

A Message on North American Indian Religion

by

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We are told that the Indians of former times were a very religious people, and there can be no doubt that this was so, and that it is so even today to a large extent. Today, the old religion and Christianity exist side by side; some think they are opposed and others think that in their deep meaning they are not; if there is any opposition, it can only be on a superficial level. Rather than discuss this matter, I shall answer the following question, the most important of all: what is religion? What is its essential nature?

There are two things to say. First: religion is essentially discernment. It is discernment between God and the world, or between the Real and the unreal, or between the Everlasting and the ephemeral. Secondly: religion is union. It is union with God, the Great Spirit. Everything in religion has its foundation in one of these two elements: in discernment and union. Man is intelligence and will, and religion is discernment and concentration.

If we consider the old Indian religion, we must first state that it is subject to many variations due to the scattering of the tribes; but there is nevertheless a unity based on the symbolism of the Directions of space and on the use of the sacred Pipe, and above all on the idea of a Supreme Being. And this religion too, with its many forms and its many different symbols is firstly discernment and then union; discernment between this vanishing world of dreams and the everlasting Reality which lies behind it, and union with this Reality even on this earth and in this life.

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If the Indians stated that God was the sun or a tree, they would be pagans. But the oldest statements prove that the authorities of the Indian religion never assumed that. God is one, but He has many manifestations. So the Indians are no pagans.

If some would object that Indian individuals could have been pagans by lack of understanding of their own religion, the same would be equally true of Christians or followers of other faiths. The ancient peoples around the Jews were pagans, except a few sages among them; but it does not follow from this that the Indian religion is heathen. It could be so by utter lack of understanding, but it is not so for those who understand it.

The angle of vision, of course, is different from that of Christian theology; it is more related to the outlook of Asian peoples. Like the Asian, the American Indian is much concerned with the question of the spiritual meaning of Nature. To see God only in nature would be false, for He is essentially above all form; but He manifests Himself also through natural forms. The Great Spirit is not the Sun, the Eagle, the Buffalo or the Rock, but these forms are something of Him, and He may be reached through them, and even seen in them, or behind them.

The Great Spirit is the innermost Self of all creatures.

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The question has been asked whether the ancient Indians called God “Great Spirit” or not. It is obvious that not all of them did; it is certain that some did; howbeit there is no doubt that this term is very convenient for the Indian idea of God, for the following reason: the Indians conceive God simultaneously in His unity and in His diversity, and therefore they speak of many “Spirits”; in another language, these may be called Angels or, on the highest level, Divine Qualities; earthly Spirits - which are below the Angels - may be meant also, or more accurately: those earthly Spirits who reflect the Angels and thus the Divine Qualities. It is like a sunray which though being pure light, changes its color on its way. But all these aspects are essentially one, and therefore we may speak of the “Great Spirit”, an expression which recalls the distinction between diversity and unity in the Divine Reality. The Indian idea of God is neither anthropomorphic nor pantheistic; it is polysynthetic, metaphysically speaking.

The most important manifestations of the Great Spirit are the West, the North, the East, the South, Heaven and Earth; then come forms like the Sun, the Eagle, the Buffalo, the Rock, the Morning Star. Firstly, all these phenomena are physical things, which we can see and feel. Secondly, they represent Principles which act everywhere in the whole Universe. Thirdly, these Principles act in the human soul: in every soul there is a West, a North, an East, a South, a Heaven, an Earth, a Sun, an Eagle, a Buffalo, a Rock and so on. Fourthly, they are prefigured in the Great Spirit Himself: although He is one, He has in Himself all these Qualities whose outer form we see in the Directions of Space and in certain phenomena of Nature.

The Great Spirit is the hidden Reality of all things. There are two truths to combine: in one sense, He is infinitely above us and we are totally other than Him, and in another sense, He is within us and He is nearer to us than we ourselves are.

