to the same place. We all pray to the same God, to You. Help us to see this wisdom. Aho! Aho!

Many American Indians also speak of “blending” or “mixing” the explanations of God presented by different religions in order to better understand the one Great Spirit. But I have rarely observed a mixing of the forms of two religions into a simultaneous practice—it is generally considered “bad medicine” to mix a practice from one religion into the rites of a different religion. They will fervently participate in their ancestral rites

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<sup>6</sup> In Frithjof Schuon, *The Feathered Sun: Plains Indians in Art and Philosophy* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> This is an excerpt from the closing prayer in Michael Oren Fitzgerald (ed.), *Yellowtail: Crow Medicine Man and Sun Dance Chief* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

in a completely traditional manner; then later they will go to Church and pray in a Christian manner. For example, in several meetings with Fools Crow at his home and at his Sun Dances, there was no mixing of the two religious forms—he was always a completely traditional Lakota, even though he was also a Catholic. I spent a summer living with Thomas and Susie Yellowtail while John Trehero, the most renowned Shoshone Sun Dance chief of the twentieth century, was also living with them.<sup>8</sup> I spent many hours in Yellowtail's pick-up truck listening to these two great spiritual leaders. They both believed in Christianity and in their traditional Indian ways; their understanding of the Maker of All Things Above was enriched by both religions; and they never mixed the two forms.

I am also obliged to note that many tribal leaders, perhaps the majority, have accepted Christianity to one degree or another. This is confirmed by the experience of John Pretty-On-Top, a Crow Sun Dance chief, who was selected to represent all North American Indians at Pope John Paul II's "World Day of Prayer for Peace" in 1986 at Assisi, Italy. This Prayer Day was attended by a representative from almost every different spiritual tradition around the world. Pretty-On-Top explained to me that he was selected to attend because Church representatives could not find another traditional American Indian spiritual leader who was not also a Christian. To reinforce this point, let us consider a few prominent tribal leaders who believe in both religions, including: Thomas Yellowtail and Leonard Bends (Yellowtail's current successor) among the Crow; Chief Washakie (1804-1900), John Trehero (1871-1985) and James Trospen, a current Sun Dance chief, among the Shoshone; and Spotted Tail (1823-1881), Charles Eastman (1858-1939), and Fools Crow among the Sioux. The long-time tribal historian of the Cheyenne, John Stands in Timber (1884-1967), and the long-time tribal historian of the Crow, Joe Medicine Crow (still living at age 93), are both traditionalists and Christians. James Trospen recently pointed out that Chief Washakie, his great-great grandfather, was baptized by two denominations, thus demonstrating that his acceptance of Christianity was based upon its universal teachings. Trospen added, "All Indian people put their

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<sup>8</sup> For information about John Trehero see Fred Voget, *The Shoshoni-Crow Sun Dance* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984) and *Yellowtail: Crow Medicine Man and Sun Dance Chief*.

traditional Indian religion first; other religions just help us to come closer to the Creator.”<sup>9</sup> Are many of the greatest tribal leaders of the nineteenth and twentieth century disqualified as valid informants because they also believe in Christianity?<sup>10</sup>

Now let us turn to Black Elk’s personal beliefs about Christianity and consider how other Lakota view Black Elk. Let me provide insights from two different sources, beginning with the words of Fools Crow, the most renowned Lakota Sun Dance chief of the twentieth century:

[M]y uncle, Black Elk, became a Roman Catholic in 1904, and I am certain his first name, which was Nicholas, was given to him at that time. Black Elk was very interested in the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, and spent many hours talking to the priests about it. When he and I were discussing it one day, 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. Like myself, Black Elk prayed constantly that all peoples would live as one and would cooperate with one another. . . .

My uncle, the renowned Black Elk, has earned a place above all of the other Teton holy men. We all hold him the highest. I have never heard a bad word about him, and he never said a bad word about anyone. All he wanted to do was love and serve his fellow man. . . . [I]n the Indian custom, he was also a father to me. I stayed with him quite often, and sometimes for long periods of time. We also made a few trips together and over the years talked about many things. I learned a great deal about *Wakan Tanka*, prophecy, and medicine from him.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Personal interview, 2007. James Trospen is a Shoshone Sun Dance chief, a Trustee of the University of Wyoming, and a director of the Grand Teton National Park Foundation.

