

THE RELIGIOUS SPIRIT OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN.

AS SHOWN IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF HIS RELIGIOUS RITES
AND CUSTOMS.¹

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1. When unaffected by European ideas, the great majority of the American Indians of both continents are unquestionably animists. Indeed, all of them must be so classed if we take the word 'animist' in the broad sense given to it by Mr. Tylor; and even after we have made—as we must make—some discrimination of the very different grades of speculative power which the term implies, it is still to be borne in mind that only in a broad way do these grades distinguish different races and peoples. While, of course, the lowest tribes are fairly uniform in their ways of thought, yet the most advanced peoples, as those of Mexico and Peru, are by no means wholly freed from primitive ideas; along with philosophic theologies they retain instinctive superstitions, and their mental attitudes (like our own) must be conceived rather as a congregation of vaguer and distincter insights than as systematic unfoldments of their clearest point of view. The human mind may be likened to a forest tree: at the summit, in the clear light of day, is the greenest and most vigorous foliage, the proper source of the tree's strength; but far down the shade are still verdant the boughs of an earlier growth; and the lower trunk is still cumbered with dying branches and marked by ancient scars.

2. Primitive or *instinctive animism* (the "zoönism" of Mr. Stuart-Glennie, the "hecastotheism" of Major Powell) is that stage where nature is simply regarded as living, in all her manifestations, without reflection, without personification; the inanimate has never

¹This paper is an expansion of the article "Communion with Deity—American," written for Hastings' *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*.

suggested itself as a possibility, and the feeling of nature's animation has never risen to the idea of personality.

Typical of such a mental state are the almost unorganized hordes of wandering savages of the South American forests. Doubtless the rivers, trees, and beasts which form their environing world seem to them endowed with the same sort of irresponsible instincts and desires as their own, but it is misleading to speak of such a consciousness as a recognition of spiritual life or as in any distinctive sense religious. Garcilasso de la Vega, describing the Indians of pre-Inca times, says² that among these tribes were Indians "little better than tamed beasts and others who were worse than the most savage animals." They adored, he says, herbs and flowers and trees, beasts, birds, reptiles, fishes, huge stones and little pebbles, high mountains, caverns, deep precipices, the earth and its rivers, fire, natural prodigies. But there were some, such as the Chirihuanas on the borders of Peru, who worshiped nothing at all, unmoved to the adoration of a higher power even by fear. It is indeed difficult to discover much evidence of religious sensibility in some of the inferior peoples, though the difficulty is probably due rather to lack of conceptual power than want of motive. Thus, the Fuegian Yaligan are said to have no real notion of spirits; in the darkness they sometimes imagine themselves assailed by the Walapatu, but it is only the more lively-minded who know these as disembodied ghosts, for the rest the Walapatu are merely warriors of the neighboring tribe.

But any recognition of external powers is a beginning in the ideal definition of environment and the classification of nature. It is already an important conceptual step, following which the further step of endeavoring to appease or win over such of these powers as may be thought potent for ill or good is not long in taking. Rude forms of sacrifice develop—the exposure of food offerings (perhaps suggested by the provisioning of the dead, for this custom prevails even among the wandering Amazonians), the slaughter of prisoners (where the more primitive self-glory of killing may be the basis), and even the offering up of one's own kin and offspring in times of stress.

Human instincts are complex. It is practically impossible to tell whether the elementary feeling in sacrifice is desire to win aid by pleasuring the higher power, or desire to propitiate by depriving one's self. The two desires are at the root of very distinct religious

²*History of the Incas*, I, ix. Garcilasso was himself half Indian, and writing as he did within a generation of the Spanish conquest, his work is our most valuable single document on the Inca civilization.

