

The Three Circles of Existence

by

Kurt Almqvist, with the collaboration of Stephen Lambert

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The Red Indian of the North American Plains and Forests represented his tribe as a circle, “the nation’s hoop”.¹ Among the Plains Indians—for it is of these that we shall primarily be speaking—the “hoop” was repeatedly made visible in the form given to the camp: the tipis were placed in concentric circles around the ritual tipi, at the center of which the sacred fire, transmitted from camp to camp, burned ceaselessly. Now the “nation’s hoop” is an image of the circle of the horizon, which in turn is the trace and the support on earth of the celestial vault.² This signifies that the unity of the tribe is a projection on the terrestrial plane of universal Unity. It should moreover be noted that the circle of the horizon unites the four cardinal points, symbolizing the fact that this sacred Quaternity transcends the multiplicity of the human world. The two pairs of cardinal points facing each other do not imply any opposition, for the two elements of each pair complete one another in a polarity which is a direct expression of principal Unity.³

However, when projected into the coagulated matter of the formal world, these principal polarities become real oppositions. The “vertical” axis of the cosmic cross, which unites the purity of the North with the plenitude and life of the South, is the “road of good” and it is red; on the contrary, the “horizontal” axis, which “goes from where the thunder beings live”, namely the

1. See *Black Elk Speaks* (Morrow, New York, 1932; new edition, Pocket Books, 1973) and *The Sacred Pipe*, Black Elk’s Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux, (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1967, Penguin Books edition, 1971). Frithjof Schuon’s introduction to the French edition of *The Sacred Pipe* has served as a starting point for the present article. The greater part of this introduction is contained in a chapter entitled “The Sacred Pipe of the Red Indians” in *Language of the Self* (Ganesh & Co., India, 1959) by the same author.

2. “If you go on a high hill and look around, you will see the sky touching the earth on every side, and within this sacred enclosure the people live. So the circles we have made [in our rites] represent the circle Tirawa Atius has made for the dwelling place of all people” (from a Pawnee priest, spoken during the rites of Hako as cited by Hartley Burr Alexander, *The World’s Rim, Great Mysteries of the North American Indians*, Univ. of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1953, p. 131).

3. The cardinal points represent the four essential divine Manifestations [corresponding to the Archangels of the Semitic religions]” (Frithjof Schuon, *Language of the Self*, p. 211): and according to Black Elk, these “four spirits are only one after all” (*Black Elk Speaks*, p. 2).

West, “to where the sun continually shines”, the East, is a “fearful road, a road of troubles and of war” (*Black Elk Speaks*, p. 24), and it is black.⁴ Thus when Hehaka Sapa (Black Elk) describes the existence of his people after the catastrophe of the “breaking of the nation’s hoop”, he says: “They were travelling the black road, everybody for himself with little rules of his own” (*ibid.*, p. 183); for “the life of the people was in the hoop, and what are many little lives if the life of those lives be gone?” (*ibid.*, p. 182).

* * *

The social rules whose absence Black Elk deplores, were of old determined by cosmic norms: the “nation’s hoop”, as we have said, was an image on the human plane of the circular horizon, which contained the empirical world of the Indian and which consequently was an image of the whole Universe. Black Elk indicates the hierarchical relationship between the two circles by saying that “the circle of the four quarters nourished...the sacred hoop of the nation. The East gave peace and light, the South gave warmth, the West gave rain, and the North with its cold and mighty wind gave strength and endurance” (*ibid.*, p. 164). When therefore the circle of the nation was broken, the immediate cause of this calamity was the destruction—or at least a certain “disturbance”—of the “circle of the four quarters”; and the well-nigh demolition of the visible universe which enclosed the way of life of the nomadic Red Indians symbolized this cosmic crisis. This demolition was brought about by the white intruders who took forceful possession of their land, and almost completely exterminated the most important of the four-footed “people”, the buffalo herds. In fact, as a result of this double plundering, the Indians were ultimately cut off from the kind of life which had been⁵ their way of “filling out” the circle of the horizon, that is, of realizing the possibilities contained in the Universe. The extermination of the buffalo is particularly significant in this respect, given that this animal, through the variety of uses which it had for the Indians, was itself a symbol of the Universe.

Now in Hehaka Sapa’s great vision—which he dedicated his whole life to interpreting and sharing with his people in view of their salvation—there is a correspondence linking the catastrophe of the Indians, not only with the attack on the visible world enclosing their existence, but also, symbolically, with the apocalyptic end of its prototype: the entire world. There is a passage (*Black Elk Speaks*, pp. 30 ff.) in which Black Elk sees his people climbing four hills, one after the other. These degrees stand for so many stages in the dissolution of the “nation” and so symbolize in a striking manner the four ages of humanity. After the ascent of the first hill, the people “camped in the sacred circle as before, and in the center stood the holy tree, and still the

4. If the North-South road is the “good road”, this is because on the horizontal plane considered in its entirety, it represents the “vertical road” of Heaven more directly than does the East-West road, in accordance with hyperborean symbolism.

