

THE RELIGIOUS CHARACTER OF THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS.

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THIS contribution which I offer concerning Indian religious character is more in the nature of homage for a people who have by their manly sincerity won my affection ; otherwise, there is very little which is new. The works of Parkman, Catlin, Inman, not to mention the rich archives of our great Smithsonian Institution to which so many well-known authorities have contributed, would make my few words seem infinitesimal had I other excuse for presenting them. I have known the Indians since when in my boyhood days I rode the saddle with the gallant "long knives" of the dear old 3rd U. S. Cavalry. I have met many tribes since then, but dearer to me than any other are my *Christian* friends of the Ojibways—warriors, orators, farmers, fathers, mothers, but all the "children of the same Father" !

Their religious character is one of their most conspicuous traits, and we are bound to acknowledge and respect them for it. A people devout, and with a strong and genuine belief in the "Great Spirit," in the "Mighty Creator," in the "loving attentive Father"—a people devoted to their country, to their nation, to their homes (humble though they be), to their families, and whose love for their children is beautiful beyond description,—such a people demonstrate beyond a doubt that their *religion* is practical, genuine, and worthy of recognition. These people are an inspiration to the palefaces who have met them !

When I asked my brave old friend Emmengahbowk, the beloved Indian priest of the Episcopal Mission at White Earth, Minnesota, what actuated him in risking his life to save the pale-face women and children from capture and death, he replied : "They have been kind to me, and I could not bear to have them

harméd, and it was my duty as a Christian." Can a man do more than risk or give his life for his friends?

The great good friend of the Indian, whom they call Straight-tongue, in his interesting book, *The Lights and Shadows of a Long Episcopate*, refers to his faithful priest Emmengahbowk :

"The wily chief Hole-in-the-Day had planned for a massacre at the same time on the northern border. But Emmengahbowk had sent a faithful messenger to Mille Sacs, to urge the Indians to be true to the whites and to send men to protect the fort. More than a hundred Mille Sacs warriors went at once to the fort,



MEE-SHEE-KEE-GEE-SHIG (DARK-LOWERING-DAY-CLOUDS-TOUCHING-ALL-AROUND).
Ojibway war chief. From a photograph in the author's possession.

but meantime Emmengahbowk himself walked all night down Gull River, dragging a canoe containing his wife and children, that he might give warning to the fort. Two of his children died from the exposure. Messages were also sent to the white settlers, and before Hole-in-the-Day could begin war the massacre was averted.¹

"I have never known an Atheist among the North American Indians. They believe unquestionably in a future life. They believe that everything in nature—the laughing water-fall, the rock, the sky, the forest—contains a divinity, and all mysteries are accounted for by these spirits, which they call manidos. When they first saw a telegraph they said : 'A spirit carries a message on the wires.'

¹ *Loc. cit.*, p. 110.

"The Ojibways are not idolaters, they never bow down nor worship any created thing. They have preserved a tradition of one Supreme God whom they call 'Kitche-manido'—the 'Uncreated,' or the kind, cherishing Spirit. They believe that the Grand Medicine was given them by an intermediate deity, the 'Grand Medicine-God.'"¹

When an Indian is thought to be at the point of death, his friends and relatives make careful preparation and nothing is omitted to ensure an honorable funeral ceremony. The dying Indian's hair is combed and oiled and braided, and he is dressed in his best clothing; if possible a new suit is provided—new blankets, leggings, and moccasins. His face is painted red (vermillion). It may be an hour, a day, or many days, before death takes place, but he is made ready for the final event with scrupulous care and attention in every detail.

"Indians are at all times prayerful and careful in their religious observances, but they are never more scrupulous about these matters than when starting on the war-path."² Those whom they have left behind pray for them at camp. The parents unwrap their sacred bundles and sing their sacred songs. Before eating, the warrior prays for the success of his undertaking. He must seek his success from Deity; without divine aid his task is hopeless, he can accomplish nothing. Each man is instructed before he sleeps to offer up his petition for strength and help and victory. The leader must offer his sacrifice for the command as well as for himself. Oftentimes the Indians continue all night in prayer, and burn incense of sweet pine and sweet grass to purify themselves. Often he offers sacrifices of food, tobacco, ornaments, some of his own hair, a scalp lock, or even a portion of his own flesh. He makes use of scourging and of incisions into his flesh, often causing sharp hæmorrhage, and even fiery coals are placed upon his naked skin to strengthen his powers of endurance and of self-control.