developments—worship and penance, communion and atonement,—but at their source they cannot be clearly disentangled. If fear be the primal religious emotion, placation of the feared power is doubtless the fundamental rite; yet even placation may be interpreted as a form of pleasuring. Cruel himself, primitive man deems other powers to take delight in suffering, and so, in the presence of danger, inflicts loss or pain upon himself to satisfy the malevolent might which he feels to be working against him, on the principle that homœopathic application sates or deceives the enemy, and so brings immunity. The Arawaks, before shooting the rapids of a river, inflict severe punishment upon themselves by putting red pepper into their eyes to satisfy the evil waters, and it is quite possible that the Fuegians, said to have thrown their children into stormy seas to lighten their boats, did so rather as an act of propitiation of the watery demon. Before setting out on the warpath, many North American tribes were accustomed to make offerings of parts of their bodies, as bits of flesh, toes, fingers, or to subject themselves to severe tortures. The sacrifice of children by their parents or of a tribesman by the tribe in case of a calamity, such as an epidemic, occurred in both Americas. Voluntary human sacrifice is also recorded; enthusiasts among the Guanches are said to have offered their lives to the mountain they worshiped, and Garcilasso states that Indians of certain tribes worshiping the tiger (jaguar), the lion (puma), or the bear, meeting these animals, threw themselves upon the earth to be unresistingly devoured by their gods. The latter of these practices (perhaps not altogether credible) seems to point to totemic cults rather than to animistic sacrifice, primitive and unadorned; yet it should not be confused with human sacrifice or voluntary suicide at the graves of the dead, both of wide-spread occurrence, for the motive underlying these customs is one of service (“tendance,” as it has been called) rather than propitiation of malevolent powers and aversion of ill.

3. Communion with a superhuman, or an extrahuman, world is, broadly speaking, a pragmatic definition of that world. The rites and practices by means of which man seeks to influence or to come into relation with powers other than human are the surest interpreters of his conceptions of those powers. A food offering implies a deity endowed with appetite, and if the food offering must be made before the human worshipers may partake of food, there is the further implication that the deity is thoughtful of his precedence—is, in fact, a jealous god. The fear that seeks to satisfy with blood the ill-wreaking powers of nature ascribes to

those powers a ferocious delight in cruelty, and eventually personifies them under the hideous forms of bugbears and ogres, as the man-devouring monsters of the Central American pantheons.

For not only are rites and practices interpreters, they are also in large part the framers of the conceptions by which they are eventually justified to reason. Ideas as well as myths are ætiological; conception follows action, and in religion the rite is prior to the theology. Sacrifice is characteristic even in the early aniconic stage of animism; gifts are offered to rivers and trees and hills—whatever powers and patrons the animist would placate or win—in the instinctive belief that these objects are endowed with human appetites and likings. But as thought gains in clearness, conceptual deities evolve from nature; objects which have all along been treated as human in feeling are inevitably conceived and represented as human in form; anthropomorphic theology follows from animistic instinct. Thus, the Mexican *Tlaloc*, the rain-giving mountains, take form as man-headed pyramids, colored the blue of the sky above, the green of verdure below, and eventually concentrate into the god Tlaloc. Cuecaltzin, the fire, the flame, “the ancient god,” worshiped in the simple hearthfire, becomes anthropomorphized as Ixcocauhqui,³ “Yellow Face,” and is given a manlike image. Even the sun—of all nature divinities most fixed and impressive in its natural form—becomes man-faced in Peruvian temple-images, thus outwardly symbolizing the mental iconography inevitable to animistic thought when it comes to conceptual realization.

4. The second stage in this conceptual development, treading close on the heels of primitive animism, is what may be termed “*fetishistic animism.*” Fetishism is merely highly localized animism. Experience early teaches men that certain natural objects or powers are more potent than others, and again there are natural objects impressive by reason of unusual appearance or given special significance from some chance happening. Should such objects be fixed or beyond control, as a tree, a waterfall, a mountain, the sun, the winds, they are on the way to become nature deities; but should they be portable, or at least appropriable, by the individual, they take rank as fetishes as soon as his special regard is devoted to them. But that there is no hard and fast line between deified nature powers and fetishes is shown by the intermediate examples: thus, one Ojibwa is said to have worshiped a certain boulder which he

³ For the spelling of Mexican names I follow the usage in Jourdanet and Siméon's scholarly edition of Bernardino de Sahagun, *Histoire générale des choses de la Nouvelle Espagne*, Paris, 1880.

saw move of itself, while another had for his special tutelary a birch tree in which he had heard an unusual sound. Schoolcraft states that the Indians propitiated "wood-dryads" at certain *consecrated spots*, with offerings of tobacco, vermilion, red cloth, or any other



ZUNI CAVE SHRINE, WITH PRAYER PLUME OFFERINGS.
(From 23d RBEW. M. C. Stevenson.)

treasure, and he also states that the Indians adore curiously wrought boulders having the essential character of idols; these are "sometimes distinguished by the use of pigments," but are "generally oddly-shaped water-worn masses, upon which no chisel or labor of any kind has been employed."