5. This was not always true, since the Indians of the Plains and of the Forests were originally only semi-nomadic; but that was in any case long before the arrival of the Whites.

land about us was all green”. Before climbing the second hill,

the people changed into elks and bison and all four-footed beings and even the fowls, all walking in a sacred manner on the good red road together. And I myself was a spotted eagle soaring above them.⁶ But just as we stopped to camp at the end of that ascent, all the marching animals grew restless and afraid that they were not what they had been, and began sending forth voices of trouble calling to their chiefs. And when they camped at the end of that ascent, I looked down and saw that leaves were falling from the holy tree...

Then the people broke camp again, and saw the black road before them towards where the sun goes down...And as they walked the third ascent, all the animals and fowls that were the people ran here and there, for each seemed to have his own little vision that he followed and his own rules; and all over the universe I could hear the winds at war like wild beasts fighting.

And when we reached the summit of the third ascent and camped, the nation’s hoop was broken like a ring of smoke that spreads and scatters, and the holy tree seemed dying and all its birds were gone. And when I looked ahead I saw that the fourth ascent would be terrible.

Then when the people were getting ready to begin the fourth ascent, the Voice⁷ spoke like someone weeping, and it said: “Look there upon your nation!” And when I looked down, the people were all changed back to human, and they were thin, their faces sharp, for they were starving. Their ponies were only hide and bones, and the holy tree was gone.

* * *

After saying that “the circle of the four quarters nourished...the sacred hoop of the nation”, Hehaka Sapa remarks (*Black Elk Speaks*, p. 164) that “this knowledge came to us from the outer world⁸ with our religion”. By these words he understands implicitly that the knowledge in

6. The transformation of the people into animals, which is to last during the ascent of the second and third hills, symbolizes the extension of the cosmic drama to subtle domains other than that of the human soul. Alone above this world of transformation soars the Eagle of the Spirit with whom the visionary is identified.

7. This is the “great Voice...of the South” (*ibid.*, p. 30), the direction in which the dead go and from where life comes and also the eagerly awaited new life for the people and for the world. In this respect, as symbolizing the Source of all Life, the direction of the South is “that path leading towards the place towards which we always face” (*The Sacred Pipe*, p. 20).

8. Frithjof Schuon specifies “from the transcendent or universal World” (*Language of the Self*, p, 219).

question—which in itself is cosmological—is merely an application of purely metaphysical principles. Thus, for example, if “the Power of the world always works in circles” as Black Elk says (*ibid.*), this is because, metaphysically speaking, the Great Spirit Himself is a Circle: “*Wakan Tanka*, like the circle, has no end” (*The Sacred Pipe*, p. 192).

Now, if every creature is made in the image of the principal “Circle”, this means that the latter is mysteriously present in it as its ontological Source and End on the one hand, and as its supra-ontological Essence on the other, by virtue of which the creature participates in absolute and infinite Reality. The attribute of “Grandfather”, particularly used in designating the last-mentioned aspect of *Wakan Tanka*, has the “apophatic” character which it should have since a grandfather does not exercise a paternal function in relation to his grandchildren, at least not in a direct way: it is the father, properly speaking, who reflects the ontological Principle. The “grandfatherly” aspect is the very “soul” of the Indian Divinity. In fact, when Black Elk refers to it, he almost always mentions either both attributes, “Father” and “Grandfather”, or only the latter. In one passage at least, he indicates the distinction between the two aspects of *Wakan Tanka* in a clear manner (*The Sacred Pipe*, p. 49): “My Grandfather, *Wakan Tanka*. You are everything. And my Father, *Wakan Tanka*, all things belong to you!” That is, in the latter case, the duality Creator-creation is not yet surpassed; this is the point of view of beings and of things which receive all their light and life from the Sun; in the first case on the contrary, the Indian identifies himself with the undivided Light of the celestial “Sphere”⁹

There is an apparent contradiction in the fact that the six Powers of the Universe—which in themselves belong to the ontological order—are represented in Black Elk’s vision as so many “Grandfathers”. But this is explained by the “polysynthetic” character of the Indian Divinity, an outlook in which the two divine Aspects as well as the universal Spirit, the supra-formal summit of creation, are placed on the same “axis”. In conformity with this perspective, everything in the Universe participates in a direct way in the nature of “Grandfather” *Wakan Tanka*.

* * *

Benjamin Black Elk, son of the sage whom we have had occasion to meet, called this “Presence”¹⁰ in man, this focus of unlimited spiritual virtualities, the “tipi of the heart”. This expression from an Indian of our time is of great significance, for it suggests what possibilities still remain, in spite of everything, for present-day Indians to realize the “knowledge of Circles” in its essential aspect. For this “tipi” may be assimilated to the ritual tipi situated at the center of the camp: just as the periphery of this central tipi was concentric with the camp (which

9. “Our Grandfather, *Wakan-Tanka*. You are everything, and yet above everything! You are first. You have always been...You are the truth. The two-legged peoples who put their mouth to this pipe will become the truth itself” (*The Sacred Pipe*, p. 13).