<sup>10</sup> In the interest of disclosure, I am considered a member of the Sun Dance religion by the Crow and Shoshone tribes because I participated in a Crow-Shoshone Sun Dance. As a Schuonian, I also believe in the transcendent unity of religions.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Mails, *Fools Crow*.

Now let us turn to observations by Joseph Brown,<sup>12</sup> which highlight factual errors involved in the debate about Black Elk's spiritual practices because it is alleged that he abandoned his ancestral Lakota spiritual traditions after he entered Catholicism in 1904. Joseph Brown's contemporaneous letters while living with Black Elk make it clear that Black Elk still participated in the sweat lodge ceremony and the prayer with the sacred pipe throughout his life—Black Elk did not abandon his ancestral Lakota spiritual practices. And, Black Elk's prayers to *Wakan Tanka* in both *Black Elk Speaks* and *The Sacred Pipe* demonstrate that his personal prayer to God was in the traditional Lakota manner. Finally, the new information in Brown's letters makes it clear that Black Elk not only continued to participate in various forms of Lakota spirituality, he was also instrumental in reviving what he called the Order of the Pipe among the Lakota people. Several of Brown's letters from 1947 detail the efforts leading up to a major gathering of traditional Lakota spiritual leaders organized by Black Elk. This excerpt outlines the meeting:

The ceremonials, all different, but all centering around the pipe, went on every night for about five days. Then on the 18th we had the large pipe ceremonial at Manderson. I had sent out notices to all the old Lakota whom we wanted to contact, and perhaps about a hundred came with their teams from all over. . . . This was of course the great day for Black Elk, for his vision was now being realized, and he was as happy and excited as a child. He and Little Warrior [Black Elk's close friend and also a Lakota holy man] painted their faces red, and put on their best clothes, and what traditional clothing they had. . . . Never have I seen a priest officiate at a rite with more dignity, confidence, and majesty. . . (Letter dated December 26, 1947, Manderson, South Dakota).

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<sup>12</sup> I had two conversations in the 1980s with Joseph Brown about Black Elk's relationship to Christianity and traditional Lakota beliefs when Brown stayed at my home while he visited Mr. Schuon. At the end of one conversation, Dr. Brown said he hoped to write an article to clarify this point, but he was never able to do so. He also explained to me that Black Elk's vision of the Great Spirit was completely consistent with Frithjof Schuon's explanation of American Indian spirituality, including the belief that there is one timeless Truth within both Christianity and traditional Native spirituality.

Brown's letter goes on to describe the events, which were intended to revive participation in the sacred ancestral traditions. Brown's next letter to Lausanne describes the confrontation between the irate local Catholic priest and Black Elk subsequent to this gathering:

Last week, as I had long expected, we received a call from the local parish priest, who is also head of the mission school at Pine Ridge. He was quite irate about the pipe ceremonial, and said he did not mind if we merely wanted to put on a show, but if we were serious, it was a terrible thing, for he could not have his people going back to "savagery". At this Ben [Black Elk] launched out with quite an oration, defending and pointing out the truths of his own tradition—during which time the priest became more and more tense and red in the face. When he finished, Old Black Elk started in, and went on for almost half an hour, after which the priest looked at his watch and sped off in his automobile in great haste. Black Elk's speech was later explained to me, and it was indeed a magnificent one. . . . The Catholic Church among the Indians in the early days gained many followers, by making catechists of the old men, tempting them with money, good clothes, and a house, and the opportunity to travel. These old men—Black Elk among them—made hundreds of converts, but now that they have gone, participation in the Church has fallen off, and a vacuum has been left. Let us hope it shall be filled by the renewal of their own Way. . . (Letter dated January 24, 1948, Manderson, South Dakota).

It seems clear that while Black Elk had a great love of Christianity, he never abandoned his ancestral beliefs and that at the end of his life he recognized the important need to rejuvenate the Lakota ancestral traditions. When looking at Black Elk's life as a whole, perhaps one can paraphrase James Trosper's words, "Black Elk put his traditional Indian religion first; Christianity helped him to come closer to the Creator."