The fetish, then, may be merely a natural object of striking appearance or associations, or it may be such an object more or less modified by human art. In any case, its use denotes a distinct advance in the systematization of ideas. It represents a concentration of religious experience, and so becomes a concrete symbol.

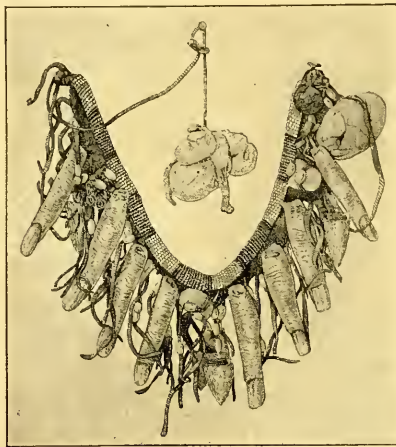


ZUNI CAVE SHRINE WITH IMAGES REMOVED FOR PHOTOGRAPHING.
(From 23d RBEW. M. C. Stevenson.)

It is regarded as a powerful being, not merely for the life which is in itself, but for the vicarious function by which its possessor is able to control other powers; indeed, its only virtue is this outer control, and the savage who has lost faith in its power to bring him good

disregards it at once.⁴ Thus the fetish already stands for experience outside itself and has in it the germ of the true symbol. It is a key to the powers of nature, by the mere holding of which the possessor believes that he is enabled to influence their action.

In strict sense the "fetish" is distinguished from the "idol" as the fact from the symbol, the living body of the god from his mere portrait. But the distinction is by no means absolute; we have seen that the fetish is already an inchoate symbol, and, on the other hand, the image of a god seldom or never entirely loses the odor of sanctity. The development of fetishism toward symbolism follows yet other paths. In the first place, it runs into the purely symbolic art



FETISH NECKLACE OF HUMAN FINGERS; CHEYENNE.
(After Bourke.)

of magic. On the magic principle that like influences like, a fetish representing some animal is deemed to give the possessor a special control over, or success in the capture of that animal, or to give him its qualities. Characteristic contents of the Indians' "medicine bags" are skins or parts of animals or their dried bodies, and from these to painted or beaded representations is but a step. As a rule the contents of the "medicine bag," though they may be bartered, are a constant possession; the painting, of course, is a matter of repetition and is varied to suit the occasion, so that in a lacrosse game described by Dr. Eastman the runners painted themselves with

⁴ A pathetic illustration is the case of one of the women wounded at Wounded Knee. She wore a "ghost shirt," and when told that it must be removed, said: "Yes, take it off. They told me a bullet would not go through. Now I don't want it any more."

representations of birds, of fleet animals, of the lightning—various emblems of swiftness. It should be noted, too, that, in general, as the symbolic character of the fetish gains, its special sanctity and value diminish; in the direction of magic it develops into the mere talisman.

Fetishes in general among the Indians are alienable and are often material of barter, but there is a special type of charm which is as fixed for the individual as the totem is for the clan. This is the personal tutelary sought during a period of fasting at the age of puberty—a custom common to many North American tribes. The tutelary might be a stone bearing a rude likeness to some bird or animal, in which case all creatures of that kind were regarded as having the finder under their protection, or it might be some natural object thought to have made a special sign, as with the two Ojibwas cited above, but most commonly it was some object seen in a dream or vision. In such case it was represented by an image or painting, and so came to acquire the representative character of the true symbol.

The development into symbolism takes also a mythological form. As the agent of a natural power, the fetish comes to be looked upon as the image of the essential nature of this power, which thus acquires a mythologic personality from the very concreteness of its representative. It is very difficult for man (primitive or civilized) to hold clear the distinction of symbol and symbolized, and it is only obvious that the development of symbolic expression should have peopled the world with all manner of quaint personalities. When by patent associations the Hopi represents the sky by an eagle and the earth by a spider, it is a natural confusion which presently names the sky "Eagle" and the earth "Spider" and identifies them as mythologic beings of eagle and spider character.

5. It is plain that the stage of instinctive animism is passed. The individual object is no longer animate in its own character, but as the sign or abode of a more far-reaching power. Nature is no longer regarded as a swarming of multitudinous living beings, but as the abiding place of indwelling potencies. Personification and mythology have begun to play their part.⁵ There is a seen and an unseen world, and the latter is the world of wills. Nature is partitioned among personalities, and gods have begun to be.

⁵ The Zuñi myth which accounts for the character of stone fetishes by a story of the transformation of living beings to this form illustrates the transition. The more primitive belief in the actual vitality of the fetish is seen to be inadequate to experience, but yet the power of the fetish must be explained; whence its life is referred to a past time.