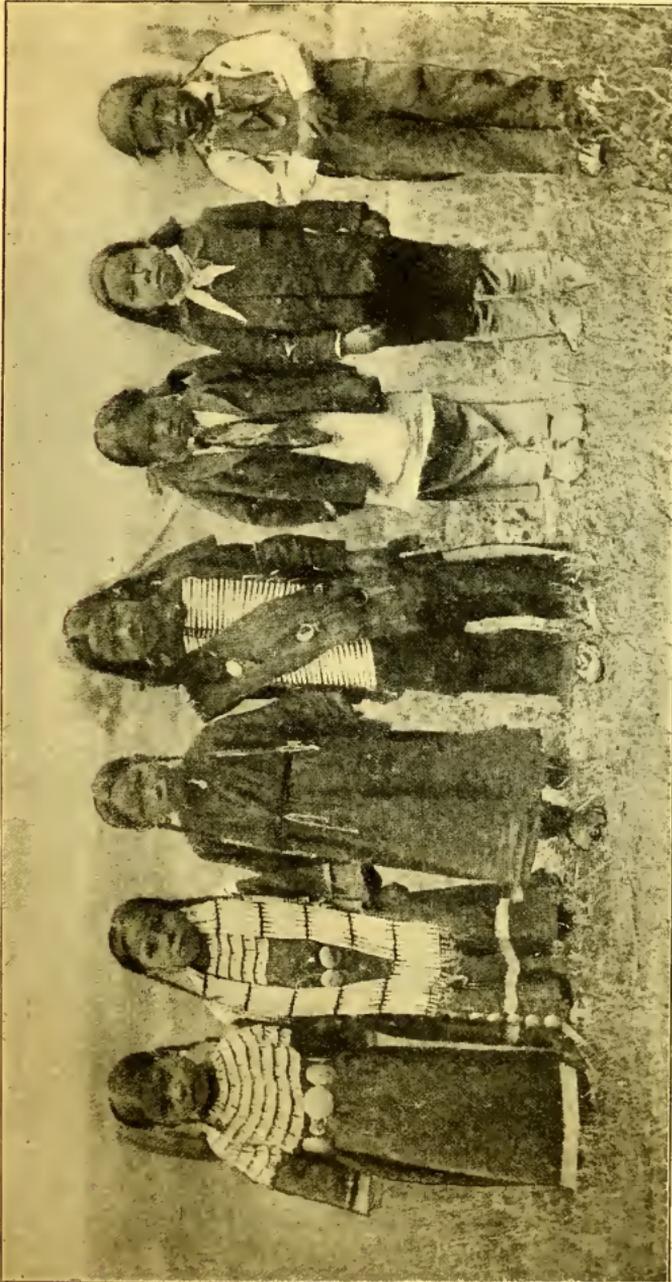
The Indians believe that when the spirit reaches its final destination, the great country, the happy hunting-ground, the final life-everlasting is forever and peacefully completed.

He forgets not his dead, this North American Indian, but often, not only once a year as on our All Souls' Day, but more frequently, they hold their rude commemorative ceremonies, and contribute from their slender means the best feast they can produce. Nor does his charity extend to the dead alone; he is peculiarly tender in his love for children, for the infirm, for the demented,

¹ Bishop Whipple, *Lights and Shadows*.

² Grinnell.

the wounded and the dying. If compassion is the test of true religion, the Indian deserves respect. Tales of his barbarity are in



WASOSO BOYS AND GIRLS.

Indian mothers are as fond of their children, and as happy in them, as white mothers are in theirs. The picture shows Indian children dressed in the best that wild life affords. (From *The Indian Missions*, by Bishop Hare.)

the excitement of war ; but how tame our Indians appear when compared with the cruel Chinese !

The Grand Medicine Man at the funeral ceremonies says in his address to the departed spirit, as he kindly spreads over the corpse the blanket :

"Do not look back, but look to your journey towards the setting sun. Let



THE REV. J. J. "EMMENGABOWK" (THE-MAN-WHO-STANDS-BEFORE-HIS-PEOPLE).
From Bishop Whipple's book, *Lights and Shadows of a Long Episcopate*.

nothing disturb or distract you or cause you to look away from your journey's path—Go—Go, in peace!"

Then another medicine man repeats this; then all in unison sing these words:

"I walk on peacefully for my long journey of life,
Soon, soon to reach the end of my journey,
Soon to reach my friends who have gone before me."

When this chant is ended, the Grand Medicine Man calls in a loud voice :

"Nuh—gah—kuk—nuw
Nuh—gah—kuk—nuw."

"An Indian burial is most touching. If of a child, the mother places the playthings of the little one in the birch-bark coffin, and strews flowers in the grave. She then makes an image of the baby, ornamenting the head with feathers, and



ST. COLUMBUS INDIAN EPISCOPAL CHURCH.