*RP: Black Elk was not the only informant of Frithjof Schuon about the Native American traditions. What were the other contacts of Frithjof Schuon about these traditions? For instance, I believe that Thomas Yellowtail became a close friend of Schuon.*

There were many different indirect contacts between Schuon and the American Indians. For example, Joseph Brown also acted as an intermediary between Schuon and other American Indian leaders. In the closing paragraph of Schuon's letter to Chief Medicine Robe, Schuon adds, "I have been very happy to hear that Chief Medicine Robe has given Mr. Brown several strands of braided sweet grass for me: I pray every day for [Chief Medicine Robe and his work] and I have told my community to do the same."

Frithjof Schuon's next direct encounter with Plains Indians was with Thomas and Susie Yellowtail<sup>13</sup> in Paris in 1953, when the Yellowtails were touring Europe with an American Indian dance troupe.<sup>14</sup> Then in the winter of 1954, the Yellowtails became the first house guests in the Schuons' new home in Lausanne. With these two visits began a friendship between Yellowtail and Schuon that became even closer in later years.<sup>15</sup> At the

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<sup>13</sup> Susie Yellowtail was the first American Indian registered nurse and a tireless advocate for her tribe. She is enshrined in the Montana Hall of Fame in the State Capital at Helena. Thomas Yellowtail became one of the most admired American Indian spiritual leaders of the last century. The story of his life and the preservation of the Crow-Shoshone Sun Dance is published in *Yellowtail: Crow Medicine Man and Sun Dance Chief*. Yellowtail's recounting of the Crow Sun Dance is also the subject of a fully illustrated book and documentary film of the same title, *Native Spirit: The Sun Dance Way*.

<sup>14</sup> While in Paris, Schuon and Yellowtail had a series of profound discussions and one evening Yellowtail held a Sun Dance prayer ceremony that Schuon and a few of his friends attended. Schuon later commented, "Yellowtail is a saintly man and we immediately talked of spiritual things, about religion and prayer. It was very interesting and I saw him every day" (1991 film interview). One month after this encounter, Schuon described in a letter to Titus Burckhardt two of his subsequent visionary experiences associated with the meeting: "Assuredly, the meeting with the Indians was a decisive experience. Yellowtail—who also bears the name Medicine Rock Chief—said to me, amongst other things, that he prayed that what I wished to understand in the Indian tradition would be made clear to me: 'Maybe in a dream', he added. As I left Paris, I was as if surrounded by a spiritual magic, in such a way that everything appeared to me as being quite distant; every distraction was for me unbearable. Two days later, towards morning just before awakening, I had the following dream: I was kneeling down and—like Indians in the Sun Dance—I had an eagle-bone whistle in my mouth and was looking towards the sun, whilst from all sides countless buffaloes came rushing and a thousand voices, from all quarters of the sky, sang: 'They say: a herd of buffalo is coming . . .' This was sung in Lakota or Absaroka, but I understood it in my dream. I had however forgotten that this was the sacred Sun Dance Song; my wife reminded me when I told her my dream; in fact, this song is mentioned in Black Elk's book, and it runs thus: 'A herd of buffalo is coming, it is here now! Their blessing will come to us; it is with us now!' A few days later, when invoking the Supreme Name, I fell into a light sleep; all at once I had a sacred stone Pipe in my mouth and saw the smoke rising; the smoke mingled with the Name *Allah* and, as it were, wrote it in space."

<sup>15</sup> The Yellowtail visit to the Schuon home in Lausanne also established a link between Schuon, Brown, Yellowtail, and Black Elk that centers on Black Elk's ceremonial pipe bag for his sacred pipe. Black Elk gave his ceremonial pipe bag to Joseph Brown during the time that Brown recorded *The Sacred Pipe*. In

time this friendship was formed, Yellowtail had not yet received his function as the preeminent Sun Dance chief of the Crow tribe, a role he fulfilled for the last thirty years of his life.

In the last decade of his life, Schuon singled out two men in his private conversations whom he called his profound spiritual friends: Titus Burckhardt and Thomas Yellowtail. Schuon wrote about his relationship with Yellowtail:

With Yellowtail I have a quite special relationship; between him and me there is a kind of unspoken friendship that is rooted in our natures. He belongs to those people of whom one knows they will go to Heaven, because the contrary would be quite unimaginable. Yellowtail is a combination of a kind of childlike earth-heaviness and simplicity with an undertone of saintliness . . . at a deeper level, something contemplative, sacerdotal, serene, profoundly good and God-centered. When he speaks, he strings image upon image, the flow of speech is mild, slow, and endless, free of all self-mirroring and hypocrisy; withal he is a rock, not out of hardness, but out of strength and patience, and something recollected and profound permeates his whole being. He always accompanies his words with Indian gestures, thereby adding a picturesque and solemn quality to his monotonous and meditative speech. . . . This infinitely mild, yet tough man seems to live outside time, as if time flowed more slowly for him. (*Memories and Meditations*)