This higher *mythologic animism* undoubtedly represents a great imaginative advance, reflecting the development of the abstractive faculty which mental symbolism implies. It is the foundation of polytheistic philosophy and the ideal basis of the complicated pantheons of Mexico and Peru.

But we should not forget that the attainment of clear personification is by no means uniform in the same race or the same experience. The older and vaguer animism, a trifle philosophized perhaps, remains still the normal attitude toward the comparatively unnoted or unspecialized mass of experience. This cannot be better illustrated than by the North American doctrine of a type of nature power variously known as *manitou* (Algonquian), *orenda* (Iroquoian), and *wakanda* (Siouan). The *manitou*, says Schoolcraft,⁶ is "a spiritual or mysterious power. . . . Manitous, except those of the tutelary class, are believed to be generally invisible and immaterial, but can assume any form in the range of animate creation and even, when the occasion calls for it, take their place among inanimate forms." George Copway, one of the first Indians of the north to write about the Indian people, describes the conception of his own tribe, the Ojibwa:⁷ "The skies were filled with the deities they worshiped, and the whole forest awakened with their whispers. The lakes and streams were the places of their resort, and mountains and valleys alike their abode." And while these nature spirits, headed by the Great Spirit, their general guardian, included many that might properly be ranked as deities, they dwindled to mere sprites having only a group or class character—powers rather than personalities—curiously conceived as minims in size. "During a shower of rain thousands of them are sheltered in a flower. The Ojibwa, as he reclines beneath the shade of his forest trees, imagines these gods to be about him. He detects their tiny voices in the insect's hum. With half-closed eyes he beholds them sporting by thousands on a sun-ray."

J. N. B. Hewitt, an Iroquois, has given us a more philosophical analysis of the belief.⁸ "All things were thought to have life and to exercise will, whose behests were accomplished through *orenda*—that is, through magic power reputed to be inherent in all things. Thus all phenomena, all states, all changes, and all activity were

⁶ *Information Respecting the History, Conditions and Prospects of the Indians of the United States*, Philadelphia, 1853.

⁷ *The Ojibway Nation*, London, 1850.

⁸ "Iroquoian Cosmology" in *21st Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology*, Washington. Future references to the *Reports* in this article will be abbreviated "RBEW."

interpreted as the results of the exercise of magic power directed by some controlling mind. . . . The wind was the breath of some person. The lightning was the winking of some person's eyes. . . . Beasts and animals, plants and trees, rocks, and streams of water, having human or other effective attributes or properties in a paramount measure, were naturally regarded as the controllers of those attributes or properties, which could be made available by orenda or magic power. And thus began the reign of the beast gods, plant gods, tree gods, and their kind. The signification of the Iroquoian word usually rendered into English by the term "god" is "disposer," or "controller." This definition supplies the reason that the reputed controllers of the operations of nature received worship and prayers. To the Iroquois god and controller are synonymous terms."

It will be seen that we have here a point of view that fluctuates between a material view of nature powers and a purely spiritual or psychological view; and in proportion as the conception lifts itself free from the material prepossessions of mere sensation, there is gain in mythical distinctness and personality. Probably the *kacinas* of the Hopis and other Pueblo Indians represent a clear advance in the direction of mythical and conceptual definiteness, while yet retaining evident traces of the more naive animism. J. W. Fewkes, the authority on this subject, describes them as follows:⁹ "The term *kacina* was originally limited to the spirits, or personified medicine power of the ancients, personifications of a similar power in other objects have likewise come to be called *kacina*. Thus the magic power or medicine of the sun may be called *kacina*, or that of the earth may be known by the same general name. The term may also be applied to personations of these spirits or medicine potencies by men or their representation by pictures or graven objects." It is to be noted that each *kacina* has its recognized symbolic form, that it is clear personification; while the *manitou* is always a god *in pössc* and may be a god or godling *in actu*, the *kacina* is never less than the latter. The development of the Mexican rain-god *Tlaloc* from the rain-giving mountains, *tlaloque*, which has been noted above, is a further illustration of the advance from a vague and general animation of nature to concrete personification; and in the manifold applications of the Peruvian term *huaca*, broadly equivalent to the Greek *ἄγος*, we can clearly infer a pervasive, naive animism preceding the highly symbolic religion of the Incas.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

⁹"Hopi Kacinas," 21st RBEW.