The Indians have the Sacred Pipe and the Sweat Lodge; they also have the solitary Invocation and the Sun Dance. These may be considered as the main features of the Plains Indian religion. There are other very important rites, but as the number four is sacred with the Indians, we mention only these four most important forms of worship.

The Sacred Pipe means prayer. With it, man prays not only for himself, but also for the whole Universe. The whole Universe prays with him.

The Sweat Lodge means purification. In it, man renews himself; he becomes a new being. He becomes pure before his Creator.

The solitary Invocation is the highest form of prayer. It is contemplation and union. But it also benefits the whole community, in a subtle and indirect way. This solitary Invocation should be continued even in daily life; it should become unceasing prayer. For that, a traditional Indian name of the Great Spirit may be invoked within the heart. This is the highest and most complete form of spiritual life.

The Sun Dance is in a sense the prayer of the whole community. For those who dance, it is union with the Great Spirit. Afterwards, the Sun Dance should continue as a spiritual vibration in the heart. It is a symbol of our connection with God. If the Divine Presence dwells in our heart, we are attached to God by a golden ray. In the Sun Dance, we are like an eagle flying towards the Sun; like him, we are above earthly things, in the pure air of the high mountains, and in the holy solitude with our Creator. The Sun Dance attaches us to the Great Spirit; those who have attended it can never forget it.

The writer of these lines is not an Indian, but he has attended a Sun Dance inside the Sacred Lodge, fasting the second day with the Indians. He has been adopted by the Sioux tribe and received the name “Bright Star” (*Wicahpi Wiyakpa*). He knows well certain holy Traditions of Asia and he accepts every true and traditional religion, but for this very reason he knows the modern white civilization to be an error, which has nothing to do with Christianity; this deviated and unnatural civilization is contrary to Christianity as well as to every true religion. The writer of these lines knows that the present world will come to an end, in a future which is not far off. He thinks that nothing which is really spiritual must be lost. We must cling to the holy Name of God and trust in it, whatever its traditional form may be.

Never forget that religion is discernment between the Everlasting and the ephemeral, and union with the Everlasting. In other words, religion is basically discernment and concentration; separation from evil, which is illusion, and union with the Divine Good, which is Truth and eternal Reality.

Many people think that magic is an essential element of the Indian religion. This is not so, for magic is only a science or an art; religion can exist without magic, of course. Magic in itself is neither good nor bad, it is amoral. Magic performed in the name of the Great Spirit and with the help of good Spirits, and for good purposes, may be called “white magic”; the same art performed without appeal to the Great Spirit and with the help of bad spirits and for evil purposes, may be called “black magic” or sorcery. Sorcery has always been strongly forbidden everywhere, and it very often harms the sorcerer himself even in this life.

White magic (the *yuwipi* of the Lakota) becomes dangerous if it is considered as self-sufficient, exactly as it is dangerous to pray only for earthly advantages. We are allowed to pray for everything which is helpful to us, provided that we pray as well and even more for our

immortal souls: we must pray for virtue and spiritual knowledge and eternal life, and for union with the Great Spirit, and also for the welfare of the community to which we belong and for God's final victory over all evil.

This victory is certain, but prayer purifies the heart; the Great Spirit likes man's prayer, He wishes us to pray. The best prayer is His Sacred Name, which contains all other possible prayers. But as long as we use many words to pray for our body, we must also use many words to pray for our soul. Besides this and above all, let us pray for God's sake, invoking His Name alone, from the depth of our heart, just as a bird sings without wanting anything other than God's glory.

Editorial Notes

In the original *Studies* article, the editor added: "The author wrote this article especially with the Indians in mind and in the hope that someday they might read it, which accounts for its direct and simple style."

In the book *The Feathered Sun* (World Wisdom, 1990), in which the article later appeared, the translator added this note: "This text was written for a group of Indian friends."

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

May the Great Mystery make sunrise in your heart.

SIOUX INDIAN.