

## SOME RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS

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**I**NSTINCTIVELY inherent in the human breast has always been belief both in the existence of some original and all-powerful creative agency, and in the continuity of life somewhere else after its end on earth. It has been co-existent with the exigencies of life itself. Even had it not been inherent, life's ups and downs would have given it an early birth; for only some principle of such belief brought consolation and encouragement to troubled souls. The efficacy of its saving virtues did not depend so much upon its scientific soundness as it did upon the quality of the faith that was back of it. If that faith was strong, firm and steadfast, the belief back of it enabled its believer successfully to encounter great difficulties, bear-up under grave adversities and overcome stubborn obstacles. It was not only an innate shield of protection in times of danger but also a portable agency of courage and consolation that neither attracted the eyes of Envy, nor aroused the spirit of Jealousy. It was an ever-present help in times of need; and, if all forms of such belief had been completely taken away from any race or people, they might have lived to no purpose—remained like insensate animals. So that the world has owed much to its ideas on the subject of religion—its philosophy concerning a future life.

But, while such beliefs have been both perennial and universal, widely divergent conceptions concerning them have come to different peoples and at different times, those of the North American Indians being more or less weird and unique. All of their nations and tribes believed in a future life. "Even the grains of corn we plant under the earth grow up and become living things, and we Indians shall never die," one of their wise chiefs once said; and, without our Revelation to guide him, the world's wisest philosopher could

never have formulated nor given a better reason for the faith that was in him. But nearly all of the North American Indians conceived such a future life to be only an improved renewal of their earthly pursuits, pleasures, relations, activities and diversions. To them, God was the "Great Spirit," and Heaven was a "Happy Hunting-Ground." It was one of their beliefs that, after an earthly death and the departed soul had been awhile in the spirit-world, the soul could, if it so chose, return to earth and be born again, but not as a new-born infant by any means. That second-birth was a re-union with, and a re-animation of, the same bones with which the soul had been identified before death, and the re-animated creation was restored to its own particular tribe.

In keeping with that belief, it was the custom of some tribes to gather together and, then, to clean, dry and carefully preserve the bones of their departed ones. It was also a custom among some of the tribes to place such gathered, cleaned, dried and preserved bones into a sort of tomb, lined with beautiful flowers and a mound erected over it.

But nearly all of the different tribes, in burying their dead, entered with the bodies such articles as it was supposed they might have use for, either in the Spirit-World, or on their journeys to it. Believing that the soul's destination was the happy hunting-ground of the Spirit-World, they frequently let food for use on the way and weapons, or feminine finery, for use after arrival accompany the bodies in burial.

Their chief burial ceremony consisted of a solemn dance, after which the bereaved relatives cut themselves with edged instruments, blackened their faces and wailed, night and morning, in solitary places.

The most of them believed that the soul, at death, undertook a long journey, which had to be made before it could reach its destination. But their beliefs as to the exact character of such a journey and what beset the soul enroute differed somewhat among the different tribes. Some fancied that the soul had to cross a deep and swift stream over a bridge consisting of a single slender log. Others substituted for such a single slender log an enormous snake. But, in both cases, the journeying-soul had to combat with a fierce dog. Still others believed that the journeying-soul had to be ferried in a stone-canoe across such a stream, or a great expanse of water. But,

notwithstanding the belief in such post mortem difficulties and hazards, the North American Indian's beliefs provided no room whatever for a place of torment, or punishment, after an earthly death. No purgatory, no hades, no hell of fire and brimstone figured at all in his philosophy.

But one important belief, peculiarly their own, was in the duality of souls. In their philosophy of human existence, every sentient being was possessed of two souls, or two spirits—a greater and a lesser one, so separable that, during one's last-illness, the lesser soul was carried away by the denizens of the Ghost Land, while the greater one remained with the body till death, and then departed with the last breath. Nor did they differ materially in the characteristics of this dual-soul. It possessed neither the vital forces of the body nor the intelligent faculties of the mind. After it left the body, it became a sort of third entity without vital force or intelligent action. It became abstract in character, and was liable to get lost on its long journey.

And yet their code of belief provided means of separating the good from the bad in the hereafter. It did not do so by creating two separate and distinct heavens—one for the good and the other for the bad. The result was accomplished by means of partitions of degrees, which divided one and the same heaven into two realms. The one in which the less worthy were to be quartered was known as the Ghost-Land; and the one in which the highest and the best were rewarded was known as the Land of Supernatural People. The former was within the reach of all, but the latter was within the reach and attainment of only the limited few. And yet the two were not differentiated by any vastly different environments and activities after death. It was rather believed that the inhabitants who went from earth to both realms ate, drank, hunted, lived and amused themselves after death in keeping with the same fashions, customs, habits and characteristics that obtained among them during their earthly lives. It was a great change without material differences—another life at the end of a long journey.

The Indian-mind, in its original environments, was one of rich imagination, vast fertility and novel imagery. His conceptions and ideas were peculiar and his own—original. His philosophy and conceptions differed vitally from those of other races. His folklore, or mythology, was not inferior in the richness of its novelty

nor the vastness of its compass to that of any other untutored nation. And, while quite enough of it has already been collected and collated to give the North American Indian both a prominent and a permanent place in the library of the world's folk-lore, the task of making a complete collection of his philosophies, beliefs and made almost constantly; and we are all interested in them, if for no superstitions has not yet been completed. New additions are being other reason, because they are vitally and peculiarly American.