Four years later—in 1958—the Schuons traveled to Brussels in order to meet a group of sixty Sioux who had come to give Wild West performances in connection with the World’s Fair. One Lakota couple that the Schuons met in Belgium was Jackson and Elva One Feather, who became life-long friends.<sup>16</sup> These contacts quickly led to the Schuons’ first sojourn among the Plains Indians in their own country.

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1950 Brown gave this sacred object to Frithjof Schuon in appreciation for the help and support Schuon gave to Brown before, during, and after his stay with Black Elk. In 1954, as a measure of Schuon’s respect for Yellowtail, Schuon presented Black Elk’s pipe bag to Yellowtail during his European trip so that it could be reunited with its land of origin. This pipe bag remained one of Thomas Yellowtail’s most prized possessions for the rest of his life. Thomas Yellowtail related this story to me on several occasions. See also “Frithjof Schuon’s Role in Preserving the Red Indian Spirit”, *Sophia* Vol. 4, No. 2, Winter 1998.

<sup>16</sup> Their son, Gerald One Feather, later became the tribal chairman of the Pine Ridge Reservation, the highest elected office on this reservation.



The Schuons then spent the summers of both 1959 and 1963 in the American West meeting with Indian leaders and, once again, lifelong friendships were formed, including Benjamin Black Elk.<sup>17</sup> On each trip they attended a Crow-Shoshone Sun Dance with the Yellowtails. Schuon wrote about the Sun Dance:

The opening of the Sun Dance was one of the most powerful things I have ever witnessed. . . . The clear symbolical significance and the elemental convincing power of the Sun Dance are quite overwhelming. The Tree is the axis, and this is in our heart; the various elements of our soul revolve around this axis, moving backwards and forwards in exteriorization and interiorization, discrimination and union.

On the Tree hangs the buffalo head, adorned with sprigs of sage, facing the sunset, and also the eagle facing the sunrise; the sprigs of sage hang down beneath the buffalo's eyes. The buffalo is the sacred, primordial power and fecundity of the earth, and the eagle is the light that comes from above, the Revelation; the buffalo is mountain or rock, and the eagle sky and lightning; but the buffalo is also the sun, or the earthly image thereof.

The Sun Dance is remembrance of God, purification from the multiple and the outward, union with the One and the Real. ("1959 Travel Journal")

At Pine Ridge in 1959, the Schuons were adopted into the family of Chief James Red Cloud, a grandson of the great chief known to history. The old chief gave Schuon the name "Brave Eagle", while with the Lakota there were many "memorable evenings". Later that summer, at All-American Indian Days in Sheridan, Wyoming, the Schuons

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<sup>17</sup> At the request of Marco Pallis, the Schuons were accompanied in 1959 by Paul Goble, who was then a young artist with a great love of the American Indians. Goble has since written and illustrated many books on the American Indians and is the winner of the Caldecott Award for children's books. The Schuons were accompanied in 1963 by Whitall and Barbara Perry. Schuon's Travel Journal for his first trip to the American West contains the following postscript: "Two months after our return home from America, Reginald Laubin wrote me the following lines: 'In September a few of our Arapaho and Sioux friends came over to put on a *Yuwipi* ceremony for us. In the sweat tipi they said prayers for their friends and they included "Mr. Schuon, for help and guidance in his wonderful work in bringing about an understanding and realization that so many religions are alike." We never dreamed that they knew of you, so you can imagine our surprise and delight when they mentioned your name and even had a copy of your splendid article on Indian religion. They were very much impressed by your good words.' And all help is from God alone!"

were officially received into the Sioux tribe by a delegation of tribal members and Schuon was given the name “Bright Star”.<sup>18</sup>

Schuon wrote in *Memories and Meditations* about his visit to the Far West: “I believe it was only then that my soul was fully healed of the wounds of my youth; I also received from the Indians a special kind of spiritual blessing.”

