

Religious Beliefs of Prehistoric Man of North America

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No race of people as far as we know has ever existed but had some form of worship or some God or gods to whom they bowed in reverence. In spite of the fact that recent writers have attempted to prove that the American Indian was atheistic in tendency, their legends and traditions prove otherwise. Through these, we find that their beliefs followed the same general line of all other religious creeds. In a way all religious creeds follow the same general scheme. They atone for the origin of the earth, the sea, the celestial bodies, the animal and plant life, and finally for the presence of man, all of which is controlled by some mighty personage who lives in the great beyond. Laws have been set up regulated by the divine will, the keeping of which insures the individual of living in a ripe, peaceful old age and when the mortal body ceases to function, he is transported into another world to live for eternally.

In view of the fact that over one hundred tribes lived in North America before the coming of the White Man, that each of these tribes varied slightly or extremely in belief and ceremonies, it is impossible to give more than a brief review of their beliefs in regard to the creation, their ceremonies to propitiate their Gods and their views of immortality.

The handbook of the American Indian recognizes five large subdivisions:

1. the Eskimo area in which the predominance of opinion holds man in the Herd role. Very little tradition is devoted to the animal but when so, he is linked to man.

2. the North Pacific Coast area, where there has been built a large cycle of transformed myths, relating to that region, the origin of man, the whole of which is loosely knit together in a disconnected mass of folktales.

3. the Western Plateau and the Mackenzie Basin, where emphasis is laid on tales of animal in which they are linked to present day conditions. They are not closely connected and are contradictory in character.

4. the California Area, the mythologies of which are grouped around the theme of creation by will power.

5. the region of the Great Plains, the Eastern Woodlands and the Arid Southwest in which the myths are systematized in the form of a well developed ritual.

Early man of North America was a dweller of the forests, rivers, mountains and hills and so his God or Gods were those of nature. He was a creature of his environment. Caves, mountains, curious rocks, waterfalls and in fact any object that excited his curiosity (especially among those of the Great Lakes Region) was supposed by them to be the dwelling place of a Spirit. These imaginary deities became the object of dread or veneration. To these an offering of tobacco was given, not as an atonement for sin, but to obtain temporal advantage or to avert the anger of the spirits. From this same source we have recorded that the sun, moon and stars were also adored. Usually the natives of this region believed in the existence of one great Spirit, with innumerable subordinate deities who have particular control over their destinies. They believe in the existence of evil spirits and made offerings to appease their anger.

The Zunis of the West worshipped a God who was the Maker and Container of All, who created the primal fogs and mists and took upon himself the form of the Sun with all its personal attributes, then by his own bright

ness and light he thickened the primal mists into water thus creating the sea. Out of his own flesh he founded the Sea. Out of the Sea came Mother Earth.

Some of the Iroquois have a unique legend explaining the lesser brilliancy of the Moon by stating that in the long ago the Moon Mother married the Sun. She was unable to stand his extreme temperature so she fled and hid in a cave. Fearing his wrath, she remained hidden so long that she pined away until she nearly died. She never recovered her original brightness. When she fattens up she remembers her husband's wrath and pines away again.

The American Indian had a superstitious fear of the animals, who, they thought, influenced their lives for good or evil. The Algonquin and other tribes believed that the animals fearing extinction called a council to decide ways and means of combating man. The deer agreed to visit man with rheumatism, the insects to inject malaria poison into his system, the reptiles to cause him bad dreams and the birds to give him lung trouble. In order that he might be successful in the chase and ward off misfortune, he always carried in his medicine bag a rabbit's foot and other parts of animals to protect him from the enmity of the animals. Those superstitious white people who today carry a rabbit's foot, would hardly believe that the belief came down from the primitive Indian who long ago reverently placed it in his medicine bag with the hope that the Gods of Chance would protect him and see that he was well rewarded. In order to propitiate their Gods, it was the custom of some tribes to address a bear as "brother" before he was slain, and carefully explain to him that it was very necessary, otherwise his soul might return and have a baneful influence on them. The Chippewa Indians always addressed the tobacco plant before harvesting it: "You are allowed to grow here for the benefit of man and I give you this tobacco to remind you of this, so that you will do the best you can for me." Then he would deposit a little dried tobacco where the plant grew. The Chipmunk was considered to be an omen of good fortune for it was he alone of all the animal kingdom, who after the Indian had been visited with the different plagues by the Animal Council, had gone to the plants and trees and persuaded them to part with their medicinal properties to cure their ills and relieve their sufferings.

Primitive man must have believed in the immortality of his soul, for in no other way can we account for the great amount of labor expended in building the many mounds that dot the region of the Mississippi Valley; most of which were built to cover their dead who, when they reached the Happy Hunting Ground, would be adorned in a manner befitting their position and would have all the necessary implements of the chase.

* West's "Tobacco, Pipes and Customs of the American Indians."