White Earth Reservation, Minnesota. This church cost \$12,000. The money was raised mostly by the efforts of Emmengahbowk and Minageeshig, who travelled in the Eastern States for that purpose.

carries it with her for one year. If of a chief or warrior, the body is arrayed as if for the chase or war-path with bows and arrows and medicine-bag by his side. The favorite dog is killed, that it may accompany him on his journey. The orator of the band then addresses the silent figure, telling of his deeds of bravery, of how he pursued his enemies and brought back their scalps, of his wise words of counsel and acts of kindness, and how having left this world for the Happy Hunting-grounds, he will find the trail a narrow one, and will be tempted by evil spirits to

turn aside, but that he must be deaf, for if he stops to listen he will miss the trail and be lost. ¹

Lt. Totten of the United States army believed our North American Indians to be the descendants of the lost tribes of Israel. ² Certainly their traditions point to the region of Behring's Strait as the place from whence they came and whither they are wending. But whether their customs and their beliefs are merely human nature, showing out in redskin as well as in paleface, there is a start-



BISHOP HARE ORDAINING TWO INDIANS.

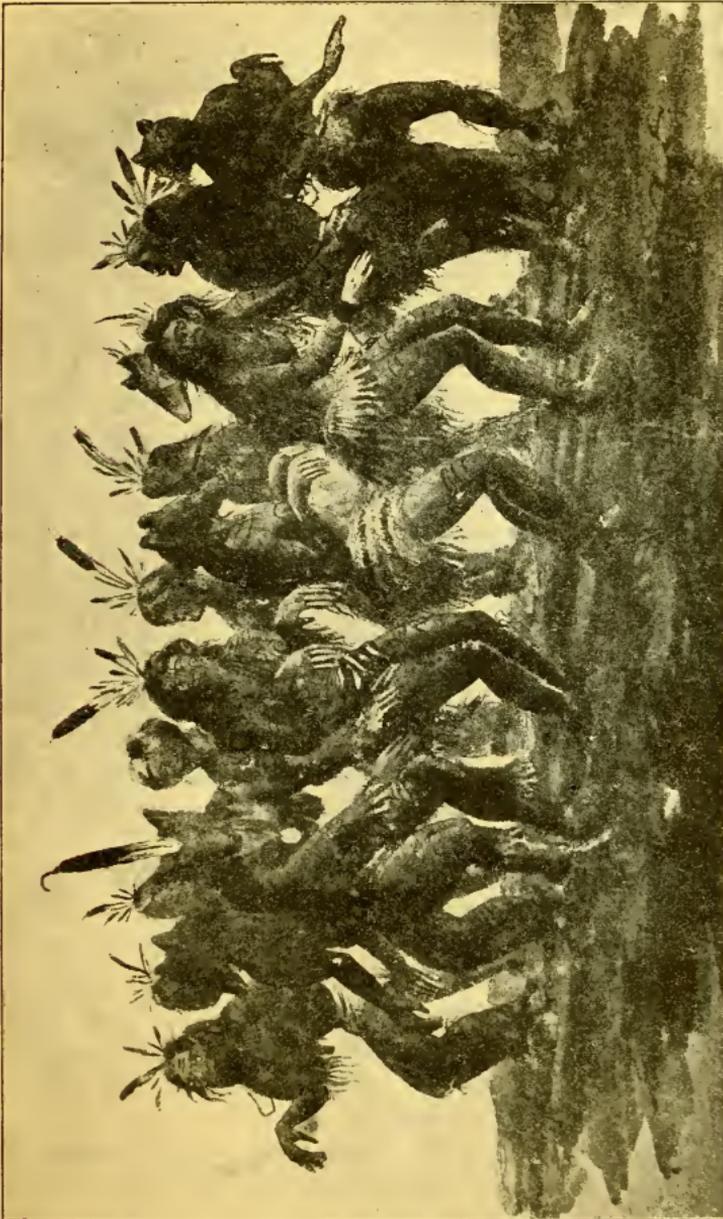
The ordination took place at the Convocation of 1898. The two candidates are kneeling in the center.

ling similarity in Indian laws of hygiene, of cleanliness, and customs of the men and women, to say nothing of their reverence for the Great and Sacred Name, which suggest Israelitish origin. And the "Chosen Race" need not be ashamed of them! The attitude of worship, the bowed head, the instantly extended palms when the

¹ Bishop Whipple, *Lights and Shadows*.

² There is no ethnological, historical, or psychological ground that we know of, for this fantastic hypothesis, the mention of which is to be interpreted here merely as affording Dr. Parker occasion to introduce his references to the natural coincidences of religious myths, customs, etc.—*Editor*.

sacred Deity is referred to, are surely remarkable. What other Aborigines are so devout and sincere, so brave in suffering, so



AN INDIAN BEAR DANCE.

