

The Matheson Trust

Book Review

**Joseph Epes Brown, *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indians*
Commemorative Edition, ed.**

**Elenita Brown, Marina Brown Weatherly & Michael Fitzgerald, Bloomington: World
Wisdom, 2007.**

Reviewed by *Harry Oldmeadow*, published in *Sophia* (Washington DC) 2007

In *The Reign of Quantity* (1945) René Guénon observes that it is only in these latter days, marked by the ever-accelerating ‘solidification’ of the world, that ‘Cain finally and really slays Abel’ (1995 edition, 178)—which is to say that the sedentary civilisations destroy the nomadic cultures. Moreover, as Guénon remarks,

It could be said in a general way that the works of sedentary peoples are works of time: these people are fixed in space within a strictly limited domain, and develop their activities in a temporal continuity which appears to them to be indefinite. On the other hand, nomadic and pastoral peoples build nothing durable, and do not work for a future which escapes them; but they have space in front of them, not facing them with any limitation, but on the contrary always offering them new possibilities. (RQ,180)

No doubt it was with these considerations in mind that Frithjof Schuon remarked that ‘traditions having a prehistoric origin are, symbolically speaking, made for “space” and not for “time”...’ (*Light on the Ancient Worlds*, 1966, 14). It follows from these general observations that the slaying of Abel—the violent extirpation of the primordial nomadic cultures—not only constitutes a drastic contraction of human possibilities but is actually a cosmic desecration. Recall the words of Marco Pallis, on the destruction of the traditional and largely nomadic culture of Tibet:

One can truly say that this remote land behind the snowy rampart of the Himalaya had become like the chosen sanctuary for all those things whereof the historical discarding had caused our present profane civilization, the first of its kind, to come into being... the violation of this sanctuary and the dissipation of the sacred influences concentrated there became an event of properly cosmic significance, of which the ulterior consequences for a world which tacitly condoned the outrage or, in many cases, openly countenanced it on the plea that it brought ‘progress’ to a reluctant people, have yet to ripen (*Studies in Comparative Religion*, 5:3, 1971, 189-190).

Similar considerations may be applied to more or less analogous cases, whether we think of the fate of the American Indians, the Australian Aborigines, the Inuit, the Bedouin, the Gypsies, the Bushmen of the Kalahari or any other peoples who have been trampled by the runaway juggernaut of modernity. Since the genocidal vandalisms of the 19th century a great deal has been written about the destruction of the Indian cultures of North America. There have also been a good many attempts, with varying degrees of success, to elucidate and to reanimate at least some aspects of the ancestral way of life. It need hardly be stated that many of the writers on these subjects are altogether impervious to the deeper significance of the events and processes which they seek to explain.

Much of the early literature concerning the religious life of the Indians came from anthropologists who were tyrannized both by the prejudices of the age and by the limitations inherent in their discipline. Recent anthropologists have abandoned many of the cruder racist and progressivist assumptions of their predecessors but all too often have succeeded only in replacing 19th century prejudices with those more characteristic of our own time whilst still retaining a childish faith in the capacity of a rationalistic and materialistic pseudo-science to grasp the mysteries of a complex spiritual tradition. Not for nothing has Mircea Eliade written of the ‘religious illiteracy’ of so many scholars of so-called ‘primitive’ religious traditions (*Australian Religions*, 1971, xiii-xiv). Whilst intellectual fashions amongst ethnologists and anthropologists have changed over the last century the one constant has been an intransigent reductionism which refuses to treat primal traditions in their own terms or, indeed, in terms appropriate to any religious tradition. The influential theories of Freud, Durkheim and Levy-Bruhl, for instance, are all variations on the reductionist theme. Furthermore, as Whitall Perry once observed, ‘...the scientific pursuit of religion puts the saddle on the wrong horse, since it is the domain of religion to evaluate science, and not vice versa’ (*Studies in Comparative Religion* 7:2, 1973, 127). Nothing so characterizes the mentality of modernism as the naive belief that the greater can be contained in the lesser, which is precisely the impossibility attempted when a profane and entirely horizontal scholarship, immune to anything of a spiritual order, tries to force a living spiritual tradition into the strait-jacket of a quasi-scientific reductionism—it matters little whether the reductionism in question be Durkheimian, Freudian, Marxist, structuralist, post-colonial or whatever! Of course, it must be acknowledged that some anthropologists have been acutely aware of the dangers of reductionism in the study of indigenous cultures. Here, for instance, are the words of the Australian anthropologist, W.E.H. Stanner, written over forty years ago, concerning the anthropological literature on the Australian Aborigines:

It is preposterous that something like a century of study, because of rationalism, positivism and materialism, should have produced two options: that Aboriginal religion is either (to follow Durkheim) what someone called ‘the mirage of society’ or (to follow Freud) the ‘neurosis of society’ (in *Religion in Aboriginal Australia*, ed. M. Charlesworth et al, 1984, 155).

This alerts us to the dangers and impostures of modernism in its many different ‘scholarly’ guises. Furthermore, from a traditional viewpoint, we cannot too often recall Schuon’s reminder that, ‘it is the spiritual, not the temporal, which culturally, socially and politically is the criterion of all other values’ (*The Transfiguration of Man*, 1995, 28). Nonetheless, the strictures above notwithstanding, it can be noted that anthropologists and other scholars accumulated a massive amount of information about traditional Indian life even if the data in question were often only superficially understood (if not altogether misunderstood!). It comes as no surprise that comparative religionists, less inhibited by materialistic/functionalistic assumptions and more attuned to the realm of the sacred, have sometimes been able to give us much more profound interpretations; in this context one might mention such figures as Åke Hultrantz, Mircea Eliade, Walter H. Capps and Arthur Versluis.

*

These remarks serve as a backdrop against which to assess the significance of the commemorative edition of a milestone work which first appeared in 1982, Joseph Epes Brown’s *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indians*. This book followed, at a distance of some thirty years, *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk’s Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala*

Sioux, Brown's salient contribution to our understanding not only of the ritual life of the Oglala but of the spiritual heritage of the Plains Indians at large. These two books, along with John Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks* (first published 1932), and Frithjof Schuon's peerless explication of Indian metaphysics and cosmology, *The Feathered Sun* (1990), provide the foundations for a properly-constituted understanding of these subjects, one surpassing anything to be found in the anthropological and scholarly literature. In recent years these foundational sources have been augmented by a burgeoning literature which, insofar as possible, allows Indians to narrate their own lives and to explain the spiritual practices of their people; one thinks of such works as Thomas Mails' *Fools Crow* (1979), Luther Standing Bear's *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (1980) and Michael Fitzgerald's *Yellowtail, Crow Medicine Man and Sun Dance Chief* (1991).

What, it might be asked, are the ideal credentials for someone writing about 'the spiritual legacy' of the American Indians? Well, here at least are some of them: a penetrating intellectual discernment in doctrinal and spiritual matters, informed by an understanding of the *philosophia perennis* which underlies all integral traditions; the capacity to decipher the symbolic vocabulary in which the myths, doctrines, arts and religious practices of primal traditions are necessarily expressed; a first-hand, existential immersion in the traditional spiritual life of the peoples in question, accompanied by a properly qualified master or adept able to explain authoritatively the meaning of the phenomena at hand; a moral integrity and probity of character which ensures that the inquiry is not contaminated by subjective prejudices and ambitions; a detachment from such sentimentalities and delusions of modernism as cultural evolutionism, progressivism and historicism, to name three closely related follies. If it further be asked how many writers on American Indian religions fulfil these criteria, then one can only answer, precious few! One such was Joseph Epes Brown (1920-2000). Indeed, as Seyyed Hossein Nasr has written,

America has not produced another scholar of the Native American traditions who combined in himself, as did Joseph Brown, profound spiritual and intellectual insight, and traditional understanding, the deepest empathy for those traditions, nobility of character and generosity... (quoted in the 'Biography of Dr Joseph Epes Brown', included in the commemorative edition).