10. By “Presence”, the author is referring to the immanence of the great “Circle”, the supreme prototype of the cosmos, in all creatures as explained two paragraphs above [Translator’s note].

symbolized the “sacred hoop of the nation”) and thereby with the great circle of the four Quarters, in the same way, the interior life of man is normally a reflection of the macrocosmic Universe as well as—to a certain degree—of the religious collectivity which corresponds to it on the plane of social life.¹¹ The ritual tipi, and, more especially, the never-extinguished fire burning at its center, forms, at the point where the six directions meet, a “seventh” direction, which in reality is a “non-direction” inasmuch as it synthesizes the diversity of the other directions. Analogously, the heart of a spiritually concentrated man is a synthesis of the whole Universe¹² and, *a fortiori*, of the genius of his people; and the “fire” which it shelters is a perpetual answer to the summons of the Great Spirit. Now, if the heart of man is all this, it is because in this lower world it symbolizes the very Prototype of all “circles”, that of *Wakan Tanka*. That supreme “Circle” is represented in the vision of Hehaka Sapa by the “Tipi made of clouds of the Six Grandfathers”. Thus the “tipi of the heart” is the perfect image of that celestial Tipi.

This “Kingdom of God within you” is a Temple which none can profane from without nor even close, and thus the Whites, in spite of repeated attempts, have been unable to deprive the Indians entirely of their mystical life. In fact it is known that the elite among them has managed to save the essence of their religion from the general catastrophe by distinguishing it—to the extent that it has been necessary—from its substantial support, the social and “material” side of the tradition. Moreover, the “circle of the four quarters” in its manifestation as the visible world of the Redman, has evidently not been completely destroyed, for independently of the particular manner in which the Indians looked at it, Nature as such still exists. Given the predominant “role Nature plays in the contemplation of these peoples, its rhythmical renewal is intimately connected with the perpetuation of their religion in its essence, despite everything. In this respect, let us cite (*Language of the Self*, p. 222, footnote) the following words spoken to Joseph Epes Brown by a “keeper of the Calumet”: “Although we have been crushed by the white man in every possible way, we still have much cause to be thankful to the Great Spirit, for even in this period of darkness His work in Nature remains unchanged and is a continual reminder of the Divine Presence”.

Quite apart from the particularly tragic manner in which the Red Indian tradition has floundered at least in its outward aspects, it may be said that the work of “interiorization” accomplished by its elite is precisely the same as what must be accomplished, in this last phase of the “dark age”, by anyone who wants to save his soul: a concentration on the “one thing needful”, a concentration which implies *a fortiori* conscious submission to the religious Law, the

11. In the purification rite of the Sioux, the main officiant cries: “O *Wakan Tanka*, behold me! I am the people. In offering myself to you, I offer all the people as one, that they may live! We wish to live again! Help us!” (*The Sacred Pipe*, p. 38).

12. And becomes thereby a receptacle for the divine Presence in accordance with the holy saying (*hadith qudsi*) of the Prophet Muhammad: “Heaven and Earth cannot contain Me, but the believer’s heart containeth Me”.

Law of the “sacred hoop of the nation”.

Consequently, one may say that in the heart of every spiritually concentrated man, the universal restoration is “prefigured”, a restoration which, at the end of Black Elk’s great vision, is symbolized by the renewal of his people. When this had taken place through the intermediary of the visionary, he was led onto the “highest of all mountains” from where he saw “the whole hoop of the world”.¹³ Black Elk continues: “And when I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shape of all things in the spirit, and the shape of shapes, as they must live together like one being” (*Black Elk Speaks*, p. 36). Thanks to its universal character, the restoration at which Black Elk is here ideally present implies that of all traditional forms: these are represented as an indefinite number of circles, of which that of Black Elk’s nation is only one. The common Essence of all the circles is at once the infinite Circle of Light and the Tree of Life which grows at its center and which is nourished by It: “And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw it was holy.”

13. John G. Neihardt, who wrote down Black Elk’s story, here adds the following footnote: “Black Elk said the mountain he stood upon in his vision was Harney Peak in the Black Hills. ‘But anywhere is the center of the world’, he added”. This comment by the Red Indian sage is indirectly a way of likening the mountain to the heart of man, which is always subjectively the potential center of the world. Consequently, “the highest of all mountains” may be said to symbolize the maximum of spiritual realization of which the heart of man is capable. As for the analogy between the heart and the mountain—and between the heart and the cave, which, in effect, is the “heart” of the mountain—see René Guénon, “The Heart and the Cave” and “The Mountain and the Cave”, *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Winter and Spring, 1971.