

The Realm of the Spirit

Belief in spiritual beings is well-nigh universal: both the highest and lowest forms of religion usually include a god or gods — some good and some evil. The sense of dependence varies with the degree of intelligence, knowledge, and training of the people. Among highly civilized people it is restricted largely to the moral realm and to the future life. Primitive people, lacking scientific explanation of physical phenomena, such as the seasons, wind, floods, plagues, earthquakes, thunder, disease, and death, ascribe them to supernatural forces.

Of the highest concept of religion, ability to grasp the infinite and the eternal, the Indian had little appreciation. He did, however, believe in a Great Spirit, known by many names, who was the creator and ruler of the universe. This Great Spirit, Getci Munito, was a good spirit, and the Indians both feared and revered him. There were also good and evil spirits which inhabited the woods, waterfalls, winds, animals, and nearly everything which the Indians saw or felt.

Since the Indians relied entirely upon oral narratives, it is not surprising that there were numerous creation stories among the various tribes. The main points in these stories, however, are surprisingly similar. The Great Spirit created the world as an

island in a great sea. This world was inhabited by a race of giants, called Aiyamwoy, by monsters who dwelt under the sea, by great snakes, by fierce submarine panthers, and by the Thunder Birds, called Nenemikiwuk, who were the gods of war and of storms. Lightning was caused when the Thunderers blinked their eyes. Between these monsters there was constant warfare. The Nenemikiwuk preyed upon the serpents with thunderbolts. That is why snakes were not desired about the lodge, because lightning often strikes places where they lurk.

In the course of time the Great Spirit created the earth, the grandmother of all living things. The grass and herbs were the hairs of her head. Then animals were created and finally the Great Spirit took clay and made man, but the first men were both wicked and foolish. According to the Winnebago, the Great Spirit then took a piece of his own heart and made a heart for man, who thus became wise above all the other animals, but he made a heart for woman out of a piece of ordinary flesh and she therefore remained foolish.

Of the warfare between men and the evil creatures which inhabited the world there are many stories. Most of them agree that Grandmother Earth gave birth to a daughter and that this daughter became the mother of a son. The name given to this boy, who was also the son of the Great Spirit, varies, a common form being Wisaka. When this semi-divine youth grew to manhood he waged incessant war on

the evil monsters. Again and again they tried to kill Wisaka but succeeded only in slaying his younger brother who became the ruler of the land of the dead. Ice covered the earth, but Wisaka survived, together with plants, animals, and men. The monsters likewise sent a flood upon the earth, but again failed to destroy Wisaka. Finally, the evil powers decided to compromise with him and inducted him into the Medicine Lodge, giving to mankind long life and immortality. It was Wisaka, too, who brought fire and tobacco to man from the abode of the gods. Having taught people how to live, he withdrew to the North where he still resides; but some day, they say, he will return.

Around these events the Indians gradually developed a great many myths. Some of them resemble our fairy tales, a favorite hero being some poor young man who, by the assistance of some supernatural power, is enabled to perform magic feats, such as supplying game in great abundance to a starving village. As a reward he marries the chief's daughter. Other stories have a more sinister implication. The chief character may be an evil spirit who goes about the world either in human form or in the guise of some animal. This puckish hero delights in performing tricks, most of which are malicious. A favorite device is tricking people into eating the flesh of their relatives. Sometimes these stories were of an obscene character.

In nearly all these mythological tales, animals

played an important part. Indeed, the whole religious life of the Indians was strongly animistic. Like children, who see nothing unreasonable in Peter Rabbit or Brer Fox, the Indians believed that not only animals, but trees, rocks, the sun, rivers, mountains, and all other things were sentient beings.

Perhaps it was this conception of existence which was responsible for the clan or gens system of the Indians. In the former, inheritance was on the mother's side, while in the gens descent devolved through the male line. Practically all the Indians who lived in Iowa had the gentile system. This was partly religious and partly social. The founder of the gens was supposed to be some animal such as the owl, bear, or wolf in the form of a man. The Sacs, for example, were divided into twelve gentes, the Foxes into eight. Marriage within the gens was prohibited. Each gens held certain ceremonies in common and had sacred packs or bundles containing objects which had magic power to protect the members. In addition children born into a tribe were generally assigned alternately to one of two bands. The Sacs called these the Kishko and the Oskush.

The Indians believed that men could influence the spirits by fasting, by concentration of mind or meditation, by sacrifices, by ceremonial rituals, and by incantations. An Indian boy was taught that he must fast until he secured a sign from the Great Spirit, usually in the form of a dream. Sacred bundles with magic objects were usually carried on

the hunt or warpath, much as the Children of Israel carried the Ark of the Covenant. If the signs were unfavorable, a war party would return home, saying the "medicine was bad".

Sacrifice might take the form of giving away personal belongings, self-mutilation, or the killing of a prisoner or an animal. During the winter of 1842-1843, for example, the Sac and Fox Indians suffered from the extreme cold. They were told by their medicine man or prophet that they were being punished by the Great Spirit because they had sold their lands to the white people. To placate the offended deity, the Indians tied a live dog to a tree, leaving his legs free. To the toe of each foot was suspended a medicine bag, and the poor dog was left to die and the body to waste away. Probably by that time the weather warmed up.

The Indians believed implicitly in a life after death, though their idea of the future existence never got much beyond a land where game was plentiful. For certain favored individuals, such as the shamans or medicine men and the warriors, the Indians believed in the reincarnation of the spirit, although this might be in the form of an animal. The soul of a dead person was supposed to linger about the body for at least four days. Sometimes this period lasted until a person was adopted in the family to take the place of the dead.

Funeral ceremonies included a feast and the sacrifice of certain animals. A horse was sometimes

killed, that it might bear the spirit to the happy hunting ground. Dogs also were frequently sacrificed at the grave to accompany the spirit. Tobacco, the smoke of which was incense to the Great Spirit, was left at almost every grave. Some thought that little children could not find their way to the land of the dead and therefore their spirits remained where they were buried.

Of course the Indians had no written account of their religion. The stories were handed down by the old men and women. Special power dwelt in the "medicine men" who were at the same time, magicians, priests, teachers, sorcerers, and physicians. Women sometimes occupied this position. Such persons were envied, respected, and feared but were generally disliked by most of the Indians.

The religion of the Indians went very little into the field of morality as we know it. Their social standards were simple: do good to the people in your tribe and especially those of your own gens. All others were to be treated as possible enemies — and there was no commandment to "love your enemies".

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