

Titus Burckhardt: A Great Friend of the American Indians

By Michael Fitzgerald

Titus Burckhardt's personal relationship with Islam and his extensive contributions to the traditional sciences and sacred art of all world cultures are well known.¹ His relationship to the American Indians, however, is not widely recognized. In a letter written shortly after Burckhardt's death, Frithjof Schuon (1907 - 1998) observed, "he was a great friend of the American Indians."² Schuon concluded, "The combination of heroism and of a priestly mentality in the Indians must have appealed to him and somehow corresponded to a personal affinity."

Burckhardt was responsible for two important contributions to the understanding of American Indian spirituality in the German speaking world. The first is his book, *The Wild West*, published in German as *Der wilde Westen*³, which includes quotations from some of the most well-known American Indian leaders and is heavily illustrated, including paintings of American Indians by Charles Russell, Frederick Remington and Frithjof Schuon. It also includes a 45 RPM recording of a Plains Indian Sun Dance song.

¹ For biographical information on Burckhardt see *The Essential Titus Burckhardt: Reflections on Sacred Art, Faiths, and Civilizations*, edited by William Stoddart, Bloomington, World Wisdom, 2003. See also the Titus Burckhardt Memorial Issue of *Studies in Comparative Religion*, 16: 1-2, 1984.

² Schuon's letter dated January 21, 1984 to Hans Küry from Bloomington.

³ *Der wilde Westen*. Olten and Freiburg: Urs Graf Verlag, 1966.

Schuon also noted that Burckhardt “had *Black Elk Speaks* published [in German].”⁴ *Black Elk Speaks* is the life story of a Lakota holy man and the best-selling book of all time about American Indians. Frithjof Schuon first drew Burckhardt’s attention to *Black Elk Speaks* in 1947, at a time when the book was long out of print⁵ and virtually no westerners were interested in Plains Indian spirituality. Undaunted, both men recognized that Black Elk (1863 – 1950) was a source of authentic Plains Indian spirituality and each set out to preserve the wisdom of the Lakota visionary for future generations.⁶ Burckhardt was instrumental in convincing the Swiss publisher Walter Verlag, where Burckhardt was a consultant and an author,⁷ to produce their first book about American Indians. He also reviewed the translation into German by Seigfried Lang. The German edition was published in 1955 with the title *I Call My People: Black Elk tells the story of the life of the Oglala Sioux*.⁸ Interest in American Indian spirituality emerged into the public mainstream in the 1960s, propelling Black Elk to the attention of millions of readers worldwide.

Titus Burckhardt also had a close personal relationship with Thomas Yellowtail (1903 - 1993), a Crow Sun Dance chief and one of the most beloved native leaders of the twentieth century.⁹ I was able to gain insights into the relationship between these two paragons and Burckhardt’s affinity with Plains Indian spirituality during a three-week trip with Burckhardt in the American West in June, 1979. Our journey took

⁴ Schuon’s letter dated January 21, 1984 to Hans Küry from Bloomington.

⁵ The original 1932 English language edition of *Black Elk Speaks* was a financial failure and the unsold inventory was quickly remaindered to used booksellers. The book would not be reprinted in English until 1961.

⁶ The story of Schuon’s role in preserving and perpetuating Lakota spiritual traditions and bringing both of Black Elk’s books to the attention of the francophone world is told in Fitzgerald, Michael, “New Light on Black Elk and *The Sacred Pipe*”, *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 41:4 (2017), p 71 – 91.

⁷ Burckhardt began his thirty-three year relationship with Walter Verlag in 1939 when he designed a cover and provided six illustrations to *Scipio und Hannibal: Kampf um das Mittelmeer* by Friedrich Donauer. Burckhardt published his third and last book with Walter Verlag in 1972, *Marokko, Westlicher Orient: en Reiseführer*.

⁸ The book’s original title is *Ich rufe mein Volk: Schwarzer Hirsch erzählt die Geschichte und Gesichte vom Leben und Untergang der Ogalalla-Sioux*. (*I Call My People: Black Elk tells the story of the life of the Oglala Sioux*). Walter Verlag, Olten and Lausanne 1955.

⁹ Yellowtail’s life story, including his efforts to perpetuate his tribal spiritual traditions, is told in *Yellowtail: Medicine Man and Sun Dance Chief*, Fitzgerald, Michael. Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

us through wilderness areas of Colorado and Wyoming before attending a Crow Sun Dance in Montana. Following the Sun Dance, we camped with Thomas Yellowtail in the Bighorn Mountains for four days before driving back to Colorado.

Burckhardt subsequently wrote his impressions of our trip, which were subsequently published in English as, “The Sun Dance”.¹⁰ The article begins by detailing his first meeting with Yellowtail in Paris in 1953, when Yellowtail invited both Burckhardt and Schuon “to celebrate the rite of the full moon” in a sacred prayer ceremony in Yellowtail’s hotel room. As Burckhardt explains, “Each of us later had a dream which symbolically revealed one or another aspect of the tradition of the Plains Indians.” Burckhardt then wrote about his relationship to Yellowtail, “The bond of friendship—and more than friendship—remains, and we have subsequently met one another on both continents more often than we would have believed possible.”¹¹

Burckhardt’s article goes on to present a lengthy description of the Crow Sun Dance before summarizing the wisdom that Yellowtail imparted around our campfire. What Burckhardt does not mention in his article, however, is that he spoke as often around the campfire as did Yellowtail.¹² Yellowtail’s discourses centered on the history of the Crow Sun Dance and his tribal traditions, while Burckhardt’s discussions invariably focused on one or another aspect of Frithjof Schuon’s life and philosophy, including a lengthy description of Schuon’s search for a spiritual master.¹³ What is most revealing about Burckhardt’s character is that he did not speak about himself, he spoke of Schuon. This incident also demonstrates Burckhardt’s great admiration for Schuon, a mutual

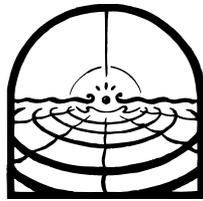
¹⁰ “The Sun Dance”, *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art*, edited by William Stoddart, SUNY, 1987.

¹¹ *IBID* p 165. Their next meeting was a weeklong visit in March 1954 in Lausanne, when the Yellowtails stayed in the Schuon home and Agnes and Donald Deernose, Yellowtail’s sister and her husband, stayed in the Burckhardt home.

¹² Burckhardt’s audience included a fourth member of our camping party, Rodney Frey, now a Professor Emeritus of Ethnography at The University of Idaho.

¹³ Frithjof Schuon’s life is the subject of two biographies: Aymard, Jean-Baptiste & Patrick Laude. *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings*. Albany: SUNY, 2004. Fitzgerald, Michael. *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*. Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2010. A list of scores of articles about Schuon’s life may be found on www.frithjofschuon.info.

To read the balance of this article, please subscribe to this volume.



SACRED WEB

A JOURNAL OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY

www.sacredweb.com