This picture represents one of the peaceful dances. It gives a good idea of wild Indian life in its milder and unwarlike phases, showing the raw material with which the Missions had to begin.

fearless in battle, so loving to children, so faithful in friendship, so unselfish, and so true?

The Indian's heaven we know as his happy hunting-grounds,

—a country of wide green and cool, clear streams, where the buffalo and other game are always plenty and fat, where the lodges (tepees) are ever new and white, the ponies always swift, the war parties successful, and the people happy.

Sometimes the Indian, "When the slanting rays of the Western sun tinge the autumnal haze with red, beholds dimly far away the white lodges of such a happy camp and sees thro' the mist and dust ghostly warriors returning from the hunt, leading horses as in olden times, with dripping meat and with shaggy skins."¹

This happy land is usually located *above* the sky, but with many tribes it is to the west beyond the *Gitche gummee*, the Big Sea Water. But wherever the home of the "Almighty Creator," the "Great Spirit," may be, his Indian children love best to call him by the endearing title of "Father." Although called by this name which the Saviour taught His followers to utter, whether of the white, the yellow, the black, or the red peoples, the Indian regards this "Father" as omnipotent, beneficent, the Supreme Ruler. Everything is within His Holy Keeping, just as *we* have been taught that no sparrow falls to the ground without *our* Heavenly Father's consent.²

Resting upon His fatherhood, nothing is undertaken without praying for His assistance. When the pipe is lighted, a few whiffs are blown upwards as incense. Some of the food is sacrificed to Him. Burnt offerings are still continued in His honor, a part of the first deer, the first buffalo, and we might almost expect to find their rule in the words of the Bible,—Whatever we do, do all to the glory of God. The words may be absent, but the practice is there.

"Father above" is the counterpart of "Our Father who art in Heaven," for do they not say, "Father who is in *all* places," "The Heavens are Thy house; we, Thy children, live within (or beneath)"?

"Father of the dead, You see us."

If the Indians have other gods, they use them merely by praying to them, "intercede for us," "pray for us" to *the* God, the "Heavenly Father."

Atius Tirana is Father Spirit. The Indian blows the first four smokes to Atius, then four to the earth, then four to each of the cardinal points.

The young warrior is advised: "My son, when thou smokest

¹ Grinnell.

² St. Matthew x. 29.

in thy pipe, always blow four smokes to the east,—to the night." The Indian regards the east as the place of night, *it comes* from the east!

The Indian is taught that he must offer sacrifices and burnt offerings to the Almighty—humbling himself and imploring His aid—if he would attain success in the world or in the life "*everlasting*." The Indian states his belief in his prayer: "My Father who dwelleth in Heaven and in all places, it is through *You* that I am living"; and it is the equivalent of our "In Him we live and have our being."

Longfellow, in *Hiawatha*, has beautifully told the story of Indian worship and belief. Pathetic beyond description is the tender, loving care bestowed upon the dead,—the solemn service, the sweet hymns, the birch-covered coffin, the hemlock-lined grave, the gentle depositing of the earth, and last, but not least, the little sheltering house above with its small window and the cross of hope rising from its eastern gable.

How beautiful in Longfellow's *Hiawatha* is the picture of the Indian's Heavenly Father, the Almighty Creator. One picture in His majesty touching the mountains, and the other,

"Gitche Manitou, the Mighty,
The creator of the nations,
Looked upon them with compassion,
With paternal love and pity."

And then the poet tells in his matchless verse such a story of Indian belief in the Almighty Creator that one feels as if the Indians should send missionaries to the palefaces!

Surely, a people with no "cuss" words, and who never mention the name of Deity except in reverence, and with bowed heads and palms extended outward, are justly entitled to respect. It is indeed inspiring to see these people we call savages going with their humble petitions to their Heavenly Father, pleading for help in their distress when all earthly help has failed.

"Gitche Manitou, the Mighty,
Cried he with his face uplifted
In that bitter hour of anguish,
Give your children food, O Father,
Give us food, or we must perish."

This prayer from the *Famine* is one of Longfellow's greatest pictures in his unrivalled collection. The poem of *Hiawatha* is best appreciated by those who know the Indian. The "parting"

is a picture with which to close our quotation. "Westward, Westward," is the word ever on their lips so mournful and so prophetic.

"Thus departed Hiawatha,
Hiawatha the Beloved,
In the glory of the sunset,
In the purple mists of evening,
To the regions of the home-wind
Of the north-west wind Kee-way-din,
To the islands of the Blessed,
To the kingdom of Ponemah,
To the land of the Hereafter."