In September 1980 Schuon immigrated to the United States, building a home in the hills and forests of Southern Indiana for the last eighteen years of his life. In October 1980 his Indian friends, Thomas and Susie Yellowtail, came to Bloomington for their annual autumn visit.<sup>19</sup> They were the first visitors in Schuon’s new home in America, just as they had been the first visitors to stay in Schuon’s home in Lausanne in 1953. Later that same month Schuon wrote about the Yellowtails’ visit:

Early this morning the Yellowtails left after a fortnight’s stay at the Fitzgeralds’, whose house is close by. . . . [E]very evening at the Fitzgeralds’ house rites of healing, with long prayers, took place, in the course of which Yellowtail touched and stroked friends to be treated with his eagle fan. I was the first he treated, and this contact with the spiritual power of his eagle feathers had a special meaning for me: it was a meeting, through the medium of the Indian world, with the *Religio perennis*, and this at the beginning of my stay on this continent.

When we showed the Indians our new house, Yellowtail said a long prayer in our home and so to speak consecrated it, and this again had a meaning similar to that of the above-mentioned event.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Schuon recorded this comment about the adoption ceremony, “The master of ceremonies of the Absaroke—he was called Medicine Crow—said to me as he gave me my name: ‘Your name is Bright Star; each time we see the Morning Star we shall remember you’” (Travel Journal, August 11, 1959). His wife also received a name from Chief Red Cloud and another at Sheridan, but she gives preference to her first Indian name, “Eagle People Woman”, given to her by old Black Elk through the intermediary of Joseph Brown.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Yellowtail, the venerable Crow Sun Dance chief, came to Bloomington, Indiana for periods of two or three weeks every October from 1975 until his death in 1993. He spent one month in Bloomington in March 1982 after the death of his beloved wife, Susie, and he came to Bloomington in March 1993 for a visit that included a celebration of his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday.

<sup>20</sup> Letter to Leo Shaya, October 20, 1980.

It was some years later—in 1987, after Schuon’s move to America—that Thomas Yellowtail adopted Frithjof Schuon into his family and the Crow tribe. At the adoption ceremony Yellowtail said of Schuon, “He is my brother. We are in the same boat together in all things.”<sup>21</sup> That same evening Yellowtail said, “My spiritual family is in Bloomington.”

Whenever Schuon met with representatives of different esoteric traditions the conversation inevitably turned to the underlying Truth (*sophia perennis*) within each religion, and his trips to the American West provide one particularly memorable example. During Schuon’s travels he carried with him photographs of spiritual leaders from various esoteric traditions that he often showed to people he was visiting. Schuon later wrote an article that details his profound interaction with the “Keeper of the Sacred Arrows” of the Cheyenne tribe, including the reaction of the American Indian holy man when he saw the photograph of the Jagadguru of Kanchipuram. In Schuon’s later article, which is dedicated to the Jagadguru,<sup>22</sup> he explains that “A spiritual encounter between His Holiness the Jagadguru and a Red Indian holy man has taken place, through the medium of a picture of His Holiness and a prayer of the Red Indian.” Schuon concludes his article by explaining:

All this may give the impression of a rather singular contribution in honor of His Holiness the Jagadguru; but it is in reality not so unrelated, and this for three main reasons: firstly, it is certainly a great event that, for the first time in history, a Red Indian holy man manifests his love for a Hindu holy man; secondly, this apparently small incident reminds us of the unity of the Primordial *San\_tana Dharma*, which is more or less hidden beneath the many forms of intrinsically orthodox Traditions; and this unity is especially represented by the very function of the Jagadguru, who incarnates the Universal Truth. Thirdly, this little incident marking a symbolical encounter between a Red Indian priest and a Hindu priest

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<sup>21</sup> In a film interview in 1992 Yellowtail spoke about Schuon, “I think that he is a great man. . . . I know that people come over here to see him from other countries—from all over the world. I regard him as a holy man. . . . Considering this and because he is a good friend, my wife and I decided that we’d adopt him. We did something well worth doing by adopting a great man into the family.”

<sup>22</sup> “His Holiness and the Medicine Man”. Schuon’s entire article is posted on the Internet site of the Jagadguru’s ashram, <http://www.kamakoti.org/souv/5-24.html>

was in fact an act of prayer; and it shows us that in prayer all earthly differences such as space and time are transcended, and that in prayer we are all united in one state of purity and in one perfume of Deliverance.