Professor Nasr's reference to 'nobility of character' should not go unremarked: the Plains Indians themselves and the various forms in which they expressed their spiritual genius exhibited a nobility and a grandeur—often evinced through the symbolism of the eagle, the solar bird *par excellence*—which can only be fully appreciated by those with something of these same qualities in their own souls.

To turn now explicitly to the volume at hand. All of the essays which we found in the first edition are reproduced here. Several of these—'The Spiritual Legacy', 'The Roots of Renewal', 'Sun Dance: Sacrifice, Renewal, Identity'—have become classics and have re-appeared in various anthologies and compilations. But how good it is to have these gems strung again on a single cord, to be discovered, we may pray, by a whole new generation of readers, Indian and non-Indian alike. These pieces comprise an invaluable introduction to the spiritual economy of the American Plains Indians in general: Dr Brown works on a large canvas and is particularly adept at sketching out for the general reader the *principles* which must inform any real understanding—something radically different from the accumulation of information. His explication of myths, rites and symbols is profound without ever becoming too burdened with detail or retreating into abstract and rarified metaphysical realms where many readers would be unable to follow. He also throws into sharp relief the sacramental value which, for the Indians, permeated the whole of the natural order, and thereby signals

the ways in which the modern world might yet find a way out of the ecological catastrophes which we have brought upon ourselves, upon ‘all our relatives’, and indeed, on Mother Earth herself on whose bounty depends our very existence. It is a bitter irony that it should have taken the ever escalating environmental calamity to awaken an interest in the ways of the Indians, a calamity which is rooted in the scission between Heaven and Earth.

Those familiar with the first edition of *The Spiritual Legacy* will be excited by several intensely interesting additions: a lucid and informative preface by the three editors (Dr Brown’s wife, daughter, and former student and friend, Michael Fitzgerald), drawing attention to the significance of some of the new material to be found in the new edition; an Introduction by the late Professor Åke Hultkrantz, the renowned scholar under whom the author studied in Stockholm, giving a conspectus of Brown’s work and situating it in the framework of the *philosophia perennis*; a most welcome biography of Brown and a comprehensive bibliography; a series of previously unpublished photographs of some of the most imposing of the spiritual leaders amongst the Indians. All of this would give us reason enough to acquire the commemorative edition but, most important of all, we also find a substantial selection from letters written by Joseph Brown during his sojourn with Black Elk in the late 1940s—that providential encounter from which flowed *The Sacred Pipe* which, as I have already intimated, is one of a very small handful of books which truly is indispensable for an understanding of the traditions of the Plains Indian. These letters dramatically illuminate hitherto unknown aspects of the lives of both the author and of the Oglala sage. They also provide rare insights into the life and teachings of other spiritual leaders encountered during Brown’s years amongst the Indians, and give some account of his visits to the Hopi, Navajo and Pueblo peoples.

A good deal of controversy has accumulated around the figure of Black Elk in recent years, particularly concerning the volatile question of the relationship between his commitment to the ancestral ways and his conversion to Catholicism. Much ink has been spilt on this subject, often obscuring rather than clarifying the spiritual and intellectual issues at stake. The excerpts from Dr Brown’s letters, published here for the first time, provide a rich vein of material which no one engaged in the debate about Black Elk will henceforth be able to ignore. Of special interest are the tantalizing references in these letters to the medicine man’s relationship with his adopted son, Father Gall, a Trappist monk of the Abbaye Notre Dame de Scourmont in Belgium, and the brother of Frithjof Schuon.

This commemorative volume stands as an eloquent and beautiful tribute—to the primordial tradition which is its subject, to Black Elk whose testimony and example was a veritable font of wisdom for the author, and to Joseph Brown himself, in whom the Indians found a true friend and a scholar adequately equipped to expound that spiritual wisdom which is indeed the Indians’ most precious legacy.