*RP: Some detractors of Frithjof Schuon have reproached him for depicting Native American traditions in a romantic manner. What is your answer to them?*

Many scholars today place an emphasis on how a religion was understood and lived by the common man. In the process they sometimes seem to forget that each spiritual civilization also has a human ideal to which all people strive and that the heart of a spiritual tradition is represented and preserved by the exemplars—the great saints and sages—even though it is evident that not all men attain the ideal. Is it “romantic” to focus on the essential spiritual teachings of a religious civilization and the lives led by its paragons?

*RP: To conclude, in your opinion, what is the role of Frithjof Schuon in preserving and perpetuating Native American traditions and the contemporary Native American community?*

Schuon’s role in guiding Joseph Brown to Black Elk has already been discussed. In addition, Schuon also had a role in the preservation of the Crow-Shoshone spiritual traditions, which started when he introduced Joseph Brown to Thomas Yellowtail. In 1971 I was Joseph Brown’s graduate teaching assistant at Indiana University when Brown introduced me to Yellowtail. With Schuon’s encouragement, I later recorded and edited Yellowtail’s autobiography about the sacred rites of the Crow-Shoshone Sun Dance,<sup>23</sup> thus helping to preserve the sacred wisdom of the Crow-Shoshone tribes for future generations. Frithjof Schuon therefore helped to preserve and perpetuate both the

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<sup>23</sup> *Yellowtail: Crow Medicine Man and Sun Dance Chief*. I also produced two documentary films and edited a companion book, *Native Spirit: The Sun Dance Way*, about the Crow-Shoshone Sun Dance from films and photographs of the Sun Dance. The book and films use Yellowtail’s words and film interviews with American Indian spiritual leaders from seven different tribes. They were published in 2007 by World Wisdom.

Lakota and Crow-Shoshone spiritual traditions.<sup>24</sup> Schuon's own writings on American Indian spirituality provide abundant evidence to support his view that, "The Indian world represents on this earth a value that is irreplaceable; it possesses something unique and enchanting . . . which it expresses with profound originality." Most of his writings on Plains spirituality are included in the anthology entitled, *The Feathered Sun*. Finally, on the full moon of each month Schuon offered a "prayer" for the preservation and perpetuation of the spiritual traditions of the Plains Indians, a practice he started at the behest of Mr. Yellowtail after their first meeting in Paris in 1953.

Perhaps Frithjof Schuon's most enduring contribution to American Indian spirituality will be invisible in the world, owing to the nature of prayer. This was put succinctly by Thomas Merton,<sup>25</sup> one of Schuon's Christian admirers:

Let us not forget the redemptive power of the hermit, the monk, the recluse, the bodhisattva, the nun, the sannyasi who out of pity for the universe, out of loyalty to mankind, and without a spirit of bitterness or resentment, withdraw into the healing silence of the wilderness, or of poverty, or of obscurity, not in order to preach to others but to heal in themselves the wounds of the whole world.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Schuon also reviewed Brown's manuscript for *The Sacred Pipe* and years later the manuscript for *Yellowtail*. Both Schuon and Yellowtail contributed to the preparation of *Indian Spirit* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2003; revised and enlarged edition, 2006), a book that presents traditional wisdom and rare photographs of the pre-reservation Indians, many of which are from Schuon's personal collection of photographs.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Merton, the famous Trappist monk, was influenced by Schuon's writings in the latter part of his life, writing to Marco Pallis, one of Schuon's Buddhist followers, "I think Schuon has exactly the right view. . . . I appreciate [him] more and more . . . [and] am most grateful for the chance to be in contact with people like [him]" (published in Merton's *Hidden Ground of Love*). After receiving a subsequent message from Schuon, Merton wrote in his personal journal, "That I can be accepted in a personal and confidential relationship [with Schuon], not exactly as a disciple but at any rate as one of those who are entitled to consult him directly and personally. This is a matter of great importance to me. . . . It can have tremendous effects. I see that already" (Journal entry for June 16, 1966, quoted in *Merton and Sufism*, edited by Rob Baker and Gray Henry [Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2000], pp. 220-221).

<sup>26</sup> "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude" from *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960). Schuon wrote a similar thought, "[T]he world needs hermits as much as preachers. In Islam it is said that the equilibrium of the world depends largely on the existence—sometimes hidden—of the saints, or also on the Invocation of God's Name. If man is not holy, nonetheless, the Name is holy, and man is made holy by the invocation" (Letter to Hans Küry, December 20, 1951).